

Belief In Life After Death Among The Zeliangrongs Of Northeast

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Abstract

The Zeliangrong people who follow the indigenous religion believe in life hereafter, land of dead, *Thuntadijang* and Heaven. It is believed that *Buh*, soul is not born and does not die since it originates from *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God. The life and death of man is indicated by the presence or absence of soul. After the disintegration of physical body, human soul goes to *Taroilam*, the land of death where he will face the judgements given by *Taroigwang*, the king of the dead based on his past deeds. The pious soul will be sent to *Tingkao Kaidai*, Heaven where he will remain in peace forever. While the good soul who did less bad and more good will be permitted to live in *Taroilam*. The sinner will be sent to *Thuntadijang*, a stage of degraded form of life which is almost equivalent to the extinction of life. However, there is no concept of hell and permanent extinction of life in Zeliangrong indigenous religion known as *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak*.

Key words: *Zeliangrong, Tingkao Ragwang, Buh, Taroigwang, Heaven, Thuntadijang*

Introduction

There are no people in the world without religion. The Zeliangrong¹ inhabitants of NorthEast India, too, follow a profound indigenous religion known as *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak*. *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* is basically based on the fundamental belief of *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God. *Tingkao Ragwang* literally means the Heavenly God, or God of the sky or Lord of the universe. R. Brown² has made a reference that the Zeliangrong people worship a Supreme Being, the creator of the universe. *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* means the religion of *Tingkao Ragwang*. This profound religious tradition is preserved and practiced through oral traditions by the ancient Zeliangrong community through the ages.

Materials and method

The application of knowledge of both history and anthropology has been utilised in the study. The necessary data rest on primary and secondary materials of published works and also on the traditional wisdoms gathered through interviews with the village elders and intellectuals of the Zeliangrong community.

Death is the last and final crisis in the lifecycle of an individual. The common theory of the process of death is the separation of the soul from the body called *Pum*.³ However, the soul may go out from the body before death as in dream. The only difference between such a separation and that of death is that the later is final. The moment when the final separation is completed, the liberated soul takes flight.⁴ It is believed that the soul commonly escapes by the natural openings of the body such as nostril, mouth⁵ and anus.⁶ The rites and ceremonies of the dead are to ensure for safety and joyful trip of the soul to the land of the dead where the soul of its ancestors are leading a life of themselves. Thus, they look upon death is not an end of human soul, but it is just a change of way of life of the soul.⁷ So, death is the gateway to the other world. Sherlock⁸ says, "We call it death to leave this world, but were we once out of it and enstated into the happiness of the next, we should think it were dying indeed to come back to it again."

Concept of soul

The primary meaning of the word soul indicates an entity conceived as the cause of the body life and psychical activities of the individual person. The soul is assumed to "exist as a spiritual substance, in rather sharp antithesis material substances, thus giving form to the contrast of soul and body (as constituents of man) and the assumption of their separability."⁹ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica¹⁰ has defined soul as an immortal principle and aspect with the body constitute the human person. Such principle has always been attributed to all the living things to the universe as a whole and even inanimate object which is regarded as ordinary. It is the every essence of a thing and not a mere part of it. It is the center of a bodily life, function and highest mental activity. Plato has opined that soul exists in pure state only when it is released from the human body. Soul is the immortal spiritual substance of human person. It is the animating substance of Individual life. The structure of the composition of soul and body is known as a living being and is further termed mortal.¹¹

Local myth tells that man was created by another god named *Dampapui* by the orders of *Tingkao Ragwang*, but the created man was lifeless. *Tingkao Ragwang* gave soul and life, only then the man became alive. "Soul is not born and does not die"¹² since it comes from *Tingkao Ragwang* who is the "source of soul and life."¹³ The belief of the existence of a soul from the Paleolithic age may be explained that "the hole frequently found chiseled in the transverse slab of the megalithic monuments or barrows belonging to the Neolithic age was meant to provide the soul (it is often called the soul hole) even if only temporarily, with a way of escape from the grave."¹⁴ According to their belief, the physical form of life is enshrouded by transitoriness, having definite span of existence or duration. The physical body is nothing but a shell or cover of the soul. Human body is the home of the soul. The man is alive so long it resides in the human person and the moment when it departs permanently from the momentary body

the man dies. The soul is pure since it originated from *Tingkao Ragwang* and the final goal of soul is supposed to go to *Tingkao Kaidai*, the Heaven.¹⁵ However, it depends upon the actions of man done in the human world since the soul resides in the body of man. Montgomery says, "The soul, of origin divine God's glorious image, freed from clay, in heaven's eternal sphere shall shine, a star of day! The sun is but a spark of fire, a transient meteor in the sky; the soul immortal as its sire shall never die."¹⁶

The belief in immortality is "the result of a deep emotional, standardized by religion, rather than a primitive philosophic doctrine. Man's conviction of continued life is one of the supreme gifts of religion, which Jude selects the better of the two alternatives suggested by self preservation- the hope of continued life and fear of annihilation. The belief in spirits is the result of the belief in immortality."¹⁷

The Zeliangrong people believe on the subject of life here after and the land of dead called *Taroilam*. Belief in future life is the main principle of the *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak*.¹⁸ To Emile Durkheim,¹⁹ "While the body no longer exists and no visible traces of it remain, the soul continues to live: it leads an autonomous existence in another world." It is believed that in the human body there lives a soul, which on being released from its mortal covering, goes its way to *Taroilam*, the abode of souls, where he will lead another life.²⁰ For instance, when a man dies, they offer food and drink for the departed with an interval till the dead body taken away for burial. It is done in the belief that like the living the dead also feels thirsty.²¹ This gives an idea of the existence of life after death.

Means of approach to the afterworld

Like in many other religions, the Zeliangrong people also believe that the dead has to make a journey to the other world, to which they actually belong. In this faith, they perform the funerary rites for safe and wonderful travel of the dead to the next world. Soon after death of a man, an elder of *Pei* (village council) who officiates as priest very close to the head of the deceased and will pronounce: "You go without fear." The dead is bathed with a haircut by using the bark of *Khoi*, a kind of tree; it is believed that if the dead comes with a bath, he is well-received in another world. They attire the dead in his best traditional clothes and costume and lay him on his bed as he is ready for a voyage. Mourners sing traditional songs such as *Ramlon-Luh*, *Chun-Luh* etc. for the departed soul in the thought that funeral songs help the deceased to enter the land of the dead with his head held high.²² As a custom, the deceased family offers *Takan*, an animal or a bird for the dead. If a dog is sacrificed, it is believed that the dog will protect him from evil spirits and will take the message ahead to the land of the dead and to his relatives of his coming. E.E Evans-Pritchard opines,²³ "His soul will go along with the soul of the sacrifice animal." They prepare seven food packets for the dead to eat and drink on different places through which he will pass his travel to the land of the dead: the first packet is for eating at the *Karangbang*, at the village gate; the second packet is for eating at the *Bamdondai*, the big resting place; the third is for eating near the *Kanung* river; the fourth packet is for giving to them who receive him at

Taroilam; the fifth packet is for giving to his parents and grand parents (those elders who died ahead of the person); the sixth packet is for feeding the dog of the *Taroilam* and the seventh is for giving to the *Khanana*, the evil spirits of the *Taroilam*.²⁴ The Zeliangrongs burry the dead along with articles like *Napdom Khatni Taktu*, food packets, *Khengmu Deimu*, rice-beer, *Shaobon*, one set of pointed thorny for the purpose of defending from the attack of enemies or evil spirits, *Bui*, a spear for throwing to the enemies or evil spirits, *Bang*, a dao for chopping the evil spirits or enemies, *Buirong*, a walking stick, *Laogai*, a small spade for cultivation in the next world, *Tambem*, *Tangnuk*, *Tangnam*, weaving equipments for female etc. for his or her safe passage to *Taroilam*.²⁵ Among the Naga tribes, the dead body is buried along with a spear and dao.²⁶ According to R. Brown,²⁷ the corpse is buried on the day of death in a coffin, in which, under the body, are placed a hoe, spear, cooking pots and cloths for his use in the other world.

In many religions also there occurs the idea that the dead had to cross some barrier that divided the land of the living from that of the dead. The Greeks and Romans had a belief that the dead were ferried across an infernal river, the Acheron by a demonic boatman called Charon and a coin was placed in the mouth of the deceased for payment to the boatman. In Zoroastrianism, the dead crossed the Requiter Bridge and bridges also figure in Muslim and Scandinavian eschatologies (speculations concerning the end of the world and the afterlife)-the Sirat bridge and the bridge over the Gjoll River.²⁸ In the same way, the Zeliangrong people put a coin in the mouth of the dead which is intended to pay to the ferry for crossing the *Kanungdui*, a mythical river which divides the living and the dead.²⁹ The ancient Greeks and Romans offered honey cake for the dead to feed the fearsome dog (Cerberus) that guarded the entrance to Hades.³⁰ The sixth foodstuff packet cited above is meant for the dog of *Taroigwang*. Thus, the soul travels to the land of death.

Geography of the afterlife

The term *Taroilam* literally means land of the dead; (*Taroi* means dead and *lam*, land). *Taroilam* is supposed to be the land of dead but no one exactly gives idea about where it is. Burial is the mode of the disposal of the dead has long been universally known and practiced, and no one doubts that it is the burial of bodies underground which has given rise to the belief that the abode of the dead is underground.³¹ The mortuary cults of many people give indication that the dead were imagined as actually living in their graves and able to receive the offerings of food and drink made to them. Some graves in ancient Crete and Ugarit were equipped with pottery conduits, from the surface, for libations.³² It is believed that grave is the residence of the dead so every effort is made to comfort the departed soul. Carl Clemen³³ has rightly stated that the earth is the soul of life, but it is the realm of dead. It is also believed that the soul that has no tomb has no dwelling place and becomes a wondering spirit.³⁴ However, the grave has been often thought of as a door to a vast subterranean or underground abode of the dead.³⁵ *Taroilam* is believed to be within the bowels of earth. The belief is widely spread and found among the Karens an Asiatic tribe. The Aryans undoubtedly held the same view and the Roman Orcus and the Greek Hades are underground. The Babylonians placed 'the land whence none return', as it was termed by them, in name both for

the grave and for the subterranean abode of the departed.³⁶ According to the oldest belief of the Italians, the soul did not go into a foreign world to pass its second existence; it did remain near men, and continue to live underground.³⁷ In view of Emile Durkheim,³⁸ it is existed side by side in the same society but nobody can see them. After death the “souls descend to an underground world, where they are met by the shades of their ancestors, who introduce them into their new habitation; the life they lead in the underground world is an exact counterpart of what they led in this-the rich remain rich, the poor, poor.”³⁹

“Sometimes, it is ruled by an awful monarch, such as the Mesopotamian god Nergal or the Greek god Hades, or Pluto or the Yama of Hindu and Buddhist eschatology.”⁴⁰ It is believed that *Taroilam* is ruled by a god named *Taroigwang* assigned by *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God to look after the affairs of the kingdom.⁴¹ *Taroigwang* literally means king of the dead; (*Taroi* means dead and *Gwang*, king). George Rawlinson⁴² tells that the fate after death would depend on his actions during his life on earth especially on his observance of the moral law and performance of his various duties. The ancient Greeks had a belief that there was a underground region, where rewards and punishments were distributed according to the lives men had led in this world.⁴³ All those (souls) who come to the land of dead will face the verdicts given by *Taroigwang* based on their past actions, commitment of sins, worship of *Tingkao Ragwang* while living in the human world.⁴⁴

According to the view of human nature and destiny held in a particular religion, this underworld may be a place of awful torments where the damned suffer for their misdeeds. In those religions in which the underground has been conceived as a place of post mortem retribution, the idea of a separate abode of the blessed dead generally became necessary. Such a place or abode has various locations. In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is imagined as being in the sky or in a divine realm beyond the sky. Sometimes it has been conceived as beautiful garden or paradise such as the *al-firdaws* of Islam. “After death the souls of men, both good and bad, preceded together along an appointed path to the “bridge of the gatherer.” This was a narrow road conducting to heaven, or paradise, over which the souls of the good alone could pass, while the wicked fell from it into the gulf below, where they found themselves in the place of punishment. The pious soul was assisted in acrossing the bridge by the angel.”⁴⁵

The Zeliangrong people also believe that after death human soul returns to *Tingkao Ragwang* from whom it comes. However, it depends on his works performed by a man in his last birth. The judgments of *Taroigwang* may be classified into the followings:⁴⁶

Those souls who are not committed sins and who have performed all duties towards *Tingkao Ragwang* and who have performed the great sacrifices in the name of God are good doers will be sent to *Tingkao Kaidai*, the abode of *Tingkao Ragwang* where they will lead a peaceful life forever and never born again.⁴⁷

Those who do more good and less bad will be permitted to live in *Taroilam*. After sometime they may be sent to the world again to fulfill the duties towards god.

Those who are sinners and evil doers who are born again and again and who die again and again and who are beyond redemption will be sent to *Thuntadijang*, a stage of degenerated form of life almost equivalent to the extinction of life. It is believed that the soul of a sinner after death will be sent to the land of *Thuntadijang*, where his soul will transform into a *Thunbang* plant. When the *Thunbang* decays and rots, it converts to a worm. The worm is eaten by a bird and the bird again is eaten by man, only after that the soul may become in the form of human being if *Tingkao Ragwang* pleases. So, there is no question of extermination of life permanently in the faith of *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak*. It is a long process to reincarnate for the soul in the human form from the land of *Thuntadijang*.⁴⁸ According to R. Brown,⁴⁹ "After their return living thus over again, they return to the upper world, and are born, live and die, unconscious of their former state; the bad however are annihilated." There is no concept of hell in their religion.

In traditional Zeliangrong society, there is a dream-diviner known as *Mangtatmei* who may be either sex. The diviner is a person who has many dreams, and is liable to work himself into more or less of a trance, when he is purported to commune with the deities and with the departed souls and to see things not revealed to ordinarily mortals. In time of crisis, he or she is consulted to find out the exact cause of it and its remedy. In this way, a relation is maintained between the land of the dead and the livings through the medium of shaman priests and dream diviners.⁵⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that there is a belief of future life among the traditional Zeliangrongs. It is believed that the dead ancestors look after the safety and well being of their living descendents; in return, the living descendents honour their dead ancestors by offering holy wine in time of festivals and religious rites of the family. They are not worshipped as deities, but honour the living deads. No shrine is installed in the family or on the grave.

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