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Shamanism and the Manchu Bannermen of the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: With the Qing armies marching into Beijing through the Shanhai Pass, the Manchu banner-men under the Eight Banners system saw great changes in their everyday lives. However, they continued with the practice of shamanic sacrifices. This paper analyzes the “Sacred Books”, genealogies, and other historical materials about shamanic rituals, to place shamanism in the lives of the banner-men of the Qing Dynasty. It explores the relationship between this religion and the lives of Manchu banner-men, their clan organizations, and their livelihoods. The paper helps strengthen our understanding of shamanism that continued to flourish during the Qing Dynasty by playing a vital role in the lives of Manchu banner-men.

Keywords: shamanism; Manchu banner-men; clan; livelihood of the Eight Banners

1. Introduction

During the Qing Dynasty, the Manchu people were organized into the Eight Banners system, a type of military-socio-economic organization, developed by Manchu leader Nurhaci (1583–1626). Under this system, they no longer had to earn their living by fishing, hunting, or farming, but were garrisoned in various places to fight on the battlefield when required. They depended on the state for their livelihood.

Shamanism is an animistic and polytheistic religion that believes in many gods and spirits. The worship of these gods and spirits is believed to bring favor, health, and prosperity. Shamanism holds that many deities were born and lived in mountains, forests, and rivers, and blessed the production and life of fishing and hunting. In this sense, the ancient religion seemed not to be aligned with the everyday lives of the Manchu people and was believed to have fallen into disuse.

However, the surviving shamanic “Sacred Books”, genealogies, and personal notes kept by Manchu clans, show that Manchu banner-men adhered to the practice of shamanic sacrifices and tried their best to uphold their tradition in northeast China, Beijing, its environs, and the garrisoned cities. Shamanic rituals and other related activities were an important part of the Manchu community of the Qing Dynasty.

Previous studies of Manchu shamanism in the Qing Dynasty have focused more on the shamanic rituals observed by the ruling house, but owing to a lack of historical records few papers have explored the shamanic sacrifices followed by folk society. Based on the collection of a large number of Manchu and Chinese documents, the paper tries to focus on the grassroots Manchu banner-men in the Qing Dynasty, revealing the important role played by Shamanism in their everyday lives, their clan organizations, and their livelihoods. This will deepen our understanding of the relationship between shamanism and the society, economy, and politics, of its ethnic group.

In the Qing Dynasty, Manchu banner-men held sacrificial ceremonies in many everyday scenarios. They habitually sought the blessings of deities for common life events, such as moving into a new house. A sacrificial ceremony for erecting an “ancestral shelf” was a must to invite deities to the new house to bless the family. If things did not go well after a relocation, the “ancestral shelf” had to be replaced by holding another sacrificial ceremony. Under the Eight Banners system, the primary duty of the men was to be battle ready. Whether preparing for a military operation, a battle victory, a promotion in the



Citation: Jiang, Xiaoli. 2022. Shamanism and the Manchu Bannermen of the Qing Dynasty. *Religions* 13: 884. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100884>

Academic Editors: Thomas Michael and Feng Qu

Received: 5 September 2022

Accepted: 20 September 2022

Published: 22 September 2022

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troops, or a triumphant return home, the clan members would hold shamanic sacrifices either to seek the blessings of the deities or report the good news to them.

Shamanism shares the same elements between both faith-based and blood ties-based organizations. *Mukūn* (Manchu for clan) was the basic blood ties-based organization of the Manchu people in the Qing Dynasty and formed the basic unit in the practice of shamanism. The clan leader was responsible for managing and supervising sacrificial rituals for the clan. As the succession of shamans was one of the major events for the clan, the clan leader was responsible for organizing the training of the successor. At a shamanic sacrifice, all the relatives and friends, far and near, had to be present to help unite the clan.

The popularity of shamanic sacrifices was closely linked to the livelihood of the Eight Banners in the Qing Dynasty. Holding a shamanic sacrifice was a costly affair and imposed a considerable burden on an ordinary Manchu family. In the early Qing Dynasty, the Manchu bannermen were prosperous and hence these sacrifices were held in a grand manner. However, by the mid- and late-period of the Qing Dynasty, the lives of the bannermen had become increasingly difficult and the sacrificial activities were scaled down.

2. Shamanic Rituals and the Daily Lives of Manchu Bannermen in the Qing Dynasty

The Manchu shamanic rituals could only be conducted in the Manchu language. With its use fading after the mid-Qing Dynasty, the shamans, or some of the clansmen who were proficient in sacrifices, recorded the prayers in Manchu or in Chinese characters, that showed the Manchu pronunciation. These “Sacred Books” have become the primary source for scholars wishing to study Manchu shamanism. The “Sacred Books” written by various clans detail the procedures to be followed while offering prayers. First, the devotees were required to report their last name (“*hala*”) and zodiac (“*aniyangga*”) to the deities, then spell out the reasons for the sacrifice, and only then offer their prayers. Typically, the “Sacred Books” would list the many reasons for offering sacrifices, so the ritualists could compose the prayers themselves. Manchu bannermen of the Qing Dynasty held sacrifices for many different reasons. Listed below are some of the shamanic sacrifices, mentioned in the “Sacred Books”, as recorded by the Yang, Shi, Haizunfu, Zang, Fu, and Guan clans.

For erecting an “ancestral shelf”, the “Sacred Books” of the Yang clan contain the following instructions:

“Building a new house: A new house has been built and to please the *mafa* (shamanic god) and deities, an ancestral shelf niche has been set up for their blessings” (Song and Meng 1997, p. 213).

“Erecting a new ancestral shelf to celebrate the buying of a used house: As a used house has been bought, we need to erect a new ancestral shelf. Today, a sacrifice will be held to worship the deities and *mafa* and make them happy” (Song and Meng 1997, p. 217).

“Erecting an ancestral shelf for a rented house: Shaman entertains and worships *sefu* (an assisting god), *mafa*, and deities with sacrificial offerings. Today, in the rented house, we set up an ancestral shelf to worship ancestors, deities, and *mafa* and hope to please them” (Song and Meng 1997, p. 218).

“Changing an ancestral shelf to drive away evil spirits: The house is haunted by something dirty and evil, leaving the parents, wife, and sons sick. Today, we pray in person for the safety and health of family members. We need to change the ancestral shelf to worship the ancestors and deities” (Song and Meng 1997, p. 286).

These examples of prayers show that whether the Manchus in the Qing Dynasty built new houses, bought used ones, or rented homes, they held a sacrificial ceremony for erecting an “ancestral shelf”. Folk surveys also reveal that before they moved into new houses, the Manchus had to put up an “ancestral shelf”, a horizontal shelf attached to the upper part of the west wall in the west room of the main house, on which offerings and incense burners were placed. Although the shelf was called “ancestral shelf” or “*weceku*” in Manchu, it was not the blood ancestors who were worshipped but the symbols of many shamanic deities enshrined by the family. Behind the erection of an “ancestral shelf” for moving into a new house was an underlying faith in shamanism. It spoke of the belief that

a family must invite deities to first move into their new house, and bless it, and that in a new home thus sanctified and made safe, everything would go well. If things went awry and the family was beset with misfortunes in the new house, it would be deemed lacking in the deities' blessings, and another "ancestral shelf" would need to be erected by holding one more ritual.

The residences of the Manchus in the Qing Dynasty, apart from the ones built by them in northeast China, were mostly those built officially for the garrisoned troops in Beijing, its surrounding regions, and other provinces. All of them had ancestral shelves in different forms. In the *Miscellaneous Records from the Bamboo Leaf Pavilion*, Yao Yuanzhi, a Qing dynasty official, describes the layout of homes of the Manchus in Beijing thus: "Whether they were born of rich, noble, or official families, their inner chambers must be equipped with wooden shrines free of any words." (Yao 1982, pp. 63–64). The houses of the Manchus garrisoned in Qingzhou, Shandong, were described thus: "In most cases, on the west gable, above the center of the west brick bed, hung the sacred *weceku* or ancestral shelf. Mostly made of pear wood, this shelf, without any words, is over two *chi* long (66.66 cm) and about one *chi* wide (33.33 cm) and carries the genealogy box and wooden incense holder" (Li 1999, p. 55).

The layout of the homes of Manchu garrisoned in Yinchuan, Ningxia, were described thus: "In the west part of the house is an ancestral shelf, and the sacrificial ceremony is held once in spring and fall" (Minzu Wenti 1985, p. 165).

Thus, we see that the ancestral shelf was common to homes of Manchu bannermen across the country, and its erection was always accompanied by a sacrificial ritual. The above records point to the universality of shamanic sacrifices in the Qing Dynasty, as well as the important role that shamanism played in people's everyday lives. Although the Manchu bannermen moved to different regions, they still prayed to the deities of shamanism for the safety of their family and their home.

Second, for military operations, the "Sacred Books" of the Guan, Haizunfu, and Yang clans, record the following prayers to be offered for success:

"For military operations in the Guan clan: With the imperial edict being issued for a military operation, we rush to visit the *ejen* (or command-in-chief) and submit the petition to the emperor before embarking on a military expedition. Rich sacrificial offerings are made to seek the blessings of the *mafa* and deities" (He and Zhang 2016, pp. 96–97).

"For military operations and promotion in the Haizunfu clan: A man is promoted in the troops and given the honor of wearing an official headgear with a rank button and blue plumes. May the deities bless him" (Fu and Zhang 2016, p. 301).

"For worshiping ancestors after winning a battle in the Yang clan: A ritual is launched to congratulate the members of the Yang clan who serve in the troops on winning victory in the battle, hoping this will make the deities and *mafa* happy" (Song and Meng 1997, p. 217).

"For wishing soldiers a safe return home in the Yang clan: May the deities and *mafa* bless the soldiers so they come home soon to reunite with their families and are safe and healthy" (Song and Meng 1997, p. 215).

The above prayers show that whether it was preparation for a military operation, a battle victory, a promotion in the troops, or a triumphant return home, the Manchus offered sacrifices to their deities, sought their blessings, or reported good news. Under the Eight Banners system, joining the army and fighting on the battlefield was the duty of every Manchu man. Since wars broke out frequently throughout the dynasty, male members from nearly every family went to fight on the battlefield. The Zhao clan in Jilin, known previously as Manchu Irgen Gioro, collected many genealogies of its own dating back to the Jiaqing Emperor (1796–1820), which detailed the involvement of the clan members in military operations in different regions. According to these genealogies, from the 3rd to the 8th generation, a total of 47 members joined military operations, among whom seven went to Jiangxi; fifteen to Barkol, Kashgar, and Altai of Xinjiang; four to Jinchuan; four to Sichuan; and others to Yunnan, Henan, Shandong, and other regions. They held many positions, including *uksin* (common soldiers), *bosoku* (lower-level official), *tuwasara hafan*

i jergi janggin (defence commissioners), *niru i janggin* (company captain), *jalan i janggin* (regiment captain), and *meiren i janggin* (lieutenant general). Many of them died in battles, with their names followed by an annotation of “childless” (*enen akū*). This was the epitome of many clans in the Eight Banners who dedicated themselves to the country (Xu 2015, p. 99). Once a military operation began, a soldier had to fulfill his mission. Out of concern for the safety of the male members, the family would hold a shamanic ceremony to pray to the deities for their blessings.

Third, for sacrifices for official errands, the “Sacred Books” of the Haizunfu clan contained the following prayers:

“Pearl harvest: Prayers for the man who seeks to harvest East pearls. May the deities bless him with safety and good luck”.

“Delivering pearls to Beijing: Prayers for the man who will deliver East pearls to Beijing. May the deities bless him with safety and good luck”.

“Catching fish in winter: Prayers for the man who will catch fish in winter. May the deities bless him with safety and good luck”.

“Delivering salmonid fish to Shenyang: Prayers for the man who will deliver salmonid fish. May the deities bless him with safety and good luck” (Fu and Zhang 2016, pp. 300–1).

For generations, the Haizunfu clan lived on Wula street of Jilin City, where the government office of Butha Ula in the Qing Dynasty was located. Around this place lived later generations of pearl pickers and fish catchers. Their responsibility was to harvest the specialties of Northeast China, including East pearls, sturgeons, salmonid fish, honey, and pine nuts. Moreover, they had to regularly deliver a certain amount of their harvests to Shengjing (known as Shenyang today) and Beijing. Their work carried considerable risk, including loss of life. The Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795) issued an imperial edict that said: “Previously, the drowned East pearl pickers were never rewarded. From now on, they will be rewarded doubly—an amount comparable to soldier funerals” (Chang 1986, p. 15).

The “Sacred Books” of the Haizunfu clan show that these pickers and catchers took their work and tributes very seriously, and held shamanic sacrifices to ask for the deities’ blessings.

Additionally, the “Sacred Books” written by some clans also recorded the sacrifices held for various other reasons, such as for the good health of the whole family; to recover from diseases like smallpox; to protect their animals, like horses, from sickness; or to recover lost items.

Thus, although the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty lived in more modern environments, shamanism as their traditional faith still served as a pivotal stabilizing factor in their culture. When faced with challenging situations, the people turned naturally to the deities for blessings. There is no denying that shamanism played an important role in the Manchu community of the Qing Dynasty.

3. Shamanism and Clan Organization of Manchu Bannermen

As an ancient religion, shamanism shares the same elements between both faith-based and blood ties-based organizations. These shared elements help cement blood ties-based organizations. For a long time, the Manchu people were organized as tribal societies, where *hala* (the surname) and *mukūn* (clan) based on the ties of blood served as the basis of administration. In the late-Ming Dynasty, the *mukūn i da* (clan leader) often led his clansmen to submit to Nurhaci. Given the features of the blood ties-based organizations, the Eight Banners system of the Qing Dynasty established the hereditary *niru* system, such as “*shiguan niru*” (company captain is hereditary in one clan) and “*huguan niru*” (company captain is hereditary but rotates among two or three clans). The *niru* were mostly based on a single, two, or three clans, and were hereditary in nature. Despite not being a formal official, a clan leader could assist the *niru i janggin* in administering the internal affairs of the clan. According to the *Regulations and Precedents for the Eight Banners*, the clan leader was ordered to work with *niru i janggin* to help deal with such affairs as the succession of *shiguan niru*, the tracing of the bannermen to their ancestors, and the selection of those to

be included in the emperor's harems. If found to conceal the truth, the clan leader could be brought to trial and punished. This meant the Manchu people garrisoned in different regions had to form a small-size clan and elect a clan leader to help manage the affairs of the Eight Banners. Meanwhile, shamanism continued to guide the clan organization of the Manchu bannermen.

Shamanic rituals were an important activity for a clan. The clan leader was obligated to manage and supervise the rituals. For example, the *Genealogy of the Kuyala Clan in Heilongjiang* records the origin of the clan, its relocation and garrisoning, family mottos, and sacrificial rituals, among others. According to the genealogy, the clan members garrisoned in Beijing, Jilin, Ningguta, Aihui, and Qiqihar, among other places, had to pay allegiance to the Qing government during the reign of Nurhaci Emperor and that of Kangxi Emperor (1662–1722). Their family motto stated: "When a sacrificial ceremony is held, the clan members living in the same town must show up as must those residing in other villages. Any absent members that fail to give a justifiable reason will be hauled up by the clan leader in stern words. The repeat offender could be beaten with a stick as a punishment for his or her failure to observe family discipline. By comparison, those absentees who reside in other distant counties and could not show up will be treated leniently" (Ming 2003, p. 575). The genealogy also details the rules of sacrificial rituals: "A family must pick an auspicious date to launch a sacrificial ritual. Each family set to launch the ritual must be notified of the need to clean the west house and prepare clean offerings. On the appointed date of the ceremony, the male head of the family should be devout and avoid acting hastily, and the elders of each clan are obliged to keep the ritual on track, ensuring that the established rules are not changed at will just to simplify the process" (Ming 2003, p. 575). Additionally, the *Genealogy of the Tatara Clan in Jilin* stated: "For a family ritual, . . . members of the clan in other villages should, according to circumstances, make their presence while those in the same village must participate in the activity. Anyone who is absent without a justifiable reason will be hauled up by the clan leader. The purpose is to cement the ties of members. At the ceremony, the officiating person should be devout and every family and its elders must maintain order. The participants and deacon must faithfully exercise their duties" (Jin 1981, pp. 109–11). The clan leader urged the clan members to attend the sacrificial ritual and oversaw the ritual to ensure the shamanic sacrifices were conducted as per the protocols. This role further raised the prestige and position of the clan leader.

The shaman, the person responsible for the shamanistic ritual, was selected within the clan, and the clan leader was tasked with the launch of training for the shaman. The *Learning Procedure and Rules on Being a Shaman*, written by the Guwalgiya clan in Guochen, Ningguta, which was handed down through generations, details the shaman succession process in this clan in the late-Qing Dynasty. The clan organized four shaman training activities in the seventh year of Tongzhi's reign (1863) and in the second year (1876), the 14th year (1888), and the 16th year (1890) of Guangxu's period, getting six shamans ready to perform the sacrificial rituals. The shamans enjoyed successful careers, which were attributed by the clan members to the blessing of deities. "If one learns to become a shaman to serve the ancestors, he will be respected and honored with noble status. Shamans are indispensable to the clan" (Guan Clan 1941, pp. 5–6).

Shamanic sacrifices were seen as integral to cementing ties among members of a clan. The high-ranking official, Na Tong, of the late-Qing Dynasty, greatly valued the sacrificial rituals of the clan. His diaries contain a detailed description of the rituals in his family. In October of the 33rd year of Guangxi's reign (1907), he recorded: "On the 14th day, my family launched a sacrificial ceremony. We conducted livestock sacrifices at 8:00 a.m., offered prayers at 16:00 p.m., and burned joss paper at 12:00 a.m. The whole family members congratulated each other. On the 15th day, we sacrificed an entire pig on the makeshift altar in front of the ancestral shelf, worshipped the deities, ate meat from 7:00 a.m.–9:00 a.m., and had more than 10 families of relatives and friends join us. The ceremony ended at 12:00 p.m." (Na 2006, p. 615). The practice of the sacrificial ritual by his family still continued throughout the Republic of China (1912–1949) (Na 2006, p. 811). At

every sacrificial ritual, the larger family as well as friends made an appearance. Thus, the ritual offered a chance for them to meet, unite, and reinforce emotional ties, strengthening kinship, and cohesiveness of the entire clan.

In a faith-based organization, religion serves to integrate the organization. Since in shamanism, faith-based and blood ties-based organizations overlap, shamanism plays a pivotal role in integrating and cementing the bonds among Manchu clans. It has played a great role in ensuring the existence of the clan organization of Manchus throughout the Qing Dynasty.

4. Shamanic Sacrifices and the Livelihoods of Manchu Bannermen

There was a considerable cost attached to the sacrificial rituals of shamanism. According to genealogy records, a shamanic sacrifice called for two to five pigs, millet and beans of all kinds, joss paper, cloth, and flax threads, among other items. Of these, the pigs were the costliest items.

Commodity prices varied considerably between the early- and late-Qing periods. According to court documents from the reign of the Qianlong Emperor: “a pig (for sacrificial offerings) cost 10.8–11.5 taels of silver” (Yun 1989, p. 48). According to other scholars, during the reign of Daoguang Emperor (1821–1850), a medium pig weighing 100–200 *jin* in Songjiang Prefecture (under the jurisdiction of Shanghai today) was priced at 8000 copper coins or 6.15 taels of silver, and a piglet at 100 copper coins or 0.77 taels of silver. (Li 2007, p. 61).

During the Qing Dynasty, an ordinary soldier earned in money and grain, and this slightly varied by army type or region. For example, a cavalryman could receive two taels of silver every month, about 15 *dan* (unit of weight in the Qing Dynasty) of rice every year, and a horse-feeding pay of 20 taels of silver. (Tuo 1991, pp. 9331–35). Thus, he could earn up to 44 taels of silver every year. The earnings varied by garrison too. According to available records, in the Jingzhou garrison: “every year, a soldier could receive 24 taels of silver in pay, medium-quality rice worth 36.75 taels of silver, horse-feeding pay of 20.304 taels of silver, and an extra 3.276 taels of silver for raising horses.” (Xi 1990, p. 102). Converting the rice into silver meant a cavalryman could receive about 84 taels of silver. Generally, a sacrificial ceremony required the use of between two and five pigs. If a pig weighed 50–100 kg, such pigs were equivalent to 12–30 taels of silver during the reign of Daoguang Emperor. Additionally, millet and beans of various kinds were needed. All these offerings consumed one-seventh to one-third of the annual income of a common cavalryman. In the northeast garrisons, only silver was given to a soldier, and a cavalryman could earn 24 taels of silver in pay every year, as the land was granted by the Qing government to soldiers. Therefore, one sacrificial ritual almost used up a cavalryman’s annual pay. The income of the soldier also had to be used to support his family, including his offspring. Given this, a sacrificial ceremony meant a considerable financial burden for a common Manchu family.

Despite the expense involved, people were still full of zeal when it came to conducting sacrificial activities. The *Genealogy of the Kuyala Clan in Heilongjiang* reads: “Each family should do its best to hold the sacrificial ritual. The rich held it every year, the common people did it once every two or three years, and the poor did it once every five years” (Ming 2003, p. 575). The *Genealogy of the Tatara Clan in Jilin* also states: “The rich should hold a family ritual once a quarter; the common people should do it three times every two years; the poor once a year” (Jin 1981, pp. 109–11).

Unfortunately, the lives of the bannermen became ever harder halfway through the Qing rule. In the later Qing Dynasty, in particular, troubled by domestic unrest and foreign invasions, the Qing government became increasingly financially strapped. In the third year of Xianfeng’s reign (1853), the silver paid to officers and soldiers of the Eight Banners was converted into copper coins, leaving their real incomes much smaller. From the 10th year of Xianfeng’s period (1860), grain and silver for soldiers started to drop so that common soldiers received just 60 to 70% of their original pay. Furthermore, low-ranking soldiers were exploited by the higher-ranked officials. The Manchu soldiers could barely afford

to hold the sacrificial rituals. According to the *Genealogy of the Nara Clan*: “the rules for sacrificial rituals were not recorded in ancient times. Since livestock and food were cheap, it was not hard for people to hold grand sacrificial offerings. Almost everyone was acquainted with the rules as sacrificial ceremonies were held every year. Later, as family size grew and prices of goods rose, the number of families that performed sacrificial practices declined. That is why the younger generation was unclear about sacrificial rituals” (Fu and Zhang 1996, p. 165). Some people even came up with other ways to worship deities. In Qingzhou garrison: “there lived a poor Manchu surnamed Fu in the north of the city, who prayed to deities for a son. Later, his wish was fulfilled as his wife gave birth to a son. During the ritual, this man made a paper pig as the sacrificial offering because he could not afford a real one. For this reason, he named his son ‘Paper Pig’” (Li 1999, p. 136).

Therefore, the future of shamanic sacrifices hinged on the livelihood of the Eight Banners in the Qing Dynasty. In the early Qing Dynasty, Manchu bannermen were prosperous and their sacrifices elaborate. In the middle and late period of the dynasty, the lives of the bannermen became harder, which was one among several factors that led to the gradual decline of shaman sacrifice activities.

5. Conclusions

In the Qing Dynasty, Manchu bannermen were garrisoned in different places and were subject to dramatic changes in the way they lived. However, shamanism continued to thrive and play a vital part in their community and daily lives. Even when misfortune occurred, people observed the shamanic rituals for the help of deities, and as always, remained devout and cautious during rituals. Shamanism brought together clansmen in a sacred way and regulated their conduct in the name of the religious authority. For these reasons, *mukūn* became an active, effective organization that could assist the Eight Banners system in administering grassroots society. Shamanism provides another perspective of the community of Manchu bannermen of the Qing Dynasty, which has been ignored in previous studies. As an ancient religion, Shamanism was closely intertwined with the society, economy, and politics of the ethnic group, and endowed the ethnic group with unique cultural characteristics, which is the harvest that the study of Shamanism brings to us from the historical perspective.

Funding: This research was funded by The National Social Science Fund of China, grant number 19VJX136.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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