



The Cult of the Door amongst the Miao South-West China

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THE CULT OF THE DOOR AMONGST THE MIAO IN
SOUTH-WEST CHINA.

IN Yunnan and Kueicheo, S.W. China, amongst Miao who have not been affected by foreign influences, no religious ceremony is of more importance than the worship of the door. The door is sacred, and a proper respect for it is indispensable to success and happiness throughout life. Miao huts are oblong. The door is placed at either one of the ends. On no account is a doorway opened in either of the sides. The fact that the door was invariably rudely fashioned made no difference to its extraordinary sanctity. Everything in life was contingent upon the door, which was carefully opened and closed, and with which children were not allowed to play. They were not even permitted to touch the door to which an offering had been made. The door was never banged.

It is commonly believed that if anything is chopped on the threshold of a house, children born in that house will be hare-lipped.

There was no definitely fixed date for the worshipping of the door. Rarely was it sacrificed to more than once in three years, and frequently much longer periods than this intervened. The time selected was commonly that following on the ingathering of the harvest. If there was illness the ceremony would be observed, and, when the head of the household waxed old the solemn rite was performed in order to initiate the eldest son into the sacred cult. If he were not naturally bright and intelligent the father would instruct his second son. A sorcerer determined a propitious date, but he was never allowed to be present at the ceremony. The head of the household acted as priest. When a day had been fixed upon the sacrificer went to the hills, where he cut a few bamboos with which he fashioned a small bamboo door. I should point out here that the door to which offerings were made was not the main door of the house. It was this small door especially fashioned for the occasion. This was attached with bamboo strips to the larger door. Formerly the larger door was also made of bamboo, but during later years it has been made of wood.

The Miao live in hamlets of from ten to thirty houses. When it is proposed to offer a sacrifice no mention is made of it to neighbours. If, however, a man is performing the solemn rite for the first time the families in the village who are of the same surname as himself are apprised of the date, and the heads of these families are expected to be present. On subsequent occasions when this man sacrifices to his door the members of his family only are allowed to be present.

The usual procedure is towards evening to sweep clean the house. At dusk the door is closed, after which no household belonging is allowed to be taken out until daylight on the following day. To carry anything out of doors at such a time would cause something dreadful—probably death—to happen to some member of the family. A young female pig which has not given birth to a litter is then taken, and being held close to the door its throat is cut and the blood is caused to run into a hole which has been delved under the jamb on which the door is hung. On no account is the hole dug under the jamb to which the door fastener is attached. No altar is used. In this hole are buried the bristles, blood, water in which the pig and entrails—the entrails are eaten—have been washed. Everything that is unclean is buried here; nothing is thrown outside. The pig is cut into pieces—heart, liver, stomach included—placed in a large iron pan and boiled. At the same time millet is steamed to be eaten with the boiled pig. If millet cannot be secured buckwheat is used. On other occasions the Miao eat maize. During the cooking of the food silence is observed. When the meal is ready those in the village who are of the same surname as the sacrificer are invited to come. Such relatives are not requested to come to a meal or sacrifice. All that is said to them is "Please come," and, as I have remarked above, it was only on the occasion of a man's initial sacrifice that relatives were allowed to be present. They came in silence and in the darkness, as no lights were allowed. A light could be used in the house, but it was essential that relatives should come and return in darkness. At the meal, during which strict silence was observed, the meat was taken with the fingers from a large central basin and the guests using wooden ladles helped them-

selves to the millet from one large central basket. It was really a kind of holy communion. The sons of the household were allowed to partake of the meal, but not the daughters. These were not permitted to participate because some day they would marry and go to another household, of which they would become an integral part. Were they to partake of the sacrificial meal their souls would become attached to the house of their birth, thus causing their marriages to be unsuccessful. Sooner or later their husbands would discard them and they would be returned to their home. The wife of the sacrificer was allowed to eat of the offering. She with the wives of relatives sat at a separate table from that used by the men. Children of relatives were never allowed to participate. Salt was the only condiment used as seasoning.

In the preparing of food the Miao are not cleanly, but on such an occasion as this very particular care is taken to ensure that everything is clean. All bones and gristle were burnt in the fire. It was forbidden to throw anything on the floor. When the meal was finished each participant stood over the fire, where he wiped his mouth with both hands, throwing the breath as it were into the fire. After this he rubbed both the hands over the fire. This was done to cleanse the hands and mouth and breath. It was an act of cleansing, the idea being that all that was unclean would thereby be destroyed. If all the meat was not consumed, that which was left over could be eaten on the morrow, but the bones and gristle must be consumed by fire. After the meal the guests quietly returned to their homes, but no member of the household went outside. To have done so would have caused blindness. With the exception of the father and the eldest son the inmates of the house now retired to sleep. Father and son waited until some two hours before sunrise, when, standing close to the door, the father ate a small piece of the cooked meat which he had carefully put to one side for this purpose. After partaking of this the head of the household in the hearing of his son quietly repeated a few words which had been handed down from generation to generation. Usually the formula was : " We worship thee, oh ! door. Keep away sickness ! Keep away disease ! Keep away slander ! Keep away

defamation ! Keep away all that is injurious ! " When a second sacrifice was made the old door was thrown away. It was never burnt or destroyed. It was allowed to rot wherever it was thrown.

Originally amongst the Miao there were very few surnames. Connected with each surname there are small variations of the above form of worship. With each name there appear to be associated very definite ceremonies. The families bearing the surname of Hmao-tang and Hmao-cheh at the time of worship, open and close the door three times, saying : " May we become rich. May our children be numerous ! May our cattle multiply ! " The Hmao-ngleh family could sacrifice either a small female pig, which had not given birth to a litter, or a small castrated male pig. One branch of the Hmao-glah family before partaking of the sacrificial meal set out five wooden basins close to the fire. In these bowls were placed small slices of meat from the liver, the stomach, the heart and from each of the limbs of the pig. Then, the head of the household, squatting on the ground, took a small bamboo, about three feet long, in the left hand, and with the right hand he severally raised each bowl, and crossing his arms he called upon his ancestors, whether they were to the East or the West or the South or the North, to come and receive the sacrificial meat now offered to them. At the completion of the sacrifice this bamboo was placed lengthwise over the lintel of the door. When in future years further offerings were made the bamboo was again used. At the decease of the sacrificant this bamboo was placed on (not in) his grave. A man used his bamboo throughout his lifetime, but a second generation had its own bamboo.

Three basins, or seven or nine, could be used, but it was essential that an odd and not an even number of basins be employed.

A few members of the " Hmao-glah " family collected the ashes of the burnt bones and sprinkled such under the bedstead and at the side of the house (inside) facing the front. This is a late and rare innovation. The majority of Miao never use a bedstead.

Should there be a guest staying in a house where the sacrifice

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is being offered he is not allowed to participate. He is given his evening meal and sent to sleep in the loft. When younger sons married and built separate huts, the father, or, if he were deceased, the eldest son, went to their homes to initiate them into the sacred cult. The reason given for the sacrifice is that the door has the power to keep away illness, evil spirits, and hostile influences of every description. There is an idea too, though it is of the vaguest possible nature, that in some indeterminate way a divinity or guardian spirit is connected with the door. A sorcerer informs me that the reason why the offal is buried at the door is as follows: Many generations ago the Miao were great hunters, but indigent. A member of a family being ill, a pig was required to sacrifice to the door. Thereupon a small pig was stolen, sacrificed and eaten. In order that no traces of the pig might be discovered the bristles, etc., were buried and the participants cleansed their mouths and hands over the fire so that there would be no odour! Though I record this I attach no importance to it. Another story which seeks to explain the origin of the custom states that a long long while ago, a youth enticed a girl to come to be his wife. Darkness overtook them before they reached home, and they stayed in a wayside booth to which there was no door. While the youth slept a tiger came and allured the maiden to go and marry him. (Tigers as men figure in several Miao folklore.) When the youth awoke the girl couldn't be found. It was thus that man realized how important the door is. The youth returned to his home and thenceforth sacrificed to his door so that it would keep away the tiger and evil influences of every description. The "Hmao-tang" family asseverate that when an offering is made the door is opened three times to let in good influences, and closed three times to keep away wild animals and malicious spirits.

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