

The Gelo Ethnic Group



Bamboo is one of the totems for worshipping among the Gelo people. It is said that the King of the Yelang was born in a piece of bamboo made up of three joints floating in the river and was named King of Bamboo later. So the people of the ethnic group named themselves after bamboo. Similar story was recorded in *The Book of Later Han—Biographies of the Southwestern Ethnic groups of the Southern People*. There are widespread folk tales like King of Bamboo and Gold Bamboo in the areas where Gelos live. And there are some relics of the Bamboo Temple nowadays. That the people regard their ancestors as the King of Bamboo represents the special affection for bamboo.

The population and environment

The Gelos have a population of 579,357 and 96% of them are located in Guizhou Province. Wuchuan and Daozhen autonomous counties of Zunyi City in northern part of Guizhou Province are two major areas for Gelo people. There are also a number of settlements in Bijie and Anshun. In addition, different ethnic autonomous counties in Longlin, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province have some Gelo people.

The Gelos within the territory of Guizhou Province live on eastern part of Yun-Gui Plateau. The terrain rises and falls with many mountainous areas and few plains. There is a saying that this area is made up of 80% mountains, 10% of water and 10% of land. Due to the changeable weather, people say that the climate is different even within ten li (half kilometer). A few of Gelo villages are perched on the flat dam between mountains. Most of them are in remote areas. Therefore, people say Gelo live on rocks where there is plateau and water.

From 1986, Daozhen and Wuchuan Gelo and Miao autonomous counties have been set up in succession. There are also 18 ethnic townships of the Gelo people or with other peoples.

The ethnic origins and the history

The Gelo is one of the original inhabitants in Guizhou Province. They have close relation with "Liao ren" who lived in Ye Lang Kingdom (an ancient kingdom in Guizhou and Yunnan province). Names like Geliao and Jiliao appeared in historical books in the Tang and the Song Dynasty. According to *Guizhou Geography in the Ming Dynasty*, the Gelos were called Liao in ancient times. Up until now, people still maintain some customs from Liao people. For example, women wear the traditional and special skirts and drill holes in teeth. In the Han Dynasty, prefecture was set up in the Kingdom of Ye Lang as a governing body.

Gelo formed its major areas where Gelos lived and different branches were also formed as early as the Tang and Song dynasties.

The names and the language

Names of Gelo are for different branches, such as “hagei”, “delao”, “bu’er” and “duoluo”. In some historical records Gelo are called “geliao” and “gelao”. Some of them are based on the literal translation of Chinese sound. Gelo later became the general name for the whole Gelo people.

Gelo language belongs to Han-Tibetan language family, while the language branch and group are still undefined. They use Chinese characters since there is no word for them. Because of widespread of Gelo inhabitants, there is much difference even between their dialects, namely, northern Qian (abbreviation of Guizhou Province), middle Qian, western Qian and southern Qian. The dialect is divided into many colloquial expressions. Today only a few of them can speak their mother tongue and Chinese is the language for communication. Some people can speak Miao, Yi and Puyi languages.

The featured housing—Wooden balustrade

The stockade villages are at the foot of a hill and near the streams. Houses are built against hills. Traditional houses enjoy different features due to different branches. Most of them are made of wooden balustrade the house is divided into two parts: the upper part is for people’s living and the lower part is for raising cattle. The roof is usually covered with bark and tile. This kind of house can still be seen in zheng’an, Daozhen, Wuchuan and Shiqian in northern Guizhou Province. The house has three rooms and the room in the middle sunken a little, forming a hall. The general house is for mill, bucket, plough dustpan, basin and table. There is a shrine on the wall. The structure and building material are much the same as that of Chinese and other minorities.



The costumes and ornaments—Gelo robe

The Gelo women are very good at spinning and weaving. The cloth named “iron flute cloth” is durable and elegant. Most men wear collarless robe with buttons down the front, as long as to knees. Their sleeves are big but short. They wear belts and tie the front and back at the waist. Both men and women cover their heads with long towels. Women wear short jackets and wide-legged pants. The jacket is only down to the waist. And the pant is composed of three parts, which the upper and down parts are flax

with black and white colors, and the middle part is red cloth made of wool. They also wear black sleeveless robe full of patterns, which the back is longer than the front. This traditional robe, generally called “Gelo Robe”, has a collar on the top. And it is pulled on from the head down. But now the Gelo costumes are almost the same as that of Hans and other groups of people nearby.

The dietetic customs—“Gold and silver rice” and “the pickled cabbage and sweet potato soup”

People living on flat dams live on rice, while people in mountainous areas mostly eat corn and potatoes. They love food made of polished glutinous rice. Some people cook rice and corn together. That is why people call it gold and silver food. Their non-staple food is vegetable, bean product and meat. They love sour food. Almost every household pickles Chinese cabbage. They like stew pickled Chinese cabbage with dry bean or potatoes, which is named soup of pickled cabbage and potatoes respectively. On occasions like festivals or celebrating days, people will treat guests with homemade “fire wine” and “za wine”(two kinds of liquor) and sweet wine.



Songs and Dancing—“The Danao Songs” and “Caitang Dance”

There are many folk songs like ancient songs, working songs, love songs, child songs and songs for drinking wine. The Danao songs popular in mountainous areas in northern Guizhou Province have their unique features. They are often sung when people work together. Two middle-aged singers sing chorus or perform musical dialogue in antiphonal style. The words of songs are about arranging work and laboring time and historical stories. The songs play role in regulating the tempo of working, spreading working experience and stimulating people’s zeal at work.

Different dancing forms include “Caitang Dance”, reed pipe dancing and lion dancing. “Caitang Dance” is popular in Zunyi and Renhuai and it often take place in general room with a group of three people leading in front and three to nine people as guide. Blowing reed-pipe instrument when they sing songs and touch the ground with feet, the atmosphere is warm and hot.

The religions—Polytheism and ancestral worship

The Gelos believe that everything has a spirit and soul will never die. They worship ancestors, gods in natural world and hosts. They also adore gods of ox, of trees, of mountains, and of kitchen. Besides festivals and holidays, when they have disaster or

illness, they worship gods in hope of getting blessing. Worship of ancestors is most important, which is shown in every aspect of working and life experiences. On occasions like making “Ciba” (glutinous rice pancake), worship of gods of trees and pick up the ear of grain, Gelo people always worship their ancestors. The forms of worship are different, ranging from putting shrine on the wall of main room, putting symbols of gods in the kitchen and hold ancestral worship ceremony on hills.

The festival customs—Beginning of the Spring Festival and “Eating-new-food Festival”

The Gelos have the Spring Festival and Mid-autumn Day as the Han people do. They also have the small spring festival of their own and the festival for worshipping ancestors and the festival for seedling of cereal crops. The Beginning of the Spring Festival and Eating-new-food Festival are most unique.

The Beginning of Spring is on the lunar year for spring. After cock crows the first time, every family will send smart and capable young men or women to grasp “spring water” in well, rivers, streams or fountains. After that they set off firecrackers and celebrate the new coming spring. It is said that people would be healthy all the year round if they boil tea and glutinous rice-ball with the spring water.



Eating-new-food Festival is on the seventh or eighth month of Chinese lunar year. At this time, people, young and old, will get some fresh grain to husk with mortar and pestle. They kill ox and chicken to offer sacrifice to their ancestors and bring forward their thanksgiving to them for opening up wasteland and blessing them with harvest.