

# A Comparative Study of Naxi Rituals in Eya Village and Naxi Rituals in the Lijiang Region

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**Abstract.** The Dongba rituals (Naxi rituals) recorded in the Dongba scriptures have been studied in detail by many scholars, and some of them have conducted field surveys in Naxi gathering places around Lijiang. However, few researchers study rituals in Naxi areas in deep mountains. Therefore, this paper focuses on comparing the differences in Naxi rituals between one of the remote mountainous Naxi gathering places, Eya Village, and the surrounding areas of Lijiang, and analyzing how geographic factors lead to very different rituals in these two areas with the same culture. Through interviews with local residents, observations, and analysis of literature, I found that Naxi rituals in the Eya region are cruder, not class-based, mostly performed in village units, and influenced by a single culture. The remote location of Eya village and the harsh geographical environment led to this set of differences.

**Keywords:** Naxi Rituals, Eya Village, Lijiang Region, Field research.

## 1. Introduction

Ritual has long been a major topic of anthropological study, and the Naxi, as one of China's 55 ethnic minorities, have been studied by countless scholars devoted to studying Dongba culture (Naxi culture) or Dongba ritual (Naxi ritual) [1-4]. Most of the studies are based on Dongba scriptures or historical records of ancient Chinese dynasties, and of course, there is also a field study based on Naxi rituals in Lijiang [3, 5]. The remote mountainous areas along the Jinshan River also have a large number of Naxi gathering areas, but anthropologists do not have the opportunity to go into these areas, so there is no deep understanding of Naxi rituals in these areas. Under our normal perception, the same ethnic group should have the same culture, and the same culture naturally comes with the same ritual customs. Therefore, most people think that the Naxi people in the Lijiang region are representative, and the rituals of Lijiang Naxi are the same as those of Naxi in other regions. However, by comparing the rituals of one of the remote Naxi gathering areas, Eya Village, and the Naxi gathering areas in the Lijiang region, I found that rituals in the two regions are very different, despite the same influence of the Naxi or Dongba culture. In the paper, I also analyze how geographical factors shape the differences in ritual customs between the two regions. This study will fill a gap in academic research on the rituals of isolated Naxi villages along the Jinsha River.

In 2016, He Hu described the grand Jitian ritual (sacrifice to heaven) of Lezhu village and the changes in the ritual over the years [6]. In 2004, Yang Fuquan documented several examples of the integration of Naxi and Han cultures in the city of Lijiang [7]. In 2012, Zhu Yongqiang studied Naxi Jitian rituals in the Ludian Village of Lijiang. In 2015, Yang Fuquan pointed out that women are almost not allowed to participate in the Jitian ritual and there are many restrictions when they participate in the ritual. In 2010, Zhao Mengxiong and Yang Hongrong introduced the changes in funeral rituals from cremation to burial in the Lijiang areas [8].

This article conducted half-month fieldwork in Eya Village, living with the villagers and observing various rituals in their daily lives, and I was also fortunate to participate in some large group rituals in the village. Since I did not catch the large-scale ceremonies related to the Naxi religion and the grand social ceremonies such as wedding ceremonies, I conducted interviews with local villagers to learn about these large-scale ceremonies from their oral accounts. Of course, it is necessary to interview different villagers to get a more comprehensive understanding of a particular ceremony. One of the 30 or so people who were interviewed was Dongba, the religious leader of the Naxi people, who is known as the wise man by the Naxi people. He is mainly responsible for all the Naxi rituals

in Eya Village, including Jitian rituals, ancestor rituals, exorcising ghosts, exorcising diseases, performing spells, and so on. I also conducted interviews and observations in villages around Lijiang to collect information about rituals in Lijiang's rural areas. In addition to this, It chose to analyze the data by searching for previous literature on Naxi rituals and customs in the city of Lijiang, as the area is highly commercialized and has been fully developed as a tourist attraction, which means that the indigenous people have moved out long before. Of course, data were also collected through photographs, videos, and other materials.

## 2. Differences in rituals between Eya village and Lijiang

Anthropologists start with personal rituals, which, as the name implies, are rituals related to individuals [9]. Most personal rituals are developed from daily routines, and these routines become rituals when people realize that these daily routines have extraordinary significance to their lives. In old photos of Lijiang, we can often see Naxi old people in front of their courtyard drinking tea in the morning. Drinking tea in the morning has become a habit for many people, just like coffee in the morning for Americans. Over time, drinking morning tea has become a ritual for Naxi people in Lijiang, as its meaning is more than drinking tea to quench their thirst. It is a sign of the beginning of a new day. Naxi people in Eya village do not have this habit, some people go to Zhuangfang (Eya Naxi people plant crops there) at dawn, some people go to the mountains to harvest the grass, and some people get up to cook. Drinking tea slowly in the morning seems to be a luxury. For the rich landowners in the Lijiang area, the morning tea ceremony is even more delicate. They have certain requirements for utensils, steps, etc. when drinking tea. Lijiang Naxi people not only have a morning tea ceremony, but schoolchildren there also have a morning reading ceremony. There are many personal rituals in the Lijiang areas, which are hard to see in Eya village.

Social rituals include wedding ceremonies, funerals, family gatherings, festivals (excluding religious festivals), and so on. Naxi wedding ceremony in Lijiang has an obvious Han culture style: after the localization movement, Naxi people practice parental order and matchmaking (men and women have to follow their parents' arrangement about marriage); before the marriage, the man had to give the woman Liuli (the betrothal gifts before the marriage); the woman has to kneel to say goodbye to her parents and kneel to her father and mother-in-law when she arrives at the man's home; the wedding colors are also dominated by white, yellow, and red (white is the main color, yellow and red are supplements) [10]. This is a purely single-culture wedding. Although Naxi weddings preserve a certain amount of Naxi culture, many parts of them are integrated with Chinese culture. In contrast, in Eya village is free to fall in love; there is no need for matchmakers or Liuli before the wedding; there is no custom of kneeling to show respect to parents during the wedding. Although there are great similarities between weddings here and Tibetan and Qiang weddings, this does not mean that Eya Village is a fusion of Tibetan and Qiang cultures because Naxi, Tibetan, and Qiang are homogenous cultures, and many rituals were the same in ancient times. In addition, Naxi weddings in the Lijiang region have a unique Suzhu ceremony, in which Dongba will tie a thread to two human-shaped carvings, signifying that the newlyweds will be together forever. Eya village does not have this extremely elaborate wedding ritual. Weddings in the Lijiang area also show different levels of hierarchy. The scale of weddings in different families is very different. Wedding ceremonies for tusi, feudal landlords, rich merchants, rich farmers, and poor people are different. However, almost every family in Eya village has the same wedding ceremony, largely because of the lack of class differentiation.

Naxi people of Lijiang also celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth day of the fifth month. Naxi women in every family tie colorful threads around their wrists and wear perfume bags. It is clear that the Dragon Boat Festival, a traditional festival in China, has influenced the ethnic minorities who are on the southwestern frontier. In Eya village, no one celebrates the Dragon Boat Festival. Villagers have only learned about the Dragon Boat Festival in recent decades, and until now, many older people in the village were still unaware of the grand festival.

When Naxi families in the Lijiang area get together for dinner or something else, they cannot randomly sit. In Naxi architecture, the hearth is located in the center of the home, while a Kang, similar to a sofa, half surrounds the hearth. The shrine is located in the middle of the Kang. Generally speaking, elders with higher status will sit on either side of the shrine, which is the central part of the Kang, while the others will sit outward in turn. This may be related to the Confucian concept of respect for the eldest. This shows the penetration of Han culture in the Lijiang area. The family gatherings I observed in Eya village did not have any special seating arrangements, and people could sit almost anywhere. In the traditional Naxi culture, there is no concept of the superiority of elders. Although the younger generation still needs to be filial to their elders, they treat the younger generation relatively equally.

The etiquette of Lijiang Naxi seems to be more comprehensive. In ancient times, Lijiang Naxi had strict requirements for what etiquette to face the Tusi, what etiquette to face government officials, what etiquette to face rich landowners and merchants, and what etiquette to face the general public. Kneeling, bending down, extending hands and other rituals related to showing respect is common in the Lijiang area. The etiquette of Eya Naxi to show respect is very simple, just smile and wave. Generally speaking, the more complex the rituals, especially those related to showing respect, the more obvious the class differentiation. This is because most of the rituals provide for interaction between people of different classes and statuses. For example, in Japan, a country with a strict class system, Japanese people have different ways of showing respect when they meet people of different statuses, such as bowing (bowing is also divided into different degrees), shaking hands, kneeling, and so on. This gives people a feeling of elaborate etiquette. Similarly, the complex classes of Lijiang have led to a variety of rituals. Although in ancient times, Eya village was also managed by a headman, there are only two classes: headman and villagers, much fewer than in the Lijiang areas. Thus, there is no need for complicated rituals related to showing respect.

In Eya village, if there was a sick villager, most other villagers would send a chicken to the family of the sick villager as a gift, forming an unspoken rule. This is a two-sided ceremony, as each family may be the one that gives and receives the chicken. In the Lijiang region, although there are cases in that other villagers express their condolences and give gifts to the sick villagers, there is no clear rule about whether they need to give the gift or what gift to give. In other words, the gift-giving activities in Eya village were more ritualized than those in the Lijiang region. The gift-giving ceremony creates a channel of communication between the villagers and brings the whole village together.

### 3. Religious rituals

Jitian ritual in Eya village allows all the men, women, and children of the village to come and participate. People stand or sit in the ritual square to participate in the biggest festival of the Naxi. In Lijiang, however, the ritual is usually held in the villagers' courtyard (the courtyard in Lijiang is like an ancient Chinese courtyard), and the ritual is performed on a family base. Women are not allowed to participate in the ritual. In the rural areas of Lijiang, the situation is very complicated. Remote villages such as Lezhu village still hold the ritual in the village base, while the closer villages such as Yuhu village, just like Lijiang city, hold the ritual in their courtyard with the family base. But most of them also do not allow women to participate in the ritual. This also seems to be influenced by the Han culture, where women are not allowed to participate in the sacrificial ceremony.

Every morning, the Naxi people have the custom to worship the ancestral gods and other gods in front of their shrine. Eya village continues the morning ritual of worshipping ancestors and gods, but this ritual in Lijiang city undergoes a remarkable change. In Mufu, for example, as the government of the Naxi kingdom, its shrine not only has the memorial tablet of ancestors and gods but also has the tablet of "Heaven, Earth, Emperor, Relatives and Teachers" (which is the traditional tablet of Han culture). Therefore, the morning ancestor worship ceremony in Mufu has changed its meaning. It includes respect for the emperor and teacher. We no longer see such tablets in ordinary people's homes, as their homes have become hotels. But most people in Lijiang have some knowledge of the Chinese

emperor. The Liuguan (officials of the central government) also reminded residents at all times to respect the emperor and even forced residents to feel the emperor's grace and kneel to worship him. Therefore, it is likely that the ancestor worship ritual in Lijiang ordinary people's homes also changes its initial meaning, just like Mufu.

#### 4. Reasons and discussions

To sum up, Lijiang Naxi's rituals are more elaborate and complex, heavily influenced by Chinese culture, linked to classes, and conducted as a family unit. Also, there are more personal rituals in Lijiang. This set of differences is related to geographical factors.

First of all, the Lijiang region is located in the middle of a huge plain surrounded by mountains, with more fertile soil than Eya village. The Eya village, on the other hand, is in deep mountains, with all the arable land on the mountainsides, and the soil is very poor. I observed the height of corn in both areas and found that the height of corn in the Eya village is generally much shorter than that in Lijiang, which seems to confirm the poor soil quality in the Eya village. Therefore, Lijiang has great potential to develop advanced agriculture. Coupled with the fact that rivers on all sides would meet in Lijiang, Lijiang developed advanced agriculture six hundred years ago. Developed agriculture produced more nutrients, which could support a larger population, and thus Lijiang region developed its initial urban size. And the surplus of food seemed to free some labor force to work in different industries and become different social roles. This formed the social division of labor and class differentiation among Lijiang Naxi. In contrast, the Eya village is still in a subsistence smallholder economy, and class differentiation has not been formed. With the formation of classes, it is not difficult to explain the formation of different scales of weddings in the Lijiang areas and the numerous rituals related to showing respect.

A subsistence economy can lead to a day full of variables (especially in spring, summer, and fall, when the farming season is busy), where people have no routine and do different tasks every day. For example, villagers in Eya village may go to the farmhouse one morning, but it is also possible that the fence of the pig pen is broken one day, and they have to go to fix the fence. Similarly, it is also possible that people go to harvest grass in the morning because the weather is particularly wet one day. Because there is no fixed occupation, people's lives are different every day, so there is no fixed period to do fixed things. In Lijiang city, along with the emergence of the social division of labor, people have their occupations, and almost every day is a routine, which naturally leads to some periodic events, which is the basis for the formation of daily routines, and also the basis for the formation of personal rituals.

At the same time, the formation of the social division of labor promoted the development of various industries in the Lijiang area, such as handicrafts and textiles. People did not need to do handicrafts, as in the case of the Eya village, where people had to do farming and weaving at the same time. The craftsmanship is not very good. However, the industry in the Lijiang region is highly specialized, so some skilled craftsmen specialize in designing wedding costumes, carvings of Suzhu, teapots, and so on, which leads to the delicacy and complexity of the ceremonies in the Lijiang region.

Also, because of the huge agricultural potential of the Lijiang area, Naxi chiefs brought a large number of people to the Lijiang plain, where the flat terrain was suitable for large-scale city building, and thus the Tusi palace (the government of the Naxi Kingdom) was located in Lijiang. From the beginning of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese government introduced the Tusi system to the region. Minority chiefs were appointed as the supreme rulers of the region but were required to follow the orders of the central dynasty. The Tusi had to show their cultural identity to the central government for their safety and security, so the localization of the Tusi class was very obvious. And this localization of the upper class radiated to the inhabitants of Lijiang to some extent. Although the localization was still not obvious because the Tusi often wanted the local people to maintain their own culture and learn the Chinese culture themselves, showing the noble status of the Tusi family.

The real localization appeared during the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, when the Qing government canceled the Naxi Mu Tusi, and sent officials and military service to manage the Naxi kingdom. Due to the presence of mainland officials and military service, as well as the unique geographical location of the Lijiang region: close to the mainland, and more convenient transportation, it was easy for mainland immigrants to enter the Lijiang region. With a large number of immigrants, the deepest localization began. The contagious diffusion, Han Chinese constantly contact and intermingling with the Naxi in Lijiang city, greatly facilitated the introduction of localization. For example, the local Han Chinese would hold Han weddings, perform Han rituals, and so on. The Naxi people would naturally absorb some of these elements, such as kneeling, wearing red clothes in the wedding ceremony, and the concept of superiority of elders. However, due to the isolation of high mountains, the localization of Naxi rituals in Lijiang could not be spread to the Eya village, which thus ensured a single Naxi culture.

Due to the limitation of food production, the population of Eya village is very small, with only 242 families so far. Combined with the harsh natural environment and isolation, the villagers have to work closely together and unite. Therefore, all villagers know each other. This provides a basis for holding ceremonies together, as people accept to hold ceremonies with acquaintances despite not being from the same family. Moreover, the village has limited resources, and it is obvious that there are not enough financial and material resources if each family performs the ritual separately. The most important thing is that the Jitian ritual and the Jifeng ritual (to drive away the ghosts) do not have an obvious family element like the ancestor worship ritual. These rituals are amid pray for good fortune, and it is reasonable for the whole village to perform the rituals together. Even in Eya village, family-related rituals like the ancestor worship ritual are performed as a family unit. The densely populated area of Lijiang makes it obvious that the whole city cannot worship together. Plus the residents of the Lijiang city have enough financial and material resources to hold the ceremony in each family, and people prefer to inherit clan-based activities from their ancestral nomadic tribes. For the rural areas of Lijiang, the villages closer to the city of Lijiang are more economically developed, and people are able and willing to sacrifice as a family unit. The more distant villages are similar to the case of Eya village, which also sacrifices as a village unit. Of course, many villages from distant areas do not contradict the way of holding the ceremony in the family unit, although they hold the rituals together, because all villagers in these villages are the same family.

## 5. Conclusion

Through this study, I found that Naxi personal rituals in Eya village are not as rich as those in the Lijiang region; Naxi rituals in Eya village are simpler, while those in the Lijiang region are more elaborate and complex; rituals in the Eya village are only the feedback from the Naxi monoculture, while the Lijiang region has received great influence from Chinese culture; rituals in the Eya village contain almost no class characteristics, while rituals in the Lijiang region are closely related to classes. Naxi grand rituals in Eya village are usually held as a whole village; the rituals in the city of Lijiang are held as a family unit; the rituals in the rural areas of Lijiang have both characteristics. Geographical factors contribute to the differences in rituals between the two areas. The geological conditions of the fertile plain soil, the geographical location of the place, and the relatively open terrain together shape the class differentiation, division of labor, Chinese localization, and clannishness of Naxi society in the Lijiang area, all of which lead to the differentiation of Naxi rituals in Lijiang and Naxi rituals in Eya village.

The present study fills a gap in research on Naxi rituals in remote mountainous areas and can inspire more and more scholars to enter these little-known tribes and study their rituals, customs, society, and culture. One serious problem of this study is in data collection: when interviewing local Naxi people, the interview process is more tortuous, and the communication is not very effective due to the language barrier. In many cases, the local Naxi misinterpreted the interviewer's meaning and the interviewer misinterpreted the Naxi's meaning due to the language problem. Although he hopes

to present accurate information to the greatest extent, misinterpretation seems to be inevitable, and there may be some data accuracy to be verified in this study. Therefore, in future research, It will focus on learning the Naxi language and the Dongba script. The necessity of learning the Naxi hieroglyphic script, which only the Dongba can write, and the Dongba scriptures written in the Dongba script should be noticed by related research fields.

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