

Miao Drum Culture and Its Social Function

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Abstract

The Miao drum, as a specific cultural symbol, possesses great ethnocultural significance and it serves an important social function complementary to Miao people's customs of production, livelihoods, beliefs, rituals and festival celebrations. Knowledge of the Miao Drum Culture is helpful for further understanding the unique culture of the Miao people.

Customs of a nation are the reflection of its economy, politics and culture. Customs are also social phenomena, with which to understand one nation and the windows to see its inherent cultural meaning. Miao is a nationality with a long history, which over time has developed unique customs. The drum itself is one kind of folk custom. The Miao people not only have dazzling drums, but they are also endowed with an elaborate drum culture, revealed in their production, livelihoods, beliefs, etiquette, recreation, etc. (Li Tinggui 1996:303-304). In the mountainous regions where the people reside, the Miao drum embodies highly significant cultural characteristics in virtue of a remarkable history, humanity and geographical environment. In the face of changes in Miao life and with the integration of cultures, the Miao drum continues to bring singing and dancing together to form diverse cultural contexts. From an indigenous perspective, the author considers it beneficial to have knowledge of the Miao Drum Culture in order to further understand the unique culture of the Miao people.

The Origin of the Miao Drum

Thousands of years ago, Miao people had a kind of mystical worship to the drum. They believed that the drum symbolized the abdomen of pregnant women and procreation. They considered that the drum, which is constructed of twelve planks, represented twelve large branches of Miao in ancient times, thus the drum could help them to find their origin. Upon careful investigation of the Miao Drum Culture, from an indigenous perspective, it was determined that the production and evolution of the drum are closely tied to Miao

people's history, humanity, geography and ecological environment.

In the earlier time of the Qin Dynasty to the Qin Han Dynasty, the Miao people experienced seven major migrations in the areas east of the monsoon line in China. Approximately 5000 years ago, tribes were reined by Chiyou, ancestor of the Miao people, and they lived together in the lower reaches of the Yellow River and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River areas. After the Yanhuang Tribe defeated tribes of Chiyou and killed him, Miao tribes migrated from the middle areas of China to the southern areas.

About 4000 years ago, under the rule of Yao, Shun and Yu, Miao tribes migrated to the middle and lower reaches of the northern and southern Yangtze River and established San Miao country (Editing Committee of The Collection of the Brief History of Chinese Nationalities 1985:1-8). During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, Miao tribes migrated to the northern and southern areas of Dongting Lake. When they migrated from the north to the south, they created diverse shaped earthenware "Earth Drums." Up until the Spring and Autumn Periods and the Warring States era, Miao tribes lived a patriarchal clan communal life in the Wuling mountainous regions of dense virgin forests with wild animals such as tigers and leopards. In their daily life, they collected branches to manufacture wooden drums or they fashioned tools of bamboo to drive away wild animals with their striking sound. Up until the Tang and Song Dynasties, Miao tribes mainly lived together in the borderlands of Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan and Guizhou Provinces, and some lived in Yunnan Province and the northern area of Guangxi Province (Editing Committee of the Collection of the Brief History of Chinese Nationalities 1985:1-8). Miao tribes attempted to make big drums and at the same time they created drum dances related to their sedentary agricultural life.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Miao people ceased migrating in groups. They modified the copper drum of the Baiyue people. In the areas of western Hunan and Hubei, they were influenced by Han people and discontinued producing copper drums and began to make simple, cheap wooden drums. Originally, they primarily used sheepskins to cover wooden drums. Later, they largely used cowhides for this purpose. There are numerous records, which indicate that the Miao manufactured and used wooden drums from "The Prosperous Age of Kang and Qianlong Emperors" to the Qing Dynasty. With the appearance of the wooden drum, various traditions developed such as *Dul Nhol*, the Drum Dance.

The Miao drum arose in the early period of the Qin Dynasty to the Qin Han Dynasty. After a migratory life during the Tang and Song Dynasties, particularly from the Ming and Qing Dynasties until the present, the Miao lived a peaceful, agricultural life. At the same time, the Miao drum appeared in different forms connected with dance, further enriching the drum culture of the Miao.

Figure 1: Drum Princess Long Juxian



Figure 2: Monkey Drum Dance



Figure 3: Miao Village



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Traditions of the Miao Drum

After the Miao Drum Dance appeared, there were many types of performances in western Hunan and southeastern Guizhou within the Qingshui River Basin. The styles and forms are heterogeneous because of diverse living environments, distinct language dialects, unique clothing and traditions. The Drum Dance may be divided into three types; “the Single Drum Dance”, “the Double Drum Dance” and “the Group Drum Dance”. According to the performance forms, drum dances may be divided into the “Monkey Drum Dance”, “Symmetric Drum Dance”, “Four Sided Drum Dance”, “Reunion Drum Dance”, etc. The specific performance characteristics are as follows:

The Single Drum Dance

The Single Drum Dance can be divided into two types: In one kind of Single Drum Dance, the performer dances while holding the drum in one hand and striking it with the other hand. In another Single Drum Dance, the performer dances while striking the drum with two hands. There is also a "Male Single Drum Dance" and a "Female Single Drum Dance". In the "Male Single Drum Dance", the male beats the drum and dances at the same time, waving his hands and stepping vigorously. The rhythm is lively and powerful. Miao

people usually use this drum dance to celebrate festivals and abundant harvests. The "Female Single Drum Dance" is the most common performance in the Spring Festival and other holidays. Sometimes people accompany the dancer. The dance steps are brisk and choreographed well, including shuttle-like turns. The upper body moves as the feet step, with sudden twists and swinging hips. The dance is spontaneous or steady, pleasingly graceful or highly energetic and spirited. (Long Ningying 2001:367-368).

The Double Drum Dance

The Double Drum Dance may be divided into the "Male Double Drum Dance" and "Female Double Drum Dance". These two drum dances are similar. The "Double Drum Dance" is free-form. The drummers can strike on the same side or on each side of the drum, or one strikes the drum and the other dances, each taking turns with coordinated rhythms.

The Group Drum Dance

The Group Drum Dance is also called "Flower Drum". With the exception of the "Four People Drum Dance", "Eight People Drum Dance", "Male and Female Mixed Drum Dance" etc., there are also the "Reunion Drum Dance" and "Jumping Year Drum Dance", which is popular and folkish. The drummers dance and strike a drum with their hands or with mallets at the same time. The two drummers' rhythms are coordinated and symmetrical. There is no limit to the revolving circle of men and women. "The Group Drum Dance" has a two-sided drum and a four-sided drum. It is performed during the special activities of traditional holidays such as "the Spring Festival", "June Sixth", "August Eighth", "Catching up with Autumn", "Catching up with Summer", etc. (Long Ningying 2001:367-368)

The Monkey Drum Dance

The Monkey Drum Dance is a drum dance that simulates a monkey's actions while dancing around a drum. Besides the simulation of productive labor, the drummer must simulate a monkey picking peaches, scratching itches and playing with the drum. (Long Ningying 2001:361) The drummer's posture is agile, light and humorous. There are many highly difficult techniques in this dance. The drummers may wear a monkey costume or furnish the monkey's performance with Miao clothes (Figure 3).

Symmetric Drum Dance

In the Symmetric Drum Dance, two drummers on either side of the drum perform identical symmetrical movements. This performance is usually conducted in the "Blocking the Drum Dance" or in a competition. In this presentation one family strikes on one side of the drum while relatives and friends strike on the other side of the drum. Sometimes people

of one village strike on one side of the drum while those of another village strike on the other side of the drum. On other occasions, a performer strikes on one side of the drum while another person accompanies.

The performers' movements on both sides of the drum must be symmetrical and harmonious. Each side should accompany the same identical rhythm. After the first rendition, the people immediately carry on the second set and change their position. In an execution, if one side cannot follow very well, the other side will win. Thus the "Symmetric Drum Dance" has become a kind of match. The drummer should not only be skilled in the repertoire and techniques, but must also be nimble and quick to respond at the right moment. In traditional grand drum matches, when the two sides are represented by accomplished drummers, the performance may continue all day and night in order for the contestants to defeat each other. "All Night Long" drum dances have been recorded in the "Historical Chronicle."

Four Sided Drum Dance

This drum dance is very special because the drum has four sides to strike. Two males and two females strike the separate sides of the drum respectively. This performance reflects the joyful mood of practical farm work. The four drummers change their positions during the performance and the dance movements are consistent and symmetrical. (Ji Lanwei et al. 1998:368-369)

Reunion Drum Dance

The Reunion Drum Dance is a collective dance form. It features setting a big drum on a drum rack and one person is selected to beat the drum. The others gather round the large drum dancing to the rhythm. The greater the number of dancers, the better the performance. Movements are divided into three types: big pendulum, small pendulum and thin pendulum. Males generally dance in the big pendulum, standing in an inner circle and females generally dance in the small pendulum and thin pendulum, standing in an outer circle, exclaiming in a passionate outcry, "Aho----" to reflect the joyful mood. This dance rhythm is quite discernible. The characteristics are obviously different from other forms with waist and hand movements.

There are various drum dances however there are thirty-six types of traditional drum strikes. The best drummer is awarded the title of, "Drum King/Princess". Miao people still maintain the custom of selecting a Drum King or Drum Princess. In Dehang Village of Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hunan Province, Long Yingtang was chosen as the first Miao Drum Princess of China. The second Drum Princess is Shi Shunming, the third selected is Long Julan, the fourth, Long Juxian (Figure 1) and the fifth Drum Princess is Huang Juan. The activity of Drum King and Drum Princess is a good way to hand down indigenous knowledge and it is helpful for understanding Miao culture.

Function of the Miao Drum

During their ancient migrations, the ancestors of the Miao people lost much yet they still carried the drum. After their migrant life had ended, the ancestors of Miao people used the drum in celebrations, welcoming ceremonies, sacrificial rites and other significant activities. They also could not abandon the drum while transmitting information during wartime. Along with the further development of the drum itself and the evolution of drum culture, the function of the Miao drum gradually advanced multi-functionally from its sole purpose. In examining the history of the Miao people, the drum primarily served the following purposes:

War Function

Originally, the drum was used on the battlefield in ancient times. Miao people suffered disastrously in the history of their migration. With each migration they underwent the brutal attacks of war. In the course of their long migration, Miao ancestors did not discard the drum because it helped them to make contact during times of war. Conversely, they could use the grand sound of the drum to enliven the spirit and to dispel anguish, which caused them to suffer setbacks during war. The resonance of the drum encouraged the survival of officers and soldiers by rousing them from defeat and restoring the battle strength of the whole clan. The drum was so important during ancient wartime that it became the weapon of necessity that might cause enemy troops to panic or be defeated. The function of the Miao drum was indispensable for alleviating Miao people's suffering during times of war.

Sacrificial Offering Function

From ancient times, Miao people struggled for survival and were subjected to widespread ethnic oppression, thus they attached their fate to the ancestors, manifested in fervent ancestor worship. They believed in animism and made sacrificial offerings. Most Miao sacrificial offerings took the drum as the faith token and the Miao killed oxen to sacrifice to the drum. The Miao people's activities associated with sacrificial offerings were popular in the villages and divergent forms were conducted with the greatest care and in the most sincere manner. When the people settled down, they would begin an assembly to make a drum. They hoped that the sacrificial offerings to their ancestors would evade calamities, and bestow them with the fortune to express their heartfelt hopes for peaceful, undisturbed and prosperous lives. In order to be rid of disasters and evil, Miao people frequently asked their holy man to sacrifice offerings to ghosts and ancestor gods, while striking gongs and drums with the assembly audience. It is evident that the drum became the essential sacrificial offering cultural apparatus and symbol.

Figure 3: Monkey Drum Dance

Symbol, Social Status and Authority

The "Drum Commune" is a patrilineal family organization, which evolved from fragmented groups after wartime. Each Drum Commune had a wooden drum, which symbolized the ancestral tablet. Miao people required regular or non-periodical sacrifices to the drum through ritual slaughter of cows; fully grown female oxen. This is the most significant sacrificial offering rite in southeast Guizhou Province. By performing sacrificial offerings to the drum, the drum's divine nature was strengthened. Therefore, in the cultural system of the Miao, the status of the drum became increasingly more important, symbolizing property and authority.

Entertainment Function

Today, at every Miao celebration, the drum is one of most commonly used musical instruments and has become a conveyor of artistic expression. Miao people merge unique dance movements with the strike of the drum. People took part in drum dances to celebrate victory, to demonstrate talent and to exchange sentiment. From few to many, from irregularly to periodically, from unselected places to agreed-upon places, the drum dance has become a tradition among the people. For thousands of years, whether in the field or in the stronghold of the village, at festivals or for wedding ceremonies, Miao people will hold the drum dance competition in order to display their brilliance and cultural traditions (Figure 2). The Miao drum is an essential musical instrument for the mass culture and the entertaining culture.

Conclusion

There are numerous functions of the drum that were not discussed in this paper. The Miao people entrust the drum with great significance and meaning. It is an empowering cultural symbol that serves to furnish the Miao people with strength of character, resolve, determination and fortitude within their spiritual and physical environment.

Today, some functions of the Miao drum that were formerly practiced are not performed because of imposed assimilation policies that have caused changes in Miao life and culture. However there are some new functions and forms of the Miao drum that have been developed, which are an integral part of Miao culture and World Cultural Heritage.

Culture is the product of the human and ecological environment of a social community or ethnic group. Lives and livelihoods are created within this environment to sustain cultural development (Yang Tingshuo et al. 1992:2). In Miao social life, the drum is an important instrument of existence and is a key conveyor of culture. The Miao Drum Culture is a system in which Miao people demonstrate their rich and colorful life.

The drum has deeply permeated Miao history and civilization. It is an intrinsic and defining ethnic spiritual symbol, which bears important social functions and fully manifests cultural

significance and the social values of Miao life. The Miao drum reflects the historical processes and cultural evolution of the Miao people. It is the product of the human and ecological environment. It is as an ancient and dynamic cultural phenomenon that will continue to be entrusted with new meaning along with changes in the environment. With the development of tourism, its form and function will be integrated into the advancement of industry and artistic development. The Miao drum is the cultural heritage of the Miao people and it will continue to possess its own inherent cultural value.

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