

A Study on the Visual Symbols of the "NIEDI" Sacrificial Rites of the Lisu Nationality in China: Investigation of Lisu Nationality from Ludila Town, Yongsheng County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province

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Abstract

The local religious culture cannot be ignored in the context of the development of traditional Chinese culture. Lisu nationality is a unique ethnic group with primitive beliefs. However, with the spread of Christianity in Yunnan in the 19th century, the core position of primitive religious beliefs in Lisu groups dwelt in Nujiang Prefecture, and other regions in Yunnan passed out of existence. The "NIEDI" sacrificial ceremony in Yongsheng portrays the system of gods of the Lisu people's primitive folk beliefs. It also reflects the traditional ideology and image system of sacrifice, with the Lisu people's natural worship as the core.

Based on the fieldwork and literature review, this paper employs the research methods of iconology and ethnology to clarify the ritual functions of the "NIEDI" ceremony and the most distinctive paintings, sculptures, and other ritual sacrificial objects, interpret the symbolic conveyance of the visual symbols of the "NIEDI." ceremony.

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Keywords: Lisu Nationality in Yongsheng, NIEDI Ceremony, Nature Worship, Visual Culture, Symbol System

Introduction

In the context of the development of traditional Chinese culture, the local religious culture of all ethnic groups can not be ignored. Lisu nationality is a unique ethnic group with primitive beliefs, who take the spirit of all creatures as the core and often worship the sun and the moon, mountains and rivers, trees and stones, and other gods. However, with the spread of foreign Christianity in Yunnan at the end of the 19th century, the core position of primitive religious beliefs in Lisu ethnic groups dwelt in Nujiang Prefecture, and other regions in Yunnan disappeared. We found in the long-term research on Lisu culture that the Lisu people in Ludila Town, Yongsheng County, are the ethnic group with relatively complete preservation of traditional religious concepts in Yunnan, especially the "NIEDI" ceremony, which is a typical and important one in the original ritual ceremony of Lisu people.

Originating from the Tang Dynasty and was once an essential sacrificial activity of the Lisu people in the Yongsheng area, the "NIEDI" ceremony is now only famous in two main villages: Zhiduping Village and Changdihe Village in Ludila Town. The sacrificial ceremony of "NIEDI" portrays the system of gods of the Lisu people's primitive folk beliefs and also reflects the traditional ideology and image system of sacrifice with the Lisu people's natural worship as the core. The visual symbol of the ceremony is the traditional cultural symbol of the Lisu people. A practical significance of communicating with and influencing the gods was thus formed through the ritual procedures to achieve the artistic function of expelling diseases and epidemics, praying for blessings, and welcoming auspiciousness.

Based on the fieldwork and literature review of the Lisu "NIEDI" ceremony (the worship of God of War) in Yongsheng, this paper employs the research methods of iconology and ethnology to clarify the ritual functions of the "NIEDI" ceremony and the most distinctive images, paintings, sculptures and other ritual sacrificial objects, analyzes the problems of folk beliefs and symbolic significance behind it, This paper has an important practical significance for the inheritance of national traditional culture. This time, we mainly investigated and recorded the two-day main sacrificial rites.

Literature Review

There are rich records of the religious rites of the Lisu people in Yongsheng. In the Qing Dynasty, it was written in *Social Customs* of the Twelfth Volume of the *Annals of the Dali Prefecture* by Kangxi that "Lisu, the bravest

among the Yi nationality. They live in the mountains and valleys, hunt for a living, and carry long knives and poisonous crossbows during the daytime. In the sacrificial contests, they set up sheds, burning torches, and peel deer and other animals." (Li Siquan, 1662). This proves that the Lisu people advocated the ritual of offering sacrifices to gods and had formed a routine witchcraft activity in the Qing Dynasty. In the Qing Dynasty, Yang Qiong recorded in "*The Trivia in Central Yunnan*" that the Lisu people dwelt scattered on the border areas of Weixi and Tengyue, who held a religious belief in ghost spirit. (Gao Guoxiang, 2009, p. 67). The documents above show that the sacrificial rites of the Lisu people in Yongsheng in ancient times were closely related to the original belief of separated gods and souls and everything spiritual.

Since the founding of New China, scholars have published several influential papers on Lisu traditional belief and totem worship,

focusing on the Lisu people's religious ideology and visual culture in southwest China. Most scholars believe that animal totem worship is an early form of primitive worship, which cannot be separated from the soil of primitive religious belief. Yang Guangmin emphasized that primitive religious belief was the primary environment for totem worship. In his article "A Preliminary Study on the Primitive Religion of Lisu Nationality," he believed that the economic root of the totem was people's reverence and dependence on nature. He made five conclusions on the totem worship of Lisu people: totem worship is universal, totem is a symbol to distinguish different clans, animal totem is the most primitive form of worship, totem representation has prominent regional characteristics, and plant totem is the visual reflection of primitive agriculture. Gong Youde believes that the economic root of totem worship of ethnic minorities is the low level of regional productivity.ⁱⁱⁱ(Zhang Qiaogui, 1990) The academic circle has also presented several rich and high-quality achievements on the cultural origin, formation, characteristics, and functions of the Lisu primitive religious ritual process. Li Jinping has detailedly analyzed and elaborated on the traditional "Kuoshi" sacrificial ceremony of the Lisu people in Lanning County, Nujiang Prefecture, Yunnan Province, and discussed the social function of the sacrificial ceremony. In addition, the research on the funerals and sacrifices in Tengchong and the marriage ceremony of Lisu in Sichuan have captured the attention of folk custom researchers, which generally show the trend of the folk custom of primitive religious beliefs and the gradual simplification of their cultural influence.

To sum up, the academic community has made a more in-depth analysis of the Lisu traditional beliefs and their totem culture from the perspective of religion, ethnology, history, and comprehensive disciplines. However, different research directions and regional

differences in folk culture made little targeted research on the Lisu "natural god" worship and its visual presentation in the academic community, let alone the thematic sorting and summary of its visual totems. Thus, it is necessary to protect and carry forward the distinctive culture of ethnic minorities in the cultural development of the Chinese national community.

Three methodology

The object of this study lies in the folk belief ceremony "NIEDI" of the Lisu people in Ludila, Yongsheng County. Literature review and fieldwork are the two major approaches adopted by this paper.

The literature review was conducted with meticulous attention to detail, focusing on three main aspects. First, I delved into and analyzed numerous ethnographic books, sacrificial scriptures, and specific religious research texts related to religious life. Second, I meticulously collected and sorted the research materials of Lisu culture, such as local chronicles where Lisu people gathered, folk literature collections, and Lisu language research. Third, I studied ancient Chinese books about the Lisu people's social life. This comprehensive review provided a solid foundation for my understanding of the Lisu people's origin and development, religious belief culture, and social lifestyle, enabling me to preliminarily analyze the belief culture of the Lisu people in Yongsheng.

The fieldwork was comprehensive, encompassing in-depth interviews, active participation in sacrificial ceremonies, and meticulous collection of visual materials. Over two months of intensive field visits and interviews with local cultural heritage figures, I gained a profound understanding of the local ethnic groups. This allowed me to study the specific procedures and modeling tools, and to deeply comprehend the Lisu people's religious beliefs and visual forms in Ludila through close contact. To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the interview results, I prepared

an interview outline in advance, tailored to the different roles of the interviewees in the ceremony.

Field Work

The "NIEDI" ceremony is a blessing activity of the Lisu people in Ludmila. Generally, it is held in autumn, a harvest season, every 1-3 years. When it is held, people from the whole village and town will gather together and carry the rich harvest sacrifices for a three-day blessing and celebration. After many interviews and attending the Nipa ceremony, I had a preliminary understanding of the Lisu traditional ritual rules, which was somewhat helpful to this survey. The sacrifice is as follows: clean the prayer platform and prepare ritual tools on the first day; Hold a blessing and sacrifice ceremony the next day; And join the sacrificial ritual to celebrate on the third day. The main contents of the ceremony include chanting sutras to invite gods, receiving gods, praying for blessings, divining, entertaining and thanking gods, and sending gods away. It is a very grand sacrificial ceremony. Although it is a complete set of ritual procedures and norms, as an oral culture, there is no effective form of preservation and transmission for the sacrificial ritual. As with Priest Ya-Wen, oral teaching from teachers to apprentices or elders is the primary way of inheritance. I selected the "NIEDI" sacrificial ceremony in Ludila Town for this survey to analyze and describe the process of sacrifice, sacrificial utensils, sacrificial customs, and rules.

The site selected for this survey is feasible; the specific information is as follows. Interviewer: Zhang Juan, female, Han nationality; Interview content: The whole process of Lisu "NIEDI" sacrificial ceremony; Dictator and chanter: the chief priest Ya Wen (Nipa of Lisu Nationality, who has been working as a Nipa for 31 years, a successor of NIEDI). He is one of the few Nipas in Ludila Town who has been in

charge of sacrificial work since he was 24. The Nipa of the NIEDI ceremony is suffering from aplastic anemia; Ya Yugao (successor of NIEDI ceremony); Interview time: June 3 to August 9, 2022; Place of interview: Hai Fulan Family Hall, Zhiduping Village, Ludmila Town, Yongsheng County; Written by: Zhang Juan; Photograph and tape recording: Zhang Juan.

Geographical Conditions

Ludmila Town is located southeast of Yongsheng County, part of Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China. (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3) According to the *Annals of Place Names in Yongsheng County*, "Ludila" is a transliteration of the Lisu language, which roughly means "villages beside mountains, forests and rivers". Ludila has a complex terrain and climate at the junction of Yongsheng Lijiang, Binchuan Dali, and Dayao Chuxiong. Most villagers live in the valley along the Jinsha River, mainly making a living in agriculture and animal husbandry. Zhiduping Village Committee is located northwest of Ludila Town, 38km from the government of Ludila Town. Zhidu means the place where water comes out. It is named Zhiduping because there is a place where water naturally comes out of the platform. By the end of 2019, there were 771 people from 210 households in the village, including 720 Lisu people from 198 families, accounting for 93% of the total population.

iv (Li Baoyin, 2022, p 003, 005 and 051)



Fig. 1 Map of the Administrative Region of Ludila Town in Yongsheng Country Photo source: Baidu Map (2022)



Fig. 2 Map of Administrative Region of Ludila Town in Yongsheng Country Photo source: Baidu Map (2022)

Ludmila Town is one of the areas where the Lisu traditional culture has been preserved and passed on entirely. Historically, the ceremony of "NIEDI" was spread in Zhiduping and Guanfang areas of Ludila Town, Yongsheng, where the Feng and Shu clans mainly participated. Today, the worship of "NIEDI" to natural gods is mainly reserved in Zhiduping Village and Changdihe Village in Ludila Town, which is carried out in some villages and alpines, taking village or clan as the unit.

Overview of "NIEDI" Ceremony

"NIEDI" is a homonym of the Lisu language, meaning to worship the highest god. According to the explanation of the priest Ya Wen, "Ni" in the Lisu language should mean "gods" and "deities." "E" means "supreme," while "Di" means "sacrifice." Therefore, "NIEDI" generally means "sacrifice to supreme gods." The observation of the whole

The sacrificial ceremony shows the phenomenon of multiple gods and bisexual worship at the same time: in addition to the main gods "Esapa" and "Esama," Nipa is called "Ezi, Emu, Eyi" during the sacrificial ceremony, which is different according to different surnames; there are also deities of "Sayipa" and "Sayima." In the Lisu language, "pa" refers to male, adult male, and "ma" refers to female.

The sacrificial ceremony of "NIEDI" is a witchcraft cultural activity in which Nipa (the priest) wears the hat of the sun and moon and holds a particular sacrificial vessel to complete the chanting of scriptures and ritual behaviors in front of the prayer platform, which has the cultural function of exorcising evil spirits and praying for blessings. In 2020, COVID-19 swept across the world, which has had a significant impact on human society. The villagers in Zhiduping and Nipa held a blessing ceremony to pray for the early passing of the epidemic, social stability and harmony, and people's well-being. The organic combination of primitive witchcraft cultural belief and modern needs has enhanced the vitality of the "NIEDI" culture, allowing it to pass on through the changes of the times.

The behavior of Nipa (the priest) singing the sacrificial scriptures while performing with sacrificial tools or weapons constitutes the whole ritual process, which is generally divided into four parts: the exorcism ceremony, the Nipa divination ceremony, the blessing and auspicious ceremony, and the god-human sharing ceremony. It covers the content of drilling the shed, praising the gods, killing evil spirits, dancing and celebrating, etc., which is a ceremony to revere nature and urge people to live in harmony with nature.

The natural god is not the ghosts and gods of the Han nationality usually said. The natural god is the manager of all creatures in nature, the undifferentiated deification of the nationality, and the general

name of the highest existence manages all creatures. It is said that the local Lisu people believe that the god of heaven and earth is natural. Unlike other regions, the natural god is not an individual but the general name of the natural deities in the world. Everything in the world is under the "undifferentiated" management of the gods of heaven, earth, mountain, dragon, fire, and family, who act by the orders of the "natural god." The natural god is regarded as an omniscient and omnipotent god in the Lisu area of Yongsheng., who is not like the gods of fire and family in every family, nor the mountain gods in every mountain.

Nipa, a particular group living in the Lisu ethnic area, comprises some senior men who usually use witchcraft and art to exorcise ghosts, cure diseases, eliminate disasters, and solve difficulties. When someone dies, they send the dead. On holidays and festivals, they climb on a pole full of knives and walk through the sea of fire to pray for blessings and auspiciousness. During the ceremony, people contributed their mental strength and financial resources for the same goal, regardless of themselves. The ethnic identity centered on Nipa was recognized and strengthened.

Ceremony Preparation

On the first day of the ceremony, people prepare for praying, including the setting of the altar, the drawing of divine soldiers, the making of the armory, the building of the exorcism sheds, the preparation of the divination and sacrificial tools, the setting of the boundary of the site, etc. These are to be finished by villagers in the mountain area above the village under the leadership of Nipa or his assistant. The ritual site must be set on a high ground to show the worship and awe of the God of Nature.

The preparations for the prayer platform, sacrificial utensils, and venues differ. Nipa generally completes the layout and repairs the prayer platform. Although the prayer platform is fixed, "NIEDI" is usually held every few years. After a long period of natural erosion, the platform has to be prepared again for each worship activity. The utensils for praying and worship consist of three prayer platforms, a divine door, and an exorcism shed. Ordinary men are responsible for the preparation of some sacrificial vessels, offerings, and statues of the god, including gold, silver, and paper ingots, as well as weapons and props used in praying, and the production of divine solid matrix, exorcism shed, path, statues of gods and evil spirits. After all the sacrificial materials were decorated on the platform, the men gathered again and folded the silver and gold for sacrifice with yellow and silver paper. Generally, villagers can finish preparing utensils for the ceremony before sunset.

Ceremony Process

The second day is the ritual process of the "NIEDI" ceremony, which mainly includes altar praying, divination, animal killing for worship, and so on. According to the principle of "one altar, one ceremony, one person, one divination," Nipa recited scriptures while leading the disciples to pray. This ritual activity gathers villagers, ritual priests, and people from all walks of life.

Exorcism Ceremony

The "exorcism" ceremony is a symbolic cultural performance of exorcising and killing evil spirits led by the priest Nipa. It mainly includes chanting sutras, praying, killing animals, blood worship, and throwing wooden swords. From the Tang Dynasty to the present, despite the change and loss of ritual culture, the original ritual function

of eliminating disasters and collective characteristics has not been changed qualitatively.

None of the three altars of the "NIEDI" ceremony does not contain the ritual of exorcism. From the God of Mountain and the God of Earth at the lower right of the altar to the lower left and finally to the supreme god, there are links of blood worship, chanting, and expelling evil spirits. Starting from the "E" altars of "Esapa" and "Esama," the priest faces the altar, and one of the left and right Nipa assistants holds the bell while the other one knocks the brass. Nipa recited the Sacrifice Sutra: "Disease does not haunt the body, but the appetite is doubled. Clean water penetrates the intestines, and the tea nourishes the body and mind. The world has no epidemic, but harmony spreads to the universe. The disease devil will be gone, and the disputes between people will disappear. The snake devils are gone; the witchcraft and the poison lady are gone. If the diseases are gone, the devil will go with the wind..." to indicate that the disease is gone. After chanting the sutra for some time, the worship with livestock begins. The disciples kill a ram together and carry it to the prayer platform. The male disciples hold a thin pine stick known as a wooden sword. They stand around Nipa facing the forest while dipping one head of the stick in sheep blood. Nipa recites the Exorcism Sutra again, leading the crowd to throw a wooden sword to expel evil spirits. (Fig. 4)




Fig. 4 Throwing Wooden Sword (third from left: Nipa Ya Wen)

Photo source: Provided by Fulan (2021)

The Divination Ceremony of Nepa

After the ram is slaughtered for worship, its liver will be taken out for divination. The limbs, liver, and intestine are put into a large pot on the prayer platform. When waiting for the mutton to be cooked, the men lump the cooked rice into 12 pieces and place them on the altar. The mutton will be cooked and then shared after the worship. The Nipa's assistant will record the names of all the male disciples in the book in advance and then ask the Nipa to perform divination according to the principle of one person, one divination. This link's primary purpose is to foretell the villagers' fortune, such as whether the livestock can thrive, whether the family will suffer from illness, whether the grains can be harvested, and whether the next year will be safe and smooth. The male disciples gathered around Nipa to observe the direction of "Leibu," a tool for divination. If the direction was not good, the divined villagers had a chance to pick up Leibu again, recite first, and then throw down the tools until the tools turned into a positive and negative state. While reading the sutra, Nipa throws down the Leibu and observes the direction of Leibu. It takes nearly two hours to do divination and prayer in turn. (Fig. 5)

Type	Divination (Leibu)	Meaning
Yang trigram		Ominous: The extreme Yang means that the Yin and the Yang are not in harmony, which means sinister.





Yin trigram		Ominous: This is double Yin, which is unlucky.
Positive trigram		Auspicious: Heaven is the Yang, and the Earth is the Yin. The up and down means the harmony of Yin and Yang. The divination symbols mean good luck.
Negative trigram		Evil: Double trigrams are contrary to human beings, which is bad luck.
Diagonal trigram		Evil: The two corners are opposite, which means fighting against each other. It means bad luck.



Fig. 5 Divination "Leibu"

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

Place it on the pine needles, not on the ground

Blessing Ceremony

It is the ritual's primary blessing and auspicious ceremony to drive away evil spirits from the "divine bath." Nipa takes the sword in the front, cuts Zhakelei (evil spirit) with his sword, leads everyone to the gate of the divine path, and passes through the divine path with male disciples first, then female disciples. The male disciples bypass

Nine pine trees clockwise cross a bridge made of 360 pine trees and cross the gate to the edge, while female disciples bypass

seven pine trees counterclockwise, also cross a bridge made of 360 pine trees, and cross the gate (Fig. 6), and all return to the main altar. Nipa believes lighting the smoke from the bay leaves could purify the body and mind and drive away evil spirits. Therefore, Nipa's assistant holds a green pine branch and sprinkles holy water at the gate's exit, intended to bring the people health and luck.



Fig. 6 Cross the Exorcism Shed

Photo source: Provided by Ya Wen (2022)

Declaration Ceremony of Human and God

Worship of Wasi: There is one leader from each of the left and right sides of the prayer platform, one chanter, and one person blowing the gourd pipe. In the front of the platform stand two bullhorn players, and on the left and right stand two people who hold long knives around the altar. The male disciples hold tridents and steel knives, forming a line on the left and right of the Nipa altar, who follow Nipa's command to perform the sacrifice. Like the God of the Mountain and the God of Earth, they kill rams and hens for sacrifice. The disciples put "Zhakelei" in the mouth of the ram, stain the pine sword with ram blood, follow Nipa's exorcism order, and throw the wooden sword into the distance. Then, they continue to peel the ram, cook the mutton, and offer it on the prayer platform. There are 12 rice balls inserted with new incense for the second half of the blessing ceremony. Two hours later, Nipa gets up slowly and begins to chant

sutras at the side of the forest, after which the assistants standing on the left and right hit "Zhakelei" with their swords, and they all went straight to kill, smash, and catch up with him. The league is not driven away until Jipi's head is up. Jipi, Zhakelei, and other tools must be kept in one place and burnt after the ceremony to declare victory, indicating that humanity will defeat the epidemic. Nipa, who returns triumphantly, will be embraced by the male disciples, who shout and dance together. After the blessing process is ended, everyone plays the gourd pipe and sings the folk song to celebrate. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7 Declaration of Victory

Photo source: Provided by Hai Fulan (2021)

Visual Symbol System

In the ceremony of NIEDI, symbols usually appear in a symbolic form and in the form of deified objects, which has no inevitable relationship between the symbol representation and the signified. Edward Tylor, a British scholar of ritual culture, emphasized the analysis and elaboration of the process of sacrifice, sacrificial utensils, sacrificial customs and rules, and the importance of modeling images in religious ceremonies for spiritual communication.⁴ (Edward Tylor, 2005, pp. 689-690) The Lisu people in Ludila believe that the god dominates the order of the whole universe and the fortunes of the human world and manages various natural gods such as the God of

Mountains, kitchen gods, and tree ghosts. From their point of view, each god and messenger has its symbol, which is not only the object of the Lisu people's worship but also the symbol and name of the "NIEDI" spirit system.

The fieldwork shows that Lisu "NIEDI" totems include the sun, the moon, a cloud, fire, a crossbow, a long knife, a snake, a bird, a bamboo sword, sweetwood, pine wood, paper, a filthy god, a chicken, sheep, trident, boat, the Big Dipper, dog, dragon, and so on. Regarding the study of the Lisu totem, Yang Yucai once divided the 19 clan totems of Lisu in Nujiang River into four categories: animal totem, plant totem, natural phenomenon totem, and tool totem.^{vi}(Yang Yucai,1981)Gao Lishi once divided the totem worship of the Lisu Nationality into four categories: animal totem worship, plant totem worship, tool totem worship, and professional totem worship.^{vii}(Gao Lishi, 1986) The "NIEDI" sacrificial ritual reflects Lisu's religious belief with "nature" as its core through natural sculpture, painting, and comprehensive production, forming God worship system of heaven, earth, and creatures from topside down. The ritual symbols can be divided into three categories according to content: animal and plant symbols, supernatural symbols, and sacrificial tool symbols.

Regardless of the forms of symbols, as long as they are used in the ritual process, they all belong to the ritual symbols of "NIEDI" discussed in this paper.

Animal and Plant Symbols and Nature Worship

The traditional beliefs of the Lisu people in Ludila are well preserved, and they believe that all things are spiritual. The sun, the moon, stars, mountains, and rivers are the objects of people's worship. Tylor put forward the concept of animism from the perspective of

primitive belief. First, the soul of living things can exist independently of the body; Second, the spirit has risen to the status of gods. He believed there is a connection between people and gods, and people's worship comes from their beliefs.^{viii} The symbols worshiped in the ceremony of "NIEDI" mainly include the sun and the moon, waves, stars, cattle, and sheep, which inherit the ethnic group's worship and awe of nature. The sun and moon symbols are characterized by simple lines in the form of images, which are distributed on the headdress pictures and carvings of wood statues. The sun pattern is closely related to the circle, represented by the combination of circular radiation. In addition, in the clothing patterns, we usually find the sun, the moon, mountains, and rivers in the form of a crescent shape and irregular approximate circle to highlight the understanding of the sun, the moon, mountains, and rivers, which vividly reflects the Lisu people's worship and belief in the power of nature, and expresses the desire for communication between human beings and gods.

The Symbols of the Sun, the Moon and the Stars

In the early days, Lisu's ancestors had doubts when facing the sun, moon, stars, and other natural things. The Lisu people believe that while the sun brings life and hope to ethnic groups, it also brings natural disasters like drought. The active response to the relationship between the Lisu people and natural forces is naturally reflected in folk myths and legends. In the history book *Genesis, passed down orally, the ancestors of the Lisu nationality believed that the Lisu nationality was a race to catch up with the sun*. There is also a story about Lisu heroes shooting the sun to protect their people, reflecting the ideological change of Lisu ancestors in their struggle against natural forces such as the sun, the moon, and stars.

In the ceremony of "NIEDI," Nipa wears a priest hat made of the power of the sun, the moon, and the stars, which became an essential tool for worshiping the natural gods and respect for the ancestors. The patterns of the sun, the moon, and stars are the symbols of ritual nature worship. Therefore, the sacrificial hat in the ceremony needs the blessing of the natural forces of "the sun, the moon, and stars" (Fig. 8). The assistant of Nipa made it from white cotton paper and straw on which painted clouds and winds, and then tied the white paper to a triangular hat made of grasses. Nipa shall wear the hat blessed by the sun, the moon, and the stars to perform the ritual. The Lisu sacrificial priests took the sun, the moon, and stars as their belief archetypes and briefly portrayed and abstractly expressed them. They painted various forms on the sacrificial costumes with reverent feelings, showing their respect for nature, which is also the expectation of the highest guardian of the "God of Nature."

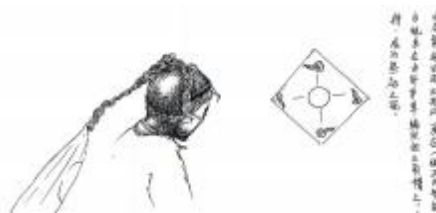


Fig. 8 The pattern of the sun and moon

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

Animal Symbols

The wave pattern expresses the geographical characteristics of the Lisu people's lives and their worship of the "God of Dragon." The God of Dragon is in charge of all rivers and seas. Since the Lisu people dwell in high mountains and river valleys, they created water streamlines based on their

worship of the forces of nature, hoping to avoid floods but harvest the grains.

Symbols for worshiping animals. The ancestors of the Lisu people in Yongsheng were the ancient Qiangdi people who migrated from the northwest. From hunting to livestock herding to the modern social form of paying equal attention to agricultural livestock and animal husbandry, cattle, sheep, pigs, and other livestock have gradually become the central part of the Lisu people's production and living materials, which is very difficult to ignore for Lisu people with difficult material conditions. During the "NIEDI" ceremony, cattle and sheep were sacrificed as sacrificial offerings in the sacrificial ceremony. The priests make horns from cattle horns, divination tools from bones, and other ethnic artifacts. These symbols, as symbols of natural worship, further achieve the function of deity worship and communication between human beings and gods. The Lisu people have kept the custom of honoring dogs for a long time. When people celebrate the festival, each family needs to give the dog the first piece of rice cake. When talking about ethnic origin and folk culture, Huang Changli believes that Lisu's creation myths describe Lisu's legends about the origin of heaven and earth, human beings, ethnic groups, and species, and show the life of ancient Lisu people.^{ix}

Application of Other Natural Symbols

Exorcism shed and divine path, etc., have the functions of natural worship and praying tools. The symbols of sun and moon, stars, waves, animals, and dragon patterns are widely used in the ritual of NIEDI. In addition, the materials for making other sacrificial objects must be divined by Nipa, confirmed by gods, and taken from nature. For example, the exorcism sheds, and divine paths are made of pine, bay leaves, hydrocoele vulgaris, and other materials.

These appearances also contain natural elements, symbols of deities, symbols of evil spirits, sacrificial utensils, comprehensive materials, animals, sacrificial sheds, and other themes. Thus, it can be seen that the ritual symbols of NIEDI extensively and intensively reflect the awe of and worship of the nature of the Lisu people in Ludmila.

Supernatural Symbols and Belief in Ghosts and Gods

Lisu people believe in the "God" of nature and the "Spirit" of their ancestors. Lisu people also believe there are souls in insects, fish, birds, animals, rivers, and mountains. In the ceremony of "NIEDI," the Lisu people call all supernatural forces "NI" and worship "Wasi," "Esapa," "Esama," and other deities.

Divine Birds "Squeak" & "Beep"

Lisu people believe that people's wishes cannot reach the gods directly, which need to be conveyed by divine birds that can reach heaven and the earth. According to the creation myth and legend of the Lisu people, birds are messengers between people and the gods of heaven and earth. Mista "Squeak" (Fig. 9) and Musta "Beep" (Fig. 10) are divine birds in the NIEDI ceremony, who are messengers to convey human desire to the God of Heaven and the God of Earth, respectively, representing the God of Heaven and the God of Earth. Lisu people believe that "Squeak" is brave and fierce and seldom meets opponents. It flies in the air without falling to the ground, so it is considered a messenger of the gods, and people begin to worship it. "Beep" mainly lives on the open ground and can hardly fly to trees and the air, so it is considered the messenger of the God of Earth. "Squeak" is the messenger bird of the God of Heaven, and "Beep" is the messenger bird of the God of Earth.



Fig. 9 Squeak (messenger of the God of Heaven)

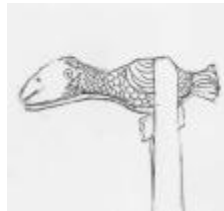


Fig. 10 Beep (messenger of the God of Earth)

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

The Lisu people used machetes, bones, sledgehammers, and other tools to make divine birds from local materials. "Squeak" and "Beep" were made by the priest Nipa and his assistant from Pines. First, they use a wood stick with a blackened end to draw a contour on the pine board and then carve a lifelike bird. Shape with tools such as machetes. A short knife cuts a wooden stick about 1m high and a bird-shaped wooden board about 35cm long. After the bird's feathers, wings, heads, and beaks are outlined with red paint, the bird-shaped wood board is clamped on the top of the stick and placed side by side. A pair of divine birds are immediately carved. The creation legend of the Lisu Nationality: "The gods of heaven and earth are from the family of birds. Lisu people call them Mista Squeak and Musta Beep, the God of Heaven and Earth." Therefore, in the ceremony of NIEDI, the head of Squeak looks up, and the head of Beep looks down, hoping that the two divine birds can convey the wishes of the village and clan to heaven and earth. The carved divine birds must be erected at a high place, which cannot be trampled.

Patron Saint "Wasi" and Divine Tree "Wawali"

At the top of the altar (Fig. 11) of "Ni" in the worship center is a pine branch about 1.8 meters high. The white cotton paper is torn into slim strips and hung on the pine branch, which means the clothes of the gods. Under the pine branch is a chestnut stake, the head of which is covered with yellow paper as a headdress. The Lisu priest uses a short knife to carve the facial features to observe everything in the world. The other branches are stretched on both sides, looking dignified and solemn. This god is named "Wasi" (Fig. 12). Behind Wasi is a pine tree up to 3.5 meters. On the pine branches, white paper strips are tied evenly to represent hair and clothes. This pine tree is called Wawali in the Lisu language and will be shaken constantly during the ceremony. Meanwhile, Nipa recited the scripture: "On the peak of mountains far away, we pray for blessings for all living beings. The tree is shaking 3,000 feet, and the smoke soars a thousand feet high. When I call my ancestors, the Pupa turned into a spirit. When I beg Wangwu, he appears to help me with the invincible might. I ask for a beautiful world full of harmony but no sin." It can be seen that "Wawali" is a sacred tree that Nipa used to communicate with his ancestors and the Holy Spirit.



Fig. 11 Altar of Ni



Fig. 12 Wasi (patron saint)

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

The Holy Soldier of "Ni"

There is a prayer platform beneath the statue of "Ni," on the left, on where 70 sandalwood branches are placed, and 90 on the right. White slim paper strips cover the top of the headdress (Fig. 13). First, the ground is made soft to insert wooden strips stable. The wooden strips will be arranged into a neat array of male soldiers and female soldiers, on top of which a small slit will be cut, and the white paper strips will be tied to the wooden strip one by one to make a simple figure. According to Nipa of Lisu nationality, 90 pine trees represent 90,000 male soldiers, and 70 sandalwood trees represent 70,000 female soldiers. They are all divine soldiers sent by the gods to help people attack and kill evil spirits. In front of the "Ni" altar is the tribute, which includes eighteen sticks of incense, thousands of gold and silver paper ingots, and twelve supplies of tobacco, local wine, tea, and food.



Fig. 13 Heavenly Soldiers



Fig. 14 Jipi (Evil spirit)

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

Evil Spirit "Jipi"

There is a three-dimensional wood carving made of pine under the "Ni" altar known as "Jipi," which is the symbol of "evil spirits of disease." (Fig. 14) They draw the sun, the south six stars, and the earth, water, humans, and livestock on Jipi. On the right side, they draw the sun, the moon, clouds and rain, the Big Dipper, and the Polaris. They draw water waves on the top of the main altar, humans, and livestock. It is similar to the effect of the deity token.

In short, the symbolic symbols of gods for the ritual of NIEDI reflect the characteristics of the religious belief of the Lisu people in Ludmila. The sacrificial objects of the Lisu people, such as the "NIE" altar with "Wasi" and "Esapa" as the core, the "Wawali" as the messenger of the gods, and the "Jipi" and "Zhakelei" as the center to expel evil spirits, all embody the space concept of "harmony between heaven and man" as the core. The upper space is superior, the left is noble, while the male is the honor, which is the traditional concept.

Instrumental Symbol and Praying Thought

It is an essential ritual for the Lisu people to use pine sheds for sacrifice. In Yunlong Prefecture of Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, it was recorded that "Lisu... set up pine sheds, burnt torches, peel roe deer and other animals in sacrificial ceremonies. They farm and do other

things and are richly endowed with millet, buckwheat, and barnyard grass." The pine shed area is mainly used to drive away evil spirits in the late stage of the ceremony, composed of the shed crossing area and the evil spirit expelling area. Pinewood exorcism shed is the core area of the function of the worship to drive away disasters. After people cross the shed in the ceremony, they wash their bodies to drive away evil spirits and welcome peace.

Exorcism Shed Symbol

As the main symbol of the "NIEDI" ritual sacrificial shed, the exorcism shed (Fig. 15), divine path (Fig. 16), and other special sacrificial tools cannot be reused, which need to be made with new materials. Most blessing utensils are made of local materials, such as pine branches, camphor branches, sweetwood, and hydrocoele vulgaris. According to Nipa Ya Wen, these plants are all used by Nipa after divination, which are the tools selected by the gods. The number of branches used to make the exorcism shed is fixed, with nine on the right and seven on the left, reflecting the Lisu people's view of gender classification. The number 9 represents men, and the number 7 represents women in routine practice.



Fig. 15 Exorcism Shed

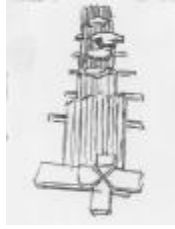


Fig. 16 Divine Path

Photo source: Painted by Zhang Juan (2022)

Pinewood and sweetwood originate from the Lisu people, who pray for blessings and practice plant worship psychology in Yongsheng. The sweetwood sacrifices are mainly divided into two forms: green leafy branches and wood. Sweetwood is an ancient alpine plant growing on the barren slopes of high mountains and has strong vitality. It has become a precious tree species in the Lisu people's areas. Sweetwood leaves can extract essential oil and have a bacteriostatic effect. In the ceremony of NIEDI, the purpose of exorcism and decontamination is achieved by lighting leaves and dyeing clothes and bodies with smoke. This is extremely important for the ancestors of the Lisu Nationality, who have long enjoyed a critical position in ritual praying tools.

Trident & Long Blade Symbol

The trident, a powerful tool of the men in this activity, also serves as a necessary production tool in the busy season of the villages. During the ceremony, a long pole made of pine wood is installed, serving as an effective sacrificial weapon to kill and drive away evil spirits. This trident, made from the bark of a camphor tree by male disciples, holds significant exorcism power in the ceremony, emphasizing the intensity and importance of this ritual.

In the ceremony of "NIEDI," there are living and sacrificial tools known as long knives and crossbows. A machete is an essential tool in the annual sacrificial ceremony of the Lisu general, "going up knives and crossing the sea of fire." In the early Republic of China, the government

dispatched the Lisu Nu Army to garrison along the western border of Yunnan. The Lisu sacrificial priest tied 36 or 72 steel knives to the upright bamboo pole frame to show that the Lisu people stuck to 36 passes and 72 checkpoints to frighten the enemy and defend the country. Long knives and crossbows reveal the brave spirit of the Lisu people. In the ceremony of "NIEDI," the long knives were used as a tool to drive away evil spirits. The front of the knife was engraved with the sun, the moon, and the stars. With the blessing of the force of nature, the priest Nipa and the male disciples could drive away evil spirits.

Straw Sandals, White Paper, and Other Symbols of Divine Blessing

Straw sandals, fireweed linen clothes, machetes, etc., are necessary for worship. Nipa must wear hand-woven straw shoes since Lisu people believe that wearing natural straw on their feet can stop ghosts from escaping. Nipa Ya Wen must also wear Nipa's exclusive fireweed linen clothing, sacrificial clothing recognized by the ancestors. Priest Ya Wen has also inherited a long machete of more than 30 years, a necessary tool for the Lisu people, whether for cutting firewood, clearing the way, or hunting in the past. In addition, all the people who participate in praying should take a handful of anti-food flour and smear it evenly on the face and neck as a protective mask.

The blessed "white paper" is the exclusive tool for the "NIEDI" ceremony. Each person holds one piece, whether a trident, a machete, or a horn. After receiving it, they cut the white paper into strips and wind it on the tool, which means "winning every battle."

Other Sacrificial Symbols

Roosters and rams are regarded as the main offerings recognized by the ancestors. In this "NIEDI" blessing ceremony, the villagers took the rams

and roosters carefully raised at home to the ceremony site to sacrifice the gods and pray for peace.

Cleaning and decontamination of sacrificial articles. Before the ceremony, the Nipa assistants built a temporary cooking platform under the prayer platform on the left, which was only used for cooking sacrificial items. They brought water to boil in the pot and then added branches and leaves of sweetwood for cooking. After boiling the water, they cleaned all tools and props to remove the world's dirt.

In the sacrificial ceremony, the ox horn is a communication tool between human beings and gods. The horn transmits signals, and different rhythms can transmit different information. Because the horn sounds loud and fierce, it is used to give orders or make political achievements on the battlefield. The sacrificial wood utensils are all carved from high mountain wood, which expresses the ancestor's worship belief of the Lisu people.





Regarding pine branches, when arranging the ground of the prayer platform, it is necessary to cut some branches on the nearby dwarf pine trees, which pine needles will be grabbed and laid in front of the platform neatly. When laying pine needles, it is strictly prohibited to drop them at will. All needles must face up to mean a good starting and ending.



In the NIEDI blessing ceremony, the blessing tools function simultaneously as blessing and sacrifice in production and life. They wave machetes and tridents to expel evil spirits in the ceremony. They shake the sacred tree, light the bay leaves, and blow the horn to represent the desire to communicate with God and pray for good wishes. It reflects the connotation of the beliefs, customs, and the connotations of rituals of the Lisu people in Ludmila.




Symbolic Schema Metaphor





In the process of historical development, the symbolic form of Lisu ritual culture has a close relationship with its unique geographical environment and folk culture. The ritual symbols in Lijiang are rich in themes and extensive in content, covering all aspects of the ancestors' life and belief system. These shapes also include natural elements, comprehensive materials, animals and sacrificial sheds, symbols of deities, symbols of evil spirits, sacrificial utensils, and so on. Using simple national painting lines, patterns, natural materials, and other belief symbols to describe the ethnic and cultural content of gods, such as sacrifice, disaster expelling, prayer, and so on, forms a unique ritual representation of the Lisu people in southwest China.



The "NIEDI" ceremony believes that nature has spirits and worships "natural gods." The shapes of various gods, rivers, stars and seas, birds and beasts, deified animals, evil spirits, etc., in the natural belief, are all displayed in the form of painting, sculpture, and comprehensive materials, forming a religious art visual culture with the worship of nature and belief in all things and the characteristics of the southwest region. Through continuous evolution, natural images have become recognized and accepted by people, such as the images of the sun, the moon, and the divine bird, which are just the rich plastic arts and aesthetic activity symbols of the Lisu ancestors.





Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Symbols for animals and plants	The sun	Hat of Nipa		Means the crown of the divine blessing of the sun and the moon.
Symbols for animals and plants	Dog's teeth	Clothing		Totem worship, respect for dogs.
Symbols for animals and plants	Azalea	Clothing		Symbolize the love of the Lisu people.
Symbols for animals and plants	Pine, bay leaves, stones	Divine path (About ghosts and gods)		Driving evil, blessing for fortune, and auspiciousness The divine path comprises 360 divine kinds of wood, above which bay leaves and

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
				burnt stones are placed to imply purified hearts after crossing it.
Symbols for animals and plants	Pine shed, wood gyroscope	Exorcism shed		Seven on the left and nine on the right represent blessings for men and women, driving diseases away to regain health.
Symbols for animals and plants	Burnt pine strips and wood plates	Pen and board		It is taken from nature, representing that divine birds are produced from natural forces.

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Symbols for animals and plants	White paper strip	Hair and skin		The personification of pine branches has become a symbol of divine skills.
Symbols for animals and plants	Pine, trident	Main prayer platform of Jipi		Auspicious altar ceremony: to attract wealth, to accept auspiciousness, and to achieve social harmony and stability.
Symbols for animals and plants	Pine, paper strip, divine soldiers	The supreme god of NIEDI		It can dominate nature and protect people, six animals, and grains.

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Supernatural symbol	Evil spirit	Jipi		Jipi is a symbol of disease and health.
Supernatural symbol	Pine	Wasi		The symbol of the god
Supernatural symbol	Pine branch	Esapa, Esama		The image of the tree in the mountain forest It symbolizes the God of the Mountain and the earth god
Supernatural symbol	earth bird	Maspa “Beep”		The messenger of the God of Earth can convey the ritual and blessing of human beings to the god.

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Supernatural symbol	heavenly bird	Mispa “ Squeak”		The messenger of the God of Heaven can convey human beings' sacrificial rites and blessings to the god.
Supernatural symbol	Pine, sandalwood strip	90,000 male and 70,000 female divine soldiers at the main altar		The divine soldiers of “Wasi”. 99 represents males, and 77 represents females.

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Supernatural symbol	Pine	Zhakelei		It symbolizes the gossip ghost. Dispelling the gossip ghost can avoid quarrels between husband and wife and ethnic groups.
Sacrificial tools	Long, cloud, the sun	Knife		Kill evil spirits, such as Jipi and Zhakelei; Production of household appliances.
Sacrificial tools	trident	Weapon		Kill evil spirits, such as Jipi and Zhakelei; Production of household appliances.
Sacrificial tools	cow	Horn		God's tool for transmitting signals

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Sacrificial tools	Magical instrument	The bronze bell for praying		The bronze bell can convey Nipa's wishes.
Sacrificial tools	Short pines	Sacrificial platform		It is strictly forbidden to leave it at will. The pine needle faces up, meaning a good start and ending. The year will be passed smoothly.
Sacrificial tools	Leibu	Divination tool		To foretell whether the diviners and their production and life are healthy and auspicious.

Theme	Name of symbol	Part of decoration	Photo of the object/ drawing	Implication
Sacrificial tools	Bay leaves and water	Clean the dirt		Cleaning and praying utensils, props, and containers
Sacrificial tools	Sacrificial vessel	Alpine azalea		Worship the ancestors

The form and application of the "NIEDI" ritual symbol -- animal and plant symbols, supernatural symbols, sacrificial tool symbols.

Summary and Conclusion

The ceremony of "NIEDI" reflects the particularity of the religious and cultural environment of the Lisu people in Ludmila. According to Zhang Zhong, a Lisu religious and cultural scholar, Lisu people have believed in the God of Mountains since ancient times, believing that they are the supreme gods that dominate everything in the world and are the supreme objects of worship in the "Misni" hierarchy.^X(Zhang Zehong,2006). However, it is also the religious culture of ghost belief, and the religious belief content in different regions has its own culture. The relationship between man and God is based on natural worship and the supreme belief of the "God" of the Lisu people in Ludila, which is worth exploring.

The Space and God-human Relationship of NIEDI

The "NIEDI" ceremony needs a specific space. Different space boundaries must be set up to distinguish the relations

between God, nature, and people. It is worth noting that the altar's location, the placement of offerings, and the boundary line of activities all reflect the subtle relationship between man and God in the ceremony.

The division of ritual space determines the boundaries between culture and ethnic groups. In the ceremony, the sacrificial activities centered on the "Ni" altar are at the core of the ritual procedures. The sacred tree with humanized "white paper strips" and the patron saint "Wriver's social features present a "look down" attitude in the altar space. "Wasi" (God of Heaven) is superior to the gods, showing its position as the master of everything. Song Enchang once investigated the religious beliefs of the Lisu people. He pointed out that the Lisu people believe in "Misni," the master of nature and the economic activities of the village community. Mountains, rocks, trees, and land belong to "Misni." The Lisu people in Ludila believe that "Wasi" is the master of all things in nature and the determiner of village production and life. Mountains, forests, and the earth are under the jurisdiction of "Wasi." The economic production in Ludila, which is dominated by agriculture and supplemented by animal husbandry and hunting, should be protected and managed by "Wasi"—at the lower right of the "Wasi" altar, worshiped "NIE" (God of Mountain, God of Earth). The white paper strips represent the clothes of gods to dispel evil thoughts and spirits. The area of the altar is also slightly smaller than that of the "Wasi" altar. The altar is the boundary of the ceremony, which is connected by Nipa's assistants with hemp rope and tied with white triangle paper flags to separate the women of their ethnic group and other ethnic groups. The boundary is an essential concept for the division of the subject and object space of the ceremony. In the NIEDI blessing ceremony,

women are not allowed to enter within the boundary of the prayer platform, nor are they allowed to speak languages other than Lisu.

The NIEDI symbol is characterized by natural images, symbolizing the top-down status relationship between gods, nature, clan members, and foreigners. Through a series of ritual behaviors such as ritual chanting, divination, and exorcism, it expresses the ritual space setting of Lisu people based on the ritual system culture of the Han people and linked by ethnic relations, different from the "other people" who have no blood relationship and establishes the relationship between man and god with heaven as the priority, nature as the second, and Lisu male disciples and people as the next.

The Relationship between Man and Nature: From "Dependence" to "Man Conquers Nature"

The sacrificial ceremony for the natural gods shows that the ancestors of Lisu Nationality have paid great respect to the universe, mountains, rivers, animals, plants, and ancestors: “There are nine galaxies and seven floors on the ground. There are three volumes of white clouds and ten thousand feet of black clouds. I want to ask my relatives who their family members are. Heaven has three types of clans, with relatives living near the river's source. The first type is black, the second is white, and the third is yellow. They are powerful to stretch out their hands and lift their feet. Their souls float outside the body in the empty world. The men and women are farming and weaving to wait for the harvest of the grains. There is no silver in their pockets and no gold sand in their waist pockets. They might hunt nothing in the mountains, even though it is dark. The herds do not return, and cattle and sheep do not flock together. ”The chanting explains the worship of the main god and their wish. When talking about ethnic origin and folk culture, Huang Changli believes that the Lisu creation

myth works of the Lisu people describe the origin of heaven and earth, humans, ethnic groups, and species, showing the life outlook of the ancient Lisu people.^{xii}(Huang Changli,2001)

Applying the NIEDI ceremony to divine birds and animal symbols reflects the religious belief of Lisu ancestors in relying on nature. Ancestors obtained food and warm clothing through hunting. In a severe mountain environment, hunting animals is a survival skill Lisu men must learn. In the eyes of Lisu ancestors, offerings such as pigs, cattle, and sheep were delicacies and fierce and dangerous creatures. It is precisely due to people's fear and dependence on natural things that this worship repeatedly appears in the Lisu "NIEDI" ceremony, which reflects Lisu's "dependence" on nature.

The idea of "fighting against nature" in the NIEDI ceremony also occupies a particular position. In the ceremony of "NIEDI" expelling evil spirits, there were repeated scenes of chasing and killing evil spirits, which were reflected in throwing the "divine weapon - the wooden sword" and killing "evil spirit Jipi." The *Lisu Sacrifice Sutra* says that a long time ago, there was a tiger in the mountain, which often killed people. Later, a young man bravely killed the tiger, bringing peace and health to people. It can be seen that under the influence of the Lisu people's concept of "fighting against nature," the power of beasts has been weakened, which reflects the gradual change of the Lisu people's traditional concept of nature and the positive thought of "man conquers nature" of Lisu people.

Informed Opinion

The sacrificial ceremony of "NIEDI," which is mainly a natural god, differs from the idea that most Lisu people regard the "God of Mountain" as their supreme god. The Lisu people regard "Wasi" (God of Heaven) as their supreme god, followed by the

God of Mountain and Earth, while Lisu ancestors, souls, and ghosts come next.

Although the "NIEDI" ceremony is only a small part of the religious activities of ethnic minorities unique to southwest China, it embodies the Lisu people's folk beliefs of "nature worship," "all things are spiritual," and "the harmony between heaven and man." This material is valuable for studying the ritual arts of ethnic minorities. I hope more experts will carry out further discussion and research on this subject.

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