

EXPLORING ORAL TRADITIONS AND DIVINE SPATIAL NARRATIVES: THE NI'EDI RITUAL AMONG THE LISU ETHNIC GROUP IN LIJIANG, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

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Received: 21 October 2024

Revised: 20 April 2025

Accepted: 28 April 2025

Published: 31 July 2025

Citation:

Juan, Z., & Boosabok, P. (2025).
*Exploring oral traditions and divine
spatial narratives: The Ni'EDI ritual
among the Lisu ethnic group in
Lijiang, China. Humanities, Arts
and Social Sciences, 25(2),
447–459.*

[https://doi.org/10.69598/hasss.
25.2.268133](https://doi.org/10.69598/hasss.25.2.268133)

This paper presents the development of a theoretical framework for constructing sacred narratives within the Ni'EDI ritual space of the Lisu people. The primary objective is to advance cultural innovation and ensure the sustainable transmission of Lisu traditions from a theoretical perspective. The research explores the dynamic interactions between individuals and rituals, particularly emphasizing the integration of material and spiritual dimensions—including historical narratives, mythological elements, natural landscapes, and sacred architecture. Through a rigorous analysis of oral traditions, the cultural space of the Ni'EDI ritual is reinterpreted and reconstructed. The study finds that the oral tradition of the Ni'EDI ritual operates as both an individual and collective narrative process, wherein memory, guidance, retelling, and recollection interweave ancient stories with contemporary experiential interpretations. The results demonstrate that narrative and spatial analyses deepen individual spiritual engagement and reveal the broader sociocultural implications of ritual spaces. Together, these elements form the core structure of belief in the Lisu creator deity, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the collective identity and faith of the Lisu people. This research underscores the importance of narrative theory in constructing cultural spaces and interpreting ritual contexts.

Keywords: Lisu ethnic group; narratives of power; oral tradition culture; ritual ceremonies; sacred space

1. INTRODUCTION

The progression of modernity has cultivated a social ritual centering communities on Indigenous cultures, which include historical narratives, belief traditions, and modes of public storytelling (Santiago, 2023). Across China, more people now safeguard local folk cultures through traditional ceremonies. In doing so, they strengthen ethnic and regional identities. The Lisu rituals in Lijiang epitomize the essence of local culture, showcasing the Lisu's faith, historical narrations, communal practices, and commitments to enhancing their living conditions through sustainable means. Lisu sacrificial ceremonies dominate Lijiang's oral histories

and collective beliefs. This enhances their cultural identity and contributes to the region's artistic influence and communicative value directly and indirectly (Figure 1).

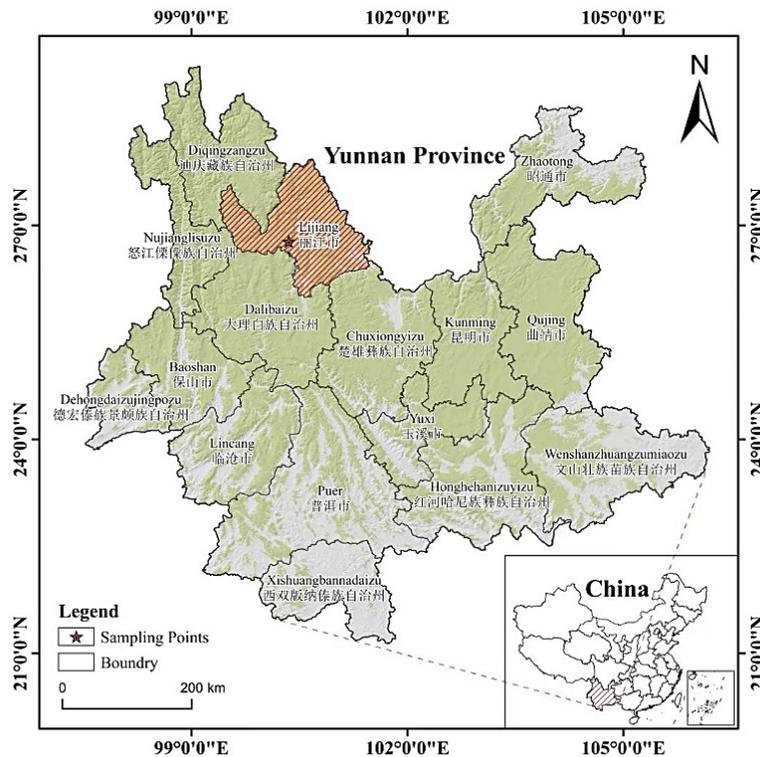


Figure 1: The geographical location of the Lisu people in Lijiang, China

Source: Ministry of Natural Resources, People's Republic of China. <https://www.mnr.gov.cn> (Jin & Di, 2002)

Modernization has accelerated population migration, promoted multicultural exchanges, and challenged local cultural norms (Crane, 2002). The interaction and clash between indigenous and foreign cultures have led to the homogenization of local cultures, diminished cultural distinctions, and disrupted the continuity of cultural experiences across historical and contemporary human contexts (Mackay, 2000). This phenomenon manifests among Lisu individuals hindered by physical, economic, or health limitations from direct participation in local culture and among those engaged in political or business sectors within China.

In the 21st century, participants in Lisu ceremonies increasingly differentiate ancient myths from the Ni' Edi creation deity ritual. Field investigations have shown that some Lisu individuals and outsiders perceive myths as fantasies and dreams, deeming them unworthy of focus. Their narratives often inadvertently overlook the sharing of divine stories, regarding rituals as a universal culture that exists independently of ethnic beliefs. However, rituals and myths are interdependent, the perspectives of Rake, Freud, and Smith attest to the importance of myth, proposing that myths primarily serve as descriptions of rituals (Kluckhohn, 1942). While receiving respect, protection, and dissemination as a new type of capital, the Lisu traditional sacrificial culture faces challenges and influences from contemporary perceptions. This predicament is expected to exacerbate with ongoing population migration.

Thus, the research contextualizes the sacrificial space within a cultural framework in this study, viewing it through oral tradition as a venue for historical narration and social experience. This method validates sacred space as a continuum in the lived experience of contemporary Lisu individuals. The article then situates the concept of sacred space within an analysis of physical, spiritual, and social practices, underscoring the mechanisms by which sacred space is conceptualized, interpreted, and crafted through selection, creation, and interaction (Lincoln, 2014). It emphasizes the dynamic interactions between sacred space and individuals, highlighting the complexity and multidimensionality of spaces manifesting divine attributes in contemporary practices across oral narratives and ritual performances.

Using the Lisu people's belief in the Creation of God as a case study, this article utilizes interdisciplinary research methods (Brie et al., 2009) to develop a narrative framework that merges cultural and spatial dimensions (Figure 2). This framework enhances the cultural construction of collective ethnic beliefs and

comprehension of sacred spaces. Additionally, the researchers aim to provide novel insights and methodologies for analyzing ritual culture and the cognition of cultural heritage.

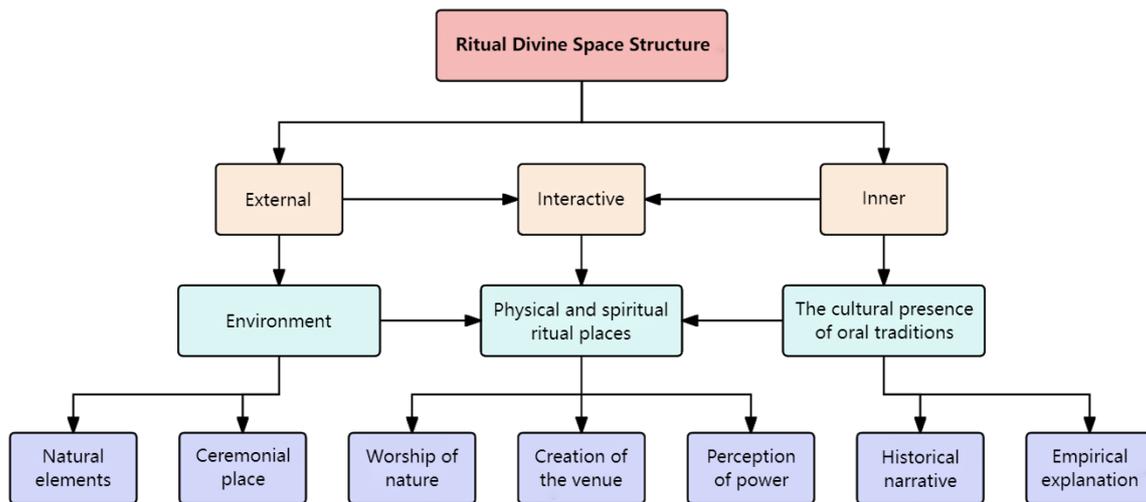


Figure 2: Sacred spatial structures
Source: Drawn by author, 2024

2. CULTURAL CAPITAL: ETHNICITY, FAITH, RITUAL SPACE

The Lisu, an ancient ethnic group in Southwest China, trace their origins to the branches of the ancient Di Qiang peoples (Gao, 2010). In the context of multi-ethnic integration, the Lijiang Lisu have developed an animistic belief system with natural deities at their core. They have a culture of belief centered on the worship of nature gods. Natural elements such as heaven, earth, wind, fire, thunder, and lightning; geographical representations such as mountains, rivers, and lakes; and other social objects that we come into contact with in our daily lives are all incarnations of deities identified by Lisu religious groups, and this worship constitutes the nature-centered spiritual practice of the Lisu people in Lijiang (Zhang, 2006a). Amongst them, the deity 'Wusa Mei'e Pula' is the chief god, also recognized as the 'Creation God' (Yu, 2010), epitomizing the highest divine authority in Lisu traditional beliefs. In response to climatic anomalies and diseases, the Lisu frequently seek the supernatural intervention of this power. Such engagement directly and indirectly impacts Lisu religious sacrificial traditions. In specific rituals, the Creation God's authority is evident in religious activities collectively overseen by him and other subordinate deities.

The Ni'EDi ceremony, as a direct act of worship to the Creation God, reflects the Lisu's supreme deity and serves as a cultural symbol of their polytheistic beliefs (Durrenberger, 1980). Originating from the Lisu language, semantic analysis reveals that 'Ni' denotes the sacred, 'E' symbolizes the highest, and 'Di' suggests sacrifice, with Ni'EDi expressing reverence for the supreme deity. Furthermore, the ritual incorporates a hierarchy of multiple deities. Natural divinities like Sapa and Sama are venerated beyond the chief deity, Wusa Mei'e Pula. In this framework, these ritual practices not only form the cultural foundation of the Lisu's communal faith in Lijiang but also sustain and reinforce the local populace's traditional views and behaviors regarding environmental preservation and respect.

A brief comparison of neighboring mountain rites helps clarify both the shared 'grammar' of sacred space in Southwest China and the distinctive features of the Lisu ceremony. In the Yi Torch Festival, a rectangular altar is usually set on an east-west axis; devotees circle it three times with flaming torches, using fire to purify land and people and making the flame a cleansing axis. During the Naxi Sanduo Festival, participants process around the village temple and Yu Long Mountain, linking the ritual grounds into a roughly symmetrical sacred landscape, the deity's protection over agriculture and forests. By contrast, the Lisu Ni'EDi rite centers on a living sacred tree: a semi-circular altar encircles the tree, processions radiate outward from its base, and chants invoke the Creator God who once shaped heaven and earth. This comparison reveals a regional sacred-center logic. However, Ni'EDi stands apart by fusing cosmology and ecology through an explicit creation myth and the living tree that symbolizes the unity of heaven and earth.

Although modernization trends have reduced the ethnic groups' direct dependence on nature, the Lisu continue to seek help from the creator god in work, economy, health, and security through the Ni'EDi

Ceremony. According to a 2021 field study by the Lijiang Lisu Cultural Research Society, the Lisu Ni'EDi ceremony is held every two to three years with the support of the Ludila township government. It involves Lisu from villages around Yongsheng and education, government, and cultural enthusiasts from all walks of life. This report documents the participation of more than 200 people in the ceremony, demonstrating its wide-ranging influence on local society and culture. This suggests that even in modern consumerism, the creator god plays a vital role as a spiritual support in the cultural transmission of the Lisu community in Lijiang. This spiritual connotation is inextricably linked to the expression of divine space in its rituals.

Through Nipa's participation in his priestly capacity (Durrenberger, 1975), the ritual embodies the narrative essence of the sacred space in the Creation God belief culture. The field study rituals suggest that the specific role of the Nipa in the rituals is expressed as the leader of the ritual process, a role that plays a key role in the transformation of the divine in the rituals. Through behavioral participation and oral traditions, Nipa and other worshippers transformed the physical space of the Ni'EDi ritual into the divine space of creation beliefs, thus demonstrating the spiritual character of the creation rituals common among the Lisu people. Their behavioral participation in the rituals, including drilling, praising the spirits, killing ghosts, dancing, and celebrating, is not only part of the four key processual rituals of exorcism, divination, blessing, and human-divine sharing but also plays a key role in the creation of sacred space. Oral traditions within the rituals, such as the sacred pronouncements of the Nipa and the personal narratives of the key ritualists, provided the divine narrative traditions of creationist beliefs for the transformation of this space. Through the actions and oral narratives of the Nipa and other ritualists, the physical ritual space transforms from an ordinary place to a divine space that carries the belief in a creator god. The Lisu Nipa ceremony demonstrates the spatial basis of the Lisu's ancient human-God relationship and provides a tangible narrative of the community's historical continuity and way of life.

3. NI'EDI RITUAL CULTURE AND ORAL NARRATIVES

3.1 Links between ritual sites and oral traditions

In the primitive forms of human communication, oral tradition constitutes an element in developing oral culture (Rosenberg, 1987), generating and disseminating information within communicative interactions. During the Lisu Ni'EDi ceremony, oral tradition manifests through Nipa's sacred declarations and the personal narratives of key ritual participants. Through repeated ritual exchanges and the dissemination of information, an ancient divine narrative about the Ni'EDi ceremony is formed, along with experiential dissemination relevant to the current ritual context. These orally transmitted narratives integrate mythological stories and contemporary experiences into the ceremony's geographical space, sanctifying the Ni'EDi ceremony's locale and establishing a collective sacred memory.

Ancient divine narratives endow the ritual site with sacred significance. The chief priest Nipa completes the sacred narrative at a specific ritual location through sacred declarations and the chanting of scriptures during the Ni'EDi sacrificial ceremony. The narrative content primarily includes the Sacrifice Sutra and Genesis, encompassing the origins of humanity, sibling unions for procreation, creation myths, and historical information about the ethnic group. It elaborates on the creation epic, detailing the origins of heaven and earth, and explores the divine narrative of the existential relationship between humans and geographical elements (Li, 2006). The natural landscape conveys sacred information through the priest's oral narratives, distinguishing the ritual site from secular landscapes and thereby enhancing the sacred attributes of the ritual space.

Furthermore, the land where the rituals occur has a special significance, creating a sacred space dedicated to commemorating ancestors and honoring nature. Through empirical personal narratives, worshippers often portray the hillside venue of the rituals as imbued with ancestral spirits, thereby enhancing the sanctity of the Ni'EDi ritual landscape. The personal accounts of the Ni'EDi ceremonies are not part of the sacred declarations but stem from the priests' individual experiences. Within these narratives, priests initially recount ancestral tales and ritual-related cultural content grounded in their immersion in ritual geography and landscape. Furthermore, by recalling personal memories associated with the ceremonial site, they narrate experiential narratives encompassing personal recollections and collective histories. These narratives are conveyed orally, recounting stories of what has happened to them or their families in the forests and hillsides where the ceremony took place, thus connecting the past to the present. The narratives include the healing process of the elders of the fathers, the dreams of the spirits seen by the individuals at the ceremonial sites, and the moments when the priests were divinely ordained.

Notably, the priests' physical gestures and language emphasize the importance of past narratives. Yawen insisted on showing us photographs of collective ritual sites and personal objects from the ritual. He repeatedly used physical gestures and postures to indicate the direction of the altar while recounting events

about the ritual site. In particular, when elaborating on the hillside scene of the altar, Nipa Yawen repeatedly mentioned, "I remember as a child (.....) that our ancestors used to be on that hill (the place of sacrifice) ...". In these ritual memories, the narrative connects past experiences to current ritual experiences but also emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between time and place in ritual practice.

Here, space and time are intertwined, creating a connection between two aspects of human experience, the sacred and the secular. When the ritual site of the Ni'EDi is transformed through sacred narratives, it facilitates the acquisition of a divine character (Beane & Doty, 1975). Because the Creation God ceremony sites have become carriers of sacred ancient narratives and experiential accounts, their ritual natural landscapes are imbued with symbolic meanings of ethnic experiences and sacred attributes.

3.2 The relationship between ritual behavior and oral tradition

Ritual acts of sacrifice are essentially narratives of divinity (Doty, 2000). The Ni'EDi ritual behavior is closely linked with migration history information in oral traditions. A divine narrative of collective memory is constructed through the combination of Priest Nipa's narrations and the imitative actions and gestures of the worshippers.

Nipa's historical oral traditions about the community migration are sacralized descriptions. In the Creation, God's Sacrificial Scripture, migration stories, as part of the oral tradition, contain historical information about the ethnic group's movement from the ancient Qiang's northwestern gathering area to the southwestern region. These narratives are not only regarded as an essential part of history and culture (Duan, 2020) but also as a sacralized description of the historical context of the community. The migratory story of the Ni'EDi ceremony accounts for the continuity of the Lisu's ancient paths, ancestral behaviors, and conflict encounters (Finley, 1965; Zhang, 2006b).

The narrative begins with an association with the ancient Qiang dynasty and includes descriptions of its splendor and successive warring disputes. The story then transitions from depictions of political decision-making and social upheaval to narratives of group action and geographical migration. Following the migration paths of the Yalong and Min Rivers and the Anning River, the close relationship between the Qiang and their natural environment is demonstrated, suggesting a shift in culture and social structure. By endowing historical events with religious and cultural significance, the sanctification of such narratives elevates migration stories beyond mere historical accounts. It includes descriptions of ancestral wisdom and ethnic survival strategies integral to the group's identity and beliefs.

In the migration narrative, the priest claims: "In the ancient Qiang Dynasty, there was golden splendor. Building golden cities and ponds, there were golden rules: nonstop wars, nonstop strife. The cries were like thunder, and the swords shocked the world. Nine patriarchs came and discussed the migration. First, it moved south along the Yalong River and the Minjiang River. Along the Anning River, along the river, and go down... " and "ancient that time, very ancient that time. The Qiang people live in the northwest, and people call them the ancient Qiang. Moving from west to south, the ancient Qiang and the Qiang..." This oral history condenses migration, war, and survival wisdom into the shared memory of the ethnic group, providing a narrative source for subsequent ritual actions.

In the Ni'EDi ritual, the priest's instructions and the congregation's actions characterize the core of the war message in the migration story, which in turn constructs a collective sacred memory. Gestures and simulated gestures are linked to ritual behavior and oral narratives (Sienaert, 1990). During the ritual, the priest gives the command, followed by a bull's horn being blown. The worshippers raise their swords and halberds to attack towards the outer side of the hillside, repeating the rushing action to drive away evil spirits. Upon receiving the command to kill, the Lisu male worshippers adopt a coordinated posture and hand gestures, forming a collective behavioral pattern. It is related to ancestral memories of war and strife, grounds the ritual behavior of the community in an important historical tradition, and forms a firm basis for action in the Ni'EDi ceremony (Sienaert, 1990). Although the historical narrative of their migration story is no longer comprehensive in some places, it persists as a concrete form of thought presented through bodily actions, namely ritual behavior and oral narratives. This contextualizes and concretizes the ethnic struggle through the actions of hands, speech, and body in the ritual context. In doing so, it collectively constructs a form of ritual collective memory that traces history and integrates a narrative structure of divinity.

Furthermore, the priests are not only the transmitters of history but also the recognized bearers and narrators of the faith culture embraced by the ethnic group. To become reliable narrators, the priest Ne'er refers to their abilities as bestowed by the highest divine mandate. They possess the highest divine power among the priests (He, 2017). Participants in the ritual should be able to perceive and comprehend the sacred messages they receive. Whether conveyed orally or in written form, this information is considered sacred and unquestionable.

Through an analysis of the cultural context, oral traditions, and sacred narratives within the Lisu Ni'EDi ceremony, the construction of sacred narratives is advanced not only at the cognitive level but also

deepened in the spiritual experiences of the participants. As one of the core elements of Lisu religious rituals, oral tradition intertwines ancient mythological stories with contemporary experiences through memory, recitation, and recollection, forming a collective sacred memory. These oral narratives convey historical and cultural knowledge and establish a close connection between sacred history and the spatial-temporal reality of the present through the linguistic and performative aspects of the ritual.

The analysis in this section demonstrates that oral tradition is not merely a tool for transmitting cultural memory but also a crucial medium for constructing ritual spaces and presenting sacred narratives. The following sections will further explore how the construction of physical space, the integration of material elements, the presentation of symbolic meanings, and the interactive dynamics of ritual actions collectively contribute to forming sacred narratives.

4. THE SACRED SPACE OF SOCIAL REALITY

The creation of ritual space is a dynamic process closely tied to the sacred narratives or rituals of previous cultural forms (Sienaert, 1990). Building upon this foundation, these integrate with modern spatial structures to establish a contemporary societal ritual. Within the Lisu people's interactive space and ritual behavior, these rituals encompass social material and spiritual spatial elements.

The Ni'EDi ritual space, as the dominant context of contemporary societal ritual culture, is not just a physical space but also a sacred space created based on material elements. The physical characteristics of the ritual environment make it a bridge between the real world and the spiritual and mythological world, serving as a vehicle for ethnic and cultural identity and collective memory (Hoteit, 2015). By connecting individuals, communities, and the environment, the sacred rituals of the creation god evoke strong historical and cultural associations, fostering a deep sense of history and identity (Finlayson & Mesev, 2014). This emotional connection enables the Lisu people to recognize the existence of sacred space and imbue specific locations or key objects with anthropomorphic qualities (Bachmann-Medick et al., 2021). In the Ni'EDi ritual, an ordinary place can be endowed with special significance, becoming a location connected to the divine or spiritual realm. This construction of sacred spatial structures contributes to the Lisu community's cultural symbols and identity recognition.

4.1 Physical space and material elements

4.1.1 Sacralization of the natural landscape

Rivers, lakes, trees, and mountains are symbols of the sacralization of natural landscapes in the Ni'EDi rituals, revealing the interaction between communities, natural elements, and myths. These landscapes transcend the nature of nature and are regarded as the abode of the gods. Their natural elements are also often closely linked to the divine narratives in the rituals. In the Nipa creation narrative, the sky god creates the world and sows the seeds of life in the forest. Lisu's sacralization of natural elements reflects a cosmic cyclical perspective (Eliade, 2021).

For example, the antagonistic narrative of the element of water is expressed in the form of dual beliefs that symbolize a bond of life: on the one hand, the flood destroys the human world, and on the other hand, transformation and rebirth are symbolized through the gourd that carries the siblings. In the ritual scriptures of the Lisu people, the mythological narrative of the surviving siblings in the flood is considered a significant part of the origin of ethnic life. This cultural narrative has also given rise to various emotional experiences among the worshippers regarding natural elements such as water sources and hillsides as ritual sites, reflecting the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and mythology.

In addition, these sacred sites symbolize the presence of the divine and serve as spaces for the ritual's vision of the community's future. Previously, when discussing the experiential oral traditions of the elderly or priests within the community, it has been demonstrated that the experiences of the ethnic group are closely intertwined with the sense of belonging to the Ni'EDi ritual sites as if they coexist with their ancestors. This encourages further contemplation among the members of the Lisu community regarding their identity, specifically, how they should establish future life order through rituals. In the creation rituals, the Lisu have developed specific ritual rules and codes of behavior in the physical site and space of the Ni'EDi rituals. As a result, people seek acceptance and protection from family members or new homes from spirits and ancestors in special places through ritual sacrifices and acts of divination. Here, these sacred sites are not only key territorial symbols for strengthening intra-community ties and a sense of belonging but also the aspirations and dreams of the believers for continued prosperity and harmonious coexistence.

4.1.2 The sacred center of creation

The sacred nature of ritual spaces in Ni'EDi is not solely determined by the specific natural landscape but also by establishing sacred centers. Each ritual has its dedicated sacred location, such as a mountain forest for celestial worship, a funeral chapel, a Christian church, a Buddhist temple, a Taoist temple, or an auditorium for school entrance and graduation ceremonies. However, it is not just the presence of these places that defines the ceremonial location; it is the presence of a sacred framework within these environments. This framework guides participants through a gradual immersion in the sacred aspects of the narrative, actions, landscape, and space, prioritized in that order. All these elements create a sacred center, evoking powerful ritual emotions like a sense of well-being, reverence, belonging, identity, or sacredness (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A. The natural materials prepared by the priests for sacrifices; B. Nipa's drawing of sacrificial costumes; C. The sacred messenger carved by the priest's assistant; D. The inheritance and participation of the priests; E. An example of the ritual scene created.
Source: Photographed by author, 2024

The Sacred Center of the Ni'EDi ceremony is perceived as the ritual structure established within the ritual landscape. Positioned at the heart of the ritual landscape, it symbolizes the interplay between the secular and the sacred aspects of the creator god. The components of the sacred structures created in the Ni'EDi rituals encompass the landscape and its spaces, including sacred altars, votive platforms, idols, pathways for exorcising evil spirits, and sacred trees for blessings (Figure 4). For centuries, these elements have served as focal points for the divine power of the creator god and repositories for sacred objects and spaces. The Lisu people have offered prayers and pledges to these sacred centers every 1 to 3 years, reinforcing the sacred center's role in the ceremony and enhancing the sanctity of the community's ceremonial space (Hamilton & Spicer, 2016; Hume, 1998).



Figure 4: A site for Lisu exorcism ceremonies
Source: Drawn by author, 2024

The perpetuation and reinforcement of the sacredness of the ceremonial center's landscape and space occur through collective creation and renewal. The sacred structure is not merely a product of secular imagination; it is also perceived as replicating a surreal model (Eliade, 1959). Based on the analysis of field research data, it becomes evident that the Ni'EDi ceremony requires the participation of a significant portion of the male population in the village for each ceremony. Preparations for the ritual instruments must commence 1 to 2 days in advance, as nearly all ritual objects require fresh carving or construction and cannot be reused. Nipa, the priest, emphasizes the need to guide and correct the behavior of many men during the preparation phase of the rituals. The rituals must be re-conducted in irreversible changes, and the preparations must start anew. For instance, the sacrificial bowl must be cleaned on the day of the ceremony by boiling water with fragrant leaves. Any contact with women or other objects is deemed disrespectful to the deity. In this context, Lisu individuals and families alternately engage in the collaborative construction of the sacred space, including creating and interacting with the ritual landscape elements. This process fosters a continuous sense of belonging and sacredness within the Lisu community.

One significant factor that establishes a location as the focal point of a sacred area is creating a ritual space dedicated to worshipping a deity or ancestor (Kapelrud, 1963). Within the context of this sacred Ni'EDi ceremony, believers select specific material elements during the ritual. It is believed that the sacred tree serves as the dwelling place of the creator god and that the supreme deity resides not only in the sacred tree on the mountain but also in other sacred material elements and spaces, such as sacred carvings and sacred symbols. This integration of individuals or families into the sacred space through the presence of the gods shapes the central layout and arrangement of the sacred space with one another.

In the Ni'EDi ritual, the ritual altar, centered around the sacred tree, constituting the structure of the ritual, serving as a key location of intense divine power. Among all the altar elements, the altar itself is a highly correlated element in constructing the narrative structure of the Ni'EDi ritual. Here, hierarchical relationships can be established among the communities as they face each other within the same spatial dimension. It allows visual and auditory symbols to describe the mythological narrative of the relationship between humans and the Creator God within the Lisu cultural space.

The construction of the altars used in the Lisu Ni'EDi ritual can be traced back to the early 20th century. They are called Tianshen Culture or Ni'EDi Culture. Their typical features include a single-body altar with a rectangular sacred path before the semi-circular altar. The ritual in front of these altars involves squatting with bent legs, usually facing east-west for blessings and warding off evil. The ground and tree poles are adorned with white powder, accompanied by textiles, symbols, and cushions, all covered with fragrant pine needles. To meet the requirements of sacred perception, the attire of the adorned sacred tree becomes a significant symbol of the altar. Together with the sun, moon, and sacred bird, it believes that man conquers heaven under faith in the cosmos, nature, and supernatural forces.

The sacred tree, situated at the visual center of the ritual space, occupies the central area of the altar and is often adorned with pine branches and leaves. The mound of stones beneath the tree and the structural altar constitute a sacred territory deliberately shaped by human hands. Both the priest, Nipa, and the male devotees actively contribute to the design and layout of this space, thereby facilitating the participation and immersion of the Lisu faithful. A legend circulates about a grand tree adorned with numerous branches and leaves within the Lisu community in Lijiang. According to the elders, this tree represents the soul-sending tree of the God of Heaven and should be treated with the utmost reverence. It is strictly prohibited to cut it down, transplant it, or show any disrespect towards it. Instead, it is to be safeguarded, worshipped, and venerated. The violation of these taboos, according to belief, may result in illness or even death.

The God bird is a wooden sculpture or installation in a forest depicting the form of a bird. Its design is notably simple, featuring red brushstrokes outlining its eyes and scales, characterized by clean and bold lines that convey a sense of primitive or folk-art aesthetics. Crafted from natural materials and placed within a forest setting, this artwork represents the dialogue between a mythical bird and a human being in the realm of mythology.

The ritual wooden swords come in pairs, each crafted from fragrant wood adorned with white ribbons. They symbolically represent the divine weapons of the gods, serving as a conduit to the sacred realm to invoke blessings from the deities.

The act of burning offerings is a ceremonial ritual observed in various cultures. It involves burning paper as an offering to ancestors, spirits, or the spiritual world (Firth, 1963). Specific shapes of paper or patterns are believed to convey gifts or messages to the spirit world. The Ne'er-do-well ceremony incorporates the burning of fragrant wood. Burning the wood communicates between humans and spirits, creating a sacred and purifying space. This purification establishes a suitable environment for prayers or sacred communion (Puett, 2005).

The ritual chants are integrated into the four ceremonies and are led by the chief priest, Nipa. The priest undergoes purification by bathing, observes fasting for a day, and refrains from wearing impure garments. These preparations, known as the pre-ceremonies, are performed to demonstrate reverence towards the deities.

The narrative is highly elaborate, commencing with a detailed account of how the heavenly gods created all things, the evolution and current status of various entities, and concluding with expressions of gratitude. The celebration of the deity's arrival is meticulously described, encompassing the details of sacrifices and offerings. Prayers are offered for the deity to accept the offerings, bestow blessings, and grant prosperity in bountiful harvests, good health, and household wealth. The narration also includes information about the origins of various offerings.

In the Creation Deity ceremony, the spatial positioning and orientation of the priest hold significant religious significance. During the priest's prayers, they typically face east, which is considered a gesture of proximity to the divine. According to Liu's (2001) research on Orientation Rituals in China, the cardinal directions, including front, back, left, and right, are closely related to notions of hierarchy, with sitting north and facing south being seen as a position of reverence. Generally, the seat facing south is considered the most honorable on ceremonial occasions. In the Creation Deity ceremony, the high-ranking priest (Nipa) is separated from the other believers by the altar, with the area outside the altar designated for the ceremony and preparations. Below the main altar is the prayer area for Nipa and male believers, while the lowest platform is used by external individuals and guests, with no distinction of hierarchy (Figure 5).

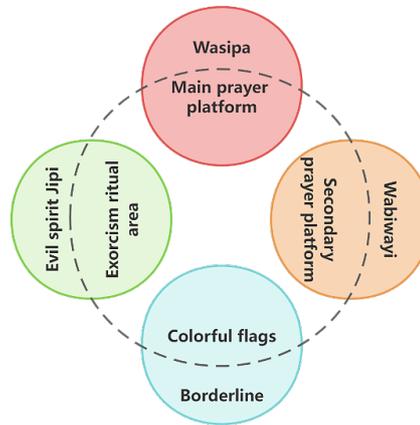


Figure 5: The picture shows the orientation and orientation of the sacrifice, with the main altar facing south, and the outside audience watching in the space outside the colorful flags.

Source: Drawn by author, 2024

The Ni'EDi altar reflects the traditional philosophical concept of the unity of heaven and humanity. From the perspective of Chinese traditional culture, the circular design is a symbolic hallmark, carrying the auspicious wishes of festivals and ceremonial moments. The layout structure of the Ni'EDi altar typically forms a quasi-circle with the divine seat at its center. During the Ni'EDi ritual, wooden circular pieces are suspended at a height and connected with grass-made sacred cords, symbolizing the pursuit of auspiciousness and the avoidance of misfortune. The semi-circular layout and circular material symbols of the Ni'EDi altar visually symbolize the harmonious unity of heaven, earth, and humanity, closely tied to the unity of heaven and humanity. Furthermore, the supreme divine deity is positioned at the semi-circle's central point, further reinforcing this connection's cultural symbolism.

4.2 Spiritual practices of the Ni'EDi ritual: Perception of sacred power

The focus of this section is to analyze the key factors in perceiving the sacred space of the altar and, consequently, to form an understanding of the sacred elements of the Ni'EDi ritual space in the interaction between the ritual and individuals.

The perception of sacredness in rituals is often closely linked to supernatural forces (Milner, 1994). In the Ni'EDi Ritual, the sacred and mystical power is commonly understood as the dwelling of deities. Interaction with this power is believed to bestow special spiritual authority upon participants. For instance, the authority and dignity of the priest Nipa are manifested within the ritual space. The involvement of the community members also becomes integrated into the altar space, thereby creating a firsthand experience of the presence of the deities. In their efforts to comprehend foreign cultures, ordinary spectators strive to interpret their more

profound cultural significance. This type of spatial power is reflected in the research of a Kilde, who categorizes the power within religious spaces into three types: first, the sacred or supernatural power attributed to divinity; second, social power, related to various social hierarchies, particularly the priestly class; and third, personal power, the sense of various spiritual powers individuals derive from divine experiences (Kilde, 2008). In this context, we will adopt this classification of power, with the supernatural power of the Creator God as the core category of 'Creator God,' providing a theoretical basis for our study of the sacred perceptual experiences within the Ni'EDi altar space.

Utilizing sacred or supernatural forces, power guides members of the Lisu ethnic group to specific non-sacred or secular locations. In his seminal work 'The Sacred and the Profane,' Mircea Eliade explores the themes of religious cultural perception and interaction with ritual spaces. Eliade's perspective centers on the concept of sacred space, considering it not only a core element in religious and mythological traditions but also a cultural perception and response to the divine (Eliade, 1959). For the Lisu 'Creator God' ritual space, each spatial deity signifies an iconographer (Southwest University for Nationalities Library, 1986) or spirit's invited dwelling. These orientations within the ritual context enhance the audience's understanding of the 'center' of the altar, which revolves around the sacred power centered on the deities (Cohen, 1969).

The spatial orientation centers around the tree vertically and horizontally. These centers connect vertically, guiding the celestial powers, troubled individuals, communities, and even malevolent entities to create a vertical 'force' spatial connection. Additionally, they 'horizontally' position the communities, delineating the landscape into sacred centers and secular areas, imbuing significance into the divine domains. The presence of the deities, the axis of this world, not only conveys spiritual meanings but also provides connections to other spaces and knowledge within the community.

As the world's axis, the tree is the physical center of space and the core of spiritual and cultural life. As an intermediary connecting different cosmic levels, the tree establishes a link between the material world and the spiritual realm, embodying the spiritual and symbolic connections between heaven and earth. The 'vertical' sacred domain and 'horizontal' secular spatial layout centered around the tree offer believers a gateway to transcend the worldly realm.

Furthermore, cultural landscapes within the ritual context often undergo changes and reconstructions (Dora, 2018; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993). It has been observed that the shrines on the Ni'EDi altar are dismantled each year, and a new sacred tree is reconstructed in the exact location or (within the same area) in its original form. The establishment and reconstruction of the ritual cultural landscape are continuous processes. Additionally, rebuilding village houses and ancestral shrine altars due to factors such as family migration or long-term wear and tear constitutes a traditional ritual cultural landscape redesign. The variability and diversity in the changing landscape of ritual shrines, marked by a cycle of preservation and renewal, contribute to the vibrant Ni'EDi ritual landscape.

The narrative of the Ni'EDi ritual provides a spatial framework for studying the continuity and changes in traditional culture. The thematic narrative of Ni'EDi highlights the vitality and divinity of the Lisu rituals, demonstrating how traditional culture maintains its essence amidst ongoing evolution. The dynamics and sacredness of the ritual are accentuated.

The analysis of the Ni'EDi ritual space further clarifies the key role of physical space in constructing sacred narratives. The ritual space is not merely a physical location; symbolic elements such as the sacred tree and altar provide participants with a space imbued with sacred power. Under the influence of these spatial elements, the sacred narrative is materialized and reinforced in the participants' visual and emotional experiences. The design of the spatial layout and the selection of symbolic elements directly impact the emotional expression of the ritual and the presentation of the sacred narrative, transforming the mythological stories from mere oral narratives into a sacred experience that participants can personally perceive and engage with.

This is closely related to the earlier section on oral traditions, which provides the theoretical foundation for sacred narratives by recounting history and mythology by combining physical space and symbolic elements, enabling the sacred narrative to be manifested in a specific ritual space. The integration of these two aspects drives the transmission and re-presentation of sacred narratives, strengthening the continuity of cultural memory and deepening the emotional and spiritual recognition of the sacred narrative in everyday life.

5. THE SACRED SPACE OF THE NI'EDI RITUAL

In the foundational research analysis of this paper, the crucial role of oral traditional culture in understanding the spatial narrative of the Ni'EDi ritual is emphasized (Cashman & Cronin, 2008). As a vital component of cultural heritage, oral traditions provide cultural insights into the history of the ritual and reveal

the cultural function and social significance of divine narrative structures in ritual participation (Foley, 2011). These narratives serve not only as carriers of memory but also as key elements in the reenactment and guidance of cultural identity transmission within the community. They complement the shortcomings of written records of the Ni'EDi ritual, providing a richer and more vivid cultural and historical context for the ritual space.

The Ni'EDi ritual space is regarded as a dynamic situational space imbued with sacred attributes. This viewpoint is substantiated through multiple arguments presented in this article. Furthermore, this paper elucidates that, to comprehensively analyze the dynamic nature of the Ni'EDi ritual space, researchers must delve into its intrinsic power structures, encompassing cultural, social, and individual influences. Within this ritual space, the diverse levels of power factors, such as social rituals and cultural entities, are not isolated but rather intricately intertwined and interdependent, collectively shaping the complexity of the Ni'EDi ritual space (Landry, 2018).

To delve deeply into the Ni'EDi ritual's power framework, researchers must emphasize the material dimension of space and human experience. The material environment is far from a neutral entity, as numerous studies have revealed that power dynamics often manifest and solidify through the physical environment and material entities (Alaimo, 2010). In the context of the Ni'EDi ritual, tangible elements such as the sacred seats or altars demonstrate power dynamics among the clergy, embodying the concretization of divinity. These material entities, including ritual implements like knives, play a pivotal role in actively shaping and reinforcing the beliefs, norms, and divine elements within the Ni'EDi ritual, constituting a fundamental component of this cultural experience.

This article recognizes the dynamic nature of the belief space of Ni'EDi, emphasizing its various manifestations in the context of the Creation God. This dynamic quality encompasses a range of elements, from sacred spaces such as the sacred seats and divine trees to the specific domains of altars. Connecting these heterogeneous spaces aims to elucidate the diverse understandings of the relationship between the Creation God and humanity. Through the analysis of oral narratives, the audience can gain a more concrete understanding of the diverse interpretations of the relationship between the Creation God and the community, both from internal groups such as the Lisu people and believers and external observers representing different ethnic backgrounds.

However, even within the space of the Ni'EDi ritual, individual spiritual experiences are closely connected to a broader network of social, cultural, and religious significance (Oakley, 2018). These deeper meanings and relationships are embodied through the elements within the ritual space. In this environment, the tools and ceremonial items are not just a part of the ritual; they also provide participants with insights into the beliefs and practices of the ritual community. For instance, the act of burning twigs in the ritual narrative environment serves not only as a purification ritual but is also designated as a symbolic tool for invoking the sacred power of the sun and moon. By experiencing these interconnected factors within the Ni'EDi ritual space, the audience can better understand how religious spaces help concretize and sustain specific relationships and practices.

The main findings of this study address the question of how sacred narratives are constructed through the integration of ritual culture, oral traditions, and physical space. The research demonstrates that ritual culture, oral traditions, and physical space interact to facilitate the construction and dissemination of sacred narratives collectively:

Through its historical context and social practices, ritual culture provides the cultural framework for sacred narratives. Sacred narratives are recited and transmitted through ritual actions, symbolic objects, and scenes. Through narration and memory, oral traditions connect the individual and the collective in the sacred narrative. Oral narration provides the textual foundation for myths and history while enhancing the sacred narrative's emotional experience during the ritual process. Through its layout, symbolic elements, and interaction with ritual actions, physical space offers a concrete space to express and experience sacred narratives. Space is not only a vessel for sacred narratives but, through participant interaction, breathes life into them.

By integrating ritual culture, oral traditions, and physical space, this study proposes a comprehensive framework for exploring how sacred narratives are constructed in the Lisu Ni'EDi ritual. From the perspective of sacred narrative studies, the researchers argue that "Lisu sacred space is not merely a physical existence," emphasizing the interactive relationship between space and sacred narratives. The innovation of this study lies not only in its interdisciplinary theoretical integration but also in the in-depth analysis of the process of sacred narrative construction. Particularly through the interaction between oral traditions and physical space, this study proposes a new model for the continuous transmission and re-presentation of sacred narratives in contemporary society. This research framework may offer valuable insights for studying sacred narratives in other ethnic or cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Jie Guo, Associate Professor at the School of Design and Art, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology; Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Decorative Arts at Silpakorn University; and Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Arts and Technology. Furthermore, we thank Professor Lianjie Liu, Dean of the School of Arts and doctoral supervisor at Yunnan Normal University, for his valuable guidance in the field of aesthetics.

This research was supported by the 2023 Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (Project Approval Number: 23YJC760158), which focuses on the spatiotemporal schema of Lisu ritual art.

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