

## rites and rituals with special reference to death and disposal of death bodies of *POUMAI NAGA* TRIBE BEFORE THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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### **Abstract**

*The Poumai Naga is one of the major tribes inhabiting mainly in the Senapati District of Manipur. Before the advent of Christianity, the Poumai Nagas have a unique belief system in the existence of life and soul after death. The concept of physical death is not considered as the ultimate death but a journey to the land of souls. It is believed that death is not everything that ends but it is a journey to the second life. Death is considered as a particular time period when the souls leave the body. It is also considered as the time the soul finally meet with their ancestors. Therefore, when someone died proper washing of the death body, rites and offerings were made as a farewell for the leaving soul. It is natural course of life. During the death of a member, rites and rituals are performed bringing close relatives, near and dear ones and friends together. A day genna was observed by the whole village on the death of a person, whether it is natural death or unnatural death. Animals were slaughtered on funeral with the belief that the soul of the slaughtered animal will accompany the departed soul as it goes to join those who have gone before. Funeral of death persons depend on how a person lived while he or she is alive. This paper attempts to analyse the nature of rites and rituals and its importance on death and its disposal with special reference to Poumai Naga tribe.*

**Keywords :** Rites, rituals, death, disposal of death

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every tribe, caste or creed performs its traditional rites and rituals of any events like birth, death, etc. The word 'Rite' is derived from the French word 'Rites' and Latin word 'Rifus' which means 'a solemn act of religion or an act performed in divine solemn service'. According to Oxford Advance Learner's dictionary, 'rite' is a religious or other solemn ceremony and 'ritual' is the action that is always done at a fixed time and in the same way, especially as part of a religious or other ceremony. According to the New Encyclopedia Britannica, in any sacrificial rite a number of goals or intention may be expressed, yet the ultimate goals of all sacrifice is to establish a beneficial relationship with the sacred order, to make the sacred power present efficacious sacrifice', (Vol.16,1974,p.132).

Rites and rituals are practiced by any society since time immemorial to express their sense of gratitude and for the favor of their god and deities or spirits in times of need. According to Sinha

(1977) “the rituals are to appease god, to secure their blessing of thanks giving, to marks supremacy in kinship as well as in atonement of some wrongful act. It form a sort of communication between man and god” (p.68).

Like any other group of people, the *Poumai Nagas* has its unique rites and rituals for various occasions and events. *Poumai Naga* tribe is one of the major nomadic tribes belonging to mongoloid race mostly inhabiting in the District of *Senapati*, Manipur. Some *Poumai Nagas* are in *Chakhesang* area of *Phek* District, Nagaland. The geographical area in Manipur inhabited by the *Poumai Nagas* extends to about 1500 sq.km and is divided into three areas called *Paomata*, *Chiliivai* and *Lepaona*. Thus, *Poumai* region is bordered with Nagaland in the north, *Thangal* villages of *Saikul* sub-division of *Senapati* District in the south, *Tangkhul* villages of *Ukhrul* District in the east and *Mao* and *Maram* sub-division of *Senapati* District in the west.

Like any other tribal groups of the North East India, the *Poumai Nagas* has its unique traditional practices of performing several rites and rituals on any occasions. Rites and rituals are very significant components of *Poumai Nagas* traditional and religious life. Its main purposes and intentions are presumed to appease god and pray for well-being, multiplication of population on both human and domestic animals, fertility of soil, good harvest, success in warfare, protection from sickness and death, etc.

Among many religious and traditional practices of the *Poumai Nagas*, rites and rituals especially of the death and its disposal of death bodies are less documented and less researched. This paper therefore, attempts to elucidate the nature of such rites and rituals performed during the death, and disposal of death body by the *Poumai Nagas* before the advent of Christianity.

## DEATH

The *Poumai Nagas* have different views on the definition and meaning of death as far as the literary term and other metaphysical term is concerned. It can be seen in various aspects of knowledge generation and its advancement. The *Poumai Nagas* like many other tribal groups also believed in life after death. They believed that death is just a moment or a particular time period when one’s soul leaves the body. Death is therefore, considered as a journey to the land where our ancestors have gone before. Since the *Poumai Nagas* believed in life after death, and the existence of soul, when someone dies proper rites and ritual and offering were made for the soul.

*Poumai Nagas* classify deaths into two types; natural death and unnatural death. Every death is not treated equal for burial rites and rituals. Some deaths were highly regarded whereas others are not. In the natural death, for instance a person who died of diseases, from accident, due to old age, etc. the death body will be buried in the village near the house or in the garden.

Villagers shared the sorrow and show sympathy to the bereaved families' by coming to the house and observe *genna* together with them. For unnatural deaths, that is, deaths due to suicide, hang, killed by wild animal, death by fire, drowning in river, death in child birth, etc., due respect is not given and the opportunities for burial inside the village is also denied. Instead the death bodies are taken outside the village boundary without coffin. They are treated with utmost contempt and humiliation and their souls are supposed to be death forever. It was also a taboo to cry on those dead bodies and the young people are not allowed to touch. This denial was made so that it is not repeated in future. Besides, unnatural death is considered to be a bad omen for entire villagers. (Interview with R.Hepuni 16.5.2018)

When a person is near with his/her death due to terminal sickness or due to any fatal injuries or because of its old age, he or she shall be removed from the dying bed and laid on the floor so as to avoid the death pollution upon the bed. This practice is also found practicing in most of the other Naga communities. Once the person is about to breath his last, people of male gender standing nearby him usually howl and called out the name of the dying person to revive back the passed away life. Ornaments such as necklaces, bangles, bracelets and earring were generally removed from the person. When the struggle and breathing completely stopped, eyes were closed followed by taking out his personal belongings and utensils for cooking rice, curry, rice beer and yeast outside the house.

As soon as the person was declared death, relatives and friends who are close by cried out and call out the name of the person to wake up was made. Then the priest (*Napao*), generally a male gender entered the room where the death body is lying and he sprinkled water over the death body. Nepuni (2010) Then the death body will be taken for washing. It is a must for everyone after the death (p.90-91). Normally, the dead body is washed by the *Napao* or by an elderly person. In some peculiar situations, washing of death body used to be delayed till the next day, believing that once the dead body is washed, the person will never rise again. After the death body is washed, it will be kept in the open bed and then covered with his personal clothing especially his favourite shawl. Articles such as plates, cups, bag, *daos*, spears, and his favourites were laid above his head. Besides, all the luxury items were also displayed to show the wealth and riches of the deceased. The whole villagers observed *genna* for the deceased person and people usually kept aside the festival, marriages or any merry making. Ngupani (2010) "It is an obligatory on the part of the bereaved family to observe five days *genna* for the death of every family irrespective of age" (p. 111). Villagers bring gifts such as rice, wine, meat and money as a sign of sympathy to the bereaved family.

When a person dies at night, youngsters from village gathered at the residence of deceased to keep vigil and show solidarity. Then in the morning young people were sent to give information

to the neighbouring villages about the death of the person. If the deceased is rich or an elderly man, blank fire of the gun was made to announce the death of a person to the villagers and nearby villages. But the gun fires were not mean for the woman. One thought that struck the mind of the people after hearing the fire of gun was; "Oh! Some rich person must have died", (Nepuni 2010, p.91).

### DISPOSAL OF DEATH BODY

For the purpose of disposal of death bodies, *Poumai Nagas* treated natural deaths differently from unnatural deaths. For disposal of natural death, certain rituals were performed with due respect and honour. Generally, the death bodies are buried in a properly dug grave. Ngupani (2010) observed that, "To dispose of the death body, certain set of rites and rituals are to be performed for burial procedures in which the *Napao* played a vital role. It is the *Napao* who inaugurates digging the grave and then other male gender join especially relative and friends of the deceased person (p.111).

Like in the present days' funeral, a close friend or relative will narrate the life history of the deceased person by means of 'Dirges' (*Kulili*) in *Poumai Naga* dialect - recalling and remembering of life history). These *Kulili* are either in the form of speech or lamenting song. A close friend or relative will perform the *Kulili* and it usually mentions about the good deeds and achievements of the persons in his lifetime. Not everyone is well versed in *Kulili*. It is believed that if the *Kulili* is not performed well, it is a disgrace and death may come again to the family. Therefore, it is a must to properly perform the *Kulili*.

Salonii Poukai observed that, "After the *Kulili* is performed, gunshots are fired. For some instances, gunshots were fires which continue for two days if the deceased person is from a noble family. The cloths which are to be buried with the death body are sprinkled with water by the *Napao*. Then the clothing is cut with knife and the knife used for cutting those cloths is also buried with the death body in the same grave". (Interview with Salonii Poukai, 6.7.2017).

Once the procedures of performing *Kuliliis* over, certain rites are to be performed again by the responsible persons from the family. Such rites are generally performed by the eldest son of the deceased person or the closest male relative if the person does not have any son. About such rituals performance, S. Pini observed that, "The eldest son or the close relatives who dig the graves will take a bundle of thatch fire, move around the grave and throw the burnt pieces into the dug grave. Putting of the burning thatch fire signifies purification of the grave and also it is believed that it gives light and warmth to the dead man's soul because the grave is cold and dark for the soul to dwell" (Interview with S.Pini.19. 5. 2018).

As death happens to everyone regardless of rich or poor, when one died in other place, the

death body is taken to their native place for burial ceremony. A day of village *genna* is observed on the death of a man and woman of honour. Domesticated animals were slaughtered on funeral with the belief that the soul of the slaughtered animal will accompany the departed soul as it goes to join those who have gone before. Generally, some domesticated animals were also slaughtered for funeral. As per their belief the souls of the slaughtered cattle will accompany the departed soul. Hutton (1968), For a hunter, usually a dog is killed in order that its soul will guard him from the attacks of the soul of the beasts he killed while he was alive (p. 71.)

Personal belongings and items of the deceased persons are considered important and carefully collected once a person is declared death. Children's below 15 years of age were restricted to touch any such belongings and items of the deceased person. Such personal belongings and items were also supposed to be buried with the death body. P. L Maikho observed that, "Once the grave is ready; the *Napao* will bring thatch fire inside the grave before the coffin is lifted down. Personal important items such as Spear, Shield, Dao, Male Basket, Cloths, etc., are normally buried along with male corpse. In case of women, cotton, spinning and weaving implements, carrying basket, cloths iron staff, rain protection sheet, etc. are buried" (Interview with P.L.Maikho, 12.8.2017). For a king or a man of honour, a live rooster is usually buried within a cave like space dug along the side of the corpse with an air passage pipe projected above the ground. "They believed that at times crowing of the buried rooster is heard through the pipe" (Interview with S. Thaili, 23.6.2018). The *Poumai Nagas* believed that dead men continued to live another life with the materials that are buried with them. Shimray (1986) "the concept of *Nagas* heaven was that all the worldly riches, garments, weapons etc, would go to heaven along with the dead person and that they would meet all those who were already dead and would pass on news of their respective families when he/she met them and would be made some presentations which were sent by the living" (p.230).

When a child dies within five days of its birth, it is wrapped in cloths and put in an earthen pot and buried under the floor of living room without any special ceremony except the family observed *genna*. Such disposal of death body is called '*ngaih re*' meaning forgotten. Nepuni (2010) The grave is usually 5 feet in length and 2 feet in breadth. Flat stones tiles are of 2'x3'breadth and length with the thickness of 3 inches to place over the corpse. Generally, the number of piles to cover were around 6-8 pieces, (p.93). In the circumstances when stones were not available good quality of wooden planks were used. The dead bodies were laid with the head facing towards the east out of the four cardinal directions. The main reason for laying head towards the east is that since the sun rises in the east, so the body should receive the first light of the day. It is considered to be a good sign of new hope to see new life.

Once the death body is buried, *Napao* will cut some bitter plant, smash it and then wash his

hand with the bitter plant juice. Washing with the bitter plant juice signifies that no more of such death will happen in the family again and spirit of dead may not disturb nor sad memory lingers on in their minds. (Interview with S.Thaipei, 23 .7. 2018). After this ritual, the priest *Napao* comes back to the house of the deceased and cleans the hearth by removing the old stone oven. Then, he erects a new stone oven and sets a new fire in it. The family's cloths are flipped over the fire. Sha (1999), These acts of cleaning and sanctification signify the sanctification of the house so that dead may not occur again in the family (p.28).

*Genna* was observed for over certain periods of time and the family members of the deceased abstained from taking part in any social entertainment programmes and other festivities unless it is a cultural sanctioned rites and rituals related to death. L. Shiliru observed that; “A village *genna* is observed, which continues for 5 days for the bereaved family members irrespective of their age. From the day of the death, the family members of the deceased were not allowed to partake in any of the social activities till the completion of one year” (Interview with L. Shiliru 19.5. 2018).

#### **KOH (FAREWELL TO DEPARTED SOULS)**

With a unique way of belief in life after death, life after death is another form of life which the departed souls will be living in the village of deaths (*Thaimai Ngu*). Therefore, certain rituals called ‘*koh*’ (Bidding farewell to departed souls) is performed as a ritual ceremony to bid farewell to all the departed souls of the particular year. This ritual is performed once in a year particularly at the ending month of *Dohkhou* which falls in November/December. Until this month arrives, the bereaved families avoid from participation of any activities like festival, celebration or any entertainment. It is the time period where the families remain in lamentation and grief of the lost. On the day of *Koh*, relatives and friends of the deceased offer rice wine to the departed soul. And the villagers pay their last respect to the departed souls. While performing this farewell ceremony, every villager comes out of the house of that deceased in order to get away and free from all evil spirits. Then all the leftover food, rice-wine and water are thrown away. This signifies freeing the family from all impending sickness and deaths. It is believed that unless this ritual is performed the souls of the death persons continue to live with the family members. As such, food and rice beer are usually served for them on all the special occasions. Once the ritual is performed the souls are believed to have gone permanently to the land of death and therefore no food and drink are necessary to serve nor is any other ritual required to be performed.

## CONCLUSION

*Poumai Nagas* have a strong traditional religious belief and accordingly its traditional practices were strictly observed and followed since time immemorial till the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Religious rites and rituals with respect to death and its burial were deeply rooted to its nativity and not just only the events of observing *genna* by the villagers, but also it directs and gives meanings to various aspects of the society; its unique culture, traditional and religious belief systems and other practices. *Poumai Nagas* believed that physical death is not the real death but a journey to the land of soul called "*Thaimaingu*". Therefore, when someone died, proper rites, ritual and offerings were made for the living soul. Death also reminds the achievement of the individual while he/she is alive and it often brings relatives and friends closer. Today, with the advent of western culture and Christianity, they have slowly abandoned most of their old traditional religious beliefs and practices. Only a handful of elderly people who don't embrace Christianity continue to practice the old aged religious beliefs and practices.

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