

The Rites Of Passage Of The Natives Of Northeast India: The Kharams Of Manipur

Dr W. Dhiren Singh
Asst. Prof., Department of History
NG College, Imphal West, Manipur
E-mail:wadhiren123@gmail.com

Dr Oinam Ranjit Singh (Corresponding author)
Associate Professor, Department of History
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam
E-mail:ranjitoinam09@gmail.com/oinamranjit2017@gmail.com

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

Abstract

The rites of passage are the rites and ceremonies that mark the transition of an individual from one stage to another. These processes consist of separation, transition and incorporation into the new environment. It covers birth, marriage and death. The article attempts to delve into the lifecycle ceremonies of the Kharam and Liangmei inhabitants in Manipur. In pregnancy and child birth, the Kharams take every precaution not to occur any unwanted incident to the mother and child. In naming of the child, rituals like *Ratha Kakoi* and *Laamtol* are performed for social recognition and protection of the child. In marriage, they follow clan exogamy and observe certain rituals like *Asrke Ka-en* and *Tui Kahe*. *Aarke-ka-en* is an omen observation performed by the *Kathem* (village priest) sacrificing a cock. Death is the final crisis in the lifecycle of an individual; and death rituals are meant to ensure for safe passage of the soul to the *Kathikho* (village of death). It is believed that the departed soul does not go to the *Kathikho* until the *Kumbu Kathak* (last mortuary rite) is performed after one or two years. And the soul of unnatural death is not permitted to live in the *Kathikho*. The Liangmeis also perform rites and rituals in birth, marriage and death for wellbeing, prosperity and safe journey of the soul to the land of death.

Key words: *Manipur, Kharams, Liangmeis, lifecycle, rites and rituals, Kathem, exogamy*

Introduction

The Kharams are one of the natives of Manipur. Racially, they belong to mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burman language. Like other native people of Manipur, they, too, have distinct culture and traditions. The word Kharam literally means southern land; *Kha* means South and *ram* (Lam), Land. Later on the word is applied to the people who settled in this land.¹ They are found mainly settled in the villages of *Kharam Pallen*, *Tuishanphai*, *Laikot Phaijol*, *Laikot*, *Laikot Kharam* part-1 and II, *Tampak Kharam* and *Riangphai* near new *Theithenmanbi*.² In the valley districts of Imphal East and West and Bishnupur, some scattered pockets of the Kharam are also found. The population of Kharam in Manipur according to 2011 census report is returned as 1145 (one thousand one hundred and forty five). The inhabited areas of the Kharams mostly fall within the *Turel Achouba* system (the *Kongba*, the *Thoubal* and the *Iril*) and the remaining villages fall within the *Barak* system (the *Eyei* River, an important tributary of *Barak* system).³ Geologically they belong to Disang formation (Eocene).¹ They believed that their ancestors originated from a cave known as *Khurpui* which is identified with *Makhel*, Mao-Maram sub-division, Senapati or north District of Manipur. Most of the Naga traditions point to *Makhel* as their origin. The theory of cave origin or earth born is a general belief found among the tribes of Manipur.⁴ The Liangmei people, too, claim their origin from a cave known as *Mahou Taobei*, which is supposed to be located somewhere near Mao, Senapati District of Manipur. Liangmei mean people of the north; *Liang* means north and *mei*, people.⁵ They also have rich culture and tradition of their own. They are found mainly in Tamei-subdivision of Tamenglong. Their population is found scattered pockets in Senapati District.

Materials and method

Interdisciplinary method of both history and social anthropology was applied in this study. The necessary data had been collected from available published works and also from knowledgeable persons of the Kharam and Liangmei communities of Manipur.

Life Cycle Rituals of the Kharams

Life cycle begins with birth and ends in death. There are four basic phases of an individual's life cycle. It starts with birth, then passes the period of adolescence, reproduction and comes to end in death. All individuals usually pass through each of these phases in the cycle of their lives. In every human society there is considerable cultural emphasis on such situations.⁶ The rites of passage are the rites and ceremonies that mark a critical transition in

the cycle of an individual from one phase to another in any society. The passage ceremonies have three steps separation from society, inculcation-transformation, and return to society in the new status,⁷ covering the birth, marriage, death and rebirth. The life cycle of the Kharams is well regulated through customs associated with a number of rites and rituals.⁸

Pregnancy and Child Birth

Life cycle begins with birth but it starts normally with conception. As the Kharams people did not understand the scientific meaning of conception they did observe some ways or means to know the conception of a woman. It is said that even though the people do not know exactly the scientific meaning, they have a time tested experience that the stoppage of menstrual cycle of a woman for about three or more months marks the first sign of conception.⁹ Malinowski Bronislaw says that maternity is a moral, religious and even creative ideal of civilization.¹⁰ A woman who is pregnant is guarded by law and custom, and should be looked a sacred object, while she herself ought to feel self-satisfied and cheerfulness. Soon after the discovery of pregnancy the expected mother is separated from her environment as well as from her family group. Because the pregnant woman is believed to be unclean or polluted and dangerous as she is physiologically and socially in an odd and irregular position.¹¹ A pregnant woman is changed to sacred to all other women establish a profane world in relation to her.¹² During pregnancy, the family members take care of her in all respect to avoid troubles because of the fact that a woman at every child is to give a new life as delivery is uncertain, sometimes leading to death.¹³

In the time of delivery, elderly women are engaged because they have reached the age of menopause. The people of Kharams believe that elder women are free from the interference of any evil spirits. In the process of child birth, the naval of an infant is cut with the help of a sharp bamboo split just after the birth the placenta is collected into an earthen pot or bamboo pipe and buried outside the room where the delivery takes place. For delivery elder women are served with rice-beer (Yu) and cooked meat by the host. The presence of expectant father is essential at the time of delivery but he is not allowed to join the party during the process.¹⁴

Naming Ceremony

On the first day, just after the child birth, the new born infant is given a name ritually for which the parents/guardian or the people of Kharams selected the name before the child

was born thinking that the evil spirits have given their name of the child first, then he/she will be their member and the life span of the new born infant will be very short. Naming ceremony is performed with a ritual called *Ratha Kakoi*.¹⁵ For this ritual they grind a piece of ginger and hold it and utter as *Haro* we have given your name 'A'. If your soul is somewhere near this place either in the east or west, or on the way in the fields or at the village gate do not wander there, instead come home quickly, *Ratha Kakoi* is followed by another ritual *Laamtol* at the common dancing ground of the village offering rice-beer (*Yu*), an egg, a piece of cotton, puffed-rice and some coins to the village deity *Khobiek*. They requested the village deity to recognize the child as the member of their (kharam) community as well as to protect him/her forever.¹⁶

Restriction after Child Birth

After child birth, the mother and the newly born child remain in isolation for a week. No one is allowed to touch them and vice-versa. Not only this, the child is not allowed to take out of the room until and unless a ritual called *Neitolsok* is performed by the maternal uncle or one of the maternal male relatives. *Neitolsok*, literal meaning is taking the child out side or introduction of the new born child to the outside world. If the child is a male, the *Neitolsok* is ritual performed on the fifth day of its birth and for the female baby it is conducted on the fourth day after birth.¹⁷

Childhood Stage

In every Kharam villages children upto ten years considered to be child. In ancient days children of a family normally helped their parents in different ways and they were member of *Kalen* (Youth dormitory). But nowadays it is not done, instead, they are going to school and helped and served by their respective parents. Among the Kharams male children are considered more valuable than the females. They are taught by village elders to become the ideal members of the Kharam society.¹⁸

Adolescence Stage

Among the non-Christian Kharams the unmarried young girls and boys are known as *Nungkak* and *Rothar*. These two groups of the adolescence stage form an institution of the society called *Nungkak Rothar*.¹⁹ All the adolescence boys and girls are the member of this institution. They also organize a festival of their own in the name of institution called *Nungkak-Rothar Kahoi* or *Kum Yu Ka in* in the month of April (*Muchai-Thaphel*).²⁰

Marriage

Marriage is an institution which permits a man and a woman to family life and to have children by involving the rights of sexual relation.²¹ Every society or community has, therefore developed a pattern for guiding marriage. And there are certain rules and regulation connected with the institution of marriage.²² The form of marriage among the Kharams can be defined as clan exogamy (marriage outside the clan).²³ They practice monogamy. To a Kharam, marriage is a customary duty and is considered very important and sacred one. The marriage between an individual and his mother's brother's daughter (Cross-Cousin marriage) is the most preferred type of marriage among the Kharams. The marriage needs certain rituals – (i) *Asrke Ka-en* and (ii) *Tui Kahe, Aarke-ka-en* is an omen observation ritual. It is done by the *Kathem* (village priest) sacrificing a cock.²⁴ They observe carefully the position of the legs of the sacrificed cock (when it breaths its last). The priests usually hold the cock up and utter Oh God! You tell me through the position of the legs this fowl. If the right leg is found over the left leg they considered it a good omen and the left leg is found over the right then it is considered as bad omen. This ritual is compulsory for the bride and bridegroom. And in the *Tui Kahe* ritual rice-beer (*Yu*) is offered to the deities. It is performed by the members of village council under the direction of village chief called *Khokalakpa*. One of the councilors offers rice-beer to the different deities by pouring it on the ground for a long and happy married life for the groom first. The same is also repeated for the bride. After performing this ritual the bride offers drinks to the groom and vice-versa in the presence of village chief, councilors, invitees, friends and relatives. Thus, the spouse is formally made in the presence of all participants of the marriage function.²⁵

Disposal of death

Death is the last and final crisis in the cycle of an individual. The Kharams considered normal death as a normal end of a man's physical existence while unnatural death come to be considered as an act of punishment given by the deities for violating the customary obeisance during one's lifetime. Moreover they also believe in life after death and rebirth.²⁶ When a man dies the family's members make it notice to the public by verbal announcement or by beating a gong. Then the deceased person is given a final bath. The water for washing the hair of the deceased is made from the rice-water which is called *Chenghee*. The dead body is then adorned with their traditional customer according to the sex. According to Kharams belief, they used to send their deceased relatives along with their traditional dresses and ornaments otherwise they (deceased persons) would not be recognized by their foregone relatives in the

village of death (*Kathikho*). The corpse is then kept in front of the main door till most of the relatives and villagers arrive to join the mourning. The members of *Lapu* and *Lapi* institutions are the first person to arrive and share the mourning. They start singing in honour of the deceased person till the corpse is buried. In the mean time a cock is killed and cooked. The cooked meat along with cooked rice is wrapped in a plantain leave separately and again packed together nicely. The packed food is then kept near the corpse as his or her share. If the family members wish to add more they can offer whatever they want.²⁷ Then the dead body is taken outside and placed on the bamboo palanquin, made of bamboo species called *Utang*. A farewell song is also sung by the members of the *Lapu* and *Lapi*. Some sesame seeds and coins are kept in the hand of the corpse. These two items are very important for the deceased person because his/her soul offers the seed to *Yongdulpa* (controller of the *Kathikho*) to appease him and used the coins to escaped from being enslaved by other.²⁸ After this, eight healthy youths carried the palanquin and other person carried goods. The procession is led by maternal uncle or his son (maternal uncle's son in case maternal uncle is no more) holding a *dao* in his right hand and a bamboo container with a piece of iron in his left hand. During the procession the leader waves the *dao* and shouts as: "Who killed my nephew or niece" repeatedly until he reaches the graveyard/cemetery.

After the selection of the grave site by clan elder, a grave is dug and curve out a shelf within the chamber. The corpse is placed in the shelf facing the head of the deceased north or south or inserted inside the side cave with the legs first. Then the shelf is closed by using some logs or planks. In the meantime the maternal uncle or the person who act as maternal uncle remove the medial log/plank and performs a ritual called *Ratha Kakoi* (calling out the soul). While performing the ritual he utters: "All the departed souls of the family either father or mother or grandfather or grandmother or the elder sister or younger sister or elder brother or son or daughter, you all come out of the grave. Today I am going to introduce a new member of your family. He/She is coming to accompany you in the village of death (*Kathikbo*)."²⁹

When the burial party returns to the village on the way but while crossing the village gate they offer a kind of leaf to the village gate saying "Mr/Mrs/Miss you will never be alive and return to this village. We are giving farewell to you. The leaves are keeping for witnessing your absence." The maternal uncle or the person who act as maternal uncle returns to the house of the bereaved family to perform another ritual which is similar to that of the

Ratha Kakoi. He also performed purification rite over the grave. On the fourth day the family performed *Inlei* ritual by sacrificing a fowl. In the meantime the family offers a feast by killing a pig or cattle. Rice-beer (Yu) is also served by the host. It may be interpreted as in honour of death.³⁰ They believed that the animals whatever slaughtered for the feast belonged to the deceased person.

Thathibu is another ritual which is performed after the full moon after the death of a person in which as in *Ramsur Inlei* the two women carry and offer the food and drinks to the departed soul over his or her grave.

It is believed by the Kharams that every departed soul does not go to the village of death (*Kathikho*) just after the death. The soul waits his or her last mortuary rite which is to be performed after a lapse of one year. During this the soul remains or takes rest at *Raingaa*-in, a small hut built near the graves and accepts the offering made by his/her family members every day. It continues for a complete calendar year. Then *Kumbu Kathak*, the last mortuary rite is performed. It is normally performed one year after the death but some families extended it up to two years.³¹ Most of the Kharam families try to perform it in time, otherwise it may cause natural calamities to the village and family itself and particular, according to their beliefs. On the day of *Kumbu Kathak* all invitees are served with food and drinks. In the case of unnatural death the dead body is buried without performing any rite or ritual but perform purification rite only in order to prevent any effect upon other human beings.³² It is believed, those person who dies of unnatural death are not allowed to live in the village of death, the *Kathikho*.

Lifecycle ceremonies of the Liangmeis

The birth ceremony of the Liangmeis comprises a number of rites such as cutting the umbilical cord (*Chalang Riang Mathui Khaibo*), swinging on the temple of the child with a dry leaf of *Makhen*, a kind of plant (*pashan kanbo*), tying the baby's neck, leg with a black thread, taking only plain food by the mother, naming the child (*Ngena Jan Mathakb*), fifth day *Tajum Gibo* ritual etc.³³ The main objective of all these rites is to secure the child and sometimes the mother from evil forces and diseases. After birth, the young baby is developed, severed from the mother's body and becomes an independent individual. And the woman also has become a socially responsible mother. On fifth day, a *Tajum Gibo* ritual is observed in which a name is given to the child, as without a name a person cannot be counted

as a member of the family. This ritual also recognizes the existence of the child and responsibility of the parents to bring up the young baby.³⁴

Among the Liangmeis, marriage is the union of a man and woman to set up a family. They have different types of marriage such as negotiated marriage (*Chamu*), elopement (*Jaipak*), kidnapped marriage (*Nimna*) and marriage by servitude (*Noumang*).³⁵ They follow clan exogamy and marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. Monogamy is the general rule. Child marriage is not existed and adult marriage is the rule. One who breaks the marriage code is punished under the customary laws of the tribe. Payment of bride price is essential feature of their marriage system.³⁶ After marriage, the bride lives in the house of her husband. Divorce is allowed, but it is very rare and not encourage in the society. The process of divorce is carried out in the *Peiki*, village court based on the customary laws. Remarriage of widow or widower or male and female divorcees is permitted in the society without any loss of social stigma.³⁷

Death is believed to be the departure of soul from the body permanently for the passage to the land of dead. It usually takes place in the house. There are two types of death, namely *Chara Mashit Sheibo* and *Tashit-Kasheibo*.³⁸ Death due to sickness of an old age is considered as normal death; this is locally known as *Chara Mashit Sheibo*. Traditionally, all the villagers take part in the funeral ceremony. In Liangmei society, it is a custom on the part of the family or lineage to offer an animal or a bird for the dead. The cooked food will be included in making the food packets for the dead. Thus, they bury the dead body along with food packets (*Tedom-chagandom*), wine (*Jou*), spear (*Chagi*), dao (*Chaniu*), *Chaheng* and other articles (weaving equipments for female) for his or her use on the way to and in the next world. The main objective of the funeral rites is for his or her safe passage to the land of dead.³⁹ After burial of the dead, all the participants in the funeral ceremony are purified by sprinkling of water and drinking of holy wine. Generally, a funeral feast is held before burial. The purpose of funeral feast is to bring all the survivors together.⁴⁰ R. Brown⁴¹ writes on the death of a Liangmei, a feast is given by his surviving relations to the friends of the family and others should the parties be well off.

Conclusion

After observing the above facts, we can conclude that the Kharams and Liangmeis perform a number of rituals through different stages of life for safety and well-being of the

individual. Death ritual is meant to ensure for safe passage of the soul to the land of dead and not to give trouble to his or her living descendents. It covers birth, marriage and dead. Moreover, they also observe different rites and rituals on different occasions within a calendar year. But after accepting the Christianity, the Kharam and Liangmei people have given up their forefathers' beliefs and practices. It is the right time to preserve the rich culture of the tribes from disappearance.

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