

Transitional Meaning and Symbolic Significance of the Funeral Rites of the Yi Pula People—Taking the Yi Pula from Beige Township, Kaiyuan City, Yunnan Province as an Example

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Abstract: The funeral of the Pula people is a symbolic behavior constructed in their specific historical and cultural context. After countless repetitions of the Pula people throughout history, the ceremony gradually became procedural and ultimately fixed. According to the theory of transitional rituals, the funeral rituals of the Pula people have transitional meanings that vary with location, state, and identity, and can be divided into three major stages: separation, marginalization, and aggregation. In each stage, many ritual behaviors contain rich symbolic meanings.

1. Introduction

The Pula people are a cross-border ethnic group mainly distributed in the mountainous areas of southern Yunnan, southeastern Yunnan, and northern Vietnam. The Pula people in Yunnan belong to a branch of the Yi ethnic group, with a population of over 300000. They mainly reside in the surrounding area of Daheishan Mountain at the junction of Honghe Prefecture and Wenshan Prefecture in southeastern Yunnan. Among them, Beige Township in the eastern part of Kaiyuan is the most concentrated area of Pula villages and population distribution in southern Yunnan.

2. Overview of Beige Yi District and Pula People

The meaning of “Beige” in Pula language is “a place a little past the stone mountain”. The entire township is located in high and cold mountainous areas, with a terrain that slopes from northwest to southeast, making it a typical karst landform. The township has a northern temperate climate, with an annual average temperature of 14 °C and an extreme minimum temperature of -6.4 °C. The annual precipitation is 1450 millimeters. Although the rainfall is abundant, the water conservancy conditions are poor, and water resources are scarce. It is a resource deficient high and cold mountainous area, which is not conducive to the growth and development of crops. The entire township currently governs 6 village committees, including Beige, Jiaji, Lugu, Luopotong, Xiaozhai, and Xiami, as well as 41 natural villages, with a total of 14360 people. Among them, the Pula people are local indigenous people, accounting for 97.3% of the total population. The Beige Pula people are accustomed to dividing them into two halves: the upper and lower halves. The Pula

people in the upper half are called “Labapo”, meaning “the Pu people who live on the highest mountain”. The Pula people in the lower half are called “Daizhanpo”, which means “people who live far away from the clouds”. In addition, there are two types of Pula people in the lower half of the township, one is “Digaopo”, and the other is “Dixizuopo”, meaning “people living in relatively flat areas”. In Beige, although the Pula people are subdivided into several small branches, claiming to be different from their own, in the minds of these Pula people, they are the same ethnic group and share common beliefs and customs.

3. Basic Procedures of Funeral Rites

In Beige, the Pula people attach great importance to the funeral affairs of the elderly, and the funeral is held with great solemnity. In their view, parents were the most caring people in the world for themselves during their lifetime, and after death, parents can also influence their lives through souls. Based on the concept of the immortal soul of their parents, the Pula people have developed a strict funeral custom. A large and complex funeral ceremony often consists of multiple branch ceremonies, similar to what Turner referred to as a densely growing ceremonial tree. The main ritual of the funeral of the Beige Pula people is the guiding ceremony for the release of the deceased. The entire funeral ceremony revolves around guiding the deceased and summoning souls for the living, and the transformation of the deceased’s identity occupies a core position in the ceremony. In terms of the entire ritual process, funerals include the following rituals: falling qi, inviting Bema, announcing the funeral, stopping the coffin, encoffining, setting up a funeral hall, sacrificing the night, hanging dragon flags, welcoming guests, offering sacrifices, gathering, nailing the coffin, filial son carrying coffin, guiding the way, washing face and feet, shouting names, dancing funeral dances, drilling the bottom of the coffin, delivering the funeral, rotating the mountain, digging graves, testing feng shui, opening the coffin, burying, exorcising evil spirits, making spiritual plaques, and supporting the mountain.

4. Transitional Meaning and Symbolic Significance of Rites

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep said in *Transitional Etiquette* that people who have not undergone a funeral are judged to be in a pitiful state and can never enter the world of the dead or be aggregated into the society there. ^[1]The transitional ceremony is the transformation of the ritual subject from one state to another determined state, from one world (universe or society) to another. The complete mode is pre-threshold etiquette (i.e. separation etiquette), threshold etiquette (i.e. marginalization etiquette), and post-threshold etiquette (i.e. aggregation etiquette). ^[2]The funeral ceremony of the Pula people also has transitional implications that vary with location, state, and identity. According to the theory of transitional rituals, the funeral of the Pula people can be divided into three major stages: separation, marginalization, and aggregation. In each stage, many ritual behaviors contain rich symbolic meanings.

4.1 Separation Stage (Falling Qi - Announcing the Funeral)

The separation stage is a symbolic separation from the previous state or position in some way. The separation stage in a funeral generally refers to the process from a living state to a state of detachment from life. From the perspective of most ethnic groups, it is the process of the deceased’s soul detaching from the body. ^[3]The separation ceremony aims to sever the relationship between the deceased and the original society, manifested in actions such as removing the body, burning the deceased’s belongings, killing their wives, concubines, slaves, livestock, etc., cleaning and decorating the body, purification ceremonies and various taboos, as well as regional isolation measures such as coffins, tombs, and cemeteries. ^[4]In the funeral procedures of the Pula people, the ritual process from falling qi to announcing the funeral belongs to the separation stage of the

transitional ceremony. Among them, falling qi is the initial symbol of the separation stage, symbolizing the end of a person's life. When the elderly lose their temper, the local Pula people will fall and kill a hen on the spot, which is a symbolic expression of personal detachment from the state of life and also a metaphor for the disappearance of the deceased from the social structure of the secular world.

In the separation stage, ritual behaviors such as cutting hair, shaving, wiping oneself, and changing one's shroud for the deceased all have symbolic significance of severing ties with the past. The purpose of cutting hair, shaving, and wiping oneself is to not bring the filth of the secular world to a new place of residence. On the surface, putting on a new shroud is to make the deceased as dignified as possible, in order to express the reverence and respect of the living towards the deceased. However, the deeper level of etiquette is that the Pula people believe that if the deceased does not change into a new shroud, it means "the deceased left naked", which will lead to family criticism and lifelong regret. Only by wearing a new shroud can the deceased be accepted by the underworld and become a blessed person in the underworld. After grooming, covering the deceased with black cloth also has a symbolic significance of isolating from the world. In addition, public methods such as setting off firecrackers and announcing funerals were used to inform the gods of heaven and earth, village neighbors, and relatives that the deceased had disappeared from this land, which also reflects the typical feature of "isolation" in the separation stage of Pula funerals.

4.2 Marginalization Stage (Stopping the Coffin - Delivering the Funeral)

At the marginalization stage, the identity of the recipient becomes blurred, neither here nor there, and is in a state of edge. The initial symbol of the marginalization stage in funeral etiquette is the long or short stay of the body or coffin in the deceased's room, hallway in front of the room, or other places, that is, the cessation of the spirit. ^[5]In the funeral of the Pula people, the marginalization stage from stopping the coffin to delivering the funeral lasts the longest, which includes many independent and interconnected ceremonies. Stopping the coffin is a sign of the beginning of the marginalization period, and then the deceased is placed in the coffin and integrated with the coffin until burial. During this time, it cannot be directly in contact with the ground, and two pieces of wood need to be placed under the coffin to prevent it from falling to the ground. This is a form of peripheral etiquette, where the identity of the deceased becomes blurred and does not belong to the sacred or secular world. At this time, the undead is not transcended and still in a state of ghost, with a strong desire for revenge, which can bring disaster to descendants or others. In the eyes of the local Pula people, if the coffin of the deceased is placed on the ground, it means that the place is where the deceased is buried, and this house cannot be inhabited. Therefore, it is necessary to use two pieces of wood to separate the coffin of the deceased from the ground and maintain a central position between the two regions, namely between heaven and earth. Only when the marginalization period ends and the deceased's coffin is carried to the roadside outside the village, can these two pieces of wood, incense burner, and burnt dragon flag be discarded together. At the same time, these artifacts and facilities were destroyed, as Van Genep said, "Sacred artifacts can only be used once, and once the ritual process is over, they must be destroyed or stored as if their power has been exhausted." ^[6]This also means that the host and village will be safe from now on and there will be no more funerals.

In the funerals of the Pula people, visible or intangible sacred gates can be seen everywhere, and the ritual of passing through the gate is also a peripheral ritual. Sacred gates such as village entrances, courtyard gates, main hall gates, and spiritual hall gates construct sacred spaces one after another. "Each sacred space represents a manifestation and a divine entry into space. This sacred entry separates a piece of land from its surrounding cosmic environment and makes them qualitatively different." ^[7]The relatives who offer sacrifices pass through the sacred gates, symbolizing their entry into a sacred ceremonial time and space, a world of complete others. At this point, the classification of secular society no longer exists, and as the host of the ceremony, Bema

naturally becomes the “deacon” and “authority” of that world. In daily life, Bema has to work, go to the ground, and farm... It is only during specific ritual periods and occasions that his special identity becomes prominent, serving as a mediator between humans and ghosts, connecting the secular world with the sacred world. At the same time, intangible “magic gates” were also set up in the ceremonies such as guiding the way, summoning souls, and rotating mountains presided over by Bema. Crossing these gate realms symbolizes that Bema combines herself with the divine world, entering a state of threshold, giving herself extraordinary identity and magic, becoming a mage who deals with ghosts and gods, and the magic will be effective.

The marginalization period of the Pula people funeral is long and complex, like a ceremonial tree with lush branches and leaves. It can be further divided into many relatively independent stages, with the more frequent being the branch rituals of pointing the way and calling the soul. The local Pula people believe that after a person dies, they have three souls. Those who have not undergone funeral ceremonies or Bema’s transcendence will become solitary spirits and return to their homes during their lifetime, bringing disaster to their descendants. Only through grand funerals can descendants arrange the three souls of the deceased, so that they each have their own place and return to their respective positions, in order to bring health to their families. The function of the marginal stage funeral is to arrange the first soul of the deceased, that is, to clear all obstacles for the deceased through a series of rituals, so that they can smoothly reach their ancestral home and reunite with their ancestors. At the same time, the Pula people believe that in order for the deceased to return to their ancestral land, they must be guided by Bema. Otherwise, they will not be able to return to their ancestral land, wander around, suffer, and even return to their homes to cause trouble. Therefore, the greatest obligation of those who are children is to ask Bema to guide the deceased. In guiding the path of the deceased, Bema read numerous place names, stopping one after another, until the imagined ancestral gathering place, and the journey of the deceased back to their ancestral land is also the process of the deceased entering the ancestral world - another world opposite to the living world. So, in the funerals of the Pula people, we can see many ritual behaviors aimed at sending and guiding the souls of the deceased to leave this place and travel to other realms. When relatives are sacrificed, they need to recite the *Guide to the Way* with silver vessels, and every time the deceased’s coffin moves, it needs to be pointed out by Bema. After reaching the final destination, which is the ancestral land, Bema also guides the lives of the deceased in the ancestral land, such as “to live in harmony with others, to raise livestock and manage money, and to live a peaceful life.” In the belief world of the Pula people, as Van Genep said, “That world is similar to ours, but better, and its social organization is the same as ours. Therefore, everyone returns to the clan, age group, or profession they once belonged to.”^[8] In addition, to ensure the life of the deceased in the ancestral land, the living also provide necessary living materials for the deceased. In the ceremony, the living provide essential necessities for the deceased by offering wine, animals, and meals. In order to prevent the souls of the living from following the dead, Bema or the elders should call the souls of the living in due course. For example, uncle ties a red thread for his nephew to summon his soul, and Bema throws rice to summon soul so on. In the long and complex marginal stage, the Pula people connect the secular world with the divine world through symbolic rituals such as pointing the way and calling the soul, conveying the belief that life can be continued, and death can also be eternal through another way.

4.3 Aggregation Stage (Rotating the Mountain - Supporting the Mountain)

In the aggregation stage, the recipient returns to society, but their identity and state have changed. During the aggregation stage of the funeral, the identities of the living and the deceased undergo a transformation. The ceremony of “rotating the mountain” and the direction of the coffin mark a change in the identity of the deceased, as the coffin of the deceased starts from being parked in the main room and ends up in the courtyard, front of the gate, and in the open space of the village several times, with the small end facing forward and the large end facing back. That is to say, the

deceased's feet are always in front, his head is always behind, and his head is facing home. In the final "rotating the mountain" ceremony outside the village before going up the mountain, the coffin needs to be turned upside down, with the deceased's head facing forward and feet behind, meaning "the deceased's head turns away from here". The return of the deceased to their ancestral land and their aggregation into the social structure to which they belong signifies the beginning of their true journey. Subsequent burial, which transforms the identities of the living and the deceased, is the actual ritual for the deceased to gather in the world of the undead. At the same time, the tomb also became the second soul of the deceased. After the burial is over, when the living arrive at the main entrance of the host's house, they need to follow the host's family to step into the house from the steam emitted from the charcoal to show exorcism. After entering the house, one also needs to wash their hands to make themselves cleaner. These purification ceremonies symbolize the return of the living to their normal position and return to village society.

On the second day after the deceased was buried, Bema would make a spiritual plaque for the deceased, arranging for their third soul and keeping it at home for worship at any time. Spiritual plaques do not accumulate, and later generations will take the spiritual plaques of the last generation to the tomb and burn them, allowing them to "live" with their previous ancestors and allowing the undead to join the ranks of their ancestors. The reunion of the dead with their ancestors has completely achieved the transition from the living to the dead, which means completing the transition from the path of life to the path of death, allowing them to enjoy the worship of future generations. ^[9] On the day of supporting the mountain, children and relatives once again went to the tomb to pay tribute to the deceased. At this point, the body of the deceased no longer exists, and the spirits of the deceased have returned to their ancestors and accepted sacrifices and prayers from future generations. After experiencing the pain of losing loved ones, the living begin to enter an orderly society. The social existence of the deceased is a node of relationship to avoid "the disappearance of a member leading to the breaking of a link in a chain" ^[10]. Subsequently, the living need to reorganize the relationships between relatives, so as to bring the village social relationship that was broken by the passing of the deceased to a new balance.

5. Conclusion

According to the theory of transitional rituals, the funeral rituals of the Pula people have transitional meanings that vary with location, state, and identity. After countless repetitions of the Pula people throughout history, the ceremony gradually became procedural and ultimately fixed. The funeral of the Pula people is a symbolic behavior constructed in their specific historical and cultural context.

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