

## **Mortuary Customs Of The Meiteis Of Manipur: A Historical Study**

Dr S. Jayalaxmi Devi  
Asst. Prof., Department of History  
NG College, Imphal West, Manipur  
E-mail:jayasaolsem577@gmail.com

Dr Oinam Ranjit Singh(Corresponding author)  
Associate Professor, Department of History  
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam  
E-mail:ranjitoinam09@gmail.com

Dr Th. Mina Devi  
Department of History  
Manipur University  
E-mail:minath345@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The rites of passage are the rites and ceremonies that mark a critical transition in the life cycle of an individual from one status to another in a given society. It covers birth, marriage and death. Death is the last crisis in the lifecycle of an individual. *Siba* means death in local dialect. It is believed that when the soul leaves the body permanently the man dies. The paper is an attempt to throw light on death and related customs of the Meiteis. There were four kinds of funeral systems such as disposal of dead body in the wild place, in the fire, in the earth (burial) and into the water (river). Disposal of dead in the fire (cremation) in Meitei society commenced from the time of *Naophangba*. But, the practice of cremation was prevalent among the *Chakpas* from the very early times. In ancient times, dead body was exposed; the dead body was kept throwing about in the *Sumang* (the space in front of the house) in the *Khangenpham* and a bird called *Uchek Ningthou Lai-oiba* which took away the dead body to a river called *Thangmukhong* in *Heirolk*. Usually, funeral rites were considered as unclean; therefore, the performers had to wash and cleanse their body. They believe in a future life and in the survival of the soul. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

Key words: *Manipur, Meiteis, funeral rites, lifecycle, future life*

### **Introduction**

Manipur, once an Asiatic state is located at the eastern corner of India. Manipur is bounded in the north by Nagaland, in the east and south by Myanmar (Burma), in the south-west by Mizoram and in the west by Assam. In the past, Kabaw valley was also a part of Manipur. A hilly state, which had once did separate Assam and Myanmar before the creation of present Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram out of Assam. Manipur had enjoyed the fortune and glory in the past and experienced sorrow and vicissitudes of her long history. It had been witnessed the transformation from a primitive tribal state to an independent kingdom and later on from native state of British India to a state of the Indian union. The Meiteis in the valley and the different ethnic groups at the surrounding hills occupy the state. The present article is a humble attempt to throw light on the traditional funeral customs of the Meiteis.

### **Method and Materials**

The study is purely ethno-historical approach; the data rest on available primary and secondary sources of published and unpublished works. Primary sources consist of chronicles, historical texts and secondary sources cover published works, seminar papers and electronics.

### **Mortuary customs of Meiteis**

In the words of Arnold Van Gennep<sup>1</sup> (Dutch-German-French ethnographer and folklorist), the rites of passage are the rites and ceremonies that mark a critical transition in the life cycle of an individual from one status to another in a given society. These consists the process of separation from society, in calculation –transformation, and return to society in the new status. It covers birth, marriage and death. Death is the last and final crisis in the lifecycle of an individual. According to traditional belief of Meiteis, human body is made up of five elements namely, *Mei* (fire), *Ishing* (water), *Nungsit* (air), *Leipak* (earth) and *Atiya* (sky) and a living soul locally known as *Thawai*. Death is the permanent departure of soul from the momentary body called *Hakchang*. When a person dies its soul moves to the abode of *Taibangmapu*, the Almighty God. *Siba* means death in Meitei dialect. This word is known by various words such as *Khamung Sonwa tanba*,<sup>2</sup> *Khamoiba*,<sup>3</sup> *Korou nongaba*,<sup>4</sup> *Shajik matung in thaba mamei waiba*,<sup>5</sup> *Aman nongaba*,<sup>6</sup> *Laioihiba*,<sup>7</sup> *Mathou khamyangba*,<sup>8</sup> *Aman tharei kumme*,<sup>9</sup> *Khamnung shawa pangba*,<sup>10</sup> *Sana kheirak kaiya*,<sup>11</sup> *Nongkaiye*,<sup>12</sup> and *Korou nongba*.<sup>13</sup>

According to Meitei traditional belief, there are many reasons of one's death and sickness. Death is due to law of nature. Secondly, illness is caused by the evil spirits. To appease them, rituals were observed by the priest and priestess called *Maiba* and *Maibi*. Thirdly, in the ancient Meitei society tendency to make a person sick and short lived by means of black magic as a result of jealousy due to a quarrel. People wanted to acquire mastery over black magic. It is believed that if the illness due to black art was detected and treated in time, the person might be saved from death. Fourthly, if a person is scared on account of injuries from drowning, beating by other people etc. then his soul becomes annulled and damaged.<sup>14</sup> Fifthly, death of women during childbirth, small pox is believed to be caused by evil spirits. Besides, there is another manifestation of death which is the

result of neglect at the critical conjunction of man's life called *Langpham*. A ritual called *Ushin Sinba* (a local fish called *Ngamu* as substitute of the victim) is observed to get of the *Langpham*. Unnatural death or ugly death is sometimes regarded to be the dispensation of justice by God. In early death of a man, it is attributed that the soul manifests in this mundane world for a short while to perform God's commands towards ultimate deliverance.<sup>15</sup>

There were four kinds of funeral system: (a) disposal of dead body in the wild place, (b) in the fire, (c) in the earth (burial) and (d) into the water (river). Air disposal is considered to be the oldest of all. It is said that disposal of dead in the fire (cremation) in Meitei society commenced from the time of *Naophangba*.<sup>16</sup> But, the practice of cremation was prevalent among the *Chakpas* from the very early times.<sup>17</sup> According to *Ningthou Kangbalon*,<sup>18</sup> in the ancient times, dead body was exposed; the dead body was kept throwing about in the *Sumang* (the space in front of the house) in the *Khangenpham* and a bird called *Uchek Ningthou Lai-oiba* which took away the dead body to a river called *Thangmukhong* in *Heirok*.<sup>19</sup> *Kakyen Meengamba* was another name of the bird for it could carry away the dead bodies. It was a servant of *Ningthou* (king) *Kangba*, who himself, after reigning for a long time, entered into the water of *Pakhangba Eeren*.<sup>20</sup> In another text, *Lai khundarol* which also states that in *Haya Chak*, the disposal of dead was throwing into the water; and in *Khunung Chak*, the disposal of dead was burial. Since early times, disposal of dead among the Meiteis was burial in the earth.

It is well known that up to the advent of Hinduism, the dead body was buried, and the chronicles mention the enactment by king *Khagemba* of a rule that the dead were to be buried outside the enclosures of the houses.<sup>21</sup> At a later date, in the year 1724, *Garibniwaz* did exhume the bones of ancestors and cremated there on the bank of *Ningthe* River and from that time ordered his subjects to burn their dead.<sup>22</sup> *Cheitharol Kumbaba* also records the introduction of cremation in Manipur by *Garibniwaz* in the month *Lamta* (February-March), 1724.<sup>23</sup> Even after the introduction of cremation in the society the traditional practice of digging the earth for burial of the remaining ashes of the body, though not in to the depth and size of the grave dug out for the actual burial, is seen under the firewood in the size of the dead body. The burial of the ashes, still used in the cremation, also does suggest the burial of dead in the early time. But the children who died before the attainment of two years old were buried preferably on the bank of river.<sup>24</sup>

In Meitei society, the process of burial was very elaborate. The dying man was in the house, a small hut of bamboo and thatch called *Khangpokshang*, was built in the *Khangenpham* (the south east portion of the court yard of the house) where the dead body did rest for a while before the burial. While building the *Khangpokshang*, it is said that the main bamboo pillar was first created in the *Chingkhei* (the north-east direction), the third in the *Santhong* (south-west-direction) and the fourth and the last in the *Meiram* (south-east direction).<sup>25</sup> Then, the dead body was carried out of the house by *Naktha* (the northern side of the house) and put in the *Khangpokshang* on a banana leaf. *Thaloi Nongkalon*<sup>26</sup> mentions that this was done before the dying man was completely dead. While in the

*Khangpokshang*, a mourner did chant all kinds of traditional songs relating to death.<sup>27</sup> Before the burial, the dead body was bathed and put on a clean dress. And the dead body was placed in the coffin, into which whatever required by a man while living were put; and the coffin was taken to the grave. While taking the coffin to the grave, it was covered with a white cloth to avoid sunlight on the corpse, and the portion of the head with a cloth of seven colors of the seven *Yeks* of the Meiteis. At the burial place, a pot of water, *Tairen*, leaves and flowers were placed on the northern side of the hole. Then, the coffin was lowered in the grave; and the other predecessors were entreated to receive here in their company.<sup>28</sup> *Mangchak* (a meal) would be offered and then the ritual of *Mangthongthingba* (the path of the spirit to the mortal world will be closed) was performed. After one year when the new moon is over, the dead body was exhumed by chanting the rite of *Mangthonghangba* (opening the gate of the grave).<sup>29</sup> After the burial, the mourners took bath and were ritually sanctified.

Mourning was observed as it is evident from the *Meiringba* that the member of the *Sagei* or community used to come to share the sorrow with the bereaved family, to console them and to append the nights in the family because the death was dreaded in the Meitei society. *Lai Khundarol*<sup>30</sup> states that after the disposal of the dead, the members of the family and relatives observed fasting.

As stated above, as death approaches, the nearest relatives, and sometimes, the whole *Sagei* gathered by the dying man. They looked after him or her carefully and attentively. For the soul to go in the right path to merger with God, so preparations including ritual performance were made with the help of knowledgeable persons. A *Maiba* was engaged to watch and attend to the dying man. There was vogue that members of the local dead organization called *Shinglup* stood watch by lighting fire (*Mei-lingba*) at the residence of the dying man in turn. At the time the dying man would crave *Mita-khamtachak* a desire to eat rice.<sup>31</sup> In this way the man passed away. As soon as death occurred, the body was washed and adorned. The most important phase, the mourning began and went on round the dead body. This was usually the centre of pious attention. In this rite, there was a desire to continue the tie and the tendency to break the bond. Usually, funeral rites were considered as unclean; therefore, the performers had to wash and cleanse their body.

Yet, the ritual at the *Khangpoksang* compelled man to overcome conquer his fears and with it, the belief in a future life and in the survival of the soul. The belief in immortality was the result of a deep emotional revelation rather than a primitive philosophic doctrine. The belief in soul was the result of the belief in immortality. There is a Meitei belief, “if born, will die, if dead will be born and vice-versa.” In the death ritual, a feasting ceremony known as *Chak-khang thou* was performed to feast the members of *Sagei* (sub clan), specially the women members and a ritual prayer is made so that the soul of the dead man may undergo rebirth by entering the womb of a good woman.<sup>32</sup> They also put identifying marks (smearing with mud) on the dead body of their relative. If a child is born in the family or clan with a similar mark it is believed that the dead man returns. Another belief is the soul of unlucky and ugly deaths incarnate in the forms of animal,

insects and tree and not in human form. When *Haoshi Namoinu* was hit on the head with a ladle by her step mother her soul transformed into a cicada is an example.<sup>33</sup>

### **Life after death**

It is believed that after death of a person, the soul leaves the body permanently. On its journey, a little further it will reach the courtyard of *Thongak Lairenbi* and takes rest for a while after having water from the water-pot<sup>34</sup> of the goddess. After that it arrives at *Khonghampat* after a short time. There the departed soul does clean its feet and washes clothes at *Phisurok*. Coming further it takes out the fruits at *Heirurok* and then at *Chayomlok*, opened the food packet to eat the meal. After that it takes bath and rinses the head and hair with un-boiled lye water. At the sight of human cross-road, the mind became romantically disturbed. Hence the place is known as *Makoi-nungonching*. Then after reaching the sacred abode of *Thongaren* the soul crosses the river.<sup>35</sup> Finally, it touches the feet of *Thongaren's* throne. However, as per belief, for the pious man the god will come to him at the last moment of death and carries him to the abode of *Thongaren*. So he faces no trouble of the journey. This clearly indicates that the soul after death goes to the abode of *Thongaren*. According to his or her deeds in the human world, the *Thongaren* sends the soul to the heaven<sup>36</sup> or *Khamnung-warak* (hell).<sup>37</sup> The main philosophy of Meitei traditional religion is a man should be virtuous so that after death his or her soul ascends to *Korou-Nongthou* and attends the divine status to unite with the Supreme one. According to this religious belief the evil man by virtue of his deed is reborn to a more lowly state; this process will continue till ultimately the soul vanishes to nothing or improves himself and be reborn in a better position. There is no concept of hell. The soul of evil minded is reborn to the state of fish, insect etc. Such sorry state of things is known as *Khamnung Warak* (punishment in hell). According Meitei belief, there are three places where the gods dwell. The places are *Koubru* hill, *Seloi-langmai* hill and *Thangching* hill. In *Pakhangba Nongkarol*, it is stated that the five successive kings of *Ningthouja* clan (from *Pakhangba* to *Naophangba*) made accession to heaven in flesh and blood.<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, like many other ethnic groups, the Meiteis also had elaborate lifecycle ceremonies. These ceremonies were key aspects of Meitei socio-cultural life. In fact, they were very important part of Meitei culture as they played a very significant role in proper functioning of Meitei culture as a whole. In each and every part of cultural traits had their respective role and functions for the right functioning of that culture as a whole. Death rituals were the final lifecycle rituals in Meitei culture. The purpose and significance of these rituals were found deeply imbedded in Meitei traditional religion and philosophy. And death of a person in a group was an important event. This severely disturbed and mutilated the close relatives and the community as a whole. The event broke the normal course of life and shaken the moral foundation of the society. Death was, therefore, much worse than the removal of a member. It gave great threat to the solidarity of the group upon which the organization of the society, its tradition and the whole culture depended.

### **NOTES AND REFERENCES**

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<sup>35</sup> It is believed that the bridge of the river is of just one strand of hair and railing also of one strand of hair.

<sup>36</sup> The Meiteis describe Heaven in different names like *korou-nongthou Leibak*, *Nungnang Kao Khangkol*, *Konkhei-Atamba* etc.

<sup>37</sup> Singh, N. Birachandra. op.cit. pp. 79-81.

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