Secondary Burial of the Chakpa Lois of Phayeng Village, Manipur, India.

Dr. Hoabijam Vokendro Singh

Assistant Professor in Anthropology, AITS, Rajiv Gandhi University,
Rono Hills, Doimukh, 791112, Arunachal Pradesh, India
Email id: vokensingh@gmail.com

Abstract

The Chakpa Lois of Phayeng village despite of a lot of influence from major communities still embrace their traditional death ritual by burning the body and picking up the bones by misubis and kept into a luphu and buried with due ritualistic observation.

Introduction

The people of Phayeng village is one of the important constituent groups of the Loi populations of Manipur which is located on the western side of Imphal at about 13 km from Imphal under the jurisdiction of Sekmai Constituency, Imphal, Manipur, India. They speak Sak (Lui) group of the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family (Grierson, 1967). The Lois are Mongoloids and are the caste group of Manipur. The Chakpa is a group of Loi. The people of Phayeng village are under this section of Loi. The community from their genesis has been strictly following their custom and tradition while the major Meitei population and the tribal population are influenced by Hinduism and Christinity respectively. In the present paper an attempt has been made to portray the secondary burial of the people.

Death Rituals among the Lois of Phayeng

A local physician (maiba) examines the pulse of the patient at the root of the thumb, at the sole and at the navel. If the pulse totally stops at these parts of the body, the patient is declared death. The dead body is then taken out of the house and is accompanied with the maiba whose finger tips are pressing on the navel of the dead body. Symphony music comprising of the playing of flute, pena recital (reciting with the rhythm of pena, a local musical instrument) and the drumming of the langdaibung (local musical drum) is being played while bringing out the corpse from inside the house. The carrying out of the body from inside the house is through the left side of the portico (mangsok) and on the right side of the courtyard (khangenpham). When the corpse is at the echum tapham (place at the courtyard where rain drops sliding from the roof strike), coins are offered to the dead body which indicates that the decease is now outside the realm of the living world. The dead body is then kept over a leaf of banana plant which is kept inside a newly constructed hut which is constructed at the right corner of the courtyard (khangenpham). The maiba after reciting the names of the upper past three generations of the deceased is then asked him (deceased) to go to the abode of land of death where his death ancestors live. On saying this, the maiba takes away his fingers from the navel of the death. The body is then bathed with water, cut the nails and dressed new clothes. A meal having seven or fourteen mouthful of cooked rice and meat (preferably pork or chicken) is assumed to serve to the decease. After this, the
body is laid down on a wooden platform of about one foot in height and is covered with three layers of cloth (pheijup maitha). Some goods which were used by the deceased in his life time were also put into the coffin along with a locally found particular plant which is classified based on the day of death. The corpse is then, made to bite a coin which is meant to use in the land of death. Now, the departed body and soul is ready for its last journey.

The crematorial procession begins with a spear and shield dance (yenpha khousa) by a son-in-law of the deceased family or by a clan member. An old man who carries a bow and arrow leads the procession. Just behind him follows a man who is in charge of a sacred thread (lang-ahingba) which acts as a symbol of bridge on which the body and soul of the deceased can cross over on any rivers, drains or trenches on the way to the crematorium. While taking the body to the crematorium, harmonious playing of flute, pena and drumming takes place.

Mode of Disposal of Death

Babies who do not complete three months are not burnt. If the decease is a male, the pyre consists of five layers of firewood and if it is a female, the pyre is six layered. To this pyre, the leader of the procession shoots an arrow which symbolizes the displacement of benevolent spirits. After taking the coffin once or thrice around the pyre in the clockwise direction, it is then placed over the pyre, the head pointing towards north or west. Then, the God of fire is worshipped with offerings and hymns. Some members of the family, relatives and friends of the decease go around the fire four or five times in the clockwise direction. This is known as mei kai bu (to go round the fire). When the fire starts burning, a near kin of the deceased throws coins into the fire. Before the body is totally burnt, it is cut into pieces by a spade and again burnt into ashes. When the flame in the fire diminishes, the son-in-law throws the thak-kan (pieces of clothes hang over the pyre tied to the tips of four bamboo poles of the four corners of the pyre) into the fire and five tongs (six tongs if the deceased is a female) are made out of the four bamboos erected at the four corners of the pyre. Meanwhile, the temporary hut at the courtyard of the decease's family is burnt. Meals are prepared with chicken curry by a close kin of the decease. A small earthen pot known as luphu is also arranged. The cooked rice and chicken curry with the luphu is carried by five old women (six if the decease is a female) and are accompanied with some men at the crematorium just as they hear the playing of the music at the crematorium which indicates that the burning is completed. The old women who are called misubi pick up the bones which are not burnt with the help of the tongs. This is called lu-khunba (lu means 'bone', khunba means 'to pick up'). The picked up bones are tied and arranged anthropomorphically with the help of non-starched thread/sacred thread (lang ahingba) and put into the luphu which is then covered with a special lid called kegam. The luphu which is a symbol of the head of the decease is decorated with non-starched threads in the form of hairs. Over the luphu, eyes, ears, nose etc. are designed with the help of crisp paper. Based on the sex of the decease, relevant dresses are put on it (luphu). The luphu is then carried away by a misubi on her back by using a cloth which is used in keeping babies on their mothers’ back (nahong) to a secluded burial site which is belonged to the particular clan of the decease. The incantation of ritual with the rhythm of the playing of pena, pasi (flute) and beating of langdaibung is performed at the site. A final meal having the same number of mouthful as was given earlier is served. This is the last phase of the funerary rite. Then, the ningol mawa (son-in-law) digs out a hole, the size of which is in proportional with the size of the luphu which is meant for secondary burial. The luphu is put into the hole and is covered with the dug out earth over which a stick is erected on which a rain shield (yempak) is hanged on.

Rite of Purification

After the cremation is over, the crematory ground is washed with water and the maiha draws seven
lines on the crematory ground with a knife by chanting hymns. This is known as mangthong thingba (the closing of the gate of death). People believed that if this rite of death ritual is not performed, death might be trailed in the family of the decease or in the locality soon.

All the participants in the funeral rites take bath into a river and then return to the family of the decease. There they are purified with the smoke of the leave of two plants khoiju (Plectranthus ternifolias) and leikham (Goniothalamus sesquipedalis). They are again purified with the leaves of tairel (Cedrella toona) by sprinkling water on their bodies by the ningol mawa. They are fed with Shingju- a vegetable salad mixing with the trunk of banana plant, salt, chilly, fermented fish etc. The male members drink rice beer. All the musical instruments are also purified with the mixture of an egg and yendem (Cycas pectinata).

The last rite of the funeral ritual is called kumon thouram which is observed on any days of the birth or death of the decease within a calendar year counting from the day of death. However, December to March is the preferential time of observance of the ritual. The ritualistic observation is carried out for two days and is meant to propitiate the departed soul. On the first day, all the relatives and friends of the decease are invited and pray to the village goddess and a feast is served. On the second day, music, wrestling competition and other festivities are organized by the family of the decease. The completion of the second day is the end of the kumon thouram.

Conclusion

It is seen that the Phayeng people believe in life after death and concept of spirit. The offering of coins to use to cross rivers and trenches shows that they believe in a land of death of spirits on the surface of the earth as well as outside the realm of earth. Besides, despite of strong forces of sanskritization that sweeps over the majority of the Meiteis, the Chakpa Loi people including the Phayeng Lois do not change their little tradition.

References

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