



Soul of Banyan Tree: A Study on the Folk Culture of Banyan Tree Worship in Hainan

Fengde Huo, Xiaomei Chen*

School of Literature, Qiongtai Normal University, Haikou, Hainan, China.

How to cite this paper: Fengde Huo, Xiaomei Chen. (2024) Soul of Banyan Tree: A Study on the Folk Culture of Banyan Tree Worship in Hainan. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(3), 697-700. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.03.025

Received: February 27, 2024

Accepted: March 24, 2024

Published: April 22, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Xiaomei Chen, School of Literature, Qiongtai Normal University, Haikou, Hainan, China.

Abstract

Tree worship is widespread throughout China, with different representations in different regions. They will choose different trees to express their spirit and belief. Banyan tree worship is one of the cultural phenomena widely existing in Hainan. The banyan tree is regarded as a "spirit" tree by Hainan folk, which has the significance of warding off evil spirits and praying for blessings. However, in the nature worship of Hainan, banyan tree worship is not just a simple "sacred tree", as a "spirit" tree, it can communicate with "God", but also lead to the "ghost" field. Banyan tree worship is related to the local ghost worship in Hainan and also related to the traditional Chinese tree worship, which is a manifestation of the Hainan immigrant culture. The study of banyan tree worship culture in Hainan and the investigation of folk tree belief in Hainan is not only an extension of the study of China's natural belief, but also an expansion of the study of Hainan's regional culture. The banyan tree worship in Hainan is a repositioning and shaping of the local ancient ghost worship and the traditional Chinese tree worship in the immigrant environment in Hainan.

Keywords

Banyan tree, Worship, Hainan, Folk custom, Immigrant culture

Introduction

China has a long history and splendid civilization through the ages. As an ancient civilization with a vast territory, people in different regions of China have accumulated their own distinctive folk cultures in the rolling waves of history. In ancient times, people had not yet formed a clear concept of a supernatural body, but they had begun to tend to supernatural natural objects and natural forces. Primitive religious forms such as God worship, natural worship, tree worship, animal worship, ghost worship, and ancestor worship occupy an important position in the history of Chinese civilization, among which tree worship is a magnificent territory in ancient religious culture. Although tree worship is no longer the main character of religious belief due to long time and scientific progress, the custom of tree worship continues in many parts of the world due to its unique significance and charm (Abidova, 2023). As the southernmost territory of China, Hainan enjoys refuge from the natural barrier of an "isolated island", and some local cultures continue with strong vitality. The worship of the banyan tree is a distinctive folk custom landscape of Hainan's local folk.

Ficus microcarpa L.f. (banyan tree) is a large evergreen tree with a height of 20-25 meters and an angry root. It is one of the tree species with the largest crown and the most tenacious vitality in the world. This paper says that the ficus referred to mainly refers to the small leaf ficus and large leaf ficus in ficus. Because the two kinds of banyan trees are common species in Hainan, and their vitality is strong, the roots are developed and the roots often rise and protrude from the ground, and the shape is very unique, so Hainan people have a special love for banyan trees. Banyan

tree worship in Hainan folk is a unique folk culture. Rongshu Xinang not only reflects the Hainan people's tree belief but also reflects the continuity and adaptability of Hainan folk culture. Furthermore, reflecting the Hainan people's ideal desire and deep national psychology.

1. Worship the significance of the Hainan banyan tree

China has the custom of worshipping trees throughout the ages. According to the record of "Gong Yang·Wen Gong 2 years", in ancient times, the God Lord made of chestnut was called "chestnut Lord", "The Lord of Yu uses mulberry, the Lord of training uses chestnut, and the Lord of hiding the Lord with chestnut", that is, the meaning of trembling and teaching. When the ancestors worshipped the gods of five grains, they often planted a colorful tree on the left and right of the altar, a cypress on the left and bamboo on the right, meaning "hundred (cypress) auspicious and rich (bamboo)", and Emperor Wudi of Han Dynasty had a "bamboo King Temple" to worship bamboo (Gu, 2002).

Tree worship originated in ancient times and played different roles in different stages of Chinese history. The banyan tree worship in Hainan has a long history, but with the changing of the world, the current banyan tree worship is closely integrated with people's social life, and the meaning has changed from the original simplicity, showing the complexity of the meaning of banyan tree worship.

1.1 The Banyan tree is known as the "sacred tree" in Hainan

Many places in Hainan folk regard the banyan tree as a "sacred tree" or "god tree". Some studies hold that a sacred tree is "a kind of tree related to religious worship" (Wu, 1991). The author thinks that this exposition is reasonable to some extent. The author believes that tree worship itself is a kind of ancient religious worship, Hainan folk have believed that the banyan tree is a "sacred tree", the reason why the banyan tree became a sacred tree is related to the growth characteristics of banyan tree. Banyan trees generally have dense foliage and a long life. Among the ancient and famous trees in Hainan, banyan trees occupy the largest proportion. For example, Hainan Chengmai County Jiayun Village village before the Banyan tree has a history of hundreds of years, and is now "a single tree into a forest". The villagers regard the banyan tree as "the treasure of the village", dedicate the banyan tree as "God", and think that "The people are prosperous as trees, or the people will fall with trees", the growth of the banyan tree and the lifeblood of the village are linked together. The Banyan trees have not been cut down, although the village has been repeatedly reformed. Accordingly, there is a story circulating in the neighboring countryside. It is said that there is a bold fanatics in the village regardless of the people stop, take an axe to cut trees, but strange things happened, although the banyan was cut but never fell. According to the old man in the village, the wounds of the tree closed overnight, and the man who cut the tree suddenly died on the third day. After that, no one dared to offend the "holy tree" for fear that the "holy tree" would bring disaster or calamity.

There is a similar legend in Luobao Village, Penglai Town, Wenchang City, Hainan. There is a Banyan temple next to the ancestral hall in Luobao Village, and it is said that both the village god and the earth god live in this banyan tree. There was once a greedy man in the village who cut down banyan trees to sell to timber merchants, because both of them violated the "divine tree", the gods sent down SINS and made the two people sick. Soon after, the greedy man who felled the banyan tree died, but fortunately, the timber merchant turned to "Shen Gong" (the local shaman wizard) for help, and under the wizard's instructions, atoned for his SINS, replanted a banyan tree in the place of the felled banyan tree, and returned the god's residence - the divine tree, and the disease began to solve. In these places, the folk regard the banyan tree as a "sacred tree" that is inviolable.

1.2 The banyan tree has the function of exorcism and warding off evil spirits in Hainan folk

"Evil" in the folk mainly refers to ghosts, souls, demons, monsters, and so on. In traditional folk ideas, demons and ghosts often walk the earth, in the Yin qi prevailing, evil people or Yang weak children. Folk have a variety of ways to avoid evil, among which banyan tree to avoid evil is a common practice in some areas of Hainan folk. In some villages in Chengmai, people often like to take a bath with boiled water from banyan leaves when their families are sick, saying that banyan leaves can eliminate bad luck and let patients get rid of ghosts as soon as possible. It is understood that in some superstitious families in Chengmai, if there is an owl parked on the branches of the courtyard at night, the family must quietly invite "Shen" or "Shen woman" (local wizards) the next day, to the village an old tree - often banyan tree, the practice of exorcising demons, praying for banyan tree to protect the family.

Naturally, the banyan tree exorcism effect of the merit needs to be rewarded, if the patient recovers, the family

must prepare wine and food to burn incense under the banyan tree to vow. While expressing gratitude in his mouth, he prayed for more happiness to the "divine tree".

1.3 The banyan tree has a blessing meaning in Hainan people

Banyan trees can be seen almost everywhere in Hainan, their canopy is like a pavilion, and their roots are floating. Due to the banyan tree is associated with more gas roots, the angry roots are sagging, coupled with the growth over a long time, more body dragon bell, although calm but rich aura, giving people wonder, in Hainan folk, the banyan tree has a blessing significance.

The villagers of Chilong Village, Huangliu Town, Ledong County, Hainan, have been praying to the banyan tree, the most important of which is to pray for the banyan tree to protect their children and let their children grow up strong; There are also prayers for the banyan tree to protect their own production, so that their livestock and crops get a good harvest. For example, there is the custom of "foster" children to the Banyan tree God: if a child is born weak and ill, villagers often take the child's birth date to the "Shen" or "Shen woman" for treatment. If it is found that the child's birth is eight characters and five elements are missing, then on the auspicious day selected by the "Shen" or "Shen woman", prepare a rich meal to worship the village's most dense banyan tree, and pray to the banyan tree God between incense and fireworks. In the hearts of the villagers, the vitality of the banyan tree is so strong because the tree God, and such a strong deity just protects their children to grow up.

2. Reasons for the formation of Banyan tree worship in Hainan

The banyan tree is widely distributed in south China and exists in large numbers in Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Fujian, and other places. Banyan tree worship as a folk culture exists everywhere. For example, in Hongya County, Meishan City, Sichuan Province, because the banyan trees by the Qingyi River grow thick and colorful, people hold reverence for the banyan trees. The first and fifteenth days of each month are the Banyan Tree Festival of people beside the Qingyi River. On that day, those who sacrifice banyan trees will prepare incense and pray for shade from the banyan tree. The banyan tree in this area has a feature that gives the banyan tree "color", when the sacrifice tree people will choose a dead branch, and tie red cloth on it. In contrast, the worship of the banyan tree in Hainan has its own characteristics. The forms and practices of banyan tree worship in Hainan are diverse, and the sacrificial activities are random, and even some meanings are contradictory. The reason why banyan tree worship in Hainan has the above significance is related to the formation process of banyan tree worship in Hainan, which is the continuation of ancient local ghost worship and tree worship in the new era.

Hainan is a tropical forest area, the climate is warm, humid, and rainy, since ancient times lush vegetation, and shrub forests. Trees, forests, and the production and life of the ancestors are closely related. People live in the forest, in the trees, and in the trees. Trees not only provide people with food and daily necessities but also provide resources for people to build buildings and various living facilities. Various species closely related to human beings in nature are often endowed with various legends of life in people's spiritual world, and people conceive another world and possibility outside of existence through their imagination. Engels said, "The first religious manifestations were celebrations reflecting natural phenomena, the change of seasons, and so on. The particular natural conditions and natural products in which a tribe or nation lives are carried into its religion" (Marx & Engels, 1975). People in Hainan also form such a poetic contrast with trees. Trees give the ancestors of Hainan a variety of imagination and expectations, and all kinds of trees have different meanings due to their different roles in Hainan folk. As a common tree species, the banyan tree formed a unique tree worship in Hainan, which has its own unique causes.

Banyan trees are widely distributed and diverse in Hainan, a tropical island. The vitality of banyan trees has aroused the imagination of the ancestors. In addition, the banyan tree canopy is thick, and the tree is often cooler. Accordingly, the ancestors had two kinds of emotional experiences.

First, the banyan tree under the cool wind, angry roots close to the tree, in Hainan many folks, the banyan tree is considered to be a very heavy Yin tree, so the banyan tree has a psychic effect, is imagined as a ladder to heaven God, the ground devil monster. Mr. Chen Xiping, who studies culture and human beings, said: "China, like other ancient countries in the world, has formed the concept of soul and ghosts and gods in primitive clan society, and believes that the soul is immortal. Therefore, in many customs of various peoples, this idea is permeated and conveyed by trees" (Chen, 2003). The banyan tree is also regarded as a spiritual tree in many places in Hainan, thus, it can not be offended. According to an old man in Sanmenpo, Haikou, the banyan tree is an inviolable tree in the area, and if it is violated,

it must offend the God and spirit who are attached to the tree, and people will have family discord, everything will go wrong, the chickens and dogs will be upset, and in serious cases, there may be casualties.

Second, the banyan tree canopy is thick, and naturally umbrellike, showing the image of shading people from the sun and rain. Hainan folk believe that the banyan tree gave shade to the ancestors. In addition, the banyan tree not only has a zigzag shape, a dragon shape, and the name pronunciation is similar to "dragon" tree or "long" tree, so the banyan tree in the spiritual world of Hainan ancestors became a unique divine tree. Many villages in Wenchang have banyan trees planted beside the door of the "Gongjiang" (ancestral hall), which means that banyan trees can bless the prosperity of the place and provide blessings for the gods. In particular, it is worth noting that the banyan tree and the bodhi tree belong to the mulberry family, which is undoubtedly different for Hainan, where the bodhi tree is generally rare. Compared with the tradition of planting bodhi trees in ancestral halls and temples in the north, banyan trees are planted more in the south. Through this planting custom, we can find another religious significance of banyan trees in Hainan.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, the banyan tree is a kind of tree with unique worship significance in Hainan. As a "divine tree", the banyan tree not only has the meaning of warding off evil but also has the meaning of blessing. The existence of this cultural phenomenon of banyan trees in Hainan is not only related to the growth characteristics of banyan trees but also related to the growth environment of banyan trees. In addition, the development of banyan tree worship in Hainan is also related to the continuation of the immigrant culture in southern Fujian. Hans Biedermann, a German scholar, said in the "tree" in the Dictionary of Symbols of World Cultures: "Because the tree is rooted in the earth but its branches point to heaven, the tree, like human beings, is the medium between beings belonging to two worlds, above and below." In many ancient civilizations, not only were specific trees or entire clusters of trees revered as the homes of supernatural beings (gods, ghosts) but trees were generally regarded as the axes of the world around which the universe formed an orderly whole." (Biedermann, 2000) Visible tree worship is the universal cultural thought, behavior, and mode of human beings. As a human culture, tree worship has always attracted the attention of scholars all over the world. Many scholars try to interpret the content, meaning, reason, and cultural psychology of regional culture by interpreting tree worship (Chauhan & Chauhan, 2019). The study of banyan tree worship in Hainan undoubtedly opens another window for us to understand Hainan culture and the origin and cultural psychology behind it, and the continuity of southern Fujian culture embodied by banyan tree worship is still an urgent topic to be explored.

Acknowledgements

This study is supported by the 2024 Hainan Higher Education Research Project (No. Hnjg2024ZC-125).

References

- Abidova, Z. (2023). Worship of trees in cultural practice of the uzbeks of the Khorezm oasis. *EPR International Journal of Socio-Economic and Environmental Outlook (SEEO)*, 10(3), 10-12.
- Biedermann, H. (2000). *Dictionary of symbolism: Cultural icons and the meanings behind them*. Guangxi: Lijiang Publishing House, 314.
- Chauhan, S., & Chauhan, S. V. S. (2019). Worship and trees in India. *Sibirskij Lesnoj Zurnal/Siberian Journal of Forest Science*, (4), 36-48.
- Chen, X. (2003). Tree Worship and Folk Culture. *Journal of Shandong Agricultural University*, 4, 70.
- Gu, K. (2002). Tree totem and tree worship in Chinese nation. *Agricultural Archaeology*, 2, 136-154.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1975). *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 01: Marx: 1835-1843*. Lawrence & Wishart.
- Rival, L. (2021). Trees, from symbols of life and regeneration to political artefacts. *The Social Life of Trees*, pp. 1-36. Routledge.
- Wu, Z. Ed. (1991). *Anthropological Dictionary*. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicography Publishing House. Pp. 703-704.