

The Exploration of “Lingyang” Ceremony in Contemporary Gansu, China

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Abstract: This article delves into the "Lingyang" ceremony, a revered ancestral veneration ritual within Gansu's funeral culture in Northwest China. "Ling" meaning "receive" and "Yang" referring to "sheep," encapsulates the ritual's essence of using animals to bridge the spiritual and material worlds. The paper detailed the “Lingyang” ceremony's complicated practices, particularly in Jingyuan and Jingtai counties, highlighting its profound anthropological significance. The paper draws comparisons between the Lingyang ceremony in Gansu and the animal sacrifice rituals of Haitian Voodoo, highlighting the similarities in their use of animals as conduits between the material and spiritual worlds. Furthermore, the study explores the "Lingyang" ceremony's historical evolution against the backdrop of societal changes and examines its relevance in the modern context of globalization and modernization. This exploration not only deepens the understanding of Gansu's funeral rites but also engages in the broader conversation on the resilience of traditional customs in contemporary society. Through a detailed comparative analysis, the article offers insights into how such rituals adapt while retaining their core identity, reflecting the dynamic interplay between tradition and change.

Keywords: Ancestor Worship, Cultural Transition, Ritual Process, “Lingyang” ceremony

1. Introduction

In the northwest region of China, "Lingyang" is an ancient ceremony dedicated to venerating ancestors, rich in cultural connotations. This ritual goes beyond being merely commemorative; it serves as an expression of filial piety and respect for the deceased. Laden with symbolic meaning, this ancient and solemn ceremony not only symbolizes respect for the departed but also imparts enlightenment for the living.

During the "Lingyang" ceremony, the filial son and clan members gather around the castrated sheep in front of the ancestral hall, holding the sheep in place. Before the ceremony, various rituals are performed, including burning joss paper as offerings, and sprinkling wine on different parts of the sheep to express respect for the deceased.

In the process of the “Lingyang” ceremony, the sheep's movements are considered symbolic of the satisfaction of the deceased. If the sheep flicks its ears and shakes, it is regarded as an acknowledgment from the deceased, indicating that the sheep has been "received." However, if the sheep shows no significant reaction, it implies that the sheep has not been "received," suggesting the deceased has unfinished regrets.

In modern society, with changes in social structure and values, the significance represented by the “Lingyang” ceremony is also changing. Currently, there is limited academic research on this ritual, with only a few descriptive articles and no in-depth interpretation. In the literature “Transformation and Continuation of the ‘Lingyang’ Ceremony in the Northwest Region,” authors Liu Hongtao and Zhang Luliang analyzed the changes in the “Lingyang” ceremony in Jingyuan, Gansu, and its underlying social reasons, highlighting the impact of modern communication and transportation on the ceremony.

Meanwhile, Zongka Yangzeng Gangbu’s “Anthropological Interpretation of the ‘Lingyang’ Sacrificial Ceremony in Lanzhou, Tianshui, and Other Places in Gansu” delves into the social and familial significance of the ceremony. Although both articles offer important insights into the “Lingyang” ceremony, they analyze it solely from a folkloristic perspective, lacking a comprehensive and in-depth approach.

This study aims to explore the forms of funeral “Lingyang” ceremonies in the Gansu region from a religious anthropological perspective, as well as the underlying theories they reflect, and to analyze the impact of the ceremony on contemporary society. The thesis will be divided into the following parts: The first part will provide an exhaustive introduction to the specific steps of the “Lingyang” ceremony and the current ceremonial situation in Jingyuan and Jingtai counties of Gansu Province. This section will give a comprehensive account of the funeral culture and the details of the “Lingyang” ceremony in rural Gansu. The second part, from the perspective of religious anthropology, will compare and analyze the Lingyang ceremony and the traditional rituals of Haitian Voodoo. It discusses the religious anthropological theories reflected behind the “Lingyang” ceremony. The third part will explore the historical changes and the current state of the “Lingyang” ceremony; finally, the fourth part concludes by discussing the significance of the “Lingyang” ceremony for the folk heritage of Gansu today. The details of the ceremonies described in this article are primarily derived from interviews with villagers from Jingyuan, Jingtai, and Qingyang counties in Gansu Province.

2. The Connotations of the “Lingyang” Ceremony

2.1. Funeral Culture and the Tradition of the “Lingyang” Ceremony in Rural Gansu

In rural Gansu, funerals, known as “White Affairs,” are considered critically important events with complex and complete ceremonial procedures. Funerals typically last 3 to 7 days, during which the family must consult a fortune teller to select an auspicious burial date based on the deceased's name and birth date. If a suitable date is hard to find, the burial may be delayed even longer. The entire funeral requires the participation of all family members: adult men dig the grave, women prepare food in the kitchen, and older children assist with various chores.[1] During the funeral, all family members younger than the deceased must wear white mourning attire. Family members kneel in front of the deceased's coffin, burning joss paper and kowtowing during the tributes of others. Respected elders or the village chief often act as the master of ceremonies, providing a final judgment and evaluation of the deceased's life. The “Lingyang” ceremony, a critical part of the funeral process, is typically held the day before the burial.

Before the “Lingyang” ceremony begins, the host first burns incense and pours libations as a sign of respect for the deceased. This is followed by the ritual of burning joss paper, considered a means of communicating with the deceased's spirit and serving as a method of message transmission. After burning joss paper, it is believed that the spirit of the deceased attaches itself to the sheep. There's a folk saying that at this moment, the sheep bridges the worlds of the living and the dead. Then, family members start asking the sheep simple yes or no questions, typically about the deceased's unfulfilled wishes or messages for their descendants. Observing the sheep's reactions determines the accuracy of the answer. If the sheep trembles, it indicates an accurate guess, signifying that the “Lingyang”

ceremony is successful; no trembling suggests the opposite. If there are relatives present who failed to fulfill their filial duties while the deceased was alive, the sheep may exhibit unusual behavior. Once the deceased's wishes are understood, the family acts accordingly. At the end of the ceremony, a needle is used to prick the sheep's ear to obtain a drop of blood on the joss paper, which is then burnt, signifying it's time to slaughter the sheep. After the ceremony, the sheep is slaughtered and consumed by the mourners. Within three days after the burial, family members are required to deliver meals to the new grave daily. Subsequently, within the forty-nine days following, a ritual is held by the family every seventh day to commemorate the deceased. Every year during the Spring Festival, Qingming Festival, and the anniversary of the deceased's death, especially on the third anniversary, the family will also pay respects to their ancestors at the gravesite.

In rural Gansu, the "Lingyang" ceremony during funeral rituals is an extremely crucial and solemn event, profoundly reflecting the cultural value of ancestor worship deeply rooted in family and tradition. These complex and exhaustive ritual processes are not only a commemoration of the deceased's life but also a reinforcement of family bonds. Through the "Lingyang" ceremony in Gansu's funeral rituals, it is found that locals believe that after a family member passes away, they journey to another world, the so-called netherworld. This is why people often use the phrase "passed away" instead of "died," suggesting that deceased loved ones have transitioned to another place rather than disappearing entirely. People believe in the existence of spirits, which can inhabit a castrated sheep to communicate with family members. This belief is a manifestation of the concepts of the afterlife and the immortality of the soul. Ancestor worship is derived from such notions of the soul. People do not just conduct funerals and offer sacrifices when a family member dies; worship continues even after the deceased has passed away. Every Spring Festival and the anniversary of the deceased, their descendants perform joss paper-burning rituals. It is believed that ancestors live in another world after death, becoming deities with supernatural powers that can greatly influence real-world societal life.[2] If the living descendants respect, venerate, and worship the ancestors, they can receive their ancestors' blessings. The ancestors will fulfill their wishes and requests, helping them realize certain ideals.[2] Hence, people worship their ancestors. As previously mentioned, funeral ceremonies are typically conducted on a large scale, involving the participation of numerous family members and taking turns keeping vigil, thereby further strengthening kinship ties among descendants. Therefore, the "Lingyang" funeral ceremony serves not only as a remembrance of the deceased but also as a vital means of reinforcing social bonds and connecting family members.

At the current stage of economic, cultural, and social development in rural communities, traditional beliefs often deemed "superstition" should be increasingly questioned and gradually fade away. However, as per the writer's investigations in Jingtai and Jingyuan counties, this assumption does not hold in reality; folk beliefs still play a significant role in local social life. Although the "Lingyang" ceremony is a funeral ritual, it carries profound cultural connotations: Firstly, it provides an opportunity for the bereaved family to express their deep sorrow and filial piety towards the deceased. Secondly, through the Lingyang ceremony, relatives and friends gather, and elders inquire about the people and matters the deceased cared about during their life, allowing the deceased's thoughts, concerns, and wishes to be expressed and continued in the public eye. Additionally, this ceremony serves as an inspiration and caution to the dutiful sons and daughters and relatives present, promoting the transmission and development of funeral culture.

2.2. The "Lingyang" Ceremony in Gansu from the Perspective of Religious Anthropology

The use of animals as instruments in ritual sacrifices is a practice deeply ingrained in human religious and cultural traditions, with its presence and practice found in various religions around the world. For example, in ancient Egypt, animal sacrifices were made to show reverence to deities like Osiris; in Greek and Roman mythology, such sacrifices were often made to gods like Zeus as offerings of prayer;

and in the Torah, people built altars out of stones to offer sacrifices to Jehovah as part of rituals for confession, placing the sacrificial animal (usually a sheep) upon the altar to be consumed by fire. These religious practices not only embody worship of the divine but also reflect a profound understanding of life, death, and supernatural forces. The ubiquity of animal sacrifice demonstrates a common mode of expression and emotion humanity shares when confronted with the divine and the supernatural.

The "Lingyang" ceremony in the funeral traditions of rural Gansu reflects the tradition of ancestor worship in Chinese traditional culture. These complex and detailed ceremonial processes not only commemorate the life of the deceased but also serve as a reinforcement of family bonds and a means of showing respect and remembrance for ancestors. They also display the deep connection and respect that family members have for past generations, a connection and respect that are also reflected in their understanding of nature and the spiritual world. Similarly, this reverence for the natural and spiritual worlds is deeply rooted in other primal religious practices, such as in the rituals of Voodoo in Haiti, where animal sacrifices and communication with spirits are also evident. Although these rituals differ in form from Gansu's "Lingyang" ceremony, they fundamentally also show a profound respect for the cycle of life, ancestors, and spirituality. These rituals are not only of religious significance but also reflect reverence and communication with ancestors and the spirit world.

Voodoo, originating in West Africa, is a religion steeped in mysticism. Its name represents "spirits" or "deities" in the local language. This religion blends ancestor worship with the belief in animism, reflecting a primal and profound spiritual belief system. In Voodoo, followers can communicate with spirits through specific religious ceremonies, even reaching a liminal state between humans and spirits. Traditional Voodoo still retains an ancient ritual of spirit appeasement, namely animal sacrifice, which continues to be practiced today. A typical example of this is the sacrifice of goats.

Hunsi (an initiated member) gently pressed his legs against the goat's hind legs to calm it down. Then, the Houngan (male priest), possessed by Angelus, placed a veve (a symbolic religious pattern) in front of the goat, designed with cornmeal around a candle. He began the ritual by sprinkling the flour on the goat's back and making the sign of the cross. Afterward, he pressed his finger on the goat's forehead, drawing multiple crosses, and then leaned forward to touch his forehead to the goat's. Several assistants then held the goat, forcing its mouth open to drink "guinea water" (a symbolic holy water originating from the spiritual homeland of Guinea in Vodou belief), akin to a communion, sharing the divine with the animal. During the ritual, the goat was led to turn in four directions and then set free. The followers stepped back, encircling the now considered 'sacred' animal. The goat, appearing intoxicated, almost hypnotized, showed no sign of fleeing. It then staggered towards the houngan's private altar, where it collapsed and began to convulse. As it died, the houngan also came out of the possession. [3] Although these animals are treated with respect during the ceremony, they are traditionally slaughtered at the end of the ritual and shared as food among the congregation. This practice is similar to the "Lingyang" ceremony in Gansu, where the slaughtering of the animal signifies the departure of the spirit from the animal body, akin to a release or liberation of the spirit.

The "Lingyang" ceremony in Gansu and the goat sacrifice ritual in Haitian Voodoo display significant similarities in several aspects, particularly in the role of animals as mediums between the material and spiritual worlds. This concept is closely linked to Edward Tylor's theory of animism, which posits that early human cultures commonly believed that all elements of the natural world possess a spiritual essence.[4] In both rituals, the sheep are not merely sacrificial objects but are imbued with deep religious and symbolic significance. In the "Lingyang" ceremony of Gansu, the sheep is considered a vessel for the soul of the deceased, with its behavior interpreted to understand the will and responses of the departed. Similarly, in the rituals of Haitian Voodoo, goats are considered vessels for possession by spirits, with their behaviors and reactions interpreted as divine indications.[3] The symbolic actions in these ceremonies, such as burning incense, pouring libations,

sprinkling flour, and drawing symbols, are all meant to establish a connection with the supernatural world. Moreover, the climax of both ceremonies involves the sacrifice of the animal and the full participation of the local community. In the "Lingyang" ceremony of Gansu, the castrated sheep is slaughtered at the end of the ritual and then shared among all participants. Similarly, in Voodoo rituals, after hours of dancing, singing, and celebrating, the sacrificed animal is also divided and served as a feast for the congregants present.

Whether in Gansu or West Africa, the use of animals in sacrificial ceremonies represents a collective social and cultural activity, playing a central role in maintaining community structure and cultural heritage. In both cultures, the sacrifice of animals symbolizes not only the completion of the ceremony but also expresses deep reverence for the deceased or the deities. Through this action, community members collectively embody their awe and respect for life, death, and supernatural forces. In both the "Lingyang" ceremony and Haitian Voodoo, the practice of animal sacrifice is deeply integrated into the people's worldview. Animals are perceived as intimately connected with both the natural and spiritual realms.

3. The Inheritance and Transformation of the “Lingyang” Ceremony

The "Lingyang" ceremony, deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Northwest China, has a long history dating back hundreds of years. According to Associate Professor Awang Jiacao from Lanzhou University, this ceremony is not only present in the local ritual "Lalu" (spirit) in some villages of the Diebu area of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, his hometown, but also in similar practices during the sacred mountain worship ceremonies among Tibetan and Han villagers of the six tribes in Gongben (Ta'er Monastery) in Qinghai. This indicates that the "Lingyang" is a widely practiced ritual in the Han-Tibetan border areas of the Qinghai Tibet Plateau.[5] The core element of this ceremony involves pouring libations over a sheep symbolizing the soul of the deceased, asking questions, and observing whether it shivers—an act symbolizing the acceptance of the deceased's soul and seeking its peace.

According to field research conducted in Jingtai County, a local villager named LYZ shared stories about the "Lingyang" ceremony. She had heard of this ceremony since childhood and recalled that her grandfather often spoke about the details of this ritual, emphasizing its importance as a family and community tradition. Similarly, a villager from Jingyuan County, KZ, confirmed this, mentioning that the "Lingyang" ceremony has a long history in the local community and is a ritual activity that has been passed down since ancient times. Narratives from villagers of different ages and regions demonstrate the continuous transmission of the Lingyang ceremony within their communities. Their testimonies not only highlight the historical continuity of the ceremony but also showcase its vitality in modern society. Although there are no explicit records of the specific dynasty in which the Lingyang ceremony originated, interviewees indicated that this ritual practice has been transmitted across generations.

Although many contemporary people regard it as superstition, this ceremony has indeed existed for many years, carrying profound social significance in terms of family unity and respect for elders. Yet, as time has progressed, particularly in the context of contemporary society, the "Lingyang" ceremony has undergone significant changes. The process of modernization, such as urbanization, transformation of economic structures, and lifestyle changes, has profoundly impacted this traditional ritual, leading to its gradual rarity in some areas. For instance, in the "Lingyang" ceremony of Jingyuan County, the original components involving communication with the deceased have been simplified or omitted in some regions, with memorial services increasingly replacing funerals. This reflects a societal shift from public to more private, individualized living. In some areas, while sheep are still brought to funerals, the traditional "Lingyang" ceremony is no longer performed, weakening its original meaning. In the past, relatives attending funerals were expected to bring sheep. Nowadays,

the tradition of "Yang Beizi" (replacing sheep with money) has emerged and become popular in many regions, further illustrating the evolution and decline of this traditional ceremony in the context of modern society.[6]

Nowadays, in some remote or conservative rural areas, the "Lingyang" ceremony, although preserved, has undergone changes in form and meaning. Particularly among the younger generation, influenced by migration to cities and modern education, there is reduced awareness and participation in this ritual. This change reflects the accelerated pace of life and a gradual weakening of traditional cultural identity. As a result, the current "Lingyang" ceremony is in a transitional state between tradition and modernity, representing a part of cultural heritage while also facing challenges of adapting to contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

The "Lingyang" ceremony, deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Northwest China, is not only a commemoration of departed loved ones but also a unique form of ancestor worship. This ritual, especially through the use of sheep as sacrificial offerings, establishes a profound connection between the living and the deceased. In this process, the sheep is more than just a physical being; it becomes a medium for conveying the emotions and prayers of the worshippers. As discussed above, the "Lingyang" ceremony reflects not only the inheritance of traditional Chinese ancestor beliefs and sacrificial customs but also embodies the religious anthropological discussion of animal soul worship, being a part of primitive worship. The "Lingyang" ceremony is not only a remembrance of ancestors from the past but also stems from primitive humans' awe of mysterious forces beyond reality, highlighting the close connection between humans, nature, and the spiritual world.

In the context of modernization and globalization, traditional cultural practices like the "Lingyang" ceremony in Gansu are facing significant changes and challenges. Particularly among the new generation, this tradition is gradually being diluted, in stark contrast to the emphasis and practice of such rituals in their parents' generation. However, despite the diminishing influence of these traditions among the younger generation, their core values and meanings still profoundly impact contemporary society. The "Lingyang" ceremony is not solely a way of commemorating ancestors but also highlights family unity and community bonds. Despite the rapid changes in modern life, the persistence of the "Lingyang" ceremony indicates that traditional culture still holds irreplaceable value and significance.

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