

An Analysis of Linguistic Memory and Cultural Value in the Ancient Miao Scriptural of the Western Dialect

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Abstract: The ancient scriptures of the Miao people are orally formulated in nature, encompassing sacrificial verses, wedding verses, dispute-resolution verses, ancient songs, epics, and other similar forms. Together, they constitute the oral documents that preserve Miao historical culture. These ancient scriptures possess significant academic value in multiple fields, including ethnology, folklore, linguistics, and ethnic history. Among their various cultural attributes, the distinctive linguistic and cultural value of these texts has been addressed in multidisciplinary research, making them important sources for scholarly investigation.

Keywords: Miao People; Ancient Miao Scriptures; Cultural Value; Linguistic Memory

1. Introduction

The Miao people were an ethnic group with an oral language but no written script in ancient China. Their history and culture have been passed down from generation to generation mainly through oral transmission. Language serves as the fundamental medium of communication for an ethnic group, and also acts as a vital carrier of its culture [1]. The ancient Miao scriptures constitute vital materials for researching the ancient Miao society, history, astronomy, geography, literature, art, folk customs and more, and serve as key documents for tracing the evolution and development of the Miao people's economy and culture.

Healing chants and blessing odes are far more than mere expressions of good wishes; they represent discursive practices deeply embedded in the Miao social structure and cultural system. The ancient Miao scriptures embody the collective survival wisdom, values and social norms of the Miao community, acting as bonds that hold society together. From an anthropological perspective, every community

endows its own existence with meaning through verbal narratives, and sustains social reproduction by passing down such meanings.

2. Archaic Phonological Lexicon in Sacrificial Chants

The emergence and development of intangible cultural heritage are inextricably linked to the interactions among traditional communities and groups. It is precisely thanks to the robust safeguarding function of the customary rules of these groups that the heritage has been able to be sustained and effectively passed on and developed [2]. Language occupies a uniquely significant role. For any ethnic group possessing its own national language, the mother tongue is indispensable in the course of sacrificial ceremonies.

The mere mention of such a group instantly evokes its distinctive language, and this association is stubbornly and rigidly fixed in our minds. Even in an era of constant and rapid change, the correlation between ethnicity and language persists unchanged. This phenomenon we term exclusive ascription language being the exclusive acoustic symbolic expression of that ethnic group's culture. The native language of a people embodies the other cultural features specific to that people [3].

God lax zaos daos zongx vangx,

I come to the gate of the courtyard,

Jas ib jaod at vrangf sit,

And see one dressed in new clothes,

Yaos gex zib yaos?

Is it you or not?

Yaos gex mak gex lef laol,

If it is you, turn back

Gob deuk gex brout khait gex ged,

I will light a torch to show you the way,

Gex at lel moul,

Then you may go.

Bred cik baos yeus dad dout gex del

Three generations of ancestors hold fast to your hand [4].

The procedure involves invoking the deceased,

ascertaining their fundamental particulars, and then directing their passage. This sentence among *Bred cik baux yeus dad dout gex del* translated as "Three generations of ancestors come to take your hand," this clearly indicates that the ancestors of three generations will come to receive the deceased.

Gex naifyos gex bongb deud lax deb,
When your mother gave birth, you came to the ground,

Ab baos keuk gex bas zout brangb del,
Your grandmother held you in her arms.

Gex zid aob lob houd jous,
Your father's two knees,
Yaos gex aob lob ghab zongx vrouf,
Are your two stools to sit on.

Gex naifaob lob mil,
our mother's two breasts,
Yaos gex aob lob hnanb hnaot,
Are your two food bags [5].

Among the sentence *Gex naifaob lob mil, Yaos gex aob lob hnanb hnaot*, your mother's two breasts are your two food bags." The care that family members provide for an individual is meticulous and all-encompassing. From the child's birth through to their upbringing, the family offers not only material support but also emotional and spiritual care. The sacrificial scriptures also emphasize gratitude toward one's family, serving as a reminder for people to always bear in mind this nurturing grace and to give back when they are able. *Breb dol nad jaox laol bob gex, Tak ib dol at gex ghaib nbaos vangb, Tak ib dol at gex ghaib nbreul ged, Tak ib dol at gex ghaib nbreuf nenl*, [6] translated as "One as your cover-basket chicken, one as your road-opening chicken, and one as your horse-sacrifice chicken." *Gex tak ceit ghak lox bas ghaib, Tak ceit ghak del jangb nyox jangb nbat*, With your left hand you hold a chicken, and with your right hand you lead an ox and a pig. *Khed dek cangd ndox las gob, Deul las ndaid, Cangb ndox gob gex nzeif ghaib ghab dik, Nangs laol gex nzeif ghaib ghab dut*, the sun there is fierce, like a fire roasting you. If the sun is too hot, you take shelter under a chicken's wing; if rain drenches you, you shelter under a chicken's tail." *Gex ghaib ghat, Nil ghaib deb, Yaos gex baux gex yeus, Gex ghaib zib ghat, Nil ghaib zii deb, Zib yaos gex baux gex yeus*, Within the ritual incantations, the function and symbolism of the fowl that guides the way are of paramount significance in burial ceremonies. The cock safely conveys the deceased across

every hardship until they reach the ancestors. From these Miao texts of directional guidance, we discern that their ultimate and constant core is the return of the departed to the world of the forebears.

The recitation of ritual formulae constitutes an indispensable component of Miao sacrificial ceremonies, serving to impart unequivocal directional guidance to the soul of the deceased. Should the rites be performed in any language other than the native tongue, the departed would risk being unable to locate the ancestors, and the ancestors would likewise be unable to receive them. Consequently, the exclusive use of the Miao language throughout the entire ceremonial process is mandatory. Given the considerable complexity of the ritual texts, those who are not the officiating priests must possess a thorough proficiency in both the spoken and written forms of Miao in order to adequately comprehend and interpret the scriptures. In addition, the researcher is obliged to conduct fieldwork personally within the social milieu of the subjects, engaging in direct observation from a participatory standpoint, and gathering oral accounts from local residents without the imposition of preconceived biases, the dominant status of indigenous peoples must be respected [7].

3. Emotional Metaphorical Communication in Marriage Chants

In Huadong Miao Village, Agong Town, Zhijin County, Guizhou Province, the three-hole flute, a distinctive musical instrument-maintains a profound and inseparable structural connection with the local Long-horned Miao subgroup's system of love and marriage. As the most iconic cultural instrument of the Long-horned Miao in Agong Town, the three-hole flute embodies and perpetuates the centuries-old traditions of Miao courtship and matrimony, occupying an indispensable and central place in the community's daily life. The Long-horned Miao value freedom in love and marriage; the emotional interactions and marital arrangements of their young men and women rely heavily on the cultural mediation of the three-hole flute. Mastery of the instrument by male members (referred to as Age) is a key cultural asset and prerequisite for winning the favor of female members (Amei), thereby enabling them to meet, know each other, fall in love, and eventually form families. Thus, the survival and

practice of the three-hole flute are intricately interwoven with the local love-and-marriage cultural model.

Long ago, in the ancient Huadong Miao village of Agong Town, there lived a wealthy landlord whose daughter was fair and graceful, attracting many young suitors. Yet the girl looked down on all who came to propose, believing they were either coveting her beauty or her family's fortune. The landlord possessed a heirloom magic iron fan that could, with a single wave, send a person flying to the farthest peaks. He used it on every suitor, banishing them to a nearby mountain opposite the village, where thousands of young men had already gathered some still struggling to regain the girl's affection. One day, a poor young man arrived in the village. He had not come to court the girl, but simply because he loved the place. By chance, they met and fell in love at first sight. When the girl told her parents, they rejected the young man because of his poverty and adamantly forbade their relationship. In desperation, the landlord took out his iron fan and sent the beloved young man to the same opposite mountaintop as the others. Days passed, and the young man grew weaker, yet he never stopped thinking of the landlord's daughter. At home, the girl suffered through each day, her tears flowing ceaselessly as she prayed for his safety. On the verge of death, the young man remembered that he had never given his beloved a gift. He picked up a human bone with seven segments and three holes, and played it, producing a mournful and haunting tune. Moved by the melody, Heaven sent an eagle to carry the young man down the mountain to meet the girl. Eventually, they were united in marriage. To commemorate this couple, later generations crafted the three-hole flute from bitter bamboo in imitation of the bone's structure. Because the flute has seven segments, every year on the seventh day of the first lunar month, the young men and women of Huadong Ancient Village would take their flutes to the hillsides to court and sing this is the Long-horned Miao's Tiaohuapo (a festival in local). The men play the flute, and the women respond with songs, thus winning each other's hearts. In the Miao language, the three-hole flute is called Ganran. In Agong Town, Zhijin, it embodies the love and marriage culture of the Miao youth, standing as the most significant representative musical instrument of the

Long-horned Miao, with an important and positive role in people's lives. Its unique timbre conveys the emotions of lovers, offering a way for young people to find love and symbolizing the rich courtship traditions of the Miao—a truly rare traditional instrument.

Regarding the origin of the three-hole flute, it is deeply rooted in the rich oral traditions of this ethnic group, often traced back to folk love legends with profound cultural significance. In Huadong Village, Agong Town, Zhijin County, a relatively concentrated traditional settlement of the Long-horned Miao—this cultural practice remains well preserved to this day. Local young men and women continue the ancient custom of expressing emotions and selecting partners through three-hole flute performances, making it a vital living vehicle for sustaining the inheritance of the group's marriage and love culture. Miao Baoding (is a song title that is a proper noun), *Ghan ranf max xiangf lon, xiangf lon max beex muax*, Ganran has seven sections, and among these seven sections there are three holes. *Ghan ranf haif zhif dlangf lou, muaf moux pies shaox tlangd*, The singing of ancient ballads such as Ganran, words cannot express all that is in one's heart; cut it down and use it as firewood' further confirms the central role and cultural depth of the three-hole flute (San Yan Xiao) in the context of love and marriage. These ballads concisely and profoundly present the cultural imagery and inner connotations of the three-hole flute among the Zhijin Miao. It should be noted that the cultural codes and symbolic meanings carried by the three-hole flute and its melodies are distinctly place-specific. Their underlying cultural logic and emotional expression rely primarily on the cultural cognitive framework of the Miao community, presenting a significant barrier to cultural understanding for outside observers. The performance practice of the three-hole flute fulfills important socio-cultural functions: it serves not only as a key medium for Miao members to entertain themselves and enrich their spiritual lives, but also as a cultural practice that strengthens community cohesion and adds meaning to life. As a core element in the intangible cultural heritage system of Agong Town, the three-hole flute carries dual cultural value, the first one, it is a materialized vehicle for the diachronic transmission of traditional Miao marriage and love culture, systematically preserving related rituals, norms, and emotional

expression patterns; second one, it has evolved into an iconic cultural symbol of the marriage customs of the Long-horned Miao branch, with its shape, musical tones, and performance settings deeply embedded in the marriage system of this branch.

4. Psychological Comfort Terms in Medical-Sacrificial Chants

The ancient canonical scriptures represent a comprehensive compendium of traditional Miao knowledge. They contain an extraordinarily rich accumulation of empirical knowledge regarding local medicine and healing practices. These knowledge systems, honed through thousands of years of practical testing, embody profound therapeutic wisdom and adaptive capacity. Humans are cultural beings. Ever since the emergence of humankind, people have dwelt in an ocean of culture. This means that human therapeutic practices for illnesses are essentially a form of cultural practice [8].

In my early years, I neither mastered traditional healing skills nor possessed the ability to read and write. At the age of 52, I fell seriously ill. Treatment at modern medical institutions failed to bring effective relief; during this period, my condition deteriorated critically, and my family held pessimistic views about my illness. This affliction troubled me continuously for three years. By the time I reached 55, I had fully recovered from my illness. Subsequently, I acquired some healing methods. At present, I am frequently sought out by people experiencing physical discomfort. Most of these help-seekers have first undergone modern medical examinations, which reveal no pathological abnormalities, yet they experience significant somatic distress. Referred by others, they come to me for diagnosis and treatment. My diagnostic method primarily involves holding bamboo divination blocks (zhu gua) in my hands and performing divination for the patient. For each different presenting complaint, I recite corresponding invocations. The invocation for treating illness is as follows: *muao ah muao, dlangh ah dlangh, geix qiaox klaof diux daf, geix miung af zhix, aux shix mingx geix daf clhai nis*, O malady, O spirit, whence do you come? What is your family name and personal name? For what deed have you come to him? [9]

Through interviews, it has been found that medical incantations reflect the transformation

and growth of individuals in the interplay between illness and belief. Folk healers, drawing on their own extraordinary experiences, gain therapeutic powers and provide another option for those patients for whom modern medicine offers no effective remedy, which to some degree fulfills their psychological and cultural needs.

5. Linguistic Expressions of Yearnings for a Better Life in Blessing Chants

Blessing incantations are blessings-seeds that cast worldly wishes, ethical precepts, historical memory, and ecological wisdom into the mould of poetic language. They go beyond personal prayers; carried on the sound waves of age-old oral tradition, they sow harmonious family values, a communal spirit of mutual aid, and the deep roots of cultural identity throughout the ethnic society.

Blessing for a New House:

nhaix duox jkiux chaix xiongf qjix,

May the small hearth fire burn bright for a thousand years,

aux biex zhaix chaix xiongf zhaix,

May the house foundation stand firm for ten thousand ages,

Zhaox shix mous,

May ferocious beasts take a detour and pass us by,

ldangx youx zhif daf,

May fire disasters never come near,

qiux qiux dous liaof vengs,

May the family always remain safe and sound.

Blessing for newborn birth:

doux ghoulf shaox zhif laf,

May descendants be like fish fry filling the pond,

doux muax shaox zhif laf,

Like bees filling the hive,

qiux qiux dou goulf dax jiad vyuex,

Diligent and hardworking in their studies,

dou goulf dou dniuf vyues laix nlangx,

May sons and grandsons all become top scholars.

Blessing for health and longevity:

geis yaox nalang aux dlongx zhif kuaix,

May your lifespan be as long as the great tree on the Southern Mountain that never falls,

shaix niuf youf zhif dtax,

may your life force be like a river that never runs dry,

dlouf xues mobx wvangx daod,

may your white hair be like snow covering the

mountains,
nhaif xues zhang zhif kuaod.
and

may your teeth stand firm like small hills that
never collapse [10].

Many blessing incantations use natural imagery
as metaphors, for example, comparing longevity
to the pine tree on the Southern Mountain, or
life to the source of a river—thus connecting
human life with the eternal forces of nature.
This reflects a reverence for both the length and
the richness of life, as well as a yearning for
harmonious coexistence between humans and
nature. At their core, blessing incantations are
positive presuppositions about the future,
embodying hopeful expectations for what lies
ahead. Such expectations can provide people
with psychological comfort and motivation,
giving them spiritual support.

6. Linguistic Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging Embodied in Ancient Miao Chants

Languages of ethnic minorities serve as the most
important medium of social communication in
ethnic regions and symbols of ethnic minority
identity [11]. The ancient scriptures and chants
of the Western Miao dialect are transmitted
throughout the Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan
sub-dialect area. These ancient texts are oral
classics created by the Miao ancestors over long
periods of productive labor and social practice.
Their content covers a wide range of subjects,
including the origin of the universe, the
emergence of humankind, ethnic migrations,
production and daily life, religious beliefs, and
more, making them an important vehicle of
Miao culture. The historical origins of the
Western Miao dialect ancient scriptures can be
traced back to the ancient Miao society. Since
the Miao people historically had no written
script of their own (several Miao orthographies
have been developed in modern times, but their
use remains limited), these scriptures have been
passed down to the present primarily through
oral transmission. Although this method of oral
instruction and rote memorization has increased
the difficulty of cultural transmission, it has also
preserved a strong degree of stability and
continuity in the process. These texts are vivid
records of Miao history, providing valuable oral
materials for the study of Miao historical
origins, migration processes, and social changes.
Through descriptions of ancestral deeds and
migration routes contained in the scriptures, it is

possible to reconstruct the historical
development of the Miao ancestors, filling gaps
left by written records. Through the chanting
and singing of these scriptures, the Miao people
have transmitted their ethnic historical memory
from generation to generation, forming a unique
mechanism of historical transmission that
facilitates a deeper understanding of Miao
history, culture, and social structure. This
historical information mainly includes Miao
origin legends, ethnic migrations, major
historical events, and social transformations. In
terms of nature worship, the ancient Miao
scriptures record veneration of natural
phenomena and objects such as heaven and
earth, the sun and moon, mountains, rivers, and
streams, which are believed to influence human
life, fortune, and misfortune, thereby expressing
awe of and dependence on nature.

7. The Role of Loanwords in Promoting Social Progress and Innovation

The ancient scriptures serve as an important
carrier of the Miao language, providing rich
linguistic material for its study. They preserve
many archaic vocabulary items and
phonological features, which are of great
significance for researching the evolution of the
Miao language, dialectal differences, and its
relationships with other languages such as
Chinese. At the same time, the poetic forms and
rhetorical devices found in the scriptures reflect
the artistic and expressive qualities of the Miao
language. These linguistic characteristics are not
only important markers that distinguish Miao
from other languages but also constitute crucial
data for studying its historical development and
language contact. The ancient Miao scriptures
preserve a rich system of initials, finals, and
tones, and also retain many archaic phonological
features, such as consonant clusters and final
consonants. They also preserve a large number
of primitive and archaic Miao vocabulary items,
which are integral parts of the Miao lexical
system. Many terms related to traditional Miao
culture and ways of life, such as those
concerning religious beliefs, production, daily
life, customs, and rituals—are preserved in these
texts. These words are rarely used in everyday
speech but remain intact in the ancient
scriptures, offering important clues for the study
of ancient Miao society.

The ancient Miao scriptures have unique
advantages in preserving and displaying

linguistic features. On the one hand, they are typically performed on specific occasions by specialized song masters or ritual priests, who have received formal training and possess high linguistic proficiency and expressive ability, ensuring accurate pronunciation and delivery. On the other hand, the performance of these scriptures follows fixed melodies and tonal patterns, requiring the performer to enunciate clearly and accurately, thus guaranteeing the faithful transmission of linguistic features. Moreover, the content of these scriptures is relatively fixed and undergoes little change over time, which facilitates the stable preservation of linguistic characteristics.

The ancient scriptures also constitute important records of language contact, reflecting the interaction and influence between Miao and other languages, especially Chinese. This language contact is manifested primarily in vocabulary, grammar, and phonology. In terms of vocabulary, the ancient Miao scriptures contain a substantial number of Chinese loanwords, which reflect the history and nature of Miao-Chinese linguistic contact. These loanwords mainly pertain to politics, economy, culture, science, and technology. The different times and methods of borrowing provide valuable data for studying the history and characteristics of this contact. In terms of grammar, the scriptures also reveal Chinese influence on Miao syntax, particularly in word order, function words, and sentence structure. For instance, some sentence patterns in the scriptures exhibit word order and structural features influenced by Chinese, and certain Chinese function words appear as grammatical particles. These phenomena reflect the close interaction and cultural integration between the Miao and Han ethnic groups.

8. The Function of Recording History and Inheriting Civilization

The ancient scriptures are the cultural cornerstone that enabled traditional Miao society to function effectively. Through sacred narratives, systematized customary law, ritual performances, and the authoritative practice of village elders, they successfully constructed a comprehensive system of social norms encompassing ethics, codes of conduct, and mechanisms for dispute resolution. This system was vigorously maintained through moral education and internalization, community

mediation and arbitration, public opinion pressure, divine judgment as deterrence, and collective rituals. Historically, this system effectively sustained order, identity, and continuity within Miao communities. The wisdom and values embedded in it, as well as its functions in specific areas such as grassroots mediation, moral cultivation, and cultural identity, still hold considerable practical significance and research value today. Moreover, through adaptation and adjustment, it seeks a path of coexistence with modern society. The ancient scriptures possess high literary value. Their rich imagination, vivid depictions, and profound connotations reflect the unique aesthetic sensibilities and creativity of the Miao people. In terms of artistic performance, the Miao ancient songs are presented in various forms—solo, duet, chorus, and accompanied by specific music and dance. This comprehensive performing art has distinctive artistic charm and appeal.

In traditional social life, the ancient Miao scriptures fulfilled important social functions. They were not only a significant means for the Miao people to express emotions and transmit culture, but also an important bond for maintaining ethnic unity and enhancing ethnic cohesion. During festivals, weddings, sacrificial ceremonies, and other events, the chanting of these scriptures creates a strong ethnic atmosphere, promotes interpersonal communication and harmony, and strengthens the Miao people's sense of identity and pride in their ethnicity.

The ancient scriptures are the ultimate source of the Miao worldview, outlook on life, and value system. They define what is good and evil, right and wrong, honor and shame. The core values emphasized typically include reverence for ancestors, solidarity and mutual assistance, diligence and courage, honesty and trustworthiness, respect for the elderly and care for the young, awe of nature, awareness of common ancestry, and maintenance of community harmony. Through the study and research of these scriptures, people can gain an understanding of the Miao people's unique perceptions of nature, society, and life, as well as the rich knowledge and experience they have accumulated over long periods of production and daily life. At the same time, these texts have significant educational value, as they can cultivate national pride and cultural identity

among Miao youth, transmit and promote the outstanding traditional culture of the Miao people, and reinforce their cultural and value identification. Although the ancient Miao scriptures emphasize the distinctiveness of the Miao people, they also acknowledge the common origins and close connections among all ethnic groups. This attitude-affirming ethnic uniqueness while respecting cultural diversity-offers valuable insights for building harmonious inter-ethnic relations.

9. Conclusion

The ancient scriptures are an indispensable and integral part of Miao history and culture. In their various forms, they record the wisdom and civilization of the ancient Miao people. They serve as an emotional bond for ethnic unity and progress, and can promote interaction, exchange, and integration among different ethnic groups. The transmission and preservation of these ancient scriptures are not only necessary for cultural heritage but also important measures for advancing the creative transformation and innovative development of China's fine traditional culture.

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