Reflections on the Crisis of Primitive Tribal Identity - The Case of “Seediq Bale”

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Abstract: The film “Seediq Bale” is a realistic reproduction of the way of life of the primitive inhabitants of Taiwan and their primitive ethnic beliefs, on the basis of which the basic identity of a primitive tribe is constructed. At the same time, we can also see in the film that the “advanced civilisation” represented by Japan, under the banner of being in line with world development, has inevitably brought about an identity crisis for the primitive tribes when they collide with the “primitive civilisation” represented by the Seediq. Beneath these appearances, what we really need to think about is the question of how to balance global integration and local differentiation of civilisations.

Keywords: Identity, Primitive tribes, Seediq Bale.

1. Introduction

This article delves into the construction process of primitive tribal identity, with a focus on the role of geographical factors and symbols of civilization. Taking the movie “Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale” as an example, it describes the tribe’s life in the Central Mountain Range and highlights the significance of the mountains, forests, and hunting grounds to their sense of identity. The geographical environment profoundly influences the cultural traditions and activities of indigenous peoples, while also shaping their close connection with the natural environment. The article analyzes the ancestral worship and facial tattoos of the Seediq tribe, exploring their symbolic meaning and function in identity formation. Furthermore, starting from the Seediq tribe, it adopts a cultural relativist perspective to examine how we should perceive the cultures of different groups in the current trend of globalization.

2. The Construction of a Primitive Tribal Identity

2.1 Geographical Factors

The film begins in the late 19th century in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation and recreates the story of the Seediq tribe, a sub-clan of the Atayal, who live in the Central Range, a mountainous, rocky region with walking trails and suspension bridges over streams. In this magnificent epic of national history with oriental characteristics, which influenced the relationship between the Seediq subgroup and the world around them, and their inseparable intimacy with the natural environment shaped their im
have hunted the enemy’s head to protect their home and women who are good at weaving will be able to cross the Rainbow Bridge after death. When Mona Rudao was unable to do anything because the mountains and forests that his people had been guarding for generations were invaded by the Japanese, he saw his father singing with him again: “I have come here, I have guarded the mountains and forests valiantly, this is our mountain, this is our stream, we are the true Seediq Bale, we hunt in the mountains, we share in the tribes, we take water from the streams, may I will give my life for this. ……” Following the commandment of the ancestral spirits to protect the peace and freedom of the mountain tops is the reason why Mona Ludo decided to lead his people “out of the grass” and rise up against the Japanese.

2.2 Analysis of Civilizational Symbols

2.2.1 “Hunting Grounds”

In the Sedgewick faith, the Rainbow Bridge is the middle link between the real world, where the Sedgewick live, and a free and fertile hunting ground, the home of their ancestral spirits, at the other end. Only by becoming a “true man” can one be qualified to guard that hunting ground and fulfil the mission of a Seediq.

In reality, the Seediq not only follow the ancestral tradition of guarding the hunting grounds of their ancestral home as the ultimate home of the tribe, but also guard the hunting grounds on which they depend, that is, the territory of each tribe. In fact, there is a causal relationship between the physical hunting ground and the faith-based hunting ground. As a primitive tribe with a single mode of production and a hunting lifestyle, the hunting grounds are the source of all the Seediq’s livelihoods, which is why there is a free, fertile and eternal hunting ground on the side of the ancestral spirit house, as it symbolises the survival and development of the Seediq nation.

So, when the colonizers took over the homes of the Seediq, seized the forests and mineral resources, and threatened to educate them by force, the Seediq were faced with the double crisis of losing their earthly and spiritual homes. With the myth of the hunting grounds losing its cohesiveness and being abandoned by their ancestral spirits when they die, defiance becomes the only option in this plight[2].

2.2.2 The Song of the “Ancestral Bird”

The Seedigers regard the Sisin as a spirit bird, and listen to the Sisan’s call and direction in all hunting and marriage proposals. This spirit bird is known as the ancestor bird, and it appears several times in the film, influencing not only Monaludo’s personal decisions but also the development of the entire Sadc community.

In the early part of the film, Monaludo has just completed his “headhunting” ritual and has become a “real man”. During the hunt he tells his father about a dream he had about a deer and asks him for an explanation, when the ancestral bird suddenly flies in and interrupts their conversation. In the eyes of the Sedgewick people, the Ancestral Bird is a symbol of good fortune and a sign of good things to come. It was because of the appearance of the Ancestral Bird that his father told Monarudo: “The Ancestral Bird has sung anSeediq auspicious song, go and chase the deer of your dreams.” And so Monarudo fulfilled the ritual of marrying a wife and having children, which is considered sacred among the.

Under the onslaught of Japanese colonisation, Monaludo became confused about the direction of his community, and even gradually forgot his own beliefs. Hearing the song of the Ancestral Bird, Monaludo sang with his lost father by the stream in a trance and decided to fight the Japanese to the death. The ancestral bird is the messenger of the ancestral spirits, foretelling good and bad fortune, and it is a true manifestation of the ancestral spirit worship of the Seediq people that they follow their ancestral instructions and always listen to its song and guidance[2].

2.3 Facial Motifs

In the film, the Sadc facial tattoo is relatively simple, but only those male members of the tribe who have reached a certain age and are led by the tribe’s chief to go out on a “headhunt” and cut off the heads of their enemies with their own hands to bring back to the tribe as trophies are eligible to have their faces tattooed. The Seediq, usually with the help of their mothers, use an awl to carve two black rectangles on their forehead to just above their eyebrows and on their chin as a symbol of “real manhood” and status, in order to be eligible to guard the “hunting grounds”. Access to the House of the Ancestral Spirits. This marked the means by which tribal society conferred power or social value on the individuals concerned that was not available to the ordinary clan.

As a form of primitive tribal expressionist art, facial motifs were also effective in decorating the body and concealing it in battle, but the emphasis was more on the unifying symbolism and emotional value contained in facial motifs. According to Boas: “Expressionist art cannot emerge among modern mankind, or at least such art cannot have the same effect on all men.” This is because the art of expressionism is demanding in terms of the stability and unity of the cultural context. And this is almost impossible to achieve in modern human society. But it is precisely because the Seediq, as a primitive tribe, had a relatively simple social and cultural background that the facial tattoo, symbolising the “real man”, has such a profound meaning for the community.

Thus, this particular pattern on the face of the Seediq not only symbolises the status of the people, but also contains a deep sense of identification and belonging to the society and culture of the community as a whole.

3. The Anxiety of Primitive Tribal Identity in a Colonial Context

3.1 Anxiety about Personal Identity

Although identity can, to a certain extent, give members of a group a sense of identity and belonging; it also magnifies the group’s rejection of other cultures. In the colonial context of this film, the integration and conflict between foreign and native cultures is inevitable. When the members of the original tribe are integrated into the foreign culture and have a dual identity, and when their two identities are in a state of
opposition, there is a loss of personal identity and anxiety.

For the young ers, Ichiro Hanagan (Seediqer name: Dachis Nobin) and Jiro Hanagan (Seediqer name: Dachis Nawei), who had already embraced Japanese colonial culture, there was both a sense of identification with Japanese culture and attachment to Seediq culture in their individual consciousness. The clash of the two cultures must have led to their embarrassment and anxiety about their identity[3]. Both Ichiro Hanaoka and Jiro Hanaoka have been colonially indoctrinated by the Japanese and speak of the anxiety of primitive tribal identity in a colonial context.

They speak fluent Japanese, graduated from a Japanese university, worked in a Japanese police station and even married Japanese people. Although they have Sedgwick blood in their veins, they have undoubtedly assimilated into Japanese culture, both in word and deed and in life. But even so, Ichiro Hanaoka and Jiro Hanaoka’s status as “tomatoes” still made them suffer from the ostracism of Japanese cultural circles in their work and life, and they were not given the respect they deserved; and among the Seediq, their own people also ridiculed them for their Japanese assimilation and for wearing the “Japanese the Seediqs” were similarly ridiculed by their own people for their assimilation into Japanese society and for their “Japanese” appearance. Because of their ambiguous identities, Ichiro Hanaoka and Jiro Hanaoka are in a state of limbo in either cultural circle, to the extent that deep down they also question whether they are a Seediq or a Japanese, and hope that they never arrive at an answer to the question of their identity. The answer would mean that the conflict between the two cultural circles had begun to intensify.

And when confronted with the war between the two communities, Monarudo asked Ichiro Hanaoka and Jiro Hanaoka the question that struck at the heart of their souls: “Would you rather enter a Japanese shrine or an ancestral spirit house when you die?” This was undoubtedly a huge mountain that weighed on the hearts of both men. In the end, under the immense pressure, they chose to fight like a Sedgwick, and to die like a Japanese samurai who had cut open his own liver, not wanting to think about anything else but to be a wandering soul at ease. Perhaps this is how Hanagan Ichiro and Hanagan Jiro redeemed themselves against both communities at the same time.

3.2 Anxiety about Ethnic Identity

The geography of the mountains and the natural mountain life have built up the tribal groups and ancestral spirit legends of the Seediq people. The tribal group is the physical home of the Seediq, where men hunt and women weave, forming the Seediq’s egalitarian community life, while the ancestral spirit beliefs, based on the mountains, are the Seediq’s spiritual home and the medium through which the people connect with their ancestors. In the film, the Japanese colonialists demanded that the Seediq surrender their hunting trophies after they had occupied the mountains, and in the minds of the Seediq, “hunting the enemy’s head” is a symbol of the Seediq warrior. In September 1913, the Japanese colonialists ordered the arrest of all those who hunted for the head of the enemy, and when the traditional way of life of the indigenous people of the mountains was disrupted, it was inevitable that this would be followed by a disruption of the traditional way of life. When the traditional way of life of the Daisen Aborigines was disrupted, it was inevitably accompanied by a strong impact on the identity of the community. In the film, Mona Ludo, in the face of the invaders’ destruction and disdain for their traditional customs and their encroachment on the mountain, risks the extinction of their clan in order that they will be able to cross the Rainbow Bridge and enter the House of the Ancestors after death. Faced with a huge enemy, the Seediq warriors chose to die bravely, and at the end they instructed the Seediq women to tell their children about it, an act that preserves and passes on the collective memory.

After the restoration of Taiwan, the aboriginal culture and modern civilisation also merged. The change in farming methods destroyed the traditional tribal memories of the past, and more people came out of their tribes to meet modern civilisation. They have lost their original meaning of “real people”. Today, more Aboriginals are entering the elite and insisting on conducting their social activities as Aboriginals, and their behaviour is constantly being recognised by the modern social system. The identity of the tribe is being perpetuated in a new way in modern society, while the rituals and traditions of the past are being preserved as a collective historical memory and symbol. On this basis, it is worthwhile to look at the preservation and sacrifice of the spirit of the original ancestral spirits by the Monaludo and other Seediq people, and the transformation of the “empirical wisdom” from nature into a “poetic wisdom”. It is worthwhile to think about this.

4. Reflections on the Crisis of Primitive Tribal Identity

From the point of view of cultural relativism, the encounter between so-called “backward civilisations” and “advanced civilisations” is often an unequal and uneven one. At the heart of cultural relativism, says Herskovits, “is a social training that respects differences and demands mutual respect. It emphasises the value of multiple ways of life, an emphasis that seeks understanding and harmonious coexistence without judging or even destroying that which does not fit with one’s own culture”.

At the time of the film’s events, although there was already a “cultural relativism”, Japan, as the representative of the “advanced civilization”, was clearly taking the opposite path of Western-centrism and cultural colonialism. The Seediqs, as a “backward civilization”, are also self-centred, and war inevitably ensues between the two sides.

Boas argues that any people or tribe has its own logic, social thought, worldview and morality, and that one should not use one’s own set of criteria to measure the culture of other people - there is no universal absolute criterion for measuring culture[4]. However, in the process of civilizational evolution, which tends towards integration and globalization, people easily categorize and even hierarchize all groups or races with different customs, styles and ways from their own, and consider everything that is different from their own as “incompatible with civilizational development”, in the name of “grand unification”. The trauma of civilisation comes from the ease with which one can categorize or even hierarchise all
groups or races that are different from one’s own, and see everything that is different from one’s own as “incompatible with the development of civilisation”, and judge and even colonise them in the name of “unification”.

5. Conclusion

How exactly should global integration and locally differentiated civilisations be balanced? There is no definitive answer to this question, and it is an ethical dilemma in the field of anthropology and cultural studies. For whichever answer one prefers, in the context of globalisation, the clash between so-called “advanced civilisations” and “backward civilisations” is inevitable, and the “backward civilisations” will, to a greater or lesser extent, suffer. Perhaps it is time to leave the choice to those who really live in the depths of nature, while we in the “advanced civilisation” should break the shackles of our human egocentrism and look at the world with an open and tolerant attitude. Perhaps this would be a better solution to the problem.

References