



The cradle of life: symbolism of Naxi's Sudu

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Summary

The Naxi people of Yunnan in south-western China that follow the Dongba religion worship a life god known as 'Sudu'. In the Naxi language, 'Su' means vitality, and 'du' refers to the bamboo basket in which the 'Su god' is believed to reside. The Naxi believe that vitality is a necessary precondition for the continuity of mankind and history. According to early researchers on the Dongba religion, Su is a family god or life god who brought life, vitality, rejuvenation, and prosperity to the family.

The German scholar Nooriman wrote that the Su god of the Naxi has primary female characteristics: the round bamboo basket is a symbol of the female body. The arrows kept in the basket, however, represent male characteristics. Thus, the Sudu includes both sexes. The Sudu is a round bamboo basket similar to the belly of the female body with an upper part that is open to the outside. Often, it is hung up on the main pillar and placed on the shrine of the family's ancestors. Within the bamboo basket are objects that symbolise the outside world such as arrows, stones, a pagoda, a ladder, and a small bridge, among others. The sacred life that takes shape within the bamboo basket enters a mother's body and allows her to give birth to children. It happens that the correct Chinese translation of Sudu is 'Cradle of Life'.

Fifty years ago, the Sudu played a very important role in Naxi life. The god was associated with vitality of life, perpetuation and protection of the family, peace, and happiness. Each family had a Sudu whom they worshipped during festivals and religious rituals to protect them and to ward off evil. There were two types of rituals in the worship of the Su god.

An important ritual called 'Suku' ('ku' means 'to invite vitality to the family') was held during a wedding ceremony. 'Suku' referred to the belief that the newly married bride would bring life and vitality to the bridegroom's family. Another belief had it that, after getting married, the couple would give birth to children and carry the family forward. The head of the family brings down the Sudu from the pillar, cleans the basket, and arranges it with new things. He then offers wine, tea, butter, animal parts soaked in salt, rice, and watermelon.

In Lijiang, Ludian County, Xinzhu village, it is the Dongba priest who conducts the ceremony. The Su god of the man's family is entrusted to protect the newly married couple, and the vitality of the bride is tied to the god of the husband's family. She can now worship the Su god and participate in social activities as a member of her husband's family. The marriage ceremony is also believed to bring major changes to the married couple: the marriage has taken place before the god and, hence, they will be husband and wife forever. They promise to live together and cannot have extra-marital relations. Their only task and responsibility is to give birth to their offspring.

The Dongba priest also smears butter oil (butter, made of mother's milk, symbolises nourishment, vitality, and strength) on the belongings of the family such as cupboards, doors, rooms, and the 'sheng' (used for measuring rice) to propitiate the Su god and to bring prosperity to the family. This ritual ensures that the god's sphere is not only limited to protecting the vitality of human life but also the things used by men and women.

During the wedding, another ceremony called 'Suke' is also performed that has a meaning opposite to the welcome ceremony dedicated to Su. 'Ke' means separation and refers to vitality separate from the bride's mother's family. The ritual ensures that when a daughter moves to her husband's family, she does not take away all the vitality from her natal family to her new marital home. Besides the wedding ceremony, some people hold the 'Suke' ceremony every five or six years to strengthen family life and vitality. The only difference is that the butter is not applied on the forehead of the newly married couple, but on family members and things.

There is another ceremony called 'Sumigong', which means, 'to hand over'. Family members are 'handed over' to Su who is entrusted with the task of protecting them. Every year, after the ceremony of the god is over, family members organise the Sumigong ceremony (conducted by the Dongba) so that life and vitality of family members are not detained at the place of worship. The offspring also holds this ceremony to ensure that, on returning from a funeral, the family's vitality does not depart with the dead person. The Sumigong ceremony is also held after three days of a child's birth. Butter is applied on the head of the newborn. Thus, the Su god is entrusted with the task of protecting the baby. The Dongba also puts butter on the forehead of the parents to enhance life and vitality.



In Ludian County, Xinzhu village, the origin of the Su god is traced back to the ceremony of worshipping the 'heaven god'. Each year during the ceremony, every family carries two bamboo baskets full of rice to worship the heaven god. When a child reaches the age of 12 or 13, another bamboo basket is prepared on his behalf; the child is now grown up and can participate in the ceremony of worshipping the heaven god. After the child becomes an adult, the bamboo basket that had been prepared for him earlier becomes his. When the owner of this basket enters his new house, the Dongba will worship the Su god, adding things such as stone, pagoda, ladder, rice, bridge, flags, and rope. This new bamboo basket will have to be taken from the ancestral shrine and placed in the shrine of the new house. The Sudu will take care of the children and grandchildren, and this 'cradle of life' will exist forever in the man's family and bring it life and vitality.

The basic symbolic equation is Female=Body=Container. The Naxi believe life comes out of the female belly, so the female body is the container of life. In the Naxi language 'big' is often representative of the mother (the female body) – a big pot is called a 'mother pot', a big tree is 'mother tree', and so on; roundness also symbolises the female body (the roundness of the belly that gives birth). Thus, the round Sudu is regarded as the container of life and symbolises the female body. The woman gives birth to children, but this takes place only after male traits enter her body from outside. The woman is not merely a container, but is composed of both male and female characteristics that come together to give birth to life. The man's arrowhead is put into the round bamboo basket to symbolise male qualities entering the female body. Life takes shape in the round belly of the woman, the container. Sudu represents the female, but includes the male.

The symbolic meaning of Sudu can also be understood from the objects contained in the bamboo basket. Things such as a pillar, stone, pagoda, ladder, bridge, flags, arrow, rope, and rice kept in the Sudu symbolise various objects in the universe. The yellow chestnut tree, associated with the god of beauty and regarded as indestructible, is used as a pillar of the Sugod; star-like black jade denoting long life and regulations and customs (that are strong as stone) is used as the worship stone. Green cypress is used to make the pagoda (that symbolises God) and the ladder. The ladder represents the way from earth to heaven. The bridge is made of pinewood and represents the bridge between life and death. Two flags, as bright as the moon and stars, symbolising victory and strength, are also kept. The arrow with the mirror symbolises man's power. These symbolic readings reveal that the Naxi regard the Sudu as a great universe, the mother body that takes the outside world into itself and contains everything.

The German scholar Nooriman pointed out that the Sudu is characterised by both 'basic' and 'variable' qualities. The round shape of the Sudu and its function as a container are its 'basic' characteristics and are associated with

the female body. He wrote that *“the variable characteristics mean that it (the Sudu) is against stagnancy and inclined to change activity and show lots of variety.”*

Objects representing vitality, bearing, reproduction, and protection are all related to basic characteristics. But the Sudu also has variable qualities related to its sacred function of increasing the population. During a wedding ceremony, a new arrow is added to the basket to preserve the continuity of the family. If no new arrows are added, the marriage has not taken place, and there will be no offspring. The Sudu symbolises the female body, creator of life; new life comes out of the pregnant body. After being protected and raised by it, when men and women reach marriageable age, the families can be divided into smaller families. During this separation, the son should take the arrow out of the old bamboo basket and put it into the new basket (representing the new female body) to give shape to new life. After the things in the Sudu have been changed, it becomes a container of new things and new life. Life appears in the Sudu, but is also separated from it. Unless separation takes place, there will be no new life. This capacity for separation and change represents its variable characteristic.

Conclusion

The basic characteristics of the Sudu are those related to bearing and protecting life. The variable characteristics are those of separation and continuity. The two qualities are inseparable from each other. The basic characteristics of stability and preservation represent the primary conditions of life. But without variable characteristics, there is no growth. Variable characteristics are the dynamic conditions of growth and separation that reflect the vitality of the mother's body.

The Characteristics of the Sudu are as follow.

- According to Nooriman's analysis, the Sudu is a whole that cannot be separated and reflects both male and female characteristics (the arrow within the bamboo basket symbolises this).
- The Sudu has primary female characteristics (the round shape and function as a container is equated with the female). It also has the exceptional quality of bearing and conserving life, which are its basic and variable characteristics.
- The Sudu is associated with nourishment and growth. Butter, which is used for worshipping the god, is derived from milk that comes from the mother's body and nourishes life. The worship of the Sudu symbolises the Naxi worship of the mother's body during earlier times. The equation of the female as body=container=world reflects the Naxi belief about life and nature. This reflects a respect for matrilineal society. Finally, the Sudu is the symbol of the female body that the Naxi worshipped as the mother body, as a 'cradle bearing and reproducing life'.

