

# Study on the Custom of Recognizing Gan Kin of the Gelao Nationality in Wuchuan

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## Abstract

**Cognition of kinship, as a kind of quasi kinship, widely exists in Chinese civil society. Influenced by traditional beliefs and geographical environment, the custom of recognizing relatives of the Gelao ethnic group in Wuchuan has its own unique characteristics. By investigating the reasons and objects for the recognition of Ganhe Village Gelao people in Wuchuan, we can explore the social function and cultural significance behind this custom.**

## Keywords

**Gelao nationality; Recognize a close relative; Traditional beliefs; Function.**

## 1. Introduction

"Kinship is a relationship based on blood or marriage, with the family as the core unit. It exists in certain marriages and families." [1] In civil society, there is also a social relationship based on karma, geography, and so on, which is called fictive kinship in anthropology. As the name implies, fictive kinship is a relationship that simulates kinship, that is, using kinship terms to address other members of society who are not kinship. The person addressed has the same responsibilities and obligations as the real kinship, which is an extended form of kinship. The main types of quasi kinship include recognizing relatives and Fraternalize, among which the custom of recognizing relatives widely exists in Chinese civil society. Due to the influence of traditional beliefs and geographical environment, the custom of recognizing relatives in Wuchuan Gelao ethnic group is relatively unique. Ganhe Village is located in Daping Town, Wuchuan Gelao and Miao Autonomous County, Zunyi City, Guizhou Province, with a large proportion of Gelao ethnic groups in the village, and maintains a complete customs of recognizing relatives. Taking Ganhe Village as a field investigation site, the author conducted a relevant investigation on the causes, objects, and functions of the custom of recognizing relatives among the Gelao ethnic group in Wuchuan through interviews and literature analysis, in order to find out the cultural significance behind the custom.

## 2. Reasons for recognizing a close relative

There must be many influencing factors behind the prevalence of a custom. Through interviews and observations with most villagers in Ganhe Village, the author found that almost every villager would recognize a close relative when they were young. However, the reasons and purposes for recognizing a close relative vary, and can be roughly divided into the following five categories:

First, because of "fate" to recognize relatives. Before, there was no developed medical technology in modern society, nor was there any scientific or unscientific concept, so many villagers would seek fortune-tellers to calculate eight characters, especially when things went wrong at home. Some people's fortune-telling results in a mismatch between parents and their

children's eight characters. In this case, either the parents subdue the children or the children subdue their parents. To solve this dilemma, it is necessary to "hold the child out of the room," which means letting the child recognize a close relative. However, there are two options for "holding out the house" here, either letting the child recognize his or her godfather or mother, or changing the way the child calls his or her parents, which means that the child cannot call his or her parents "parents.". However, in situations where a child is abusive to their parents, it is difficult for others to accept the child as a close relative. Therefore, when a child and their parents disagree, it is basically to let the child change the address of their parents.

Second, because of "illness" to recognize relatives. China has been a large agricultural country since ancient times. In an era without advanced production methods, people relied on their own labor to produce food. Ganhe Village, a typical karst landform, has poor land, rugged surface, and numerous rocks. It requires people to work hard with their own hands. Even in today's rapid development of high-tech, human labor is still being carried out here. If you want to work, you must have a healthy body. Therefore, a person's health is an important factor in measuring their ability to do something. Some children are frail and sickly, and the local saying is "fussy", which means they often get sick. In this case, parents will also take their children to calculate eight characters. The result is that children are generally asked to identify healthy people as adoptive parents, especially those with both children who are considered more suitable candidates for adoptive parents. According to the village fortune teller, if a child lacks one of the five elements in the eight characters (i.e., gold, wood, water, fire, earth), it is necessary to identify the person who belongs to that element as the godfather and godmother. However, in Ganhe Village, there are only two elements that can be recognized: tree (wood) and stone (soil), commonly referred to as "tree protection" and "stone protection".

Third, because of "affection" to recognize relatives. In Ganhe Village, if two families without kinship get along well and both parties want to make the relationship between the two families more intimate, then recognizing a close relationship is their best choice. Of course, the scope of recognizing a close relationship is not limited to the village. As long as both parties know each other and have deep friendship, they can become a close relationship. In this type of relationship, there are generally two types of recognition: one is when you want to enter into a relationship, but both parties have no children yet, you will agree which party has the child and let the child recognize the other party as the godfather and godmother; The second is that families with children will directly enter into a dry marriage relationship.

Fourth, because of "son" to recognize relatives. In traditional Chinese philosophy, having both children is the best form of family. If there are only daughters without sons or only sons without daughters, people will always have regrets, especially when there are women without children. Therefore, some families that do not have both sons and daughters will make their families complete and happy by recognizing relatives, and Ganhe Village is no exception.

Fifth, because of "predestination" to recognize relatives. Chinese people believe in predestination, and the encounter between people is a kind of predestination. Even in remote mountain villages, there are occasional visits from outsiders. In Ganhe Village, there are businessmen from Sichuan and people from neighboring counties who come to work. Some people come and settle here, while others stay briefly before leaving. If those who live in Ganhe Village for a short time encounter a child they like very much, they will discuss with the child's parents to make the child recognize themselves as a godfather (mother). In this type, the child's willingness is more valued. If the child is unwilling or not close to this person, then the child's parents will basically not agree to enter into a close relationship with them.

### 3. Identify the target of a close relationship

As a unique activity of human beings, Ganhe Village generally only occurs between people. In addition to Ganhe Village, people in other regions also recognize things other than humans as Ganhe Village. However, Ganhe Village has a special target for Ganhe Village, where they recognize trees and stones as Ganhe Village, and other villages and towns in Wuchuan County also have similar customs, The reason is found to be related to the traditional beliefs and geographical environment of the Gelao people.

#### 3.1. Targeting "people"

The types of relatives in Ganhe Village are basically based on people. Except for the option of trees and stones when recognizing relatives due to "illness", other types of relatives are based on people. Generally, the custom of recognizing relatives based on human beings is based on certain needs of both parties, and these needs can only be obtained from human beings. Taking the category of "illness" as an example, one party wants the child to grow healthily, while the other party has short-term and long-term considerations. In the short term, entering into a close relationship is conducive to the expansion of interpersonal relationships; In the long run, you can find a more reliable place to rely on when you get old. It is precisely based on these needs that the two parties have established this close relationship. From the perspective of human needs, it can be found that the benefits that can be achieved by establishing a close relationship with people are far greater than those of other things. This is not difficult to explain why most regions recognize close relationships based on people rather than other things.

#### 3.2. Taking "Trees" as Objects

The folk beliefs of the Gelao people mainly include ancestor worship, natural god worship, and totem worship. The worship of tree gods in the worship of natural gods is one of the common beliefs of the Gelao people. The luxuriant ancient trees that grow in the Gelao ethnic village are regarded by the Gelao ethnic group as spiritual artifacts. During the Spring Festival, villagers will offer sacrifices to these trees, and in ordinary times, villagers will protect the ancient trees. In Ganhe Village, there is also such a venerable ancient tree, which grows beside the cemetery next to the Huajiaoping Group in Ganhe Village. According to villagers, this tree has been more than 100 years old. If there are children in the village who are frail and sickly, in addition to identifying healthy and suitable people as caretakers, they will also come to worship this ancient tree and call it "Tree Guardians", which is equivalent to recognizing this tree as a caretaker father, in order to pray for the healthy growth, longevity, wealth, and honor of the child. After children recognize the ancient tree as "the Tree Protector," they will worship it during festivals. "When worshipping the Tree Protector, children should kneel on both knees, and then worship the ancient tree and shout 'Godfather' and 'Protector', 'Protector will show his majesty in the sky, bless the child to grow up, live a hundred years of prosperity, honor, and glory, and protect the divine power of the Lord for all spring.'" [2].

The tree god worship of the Gelao ethnic group has a certain inheritance relationship with their ancestor worship. In the entry of the "Dictionary of Chinese Mysterious Culture - Sacrificing the Tree", it is said that the ancestors of the Gelao ethnic group lived on a big tree when they first arrived from heaven. "Some people say that ancestors passed through trees, so there was a custom of 'sacrificing trees' later." "Sacrificing Trees" is actually the tree worship festival of the Gelao people, also known as the Feeding Tree Festival. In ancient times, the ancestors of the Gelao ethnic group did not have a shelter when fleeing, so they placed their ancestral spiritual cards in a tree hole with them. After that, the tree that housed the ancestral spirit became a symbol of the ancestors, and was regarded as the ancestral tree by the Gelao people. Originally, the Tree Worship Festival was held on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month to worship the ancestors. Later, it gradually evolved into the first and fifteenth days of the first lunar month

to feed the trees. That is, the men in the family took paper money (paper money or packages for sacrificial purposes), incense candles, tofu, and other sacrificial items to worship ancient trees in the deep mountains. It can be seen that the "tree protector" in Ganhe Village actually has a certain origin with the ancestor worship of the Gelao people.

### 3.3. Taking "Stone" as the Object

In Ganhe Village, there are not only "tree protection masters", but also "stone protection masters". "Shi Baoye" refers to letting weak and sick children recognize Shi as their godfather to ensure their healthy growth. Although there are few records of stone worship among the Gelao people in historical documents, it can be seen from the widely circulated "Shi Baoye" among the Gelao people that stone worship actually exists among the Gelao people. The origin of the stone worship of the Gelao people is not only related to the ethnic interaction between the Gelao ancestors and other ethnic groups in history, but also related to the geographical characteristics of the Gelao people living in karst terrain.

"The stone worship existing in Chinese folk can be roughly divided into stone worship represented by the 'Shi Dardang' custom in the Han culture region and stone worship widely existing in ethnic minority regions based on their characteristics." [3] "The 'Shi Dardang' is a manifestation of stone worship in the Han culture that integrates exorcism, the location of a house or tomb, and spiritual stones, and is widely spread around Shandong and Fujian." [4] The main way of spreading the custom of "Shi Daredang" was during the migration of ancient populations, which led to the spread of the custom. The custom of "Shi Baoye" is commonly practiced among ethnic minorities living in the Wuling Corridor and the Miao Corridor, such as the Buyi, Shui, and Gelao ethnic groups. It can be seen that stone worship in ethnic minority areas is closely related to the interaction between ethnic groups. The Gelao people are mainly distributed in the the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, at the intersection of the Wuling Corridor and the Miaojiang Corridor, and their folk stone worship is naturally affected by the cultural customs of other ethnic groups in the same region.

Most of the areas where the Gelao people live belong to Karst scenery, which to some extent has led to the stone worship of the Gelao people. Karst terrain, also known as dissolution terrain and limestone terrain, is characterized by rugged terrain, poor soil, and mostly composed of rocks. There are many unique natural landscapes in Karst scenery, such as peak forests composed of stones, Tiankeng, karst caves, etc. These natural landscapes can basically be seen in Wuchuan County. Huangyang Village, adjacent to Ganhe Village, is surrounded by the famous stone mountains of Wuchuan County and numerous karst caves due to its high terrain. According to villagers in Huangyang Village, there is a statue of Guanyin Bodhisattva in the cave, as well as many stones of various shapes. These should actually be the unique stalactites, stalagmites, and stone pillars in the cave. From this, it can be seen that stones can be found everywhere in the lives of the Gelao people, coupled with their unique characteristics of being strong and not disappearing over time, which will be recognized by the Gelao people as "the Lord of Stone Guardianship", in order to protect the health of children and ensure their smooth growth into adulthood. It is naturally understandable.

## 4. The function of recognizing relatives

"Function refers to the contribution that a part of an activity makes to the entire activity. The function of a particular social convention, that is, its contribution to the entire social life and social system... Every social activity has its function, and only when its function is discovered can its significance be understood." [5] As a pseudokinsship relationship, Gan relatives play an important role in the Wuchuan Gelao society, as Brown said, Only by clearly understanding the functions of Ganqin can we understand its local significance and understand the reasons behind

its popularity. After literature review and field investigation, it was found that recognizing relatives has the following three functions in the Gelao society in Wuchuan:

First, it has the function of developing productive forces. The Gelao people live in a mountainous area with a relatively harsh living environment, where there is no flat and fertile soil, only rugged and barren land. All food production and cultivation can only rely on the personal strength of people. Therefore, children's healthy talents represent a guarantee of the productivity of the next generation. Although it is out of a feudal superstition to allow children to recognize their relatives to protect their healthy growth, in the eyes of the Gelao people, this is a measure they have taken to protect their productive forces, which not only can provide them with psychological and spiritual comfort, but also can effectively alleviate the destabilizing factors brought about by it in society. Children generally have low resistance before the age of six, making them prone to frequent illness. However, as they age, their resistance gradually increases, and the frequency of illness naturally decreases. This growth trend, combined with the role of recognition of kinship, has made the custom of recognition of kinship mysterious and convincing.

Second, it has the function of expanding the interpersonal network. Regardless of the reason for forming a relationship, there is actually a function behind the expansion of the interpersonal network. Recognizing a close relative as a pseudokinship relationship indicates that when two families become close relatives, their relationship is no longer limited to simple friendship, but rises to the level of relatives. After that, major events in the lives of both families require the participation of both parties. When one party encounters difficulties, the other party should also provide assistance. During the New Year's holiday, both parties should also exchange gifts. Moreover, it is not only the two families that have become close relatives, but also the family members of both sides can be considered "distant relatives" from now on. It can be seen that identifying relatives plays a significant role in the expansion of interpersonal networks. However, recognizing a close relative is, after all, a quasi kinship relationship without blood ties, so the connection between this layer of relationships is not stable and strong enough. To maintain this relationship well, you can only exchange gifts or interact with each other continuously. When one party no longer exchanges contacts, this relationship ends.

Third, it has the function of ecological environment protection. The Gelao ethnic group basically lives in karst landform areas. This special geological background and climatic conditions make the ecosystem in karst areas have two characteristics, namely, poor stability and weak external anti-interference ability. External disturbances such as human activities can easily disrupt the already fragile ecological balance system in the region, causing changes in its internal structure and functions, leading to operational obstacles, with the consequences of degradation of the entire local ecosystem. Therefore, the Gelao people living in this ecological environment may be slightly careless and cause the overall deterioration of the local ecological environment system, leading to the formation of rocky desertification, which is extremely detrimental to the survival and continuation of the local people. Therefore, the Gelao people recognize trees and stones as "tree protectors" and "stone protectors", which to some extent also protect the local ecological environment.

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