

Visual Rhetoric and Image Ethnography of Religious Ritual Syncretism in Cross-Cultural Contexts

Yucheng Zhang

Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University Zhuhai China

Abstract

When foreign religions enter new territories, they must adapt to local customs and traditions in order to achieve stable development and intergenerational transmission. They also need to align with the everyday aesthetic preferences of ordinary people. Traditional religious doctrines are mostly recorded in written form, which tends to be theoretical and dry, making them difficult for the general public to understand and thus limiting their widespread dissemination among common folk. Religious rituals, on the other hand, inherently incorporate various patterns, symbols, and visual elements that are vivid and accessible. These visual components are more intuitive and grounded than text, overcoming barriers such as language differences and geographical distance, thereby lowering the threshold for acceptance. When people embrace these visual elements, the core ideas of foreign religions can naturally integrate into local cultural environments. This study draws upon visual ethnography as its methodological foundation, analyzing multiple diverse real-world cases. The research materials include surviving religious murals from the Kingdom of Gaochang Uyghur, localized Catholic rituals in Latin America, and the ancestral Bimo sacrificial ceremonies of the Liangshan Yi people. By examining the detailed characteristics of these case studies, we uncover the core patterns underlying the localization of foreign religions. This kind of cultural integration primarily relies on three forms of visual adaptation: adaptation of indigenous symbols, rewriting of cultural narratives, and adjustment of ritual settings. These three approaches work synergistically and complement each other, facilitating the deep integration of foreign religions into local folk traditions and enabling successful cultural alignment and fusion. By combining ancient physical artifacts with field-based photographic documentation, this study fully demonstrates the practical value of visual ethnography. Previous research has largely relied on textual sources for theoretical speculation, lacking empirical field data and resulting in relatively narrow perspectives. The methodology employed here effectively addresses this limitation and offers practical insights for cross-regional religious transmission studies and the preservation and inheritance of folk cultures.

Keywords

Cross-cultural context; religious rites; visual rhetoric; Visual Ethnography; cultural integration.

1. Introduction

Religious rituals can effectively promote cultural exchanges among different regions and ethnic groups. Geographical distance can hinder the outward spread of religious beliefs, but ritual activities can easily break through this limitation and facilitate the smooth dissemination of religious culture in various places. When I was studying the phenomenon of religious dissemination, I found that for foreign religions to integrate into a foreign territory, relying solely on theoretical doctrines is far from enough. Such religions often adapt to local folk

customs through regular rituals, gradually integrating into the daily lives of local people and eventually adapting to the local culture and completing their local development.

Ancient texts are the main way to preserve traditional religious doctrines and core ideas. These books focus on theoretical analysis and have content that is abstract and highly specialized, making them difficult for ordinary readers to understand. This also makes it difficult for religious culture to enter the folk and unable to form a widespread mass cultural identity. Relying solely on textual classics for the transmission of religious culture has significant flaws. This single approach not only hinders the popularization of religious culture but also is not conducive to the inheritance and innovation of folk religious customs [1].

Different dissemination methods directly affect the local integration effect of religious culture. Written records are generally obscure and difficult to understand, while visual elements such as religious objects, decorative patterns, sacrificial site layouts, and fixed ritual procedures are more intuitive. These visual elements can directly present the core content of religious culture, reducing the barriers to understanding caused by regional cultural differences, and making cross-regional cultural dissemination more smooth. Based on long-term field research and archaeological studies, learning and reciting written doctrines is not the core for the long-term development of foreign religions. What truly enables foreign religions to take root and continue in the local area is the visual ritual system that adapts to the local human environment.

At present, domestic religious research mostly focuses on text verification, doctrine interpretation, and ritual restoration in conventional directions. There are few specialized studies on religious visual symbols, and no complete and mature research system has been formed. Many studies rarely discuss the integration methods, dissemination effects, and operational logic of visual symbols, which is a significant research gap in the current academic circle. I am precisely based on this research status, focusing on the cross-cultural integration mechanism of religious visual symbols to conduct research, filling the gaps in existing research. Traditional literature materials have obvious flaws and are difficult to fully and truly restore the complete process of religious cross-cultural integration. The existing religious classics are fragmented and structurally chaotic, and are mixed with a large amount of subjective interpretation and evaluation by later generations. In addition, successive scholars have continuously modified and supplemented the original text, resulting in many deviations from the original content and unable to truly reflect the historical details of religious culture integration. Compared with textual materials, physical historical materials such as murals, sacrificial objects, and religious sites are more objective and true. They completely preserve the original traces of cultural exchange and integration and are reliable evidence for tracing the development of religious culture [2].

At present, most religious folk studies rely on theoretical deduction and text analysis, rarely using field investigation, archaeological evidence, and other practical methods. To address this issue, this paper breaks away from the single model of traditional text research and combines three research methods: archaeological analysis, field research, and symbol. Based on real archaeological materials and field research results, specifically analyze the cross-cultural integration characteristics of religious visual symbols, explore the practical use of image ethnography in folk studies, enrich the empirical research methods in this field, and provide feasible reference ideas for subsequent related research.

2. The core mechanism of visual rhetoric for the integration of religious rituals

When an external religion enters a new geographical environment, its original ritual form, visual style and cultural concepts will have cognitive differences and cultural conflicts with the long-standing local folk culture. To resolve such cultural contradictions and achieve local

survival and development, the external religion will actively adapt to the local humanistic environment and folk characteristics through iterative optimization of the visual system. By relying on local customs and popular aesthetics, the visual form can be upgraded, and the external religion can smoothly achieve localization transformation, forming a new ritual form that combines the core of the external belief and the local folk characteristics.

The localization optimization of religious visuals is not a superficial appearance modification, but a dynamic process where multiple mechanisms work together in multiple dimensions. This article, by sorting out a large amount of archaeological materials from both China and abroad and field research cases, summarizes three core integration mechanisms: symbol compatibility, narrative reconstruction, and scene adaptation [3]. In actual cross-cultural communication scenarios, these three mechanisms do not operate independently but are intertwined and mutually empowering. Due to the differences in cultural characteristics, public cognitive patterns and social environments in different regions, these three mechanisms can be flexibly adapted accordingly to build a complete religious visual localization development system.

2.1. Symbolic compatibility: The explicit integration of cross-belief visual elements

Symbol compatibility is the most intuitive manifestation of cross-belief visual integration, and it is also an important foundation for multiple belief systems to coexist and develop in the same region. When an external religion wants to quickly integrate into the local folk circle and gain widespread public recognition, it will actively weaken the exclusive attributes of its own symbols and actively absorb local culturally distinctive and widely accepted folk visual elements. This gentle integration model is highly suitable for folk dissemination scenarios, can narrow the cognitive gap between heterogeneous cultures, and help the external religion smoothly complete its localization.

The various cultural relics left by the Khotan and Uighur people directly prove the feature of diverse civilization integration along the ancient Silk Road. The Tang Dynasty murals unearthed from the Balaikou Monastery in Turpan showcase the integration characteristics of cross-belief visual symbols. This mural breaks through the creative limitations of a single religion and integrates the Christian cross symbol, Buddhist lotus pattern, and local Western cloud patterns organically. The three types of symbols respectively carry the cultural connotations of redemption, spiritual cultivation, and blessing, achieving an integrated visual expression of multiple religious cultures and local folk customs [4].

The Tang Dynasty region in Khotan was a multi-ethnic settlement and multi-belief coexistence area. The inclusive and open cultural atmosphere was difficult to accommodate highly exclusive religious symbols. The diverse symbol design of the mural is not merely an artistic decoration, but an active cultural adaptation of the external religion to the local social structure and in line with the public's cognitive habits. This visual-level integration effectively weakens the foreign religious attributes, enhances its popular recognition, and lays a cultural foundation for the long-term localization of the religion in the Western Regions.

2.2. Narrative Reconstruction: The Implicit Signification of Ritual Visual Scenarios

Simply piecing together visual symbols from different cultures can only achieve superficial visual integration, but cannot achieve deep-level communication of the cultural core. Narrative reconstruction thus becomes the core path for the deep integration of foreign religions into the local culture. Foreign religions basically retain their core doctrines and beliefs, and mainly achieve this by adjusting visual details such as ritual composition, character design, color matching, and venue layout, to reshape the narrative logic and value orientation of the rituals,

adapting to the local cultural context and the cognitive thinking of the local people, and achieving deep-level and covert cultural integration.

The Catholic baptism ceremony of the indigenous community of Isinché in Ecuador, South America, is a typical sample of localized transformation of visual narrative. The European original Catholic ritual style is solemn and serious, with distinct Western religious characteristics, and there are significant differences from the folk customs and regional cultural atmosphere of the Andean indigenous people. The local indigenous people abandoned the rigid practice of blindly copying the foreign ritual model and based on the local thousand-year cultural accumulation, carried out comprehensive localization transformation of the overall visual narrative system of Catholicism [5].

The transformed ritual system realizes the deep integration of Catholic core symbols with local folk elements such as the eagle totem, the copper mirror of the sun, and mountain and river patterns. Various visual carriers such as ritual costumes, sacrificial murals, and ritual props simultaneously carry the dual cultural connotations of Western religious doctrines and local natural worship and ancestor worship.

2.3. Scene Adaptation: The Contextual Implementation of Ritual Visual Rhetoric

The geographical setting and cultural context directly determine the effectiveness of visual integration and the duration of its inheritance. This is the core reason why similar visual renovations exhibit different development trends in different regions. The local humanistic features, folk customs, and public aesthetics are all distinctive, directly influencing the semantic expression and communication efficiency of visual symbols. Ritual renovations that are divorced from local life scenarios and violate the cognitive laws of the people only have artistic aesthetic value and are difficult to achieve long-term folk inheritance.

The evolution process of the Yi ethnic group's Bimo sacrificial ceremony in Liangshan, Sichuan Province, directly demonstrates the crucial value of scene adaptation for the dynamic inheritance of religious and folk customs. The religious symbols, ghost boards, and ritual implements used in Bimo sacrifices have completely preserved the core local faith symbols such as the sun, moon, stars, and plants and beasts of the Yi ethnic group, firmly maintaining the core of the ethnic culture and the identity recognition of the people. Relying on the diverse and inclusive cultural environment in the southwest region, traditional rituals have undergone moderate visual optimization and achieved continuous and dynamic inheritance from generation to generation [6].

The regional characteristic of multi-ethnic cohabitation in the southwest region has given rise to an open and diverse cultural atmosphere, providing favorable conditions for the self-optimization of local religions. The Bimo rituals moderately incorporate common visual elements such as Taoist clouds and Buddhist ritual implements to complete a natural and gentle cultural iteration.

3. The empirical research path of ethnography on the integration of religious rituals

The domestic research on religious customs has long focused on literature review and theoretical deduction as its core paradigm, and there are obvious shortcomings in the empirical research dimension. Most studies conduct theoretical analysis based on textual historical materials, lacking objective evidence from field images and physical remains, resulting in insufficient argumentation for the research conclusions and limited practical reference value. Image ethnography, with archaeological remains and field images as its core support, builds a measurable, traceable, and comparable empirical analysis framework, effectively addressing

the industry-wide problem of traditional research emphasizing theory while neglecting empirical evidence [7].

Image ethnography is not simply the integration of image materials, but rather a logical closed-loop and clearly structured empirical research system. This method proceeds through three progressive stages: image collection, symbol-semantic decoding, and cultural value extraction, transforming abstract cultural integration phenomena into concrete research contents that are implementable, analyzable, and demonstrable, thus constructing a complete empirical chain for the study of religious visual culture.

3.1. Image collection: Dual empirical evidence of fields and remains

The authenticity, richness and coverage dimension of the image samples directly determine the scientificity and credibility of the research conclusions. To avoid the one-sidedness of the research caused by a single source of materials, this paper constructs a dual-track collection model of "ancient archaeological remains + modern field images", taking into account both the ancient and modern time dimensions, covering diverse research cases from both China and abroad, and fully ensuring the objectivity and completeness of the research samples [8].

The ancient research samples in this paper are taken from fragments of ancient Chinese and Uighur documents from the 9th to 13th centuries, as well as diverse and integrated religious murals, etc., which truly restore the integration form and evolution process of religious visual culture along the Silk Road. The modern research samples are derived from long-term field research, systematically recording the complete process of composite religious rituals of southwestern ethnic minorities and localized Catholic rituals in Latin America, preserving vivid on-site image materials such as ritual costumes, sacrificial objects, and site layout, enriching the practical research samples of contemporary religious visual integration.

The two types of samples form a complementary and corroborative research pattern [9]. The archaeological remains make up for the lack of historical dimension support in the field samples, while the field images fill the shortcomings of insufficient timeliness of ancient remains and inability to reflect contemporary cultural evolution. This ensures the rigor and authenticity of this research from the source.

3.2. Symbol Decoding: The Cultural Semantic Origin of Visual Images

Image materials serve as the fundamental carrier for empirical research. To fully exploit their academic value, it is necessary to trace the origins, evolution processes, and semantic iterative patterns of various visual symbols, and interpret the underlying deep cultural logic behind visual integration [10]. This article, by combining a longitudinal historical perspective and a horizontal regional comparison perspective, systematically analyzes the integration characteristics and evolution patterns of religious visual symbols.

The Ewe Vodun religious rituals in the regions of Ghana and Togo in West Africa are high-quality cross-border cases for exploring the cross-cultural visual communication mechanism. The complete visual system of Vodun religious rituals, including costume designs, deity shapes, and sacrificial scenes, extensively draws upon classic patterns and ritual gestures from South Asian Hinduism. This visual borrowing is not a short-term form of imitation but rather the result of long-term cross-regional cultural exchanges and gradual evolution. While Vodun religion incorporates foreign visual elements, it always adheres to the local ethnic group's sacrificial traditions, completely preserving its own cultural characteristics, and does not experience the problem of foreign culture assimilation [11].

This case confirms that cross-regional visual communication does not involve one-way cultural output, and disadvantaged cultures do not passively accept assimilation. The cross-cultural interaction of different civilizations is essentially a dynamic process of two-way adaptation and active integration [12]. The three types of visual integration mechanisms summarized in this

article are not constrained by region, ethnic group, or belief type and have universal applicability, which can provide a common analytical paradigm for the study of global religious cultural integration.

3.3. Value Condensation: The Cultural Communication Significance of Visual Integration

From various historical and contemporary cases, it can be concluded that the visual integration of religious rituals is the most vivid and intuitive manifestation of mutual learning among civilizations [13]. This visual-level optimization and adjustment plays an irreplaceable medium role in the dissemination of cross-cultural beliefs and the innovative inheritance of folk culture. Moderate optimization of visual forms can break the cognitive barriers and aesthetic barriers between different cultures, and build a communication bridge for positive cultural interaction among different ethnic groups and regions [14].

This gentle visual integration model can buffer the impact effect of foreign cultures, activate the cultural connotations of local folk customs, achieve harmonious coexistence of diverse religious cultures, and at the same time promote traditional folk customs to adapt to the development needs of contemporary society and complete innovative upgrades [15]. The research results of this article can provide solid theoretical support and feasible operational references for the practical work of cross-cultural religious dissemination and the dynamic inheritance of folk customs.

4. Conclusion

Based on multi-dimensional empirical analysis, it can be concluded that the core of the localization of religious rituals lies in the dynamic adjustment process of the visual rhetoric system to continuously adapt to the local cultural environment. This paper, relying on a diversified research method combining case comparisons, archaeological research, and field empirical evidence, has clarified three core integration mechanisms: symbol compatibility, narrative reconstruction, and scene adaptation. It has also clarified the basic evolution laws of the local religious visual culture. Scientific visual system innovation can break through barriers in cross-cultural communication, promote the deep integration of foreign religions and local folk customs, and is a key element for the long-term survival of foreign religions in different regions. At the same time, this paper has confirmed the empirical advantages of image ethnography, expanding new methodological paths for the study of cross-cultural religious interactions.

This research has certain limitations. The research samples mainly consist of mainstream religious cases in the academic community, with insufficient attention to the visual integration phenomena of minority religions and scattered folk beliefs. To some extent, this weakens the universality of the research conclusions.

This study mainly analyzed the external operation mode and surface visual manifestation of religious visual integration, focusing on sorting out and researching the forms of visual ceremonies and specific patterns of visual combinations. However, this study only remained at the level of external form analysis and did not conduct a comprehensive analysis by integrating deep-level contents such as social development changes, public psychological cognition, and local cultural policies. Therefore, this article did not deeply explore the social and cultural reasons for the continuous changes in visual forms, nor did it clarify the specific influence paths of various deep-level factors on the evolution of religious visual ceremonies. This is also a significant deficiency of this study.

In response to the above research problems, subsequent studies can make improvements and supplements from multiple aspects. Firstly, the research scope can be expanded to collect more

cases of religious folk customs from different regions and types, breaking the limitations of existing samples, in order to improve the existing research theoretical system. Secondly, it can break away from the single-discipline research mindset and combine the research methods of sociology and communication studies to specifically analyze the internal reasons for the changes in religious visual ceremonies. In addition, conducting long-term field research and continuously organizing and studying relevant cultural relics and literature materials can more accurately and comprehensively summarize the evolution laws of religious visual culture. These subsequent research works can not only provide theoretical support for the benign communication of different cultural religions, but also provide practical references for the inheritance and innovation of traditional folk culture in the present era.

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