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**Ancient Asiatic Culture:  
The Zhi Ma Funeral Ceremony  
of the Na-Khi of Southwest China  
by Joseph F. Rock**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 5, no. 2 (1957): 230–234

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## ANCIENT ASIATIC CULTURE

**THE ZHI MA FUNERAL CEREMONY OF THE NA-KHI OF SOUTHWEST CHINA.** Described and translated from Na-Khi manuscripts by Joseph F. Rock. *Studia Instituti Anthropos* vol. 9. St. Gabriel's Mission Press. Vienna-Modling. 1955. Pp. xv, 228. Plates 10. Appendix.

*The Zhi Ma Funeral Ceremony of the Na-Khi of Southwest China* by Joseph F. Rock of the Harvard-Yenching Institute is a fascinating book containing valuable information about the Na-Khi people, which will serve as clues to a better understanding of the changes and intermingling among the various tribes, such as the Moso, the Pa Chi or Hsi Fan, the Lu-tso, the Kiutze etc. in Yunnan Province. Despite the innumerable untranslatable passages, the scholarly rendering and the plates do help to present a vivid picture of the customs and traditions of this strange people.

As it appears today, the Zhi Ma ceremony consists of a medley of spirit worship, Lamaism, Taoist rituals, very ancient Chinese occultism and rites. For instance the blood lake, the sword tree, the eighteen hells, the thirty-three heavens, the six paths of metempsychosis etc. betray its Lamaistic lineage. The bpo or Bon chants, the Mba-mindzer or lamp tree, the cloven-footed spirits, the strange hosts of gods and demons—these are signs of spirit worship Tibetan and otherwise. The transference of human disease upon the body of an animal or bird, the rat as the animal beginning the animal cycle of the year (p. 25), the list of three generations of ancestors, the planting and erection of the pine tree, the grains of rice and silver inserted into the mouth of the dying person, the five-colored officiating wand of the dto-mba or priest and the five-colored scarf decoration on the pine tree representing the five elements, the dragon as the "blue-sky power," the Shou Hsing or God of Longevity—all these bear the print of Chinese influence.

"Zhi-Ma" as pointed out by the author means "road teach", that is, guidance or instruction as to which way the soul of the deceased should take in order to arrive at the realm of the gods. Indeed the entire Zhi-Ma ceremony is a performance, superstitious as well as religious, by the dto-mba or priest for the safe conduct

and purification of the soul. A few passages will show the point:

On the left the sun appears, today the sun is hot, on the right the moon appears, today the moon is bright.

In the north at La-ssaw-dto-k'o-p'er the Tibetan is well versed in casting horoscope (s) for the year, this year is propitious.

In the south the La-bbu from Bbu-lv-zhisaw-man is proficient in casting the horoscope for the month, this month is propitious....

In the center in Dzi-ndsu-lu-gv the Na-khi is proficient in casting horoscope for the day (night), tonight is propitious....

You will arrive in the good land of the O and Ha, you will arrive in the realm of the 360 good gods on high.

You have not been caught in the 18 realms of La-chou in hell.

You have not been caught in the 9 black houses of Nyi-wua.

You have not been caught in the lake of Khyu-dso du: the land of the brutes (animal world)....

In the east before Ko-tsa-tsa-mbu DtO-ddu present your lamp.

In the south before Ssa-zhi-ma-ngu DtO-ddu present your lamp.

In the West before Na-ssa-ch'ung-lu DtO-ddu present your lamp.

In the North before Gv-ssa-k'o-mba DtO-ddu present your lamp.

In the centre between heaven and earth before Sso-yu-dzi-gv DtO-ddu present your lamp.

I am not sure whether this ceremony is Chinese in origin or not, but the mention of the five directions and the tone of warning certainly remind me of the *Great Summons* of Chu Yuan B.C. 340-278), the Father of Chinese poetry and a native of the State of Ch'u (B.C. 1100-222) where necromancy flourished and exerted a great deal of influence upon the numerous tribes there, including perhaps the ancestors of the Na-Khis. The following lines may serve to show what I mean:

O Soul come back again and go east or west.

Or north or south!

For to the east of mighty water drowneth Earth's

Other shore:

Tossed on its waves and heaving with its tides

The hornless Dragon of the ocean riseth;

Clouds gather low and fog enfolds the sea

And gleaming ice drifts past.

O Soul go not to the east,

To the silent valley of Sunrise!

O Soul go not to the South

Where mile on mile the earth is burnt away  
And poisonous serpents slither through the flames;  
Where on precipitous paths or in deep woods  
Tigers and leopards prowl,  
And water scorpions wait;  
Where the king python rears his giant head.  
O Soul, go not to the South  
Where the three-footed tortoise spits disease!

There is one major difference here: while the Zhi-Ma ceremony offers to guide the soul to the realm of gods, the Great Summons call the soul back to his own land and home. However, the basic idea to usher the soul to its final resting place—be it in heaven or on earth—and to ward off dangers awaiting it in all directions is the same. It is quite possible that the Na-Khi people first learned this practice either directly from the Ch'u people or indirectly through the P'u tribe which had occupied that region before the Na-Khis. It is also possible that the Ch'iang tribe, the ancestor of the Na-Khis, simply adopted the very ancient Chinese rite of Fu and then, later on, modified its form, first according to the influence of Ch'u and then according to the influence of Lamaism. The Fu, the calling of the soul back to its body, is a very ancient practice of the Chinese people. According to the *Book of Rites* (Chapter II b) and other classics, while a person is dying a member of his or her family would climb up the roof and facing north and calling his name summon the soul to return with some clothes worn by the dying one.

That the pattern of the Zhi-Ma ceremony is basically Chinese may be proven by numerous facts throughout the book. First let us look at plate VI in the appendix. The dragon in the upper part of the plate, the costume of the dto-mba, the white horse of Shi-lo and the white horse on which the dto-mba is riding, the conventionalized flow of water and the flat gong are all unmistakably Chinese. The dragon appears in the legends of many lands, but the dragon as "the blue-sky power" is a Chinese idea. And the white horse plays an important part in Chinese sacrificial and funeral ceremonies from very ancient times down to the present.

Secondly, the nine grains of rice and a piece of silver put in the mouth of a dying man (seven grains and a piece of silver into the mouth of a woman): this is an orthodox Chinese practice known as "fan han" in the *Book of Rites*, the *I Li*, the *Chou Li*, the *Chun Chiu Wei* etc. "Fan" means rice or to feed; "han"

means to hold something in the mouth. Here "fan" means to put rice into the mouth of a dead person and "han" means to put a piece of jade or pearl or gem or cowry or silver into the mouth of the deceased according to the rank or dignity of the person. A piece of jade for instance would be inserted into the mouth of a dead ruler. This has been a Chinese state rite from time immemorial.

Thirdly, the erection and planting of the pine tree: the planting of the pine tree at the sacrifice to earth conducted by the sovereign himself is a rite of the Hsia Dynasty (B.C. 2183-1754). In the Confucian *Annalects* (Book III, Chapter 2) a tree-planting ceremony is described. The *Huai Nan Tzu* (second century B.C.) Chapter 2 mentions tree-planting in connection with a burial. The planting of a pine tree at the burial is the rite of the Yin (Shang Dynasty) people; the planting of cypress is the rite of the Chou (Chou Dynasty) people. The erection of the pine tree for the ceremony and the planting of it at the burial place by the Na-Khi people may therefore be a survival of this ancient Chinese rite.

Fourthly, the five elements: the five colors representing the five elements on the dto-mba's wand and on the pine tree is certainly a Chinese idea, which is well known to the world.

Fifthly, the establishment of the cycle year, month, day and hour of the birth and death of the deceased is again a Chinese practice. This is known to the Chinese fortune-tellers as the identification of the "pa chih". "Pa" means eight, "chih" means a word or character; together they mean "the eight characters." The eight characters represent four combinations of the "ten celestial stems" and "twelve horary characters," and these four combinations are assigned, one each, to the cyclic year, month, day and hour respectively. For example, the first stem "chia" and the first horary character "tzu", which stands for the animal rat, together form one combination, the combination "chia tzu" which may be assigned to the year. The second stem "i" and the second horary character "ch'ou" which stands for the animal ox, together form the combination "i ch'ou" which may be assigned to the month. The third stem "ping" and the third horary character "yin" which stands for the animal tiger form the combination "ping yin" which may be assigned to the day; and the fourth stem "ting" and the fourth horary character "mao" which stands for the animal hare form the combination "ting mao" which may be assigned to the hour. Thus the person may be said to have been born or to have died in the year of the rat, in the month of the

ox, on the day of the tiger and at the hour of the hare. As soon as the "sheng hsiao" (the animals that rule the year, the month, the day and the hour) of the person is found, the *dto-mba* can compare it with those animals ruling the year, month, day and hour of his death and tell whether the person died at an auspicious or ill-omened moment. If there is no mutual conflict or destructive effect among the animals, then the death is good; otherwise it is bad and measures should be taken to exorcise the evil. The Na-Khis apparently adopted this Chinese practice.

From the above evidences—and other evidences too numerous to be quoted—it is quite clear that the basic pattern of the Zhi-Ma ceremony is Chinese and that the Chinese influence over the Na-Khi people is very prominent. This influence is only natural when one recalls that the Ch'iang tribe (the Na-Khi being one of its branches) is one of the earliest composite elements of the Chinese race. Ever since the time of Emperor Shen Lung (B.C. 2737), who was supposed to be the ancestor of the Ch'iangs, wars, social intercourse and inter-marriages between the Ch'iangs and the Chinese took place and they were driven by the Chinese from the northwestern part of China to the southwest.

In assigning a Chinese origin to the basic pattern of the Zhi-Ma ceremony, there is not the least intention on the part of the reviewer to make another claim for the tremendous cultural influence of China on the lands and peoples surrounding her. The important point here is that the ceremony itself, so complicated and representative of the life and background of the Na-Khis, cannot be completely understood unless the ruling Chinese influence exerted upon it thousands of years ago is traced out. This influence is historically prior to the appearance of Lamaism. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea for the author to devote more study to the skein of Chinese elements underlying the Lamaistic and Tibetan veneers of the ceremony. And certain important factors, such as the route of migration of the Ch'iang tribe, the chronological order of the cultural impacts upon the Na-Khis themselves, the introduction of a written language to the Na-Khi people by Me Tsung in the twelfth and thirteenth century, the relationship between Chiang, the surname of Emperor Shen Lung (B.C. 2737), Ch'iang, the tribal name, and Tsang or Hsi Tsang, the Chinese name for Tibet, have to be reconsidered systematically before the unknown gods can be identified and the puzzling problems solved.

JEN TAI