

Cosmology, Gender, and Rituals: An Analysis of the Nuosu Shalaluo Ceremony

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Abstract

The Shalaluo ceremony, a coming-of-age ritual in Nuosu¹ society, represents a critical transition for girls into adulthood. This study examines the ceremony's sociocultural and spiritual significance by situating it within the broader framework of the Jia zhi system, ancestral worship, and gendered expectations. Through its symbolic processes—such as the five-section skirt and ancestral blessings—the Shalaluo reinforces the Nuosu cosmology's emphasis on lineage continuity, moral purity, and spiritual legitimacy. Moreover, the role of elderly women as ritual facilitators highlights their unique position as cultural custodians who transmit tradition while upholding patriarchal norms. This paper argues that the Shalaluo ceremony not only reflects the societal and spiritual pressures placed on women but also reveals the interconnectedness of family, cosmology, and identity in Nuosu culture.

Keywords

Patriarchy, gender roles, Nuosu, rituals, ancestral worship

1. Introduction

Rituals hold a central place in the cultural and spiritual lives of many ethnic communities, serving as mechanisms for societal regulation, spiritual integration, and the preservation of cultural identity. In Nuosu society, the Shalaluo ceremony is a cornerstone of their cosmological and social framework, marking a girl's transition into adulthood. This ceremony is not only a personal milestone but also a deeply symbolic act that connects the individual to the broader moral, spiritual, and familial obligations dictated by the Jiazhi system and ancestral worship. The Shalaluo reflects how Nuosu cosmology, gendered expectations, and familial structures intersect to shape individual identities and ensure cultural continuity.

This paper analyses the Shalaluo ceremony as a site of cultural negotiation, spiritual responsibility, and societal reinforcement. It examines the ritual under Nuosu logic, particularly its function in legitimizing a girl's role in the Jiazhi system and ensuring her moral and spiritual alignment with ancestral expectations. The study

¹ The Yi ethnic group is one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China, with a population of over 9 million, primarily residing in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou. The term "Yi" serves as a broad classification encompassing various subgroups with distinct languages, traditions, and cultural practices. Among these, the Nuosu are the largest and most studied subgroup, predominantly inhabiting the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province. The Nuosu maintain unique cultural systems, such as the Jia zhi kinship structure and a rich tradition of ancestor worship, which form the basis for their life-stage rituals, including the Shalaluo ceremony. This paper focuses on the Nuosu subgroup to explore the specific cosmological and social logic embedded in their cultural practices.

highlights the critical role of elderly women in facilitating ceremonies, not only as transmitters of tradition but also as enforcers of patriarchal norms. Additionally, the analysis includes a comparative perspective with Japanese Shinto, providing insights into how ancestor worship and life-stage rituals differ in their treatment of women's roles and responsibilities.

The broader objective of this study is to contribute to discussions on how minority rituals operate as tools of cultural resilience and social cohesion. By situating Shalaluo within the framework of the Nuosu cosmology, this paper fills an academic gap in understanding how ritual practices intersect with spiritual beliefs and gendered expectations in Chinese minority communities. Furthermore, it provides a critical lens for exploring how rituals adapt to modern pressures while retaining their cultural essence.

2. Ritual Processes and Symbolic Elements

The Shalaluo ceremony is one of the most significant rituals in Nuosu society, marking a girl's formal entry into adulthood. As a performative and symbolic ritual, it reflects the complex interconnections between Nuosu cosmology, ancestral beliefs, family structure, and gender roles. This section explores the broader sociocultural and spiritual significance of the Shalaluo ceremony by analysing its processes, symbolic elements, and underlying logic.

The Shalaluo ritual is typically conducted when a girl experiences her first menstruation, a moment recognized as her transition into adulthood. Before the ceremony begins, spiritual specialists such as Bimo or Suni are invited to determine the officiant for the ritual on the basis of the girl's zodiac sign. The chosen officiant must be an elderly woman who possesses cultural and moral virtues: she must be physically whole, virtuous, and a mother of many children. These attributes represent the cultural ideal of Nuosu womanhood, emphasizing fertility, moral integrity, and physical perfection.

The ceremony cannot take place inside the family home. Instead, it is typically held in liminal spaces such as livestock pens or firewood huts, symbolic areas that reflect the transition from one stage of life to another. Male attendance is strictly forbidden, reinforcing the gendered and sacred nature of the ritual. The ritual begins with elder women teasing the girl and offering playful yet meaningful blessings.

During the ceremony, the chosen elderly woman dresses the girl in the five-section skirt, symbolizing her readiness to assume societal and familial responsibilities. While dressing her, the officiant recites (Shi & Shama, 2007):

“The youth skirt is worn down; sons of uncles rise above;

Avoid improper unions, avoid lowered ranks;

Protect the family name, forbid those of the same Jia zhi;

Prevent cousins and welcome the sons of uncles.”

This chant reflects Nuosu society's strict exogamous rules, particularly those of the Jiazhi (family clan) system, ensuring that marriages and alliances do not disrupt the family lineage or hierarchy. Following the chant, the girl's single braid is separated into two braids, and she is adorned with a black headscarf decorated with floral edges and traditional accessories, signalling her new identity as an adult woman.

The officiant and other elderly women then invoke ancestral blessings, ensuring the girl's successful transition into adulthood while purifying her soul. This symbolic connection to the ancestors reflects the deep interdependence between the Nuosu cosmology and social life. Nuosu researcher Zuoti (2021) believes that the ceremony grants legitimacy to the girl's transition, aligning her new identity with the family's spiritual and moral expectations.

However, contradictions arise after the ritual is complete. Girls who have undergone the Shalaluo ceremony are prohibited from participating in certain religious activities within the family, such as entering sacred spaces such as upper floors of houses or rooftops. These restrictions are believed to prevent the desecration of ancestral harmony and avoid causing misfortune in the family. This paradox highlights a tension within Nuosu society: while the ritual purifies and legitimizes the girl's maturity, it also imposes social isolation that reinforces her regulated gender role.

3. Nuosu Cosmology and the Jia zhi System

The Shalaluo ceremony cannot be understood outside the broader sociocultural framework of Nuosu society, particularly the Jia Zhi system and the central practice of ancestral worship.

The Jia Zhi system is the foundation of the Nuosu social organization, uniting individuals into patrilineal kinship-based clans. This structure prioritizes familial continuity and collective responsibility over individual autonomy. Within this framework, women play a dual role: they are essential for maintaining the lineage through reproduction, yet their societal value is constrained by patriarchal expectations. The Shalaluo ritual reflects these dynamics, as it formalizes the girl's readiness to fulfil her duties within the family while aligning her identity with ancestral expectations.

Closely connected to the Jia Zhi system is Nuosu cosmology, which emphasizes the spiritual relationship between the living and the dead. Ancestors are revered as protectors and moral arbiters, and their blessings are necessary for familial harmony and prosperity. Nuosu suggested that “the ritual links life transitions to the realm of the ancestors.” (Huang, 2006). The Shalaluo ceremony reflects this belief by ensuring that the girl's transformation into adulthood is legitimized within the spiritual framework of ancestral worship. Through the officiant's prayers and symbolic acts, the girl's identity is spiritually purified and aligned with the expectations of both the living and the ancestors.

One particularly significant aspect of the cosmology of Nuosu is the soul's determination after death. The Nuosu people believe that upon death, the soul can be divided into three parts: the ancestral soul, the family soul, and the grave soul. Different types of souls have different requirements. In the Nuosu language, the soul enshrinement ceremony is called Ni mu cuo bi, which enshrine spirit tablets into the ancestral spirit cave. For women, this ceremony can only take place if they are over 40 years old and have no children, while there are no such restrictions for men. The Ni mu cuo bi ceremony also applies to the ancestral soul, but with stricter conditions—regardless of gender, individuals without sons, their souls are cast into the forest and excluded from entering the ancestral resting place so-called zi zi pu wu². Nuosu believes that only pure and virtuous souls are allowed to enter that holy place (Bamo & Huang, 2000). However, the souls of those who die without children are denied access to this sacred space and cannot reside with the ancestral spirit in the ancestral cave. This stands in stark contrast to the Japanese Shinto view of the soul. Both systems emphasize that ancestor worship serves to maintain familial and societal harmony, but Shinto practices diverge in their treatment of the dead.

In Shinto, souls undergo a gradual process of purification through long-term rituals, eventually merging with collective ancestral spirits. While the relationship between ancestral spirits and descendants is not explicitly emphasized, the Japanese language includes the term Mukyo-butsumi, which refers specifically to deceased individuals who have no descendants or relatives to perform rituals for them. These Mukyo-butsumi souls, though lacking direct familial ties, still receive offerings and eventually merge with collective ancestral spirits, becoming part of communal worship rather than being completely excluded (Xu & Cai, 2015).

A comparative analysis with Japanese Shinto beliefs highlights the unique pressures within the cosmology of Nuosu. In Shinto, souls without descendants are still purified over time through collective rituals and integrated into the ancestral realm. Unlike Nuosu society, where women's inclusion in the ancestral realm depends on their fulfilment of societal obligations, particularly reproduction. Failure to meet these expectations, such as remaining childless, results in exclusion from the ancestral realm, with their souls condemned to wander in the wilderness. This contrast reveals how deeply Nuosu beliefs intertwine gendered expectations with spiritual legitimacy, placing immense pressure on women to fulfil their prescribed roles.

4. Gender Roles and Familial Expectations: The Role of Elderly Women

² According to a set of epic records, Zi Zi Pu Wu is considered a sacred land in the hearts of millions of Nuosu people, the dwelling place of their ancestors and the final resting place of their souls after death. When a Nuosu person passes away, a Bimo, the medium is invited to recite the Guiding Scripture for the deceased's soul, guiding it on the journey back to its ancestral homeland. The Bimo directs the soul toward its home, but the exact location of Zi Zi Pu Wu remains unclear. It is speculated to be in regions such as northeastern Yunnan, Zhaotong, Kunming, or the Erhai area.

The Shalaluo ceremony reveals not only the patriarchal values embedded in Nuosu society but also the significant role of elderly women as custodians of tradition and cultural knowledge. Although Nuosu society is largely structured around the patrilineal Jia Zhi system, elderly women occupy a unique position as key facilitators of rituals and transmitters of moral and cultural values. Their leadership during the Sha La Luo ceremony demonstrates how women, while constrained by patriarchal norms, exercise a degree of authority within their families and communities. This dual role highlights the nuanced relationship between women's agency and their responsibilities within a hierarchical social order.

Elderly women in Nuosu society are entrusted with guiding Shalaluo, a role that grants them symbolic and practical influence. As officiants, these women must embody the cultural ideals of virtue, moral purity, and fertility. Their selection is deliberate, as they are seen as role models that represent the pinnacle of womanhood within the Jia Zhi system. By leading the ritual, elder women publicly reinforce the moral and social values that the younger generation is expected to uphold, ensuring the continuity of family honor and lineage.

The act of dressing the girl in the five-section skirt is particularly significant, as it symbolizes both mentorship and the transmission of cultural identity. In performing this task, elderly women act as intermediaries between the ancestral realm and the living, invoking blessings from ancestors to legitimize the girl's transition. Their recitation of chants and blessings carries immense spiritual weight, as it ties the girl's future to her fulfilment of familial obligations. This performative act reinforces the interconnectedness of women's roles within the spiritual and social frameworks of the Nuosu society. At the same time, it elevates elderly women's status as cultural authorities, granting them a platform to influence the family and broader community.

Elder women's authority, however, is not unrestricted. Their influence is deeply embedded within the patriarchal structure, as their leadership during the Shalaluo ceremony serves to uphold gendered expectations rather than challenge them. By guiding the younger generation of women to embrace their roles as reproducers and caretakers, elder women perpetuate the very norms that limit female autonomy. However, their ability to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge also demonstrates their indispensable role within Nuosu society. In this way, elderly women navigate complex duality: they are both enforcers of tradition and agents of cultural continuity, embodying a form of constrained agency within the patriarchal order.

In addition to their ceremonial roles, elderly women serve as cultural memory keepers, preserving the oral traditions and ancestral knowledge that are central to the Nuosu cosmology. Their involvement in the Shalaluo ceremony ensures that these cultural practices remain intact, even as younger generations adapt to modern influences. This role becomes particularly important in the face of societal changes such as urbanization and globalization, which threaten the continuity of traditional practices. By actively participating in rituals such as Shalaluo, elderly women reaffirm their role as pillars of cultural preservation and transmitters of collective identity.

In conclusion, elderly women occupy a critical space within Nuosu society, where their leadership during the Shalaluo reflects both their agency and their adherence to patriarchal norms. As facilitators of ritual, they play an essential role in legitimizing the girl's transition into adulthood, reinforcing cultural values, and connecting the younger generation to their familial and spiritual obligations. Their position as mentors, cultural custodians, and spiritual intermediaries highlights the intricate balance between constraint and influence, which defines women's roles in Nuosu society. By focusing on the role of elderly women, it becomes clear that their contributions are central to the ceremony's significance and to the preservation of the Nuosu cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

Shalaluo is far more than a cultural tradition; it is a ritual mechanism deeply embedded in Nuosu cosmology and social structures. At its core, the ceremony legitimizes a girl's transition into adulthood, aligning her biological and social maturity with familial and spiritual expectations. By symbolically connecting the girl to her ancestors through acts such as dressing her in the five-section skirt and invoking blessings, the ceremony ensures her integration into the Jiazhi system while safeguarding the family's moral and spiritual continuity.

The ritual also reveals the complex relationship between gendered expectations and spiritual legitimacy in Nuosu society. Women are positioned as central to maintaining familial lineage and ancestral honor, yet their worth is often tied to their reproductive roles. The spiritual exclusion of women who fail to bear children underscores the patriarchal constraints embedded within the Nuosu cosmology. Moreover, elderly women play

a dual role as facilitators and enforcers of tradition, ensuring that the values of the past are transmitted to future generations. Their authority within the ceremony reflects a constrained agency, where their leadership exists within the boundaries of patriarchal expectations.

Comparing the Shalaluo ceremony with Japanese Shinto practices highlights both the uniqueness and universality of life-stage rituals. While both systems emphasize ancestor worship as a means of maintaining familial and societal harmony, the Nuosu approach ties women's spiritual legitimacy directly to their societal roles, particularly motherhood. In contrast, Shinto's treatment of Mukyo-butsumaru (souls without descendants) reflects a more inclusive framework, where purification rituals allow all souls to merge with the ancestral realm over time. This contrast underscores how the Nuosu cosmology intertwines ancestor worship with patriarchal constraints, placing women in a position that is simultaneously essential and restricted.

By examining the Shalaluo ceremony within the framework of the Nuosu cosmology, this study contributes to broader discussions on the role of rituals in shaping cultural identity and gendered expectations. It highlights how minority communities sustain their traditions amidst modern pressures while negotiating the tensions between spiritual beliefs and societal norms. Shalaluo stands as a powerful example of how rituals function as tools of cultural resilience, bridging the past and present and reinforcing the values that sustain Nuosu society.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed to this work. Special thanks to the Meigu County Cultural Center for their support throughout the research process.

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