

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE RITES AND RITUALS OF DEATH OF THE MEITEI OF MANIPUR AND SHAN OF BURMA

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Abstract: If there is a birth then there will be a death.. It is the nature of life. Once a monarchial state, Manipur is closely link to South East Asia. Meitei is one of the main ethnic groups of Manipur. Several rites and rituals are performed by the Meitei. There are lots of similarities between the Meitei culture and the Shan culture. Shan is also one of the ethnic groups of Burma. Both the groups performed several rites from birth to death which were similar as e.g. as soon as a person dead, the body was carried out from inside the house to the verandah. The body was washed start beginning from the feet to head. The body was then dressed. The head of the body was placed and turned on facing north.

Keywords: Meitei, Shan, dead, ritual, rites

Introduction:

All human beings are mortal. So, whenever there is a birth, death will uncertainly occurred. The Burmese called the Meitei as 'Kathey' (a corrupted word of Kassay) whereas the Shan addressed then as Cassey and Assamese used the word as Maugli (Maung-lai).¹ Meitei and Shan both performed several rites and rituals from the birth of child to till death as do all people and communities. Death is an ending of man in human form and being of a journey to the spirit world. This spirit world is usually associated with the primeval religion of different ethic – communities in North East India, South East Asia and East Asia.

Meitei Death Rituals :

In primitive times, the corpse was thrown out into the air particularly of the forest region and the rivers. The disposal of dead by burial was introduced by King Moriya Phambalcha in Haya Chak or second human age.² Meitei had four human ages i.e. Hayi Chak (First human age), Haya Chak (First human age), Langba Chak (Third human age) & Kona Chak (Fourth human age). Sakok Lamlen, a Puya (ancient text) tell us about the absence of graves and Cremation.³ The family members observed dead rituals after five days of the death. Sakok Lamlen again states that, the early Meiteis practiced four forms of death rituals.

They were;

1. Nungsitki Potloi (exposing the dead in the open air).
2. Eshing Potloi (throwing the bodies into water, most probably in a river).
3. Leipak Potloi (burying in the ground).
4. Meigi Potloi (cremation).

T.C. Hudson in his book "The Meitheis" states that during the time of Khagemba (1597 – 1652 CE) all the dead were buried outside the enclosure of their houses. He also further states that from time of the adoption of Hinduism, the King Garib Niwaj (1709 – 1748 CE) collected all the bones of his ancestors and cremated them on the bank of the Ningthee River.⁴ The Meiteis started cremation of the dead from the time of the King Garib Niwaj and it is still practiced today. Cheitharol Kumbaba (Royal Chronicle) also mentions that "On 20th Day of the month of Hiyangei, the King took all the bones of the ancestors for Cremation".⁵

Process of the Death Rituals of Meiteis :

As soon as the person died, the body was carried out from the Imung (inside house) to the Mangol (Verandah) through Naktha (northern left side of the Verandah).⁶ A small hut called 'Khangpokshang' is constructed at 'Khangenpham' (the right side of the front of the house). The body was kept in here for a short period of the time.

Process of death rituals of Shan :

After the announcement of death, the dead body was soon taken out from the room and placed in the front portion of the house. It was not kept in the Verandah as in the case of the Meitei.

Washing (bathing of the corpse) of Meitei :

The dead body was washed starting from the feet to the head.⁷ After that the body was dressed. Before placing the body inside the coffin, it was carried around the coffin for three times in a clockwise direction. After that the body was placed in the coffin. The head of the body was placed and turned on facing north.

Washing (Bathing of corpse) for Shan :

Like the Meitei, The body of Shan too washed in the same manner and it was placed with the head facing the north towards Mount Meru, which was abode the spirit of death.⁸

Meitei Ritual – Crossing the river of the dead :

A coin was inserted inside the mouth of the deceased, the money was used for crossing the river of dead.⁹ A few coins were also tied by two knots after being placed in a piece of cloth and it was fixed one each at the head side and the leg side of corpse. The coin placed at the 'Lukham' (Head Side) was known as 'Lukhamsen' and the other tied at the Khuya (Leg side) was known as 'Khuyasal'.¹⁰

It was also believed that, the coins could be used in the next World. It was further believed that, the dead person used to pay money for crossing the river of death. This is also a belief of tribal ethnic communities of Manipur.

Shan Ritual – Crossing the river of the dead :

A coin was put inside the mouth of the dead body. It was believed that the money was used while crossing the river of dead.¹¹ According to W.W. Chochrane, no ticket was issued by the boatmen and tolly varied from a paisa to a rupee slipped into the mouth of the dead.

Purchase of Land for burial of Meitei dead :

A coin was put at the place of the burial.¹² It signified the purchase of Land for burial. It further signified that piece of Land belonged to the dead body.

Purchase of Land for burial of Shan dead :

An Egg was thrown in order to find out where the exact place for the burying of the corpse.

Dress Thread tying for Meitei :

After washing, the body was dressed in clean clothes. Usually men wear white cotton clothes and women wear Mapannaiba (Garment of Lady). Ropes were used for tying the coffin. Thread was used to bind the two hands and legs together.

Dress and Thread tying for Shan :

A new white cotton cloth was put on the dead body.¹³ The body was dressed with the opening of the cloths at the back believing that the spirit of the deceased goes out from the back part of the body.¹³ It was believed that the spirit of the deceased remains on earth for three days after death. The thumbs of the body were tied together and the big toes were also tied together with thread before burial. Women prepared the body of a woman and men prepared only the body of a man.¹⁴ The garments were torn a little bit to enable the spirit of the body to escape easily from the body.

Meitei Coffin:

From a hollow tree trunk, wood was sawed to make a coffin. The body was kept facing north. There were some differences with reference to this practice between normal dead people and pregnant dead women. For the pregnant dead women, the baby was removed and buried separately.¹⁵ After that, the women (mother) was buried.

All the materials and clothes used by the dead body were burnt at the burial place or outside the gate. Earthen pots used in the kitchen were also destroyed. It was believed that after the death of a person, the house became impure for some days.

Shan Coffin :

The body was placed in the coffin on a fine bamboo mat and sandalwood was placed under the Mat.¹⁶ The body was kept straight inside the coffin. Usually four men carried the coffin. The man whose wife was pregnant was not allowed to carry the coffin for fearing that the spirit of the dead may affect the baby in the womb of the wife.¹⁷

At the time of the death of unmarried women, it was a custom to knock the coffin, on the way to the burial ground. Firstly, the dead women were married to a tree so that when reborn they would not be barrel. By doing so, it was hoped that in the next life this women would not have the misfortune to die unmarried again.¹⁸

In case of the pregnant women, the baby was taken out and both the mother & child were buried separately.¹⁹ Both of them were wrapped in separate mats and buried without coffins. It was to prevent any such occurrence in the future.

Sanctification of the Participant for Meitei :

Purification of those who attend the funeral takes place by sprinkling holy water i.e., water in which Tairen and Pungphai leaves are dipped.²⁰ It was because of the belief of keeping away any evil spirits from the way of funeral. The participants of the ceremony have to take a bath before entering the house to cleanness themselves of any impurities.

Sanctification of the Participant for Shan :

All those who go to the burial ground have to compulsorily cross some thorny bushes. It was believed that by doing so, the evil spirit stayed away from the people. People usually took a bath before entering the house to cleanse themselves as did the Meitei.

However, the cloth left by a person who died of a natural death could later be worn by relatives or friends.²¹ But, the clothes of those people who died from un-natural causes like murder, lightning, suicide or accident were generally buried with the body.

Sanctification of Meitei House :

On the sixth day after the death, a ritual is performed. After that on the tenth day Yumsengba i.e., sanctification of house is performed. Flowers and fruits were offered to the deities. On the eleventh day, Lanna Thouram (Sradha Ceremony) rituals are performed which ensure safe journey of the departed soul to the abode of the dead.²² The Shan do not believed in this practice.

Conclusion :

It is apparent from an analysis of the rituals of both the Meitei and the Shan, that the death rituals of the two communities are very similar which is perhaps, because from the ancient times the Kingdom of Manipur had contact with Burma and its country influenced the others.

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