

Analyzing the Image of Yi di through the Interpretation of Spirit Possession and Otherness among Yunnanese Muslim Migrants in Myanmar

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1 Introduction

Spirit possession is an abnormal behavior by an individual interpreted by other members of the society as evidence that a spirit is controlling the person's actions and probably inhabiting his body (Firth 1967: 296). It can also be considered as an interpretation of a person's experiences about the particular belief system of the person's cultural group.

Crapanzano further discusses that spirit possession provides each individual with an idiom for articulating a certain range of experiences. This act of articulation by the individual is more than a passive representation of the event; it is, in essence, the creation of the event (Crapanzano 1977: 10). Spirit possession can be characterized as centripetal, from outer to inner, literally but not psychoanalytically speaking, and introjective (Crapanzano 1977:13). Introjective describes the phenomena that the reality of outside world would be projected to the inner experience and this would give its shape. Hence, spirit possession can be used as a way to represent the individual's relationship with Otherness. It is the mimicry of the Otherness of outer world and it also one way of know the Otherness (Kramer 1993).

In upper Myanmar, Spirit possession is used as a way to know the status of people vis a vis the existing ethnic and religious groups. It also describes the relationship among these groups. In this part of the Myanmar, multi-ethnic and multi-religious settings exist and spirit possession is deeply connected with the image of the existing ethnic and religious groups. Otherness, on the other hand, is embedded in the discourse of spirit possession. This discourse indicates the ambiguity of the nature of Otherness from the view point of Yunnanese Muslim

migrants. They recognize the indigenous ethnic and religious groups according to the framework of Barbarian images and not as depicted by themselves.

Yunnanese Muslim migrants never identify themselves based on the image of otherness; however, they could not separate themselves from the image of otherness in the symbolical dimension of Spirit possession. This is the ambiguity of otherness.

This paper would like to analyze this Barbarian images through the analysis of spirit possessions and otherness and its interpretation by Yunnanese Muslim migrants in upper Myanmar. It also investigates the symbolical dimension of their Spirit possession discourse by tracing the history of Yunnanese Muslim migration and by recounting actual stories of spirit possession among Yunnanese Muslim individuals.

2 “Yidi (Barbarian)” – The Prevailing Image of Indigenous People

Primitive barbarian is the common image of indigenous people at the China and Myanmar border. This image was created by the Han Chinese. Giersch argues that the Han Chinese have produced images of backward and wild indigenous peoples based on their own cultural standards on various aspects such as clothing and premarital sex. These images prevail and recur, despite their increasing contact with indigenous people.

Among these images, witch spirit is the most evident. The origin of these spirits was greatly attributed to the indigenous people by the Han Chinese. Giersch, in his book, related a story of witchcraft which was described in a historical document compiled by the Han Chinese. He wrote one tale about the Boyi (Dai), a group of people who could disguise themselves as animals standing along the side of the road so they can afflict an unwitting passerby with a goblin and enter his midsection to eat his vital organs (Giersch 2006: 73).

The image of indigenous people doing witchcraft is sufficiently discussed in Kawano's work. Kawano's *Spirit Possession in China* introduces plenty of images of indigenous people as witch spirits which had been described by Han Chinese in Yunnan. Horse caravan (*Ma Bang* in Chinese) used to be the main transportation of the trade between Yunnan and upper Myanmar. This horse caravan had to

* Original text in Yunnan Tongzhi (Yunnan history): “在元江者能為鬼魅以一帚繫衣後即變形為象馬豬羊犬立通衢或直衝行人稍畏避之即為所魅入腰中食其五臟。”《雍正雲南通志》卷二十四。

pass through mountain areas where the main residents were not Han Chinese but indigenous people.

This caravan trade to upper Myanmar was thought to be a life-threatening enterprise and was referred to as “qiong zou yifang”, meaning poor people go to the barbarian areas. The China-Myanmar border, the area where indigenous people settled in, was called “Yifang” or “Yidi”, referring to the barbarian areas, while “Yi” refers to the people, the barbarians.

Even though the main concern of life-threatening aspects in this “Yi” or “barbarian” areas was the malady (zhangli) and the bandit, witchcraft practiced by the “Barbarian” toward Han Chinese also constitutes a strong image of menace for Han Chinese.

Yidi is often related to the “Fang gu”, which means spreading the magical poison, or “Diyang”, which means metamorphosing, as the description of these two terms often show up in folk literatures or travel report concerning Yidi. Kawano wrote that these folktales about witchcraft appear repeatedly in text. It persuasively symbolizes the fear of Han Chinese traveler during their stay in Yidi (barbarian areas).

This image corresponds to the cosmology of Han Chinese (Kawano 2005: 261). Fears of the witchcraft directly related to the outstanding image of barbarian in the eyes of the Han Chinese.

The image of indigenous people, however, was not the only fear of “primitive barbarian”. Images of the others often depend on what people want to acquire from them. According to Giersch, the images of indigenous people generated by the Qing officials are ambiguous.

From Qing official’s viewpoint, it is significant if the colonized indigenous people can be accommodated to the political hegemony. Giersch argued that it was the Qing who actually hoped to gain authority from the Tai or Dai by recognizing existing local hierarchies (Giersch 2006: 89).

For this reason, some of the Qing officials constructed an image of indigenous peoples, particularly indigenous political leaders, both as the undeveloped rude barbarian and as the amenable people who are obedient to the force of Qing emperor. Giersch refers to this contradictory image of indigenous peoples as the ambiguity in the Qing interpretation of indigenous groups (Giersch 2006: 75).

Unlike the Han Chinese described by Giersch, Yunnanese Muslim migrants settled in the middle of indigenous people and are not a hegemonic authority to

be able to control them. They are both ethnic minority among the various indigenous peoples such as Burmese or Shan, and are considered a religious minority in the Buddhist community. They are also different from the Han Chinese migrants in terms of their religion.

Aside from these differences, ambiguity can also be found on how the Yunnanese Muslim migrants interpret the spirit possession that occurs among them. The cause of spirit possession is usually ascribed to indigenous peoples or non-Muslims. The distances and differences between the Chinese Muslims and indigenous peoples show their contrasting and contradicting interpretation of spirit possession.

3 Brief History of the Migration of Yunnanese Muslims in Upper Myanmar

Yao Jide divided the migration of Yunnanese Muslims to Southeast Asia into four tides. The first tide was the migration accompanied by the Yongli emperor of South Ming. The second one occurred after the collapse of Du Wenxiu's Sultanate on 1872. The third migration happened when several Muslims left Yunnan province during the Sino-Japan war and the last migration took place during the defeat of Kuomintang regimes.



Yunnanese Muslim migrants now settling in Myanmar were the direct migrants and their descendants who migrated from Yunnan from the second period to the fourth. Since the history of migration at the time of Muslim Sultanate collapse has been asserted repeatedly and the settlement place was somehow mythicized as the basement of migration, thus the history and settlement shall be emphasized in this paper.

After the collapse of Muslim Sultanate based on Dali and led by Du Wenxiu, a Yunnanese Muslim, around 60 soldiers and their families

fled to Upper Myanmar. They built a small village on the border area between China and Myanmar and chose one Yunnanese Muslim as the leader of that village. The first leader was General Ma Linyu.

According to *Yunnan Kanjie Choubei ji*, compiled during the late Qing period, “when they first fled from Yunnan, they chose Ma Er (Ma Linyu) as the leader (Toumu)¹⁾” and afterwards, “Muslims from those areas such as Yunxian, Fengqing, Lincang and Zhenkang seamlessly moved to this place.²⁾” This place became one of the central trade cities along the border of Myanmar and China. This place was referred to as “Panlong” (Map 1) and the Yunnanese Muslims from this place and their descendants were called “Panlong people (Panlong ren)”.

Although the Yunnanese Muslims governed Panlong, they did not dominate in number. According to the document which recorded the history of Panlong people, as spoken by Ma Meiting, their former leader, there were many ethnic groups around this area. He said, “As for the population in Panlong, there were 200 households of Han Chinese, 1000 households of Dai (Baiyi), 500 households of Jingbo (Kachin), 200 households of Luohei (Lahu), 200 households of Lisu, 100 households of Kongguo and 350 households of Hui (Yunnanese Muslims).³⁾” They settled among indigenous people and their relationship with these indigenous people has been significant for them to maintain harmonious lives in Panlong.

4 The Spirit Possession among Yunnanese Muslim Migrants

Spirit possession is considered as a mental disease in psychiatry. Psychiatrists analyze spirit possession by using the term possession-syndrome (Kuba 1981; Nakai 2001). Kuba distinguishes “shaman culture” from “modern culture” and argues that the shamanistic cultural symbols will be useful to cure the patients.

The symbolical dimension is significant in the analysis of spirit possession. Possession should be investigated based on the dimension of cultural symbols.

1) The original text is as follows: 聞其初次逃出時係馬二為頭目。《雲南勘界籌備記》。

2) Ma Shaozhong “Awashan Bannong Huizu Lishi Diaocha.” Yunnansheng Bianjizu ed. *Yunnan Huizu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* 4. pp. 28–33. Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe.

3) Yunnansheng Bianjizu ed. “Baoshan Du Wenxiu Qiyi Lishi Diaocha.” *Yunnan Huizu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* 1. p. 119. Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe.

How the individuals narrate and make sense of their own possession experiences should also be considered in the analysis.

Spirit possession among Yunnanese Muslim migrants in upper Myanmar is not as common as in some other societies such as Africa or Northern Asia. Nor is it placed aptly in their cultural schema such as Shamanism. However, while conducting fieldwork, a significant number of cases of spirit possession were noted among the Yunnanese Muslim migrants. The narratives about spirit possession signify its relationship with the otherness.

How did the Yunnanese Muslim migrants constructed the images of indigenous people? Originally, the Han Chinese identified witchcraft as the major image of “barbarians”. These images were extracted from their unknown fear of the indigenous people. Although the Yunnanese Muslim migrants had closer contact with indigenous people than the travelers in Qing period, they still considered the indigenous people as the “others”. This concept of otherness has a direct relationship with the actual spirit possession experiences of Yunnanese Muslim migrants.

4-1. Religion: Islam and Buddhism

Religion is the primary aspect that the Yunnanese Muslim migrants attribute their spirit possession to. The difference between Buddhism and Islam is a factor that causes spirit possession. This is illustrated in the first case study.

One woman from Taunggyi in Shan state on upper Myanmar explained his son’s mental problems by using the Buddhism versus Islam framework. The following is a narrative of her son’s spirit possession experience as told by the mother.

Case Study 1

A couple of years ago, I was invited to a party hosted by a Buddhist woman. At the party, I felt there was something wrong. For this reason, I did not eat the food they provided for us. Afterwards, I heard everyone who attended the party and ate what the Buddhist woman encountered problems with their health. Meanwhile, my son started having problems about his behavior.

His attitude suddenly became rude. Sometimes he eats one to two kilograms of beef, all at once. Then, I asked one *wuso* or the religious intel-

lectual who was living in Taunggyi to see his strange behavior. He made an amulet for him. I put it inside the well as instructed by the *wuso*, but my son went to the well to find the amulet and threw it away.

Since the first one did not work out, I consulted another *wuso* living in Mandalay and asked him to make another amulet. I put this amulet on my son's neck and I recited the phrases of Qur'an to him. Then, my son vomited. After this, he got better.

I think the Buddhist woman who held the party was my business competitor. She probably asked a monk to put a spell on the food and this harmed my son.

It is not easy to figure out whether this is a case of sorcery or witchcraft in the classical definition of anthropology. It should be noted though that the informant's son was possessed by something and through the magical way of healing instructed by Muslim *wuso*, he finally recovered from his suffering. What happened to the informant's son was caused by the Shaytan, which means devil in Islamic context.

4-2. Ethnicity: Phiphə or Phi as a Symbols of "Barbarian"

The second case study shows the significance of ethnic differences as the factor to cause the spirit possession. Yunnanese Muslim migrants often mention *phiphə* or *phi* as a factor of spirit possession. The second informant is an 83 year old woman who told the story of her daughter.

Case 2

My daughter was possessed by *phiphə* twice. The first one occurred when she was still in Tanyang. The *phiphə* of an English teacher possessed her and she bit her eyelid. We went to an Indian *wuso* to consult regarding her condition. He recognized that the English teacher's *phiphə* bit her. My husband did not believe in *phiphə*, so our consultations with the Indian *wuso* were all hidden from him.

The second possession happened when my daughter moved to Pinoolwin after her marriage. When she was still in Tanyang, one Yunnanese Muslim lady was fond of my daughter very much. My daughter went everywhere with her. Just after moving to Pinoolwin, my daughter began

to have mental problems. She felt that her shoulders were heavy and she stared blankly at the wall the whole day. She went to a dozen psychiatrists but found no cure. Eventually her husband decided to take her to see a famous Indian *wuso* (Babaji) who had been living in central Myanmar.

The *wuso* considered that her possession was caused by the lady who was living in Tanyang. The woman loved her so much and she filled herself with such a great sadness when my daughter left, that the *phiphə* spontaneously came out of her and caused my daughter to suffer spirit possession. The lady did not know that her *phiphə* affected her. My daughter went to visit her in Tanyang to give offerings. After a couple of months, she recovered.

In this case, the spirit possessions were caused by *phi* or *phiphə*, the spiritual being common in Shan or Dai cultural context. *Phi* or *phiphə* symbolizes the negative image of indigenous people in the Myanmar and China border.

Edmond Leach introduced *Hpyi*, the witch spirit, in the *Political System of Highland Myanmar*. He discussed that Kachins believe that people can be possessed by witch spirits even though they themselves are unaware of this malady. Witch spirits may cause all manner of sickness and misfortune; not to the person harboring the witch spirit but to others. *Phi* is a witch spirit commonly known among the various ethnic groups at the Myanmar-China border.

Yao Hesheng also mentioned the same kind of witch spirit, the “*pipai gui* [*pipai demon*]” in his *Water Baiyi Local Report (Shui Baiyi Fengtuji)*. He wrote, “Among the various types of demons, the most heinous one is *pipai demon* and *pusi*. *Pipai demon* is grown up by women. If someone hurt her feeling, she would release *pipai demon* and let it go into the person’s body. And the person who possessed by *pipai gui* would have fever and get crazy.”

Yunnanese Muslims migrants refer to this witch spirit as *phi* or *phiphə*. For them, *phi* symbolizes the image of “*Yi*” or barbarian. Informants often point out that they are living in “*Yidi*” or “barbarian areas” and this is the reason why spirit possession often occurs around them. From their perspective, spirit possession is directly linked to the image of indigenous people as “barbarian”.

Case 3

Miss C was a Buddhist who converted to Muslim to cure her illness.

She used to live in Taunggyi with her family, but she moved to Bangkok to help her relative's family take care of their children. She stayed there for more than 10 years, then she returned to Myanmar when she was 19 years old.

After coming back from Bangkok, she started her life in Lasho with her mother. Four months after she came back, she got sick. She suddenly began to cry without any reason. She went to big cities such as Yangon and consulted with a number of medicine men. Sometimes her mother spent \$ 600 to \$ 700 to pay for the medicine man. Finally, they went to see Mr. Ma, the husband of her aunt. Mr. Ma immediately recognized that Miss C's relatives in Bangkok felt so sad when she left. So he concluded that the phi of her relatives had something to do with her sickness.

Miss C is the relative of Mr. Ma, the healer. Her father and Mr. Ma's wife are siblings. Mr. Ma's mother-in-law used to be a Buddhist like the patient. She only converted to Muslim after she remarried. After coming back from Bangkok, the patient's mother found out that one of his husband's relatives can cure spirit possession, they came to see Mr. Ma and Miss C converted to Islam.

Most healers who cure the patients are Muslims. Patients or their families do not always consult the Yunnanese Muslim healers but instead Indian or Burmese Muslim healers.

4-3. Healer and His Explanation

Mr. Ma, in his 50s, is not a professional medicine man. He graduated from an *Awen xuexiao* (Arabic school) run by Yunnanese Muslim. He used to do business before his wife got sick. When his wife got possessed by phi (Case 2), he began to study how to cure possessed patients under a famous Indian Muslim in Central Myanmar. Unlike the shamanism however, he does not put himself into trance. Instead, he uses copper bowls, iron stick and magical numbers which abbreviate and symbolize the phrases of Qur'an. He also recites Qur'anic verses.

The spirits are explained in Islamic terms. He referred to several spirits such as Azazel, Jinn, Shaytan, Diw and Iblis as the cause of spirit possession. He mentioned that there is a hierarchy and the Diw is the lowest among them. He further explained that some witch spirits such as phi or phiphə are ascribed to

indigenous people and are a mother name of Diw. Religious intellectuals or people who have more knowledge of Islam are inclined to explain spirit possession according to the Islamic framework. They converted the unknown into their Islamic cosmology and gained control over the otherness.

5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how the image of the “Yidi” or barbarian areas can be analyzed through examining the belief of Yunnanese Muslim on spirit possession and otherness. The brief history on the migration and settlement of Yunnanese Muslims was significant to show that the analysis was done in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting. The Yunnanese Muslim migrants maintain their political status despite this, by building up a familial tie with the indigenous political leaders.

Through the narratives in the particular cases given, it was shown how the interpretation of spirit possession can be used as a way to construct an image of the Yidi. Spirit possession is introjective. It provides idioms that project the reality of outer world to the inner experience. Under the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society surrounding Yunnanese Muslims, the relationship with the ethnic others and the religious others projects in their subjects as idioms to interpret their spirit possession. Spirit possession is always interpreted by Yunnanese Muslim migrants in Buddhist or Muslim axes or indigenous people or Chinese axes. Thus, spirit possession is also a way to construct a hybrid subject.

However, construction of hybrid subject through spirit possession is different from the strategic hybridity to maintain their political status. The person who is possessing is a different entity from the person that is being possessed. Hence, spirit possession is a way to project or introject the unidentifiable ethnic others or religious others into the self.

In the region that Yunnanese Muslim migrants recognize themselves as “Yidi”, narrating the spirit possession in the idiom of otherness is another way to recognize the otherness while not identifying them to this “Yidi.”

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