

## DISPOSAL OF DEATH WITH RITUALS: THE LIFECYCLE OF THE KHARAMS

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### ABSTRACT

*The Kharam is one of the natives of Manipur; the population of this tribe is found in Senapati District, particularly in four villages. This paper attempts to delve into the death and disposal of the Kharams. Death is the last phase in the lifecycle of an individual. It portrays the types of death and related customs in the form of rites and ceremonies. They look upon death as not an end of life, but simply as a change of way of life of the soul. The dead body is therefore, buried along with grave goods for his/her use in the next world locally known as Kathikho. All the dead members of a family enter in a common grave in the belief that they will live together in the Kathikho. The Kharams place the head of the dead north or south as opposite of the living people do as they sleep normally facing east or west according to their convenience but never south or north. They sing funeral songs in honour of the dead. The whole village community takes part in the funeral as collective mourning. On the fifth day after burial, the village observes genna abstaining from normal work. On this day, the family prepares a bed for the departed soul. From this day onwards they offer food and drink to the departed soul; it continues for a year till the last mortuary rite is over. The body of unnatural death is buried without ritual. Based on his/her deeds or actions in the living world, the soul is sent to heaven or hell or retained at the land of dead; the judgment is given by deities called Khuisem and Aarme. The corpse of unnatural death is buried without any rite outside the village. The data is based on available literature and also on works interviews.*

**Key words:** Kharam, Death rituals, Kathikho, Talai, Kumbu Kathak, Unnatural death.

### INTRODUCTION

The Kharam, one of the natives as well as least populous tribe of Manipur is recognized as scheduled tribe by the Government of India only in January 2002 (The 2<sup>nd</sup> Schedule, Part X, Manipur 2002). During the first half

of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chandrakriti Singh the then king of Manipur recognized the Kharam tribe by issuing a royal decree. The Kharam belong to Tibeto-Burman of Mongoloid racial stock (Grierson, 2000:447). The population of this tribe is found in Senapati District particularly in four villages namely; Kharam Pallen, Tampak Kharam, Tuisaphai and Laikot Phai, located on the hill slopes except one. The total population of the tribe is about three thousands.

Like other tribes of Manipur, the *Kharam* also traces their origin to a cave. It is in conformity with their folk song sung by female singers locally called *Lapi* group during their annual festival in October, which says: “Look, here we came out from this cave. Our life in this world is enjoyable than in the cave.” According to their tradition, there was a tiger at the entrance of the cave, which killed and ate whoever came out of it. One day a man disguising himself as tiger came out of the cave. On seeing him friendly gesture, the tiger remained silent and left the spot. Thus, man emerged out of the cave. It is believed that the said cave is located somewhere near the *Makhel*, about ten kilometers away from *Oklong* village, Senapati District, Manipur.

After emerged out of the cave, the tradition further relates that they settled on the west of *Makhel* at *Makuilongdi*, a big village and in course of time their population increased as many as 7777(seven thousand seven hundred only) (Marulung, 1996:100). From there, they migrated to southwards following the course of the *Gowai* River and settled at *Gokkoklong*, Tamenglong District along with other tribes like *Rongmei*, *Aimol*, *Chiru* etc. As differences cropped up with the *Rongmei*, they parted from there and migrated southwards and finally settled at *Khudungsaitaakboi*, which is believed to be located near the border of *Lushai* hills, present Churachandpur District. Now, they are found inhabiting mainly in Senapati District. These people are also found scattered in different villages like *Laikot*, *Charoi Chagotlong*, *Sempangjar*, *Lowangsengol*, *Senam Kom*, *Wakanphai*, *Natok Kabui*, *Gaipuinam*, *Langol Tarung*, *Theiyong* etc. Of these *Laikot*, a *Kom* village, the *Kharam* forms a major population.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data of the study are based on available primary and secondary sources and also on information collected from village elders of the Kharam.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

No scholar has so far been examined the funeral ceremony of the Kharam in systematic way. So, thorough investigation on the subject matter is still awaited. Death is the last crisis in the lifecycle of an individual. It is

believed that when the *Rai* (soul) departs the human body permanently the man dies. There are two types of death; the Kharam people consider normal death as a normal end of an individual's physical existence while unnatural death by different reasons are considered as an act of punishment imposed upon them by the deities for breaking the customary practices during one's lifetime. In addition, they believe in life after death, heaven and hell.

As soon as a man dies the members of the family make it inform to the village by verbal announcement or by beating the gong. Then the dead is given final bath; the water for washing the hair is made from the water used for washing rice before cooking. Bathing the dead body is a universal symbol of inner purification (Channa, 2002:90). The dead is then adorned with their traditional costumes according to sex of the dead person including headgear. It is believed that if one comes with the dress of the clan he is well received by his/her ancestors in the village of death locally called *Kathikho*, otherwise he/she will not be recognized by their ancestors. The dead is then placed in front of the main door till all the relatives arrive to join the mourning. In Kharam society, it is a custom to bring something to the bereaved family as a sign of sympathy. It is done in the sense of equal sharing and mourning. And everyone in the village will stop from their normal work as a mark of condolence as soon as the news of the death reaches them. It is also a taboo because the dead is unclean (Jevons, 1986:44).

The members of *Lapu* and *Lapi* institutions are the first persons to arrive and share mourning; they start singing traditional songs and continue till the dead is buried. It is done in honour of the deceased person. In the meantime, a cock or an animal is killed and cooked; the cooked meat along with cooked rice is wrapped in a plantain leave thus made a packet and then a food packet is kept near the corpse as his/her share. All the offerings of the dead enter the grave as grave goods of the deceased person.

### **Preparation of burial**

When all the relatives have arrived, preparation of burial is conventionally done. The Kharam have a graveyard for each village and each family has a common grave of their own. All the dead members of a family enter in a common grave. It is believed that they also will live together in the *Kathikho* after their death; (*Kathi* means death and *Kho*, land). A hut called *Raingak-in* is built near the grave for the soul to take rest and wait his/her mortuary rite. The hut is very small for a common man, but in the case of village chief or councilor or one who performed great sacrifice etc., they built the hut nicely and thatched with a red blanket. It indicates the high status acquired by the deceased person in their social ladder during his lifetime.

They also prepare a palanquine made of bamboo locally called *Talai*. It is prepared from a special bamboo species locally known as *Utang*; this kind of bamboo is used only for this purpose. Then the body is taken outside and placed on the bamboo palanquine. They fasten the dead body tightly with the creepers and bamboo split for the fear of falling down. A farewell song is also sung at the same time for the departed soul by the *Lapu* and *Lapi* groups. It is believed that funeral songs help the deceased to enter the land of dead with his head held high (Gennep, 1960: 155).

They put some sesame seeds and coins in the hands of the dead because the soul of the deceased person will offer the seeds to *Yongdulpa* to appease him and use the coins to escape from being enslaved by others. After this, eight healthy youths come out and carry the palanquine towards the graveyard. The grave goods are carried by other persons who joined the procession. The procession is led by maternal uncle holding a dao in his right hand and a bamboo container with a piece of iron in his left hand. If the maternal uncle is no more his son acts as the maternal uncle. It is believed that the soul will use the iron piece as weapon in the village of dead. During the procession the leader waves the dao and shouts "Who killed my nephew/niece." He goes on shouting until he reaches the graveyard.

### **Preparation of the grave**

Clan elders select the grave sites for each and every family. Then each family dug a common grave which measures about 15'X16'X6'. Then they again carve out a shelf within the chamber. The dead body is placed in this self. The Kharam people place the head of the dead north or south as opposite of the living people do as they sleep normally facing east or west according to their convenience but never south or north. After preparing the grave by the young men of *Nungak-Rothar*, it is purified with fire to drive off the evil forces residing in the grave. According to dictionary of Anthropology, the fire at or enroute to the funeral are probably to warm and light the spirit (Tylor, 1988:223). Then the dead body is allowed to enter the grave along with her/his articles. Inside the grave the dead body is again put over the shelf. Then the shelf is closed with logs or planks. In the meantime, the maternal uncle removes the medial log or 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 sister or 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 *Kathikho*." The ritual is performed because they believe that the souls of the relatives of the deceased, out of love and affection may accompany the body even inside the grave and so, they must be asked to leave the place of the dead and join that of the living.

## Purification and embellishment

Purification means the ritual which is used to protect against unclean, sinful and undesirable situations. The purification of the mourners is the other post funerary action. A corpse straddles the boundary between this world and the next and as with most such liminal objects it is regarded as simultaneously powerful and polluting. After the burial, all the participants return to the village. On their way while crossing the village gate, they offer a kind of leave to the gate pronouncing: “You are not alive and return to your village. We are giving farewell to you. The leaves are keeping for witnessing your absence.” The maternal uncle returns to the house of the bereaved family and performs another ritual which is similar to that of the *Ratha Kakoi*. He also performs purificatory rite over the grave. For this rite, he collects some ginger and a bamboo mug to serve as a mortar from the house of the deceased. Then, he goes to the grave with some other relatives. When he reaches the graveyard, he smashes the ginger and takes some pieces; the remaining ginger is then used for smearing his whole body especially the joints tips and toes and facial parts to protect from the evil spirits. Those accompanying persons also follow the same process. It is believed that the ritual act purifies the whole village and the members of the bereaved family in particular. After the burial, an animal is killed by the family of the deceased and feast the people along with the rice-beer in the belief that such animal is given to the departed soul. Evans-Pritchard writes, “His soul will go along with the soul of the sacrificed animal (1977:153).”

On the fourth day, the clan members of the bereaved family, relatives and friends embellish the grave by performing another ritual. At home, the family offers a feast by killing a pig or cattle. Rice beer is also served by the host. It is believed that the animal whatever slaughtered for the feast is in honour of the dead. In other words, it is another form of offering to the departed soul.

The deceased family performs *Ramsur Inlei* ritual on the fourth day by sacrificing a fowl. The victim is divided into two halves; the right half is meant for the living people and the left, for the departed soul. The victim is then cooked; the chicken meat is then wrapped in a plaintain leave forming a nice pack. Similarly, a packet of cooked rice is also made. Two old women carry these packets along with seven bamboo cups of wine and offer to the departed soul by placing them on the grave. *Thathibu Kathak ritual* is performed on the first new moon after the death of a person. As in *Ramsur Inlei*, the two old women offer the foods and drinks to the departed soul.

On the fifth day, the whole village observes *genna*; no one is allowed to move out or enter the village. Within the village itself no one is permitted to enter the bereaved family and vice-versa. It is prayer of the village community. On this day, the family prepares a bed for the departed soul. From this day onwards they offer food

and drink to the soul and it continues for a year till the mortuary rite is over. A pot full of water is also placed near the hearth.

### **The last mortuary rite**

The last mortuary rite known as *Kumbu Kathak* is normally performed one year after the death of a man. It is an annual giving food to the departed soul. But it is carried out before the winds come, provided that the family members have sufficient wealth to defray the cost. Some families extend it up to two years and so because it is expensive. Most of the Kharam families try to perform it in time otherwise it may cause natural calamities to the village and the family itself in particular. It is the annual and last mortuary rite for a departed soul. On the day of *Kumbu Kathak* all the female members of the village are invited; they are served with foods and drinks. The rice-beer offered during this feast is called *Yube* in local dialect. The family offers the food and drinks until and unless they felt contented. If the feasting is over, the last rite is over. It is believed that the spirit of the dead leaves the burial place after the feast.<sup>27</sup> These rites lift the prohibitions of mourning and make the reintegration into the life of society (Gennep, 1960: 147). There is a festival called *Lung-in Kam* i.e. placing of stone in memory of the departed soul and it is performed by those who can afford it only.

### **Ritual of unnatural death**

Among the Kharams, the unnatural death is considered as the most severe form of punishment given by their supreme God for violating the customs and tradition. Deaths caused due to drowning, fire, falling from the tree, dreadful deceases etc. are considered unnatural death. Those persons who die of unnatural death are not permitted to live in the village *Kathikho*. The nature of death plays a very important role in deciding one's fate (Hasting: 419). So, it is an important factor to them. They bury the dead body without performing any rite (Barua, 1991:200) but perform only the purification rite. For the burial of such dead, only the village elders take part. The purification rite is performed by *Raangla Kathem*; in his absence *Seilon Kathem* or *Saichal Kathem* can also perform the rite with four different plants leaves/branches (*Tumber* plant, *Inther* plant, *Yeiyou* creeper and *Kanter* tall tree) instead of ginger. The four kinds of branches represent the dwelling places of the evil spirits that caused the unnatural death. Unlike the purification rite of natural death, it is performed either on the spot of burial or at the village gate.

## Life after death

It is believed that the departed soul who dies natural death goes to the village of death and lives there with his/her ancestors as in the living world. But, every departed soul does not go to the *Kathikho* directly just after death; each soul waits his/her last mortuary rite. During this period, the soul takes rest at *Raingaak-in* and accepts the offerings in the form of food and drinks. It continues a complete calendar year and abandons the *Raingaak-in* for the *Kathikho*. They believe that a soul suffers or enjoys after death according to the deeds/actions done during one's life on earth. It is said that a soul goes to *Kathikho* where *Khuisem* and *Aarmei*, a couple passes judgment and not by *Pathen*, Supreme God. According one's deed on earth, one is sent to places like *Neitaanganu*, heaven or *Khupem Khuloi*, hell or retained at *Kathikho*.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the strength of the family has been decreased by the removal of a member. It is worse than the temporary separation of a member. The whole village community is disturbed and shaken by the death; collective mourning and customs of the death serve to realign the unity in an emotionally satisfactory and socially approved manner. There is a belief of life after death, land of dead, heaven and hell, but no concept of rebirth. The dead is buried along with articles for his/her use in another village called *Kathikho*, while the abnormal death is buried without formal ritual.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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