



## Gone but not Forgotten: Death Rituals among the Meiteis of Manipur

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study attempts to describe and analyse the death rituals of the Meitei people, a major ethnic group of Manipur, one of the north-eastern states of India. Observation and interview methods were employed for data collection during fieldwork from January to December 2016. There are five distinct stages in the death ritual of the Meitei people: funeral rites (cremation), Mangani Leihun, Lalna Thouram, Thagi Chak Pijaba (monthly food offering) and Kumon Phiroi (first death anniversary). These rituals not only mark the passage of one stage of life to another, express their social identity and belief system, but also build up social relationships and keep those relationships alive and functioning.*

### Introduction

What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten- raw, cooked or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned, or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of ways. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; it is always meaningful and expressive. (Huntington and Metcalf 1979:1)

Rituals are instrumental parts of every religion. A ritual behaviour is “religion in action” (Wallace 1966:102). For Turner (1968), a ritual is the concentration of custom, the place where society’s values, norms and deep knowledge of itself are reaffirmed and sometimes created. According to Durkheim (1995), collective representations, which are necessary for the existence of society, must be periodically strengthened and recharged. This is the function of a ritual. A ritual also exercises a profound influence or force over its performers. Rappaport (1999) also asserts that a ritual has creative functions in two different senses: not only it a ritual informs the participants of meanings, but it also, sometimes, transforms them or their surroundings. Douglas (2002) too, believes that a ritual creates a symbolic universe that unifies a society, simultaneously playing the role of maintaining the society’s order. Bell (2009) is also of the opinion that a ritual not only informs meanings but also

makes meanings.

A rite of passage is a ritual that marks the transition from one stage of life to another. The term 'rites of passage' is often used to refer to the 'life cycle' or 'life crisis' rituals which are associated with a change of status in the lives of individuals and groups. Rituals surrounding birth, initiation, marriage and death are typical examples of these life-cycle rituals. Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) tried to explain these rituals in his work 'Les Rites de passage' published in 1909. He thought of these rituals in much broader terms, as a universal structuring device of all human societies. Van Gennep used two parallel sets of terms; separation → transition → incorporation/reaggregation and preliminal → liminal → post liminal. He used these three stages to explain the movement from one state to another. "The essential purpose of these rituals is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (Gennep 1960:3). These rituals not only mark the change of the state/status of an individual or a group to the next but also develop group solidarity, because they show that they are part of something bigger. When an individual or group goes through one of these rituals, family members, group members, clan members, friends and relatives extend their concern and help.

Life does not go on at a uniform rate and human experience is composed of stages and life crises, such as birth, puberty, marriage, childbirth and death. In life, there are times when not much seems to happen and change and other periods when our lives undergo a drastic change, after which nothing is quite the same as before. For instance, the birth of a child or the death of a parent or a family member or a marriage etc. brings a drastic change to a person's life. These life events, changes of status are often marked by rituals. Turner (1969) sees the rites of passage as a movement from structure to anti-structure and back, once again to structure. He also emphasises the second, the liminal or transition stage. He coined the term 'communitas' to describe the unstructured, egalitarian, human relatedness which he saw as a typical character of the liminal stage of a rite of passage. A communitas is spontaneous, immediate and concrete relatedness, typical of bonds formed between people in the middle, liminal stage of a rite of passage. It is the ritual fusion of individuals into a collective identity during this transitional stage. Enclosure → metamorphosis/magnification → emergence is an alternative structure proposed by Bruce Lincoln to explain women's initiation rituals. Lincoln regards Van Gennep's and Turner's models of rites of passage are "essentially masculine, with less salience for women and therefore less universal than claimed" (Bowie 2000:172). For Lincoln (1991:6), "...ritual is a coherent set of symbolic actions that have a real transformative effect on individuals and social groups". According to him (1991:6), "...most rites of passage transform people, replacing old roles, statuses and identities with new ones. However, women's initiation rituals do something more. In this case, the cosmos itself transformed along with the initiand". Thus, life-cycle rituals are ceremonies or events that mark important transitional stages in an individual's life such as birth, initiation, marriage and death. These rites mark the passage of a person from one stage to another. Life-cycle rituals are found in every human society and in every religion although their relative importance and degree of elaboration of the rites may vary. Meitei society is not an exception. Religion plays a significant role in Meitei community's life-cycle rituals.

Meitei is a major ethnic group of Manipur, one of the north-eastern states of India in the eastern part of the country bordering Myanmar. Meitei people inhabit mostly in the central valley of the state. There are different opinions on the origin of the Meitei people. However, it is clear that a Meitei ethnic group was formed through the amalgamation of seven different principalities once settled in different parts of Manipur and migrants from different directions who have completely assimilated into the Meitei society (Manikchand 1988, Roy 1999, Kamei 2015). There are different religious groups among the Meitei: the Meitei indigenous religion (Sanamahi) followers, Meitei Hindus, Meitei Christians

and also Meitei Buddhists. An attempt has been made in this article to study the death rituals of the Meitei people focusing on those practices of the indigenous religion followers.

Death rituals are one of the important life-cycle rituals performed after the death of an individual in every society. They mark the passage of a person's life from this world to the other world, that of souls or rebirth or afterlife, according which people believe in. Perhaps it is one of the oldest rituals: according to Cohen (n.d.) death ritual is at least as old as our Neanderthal predecessors who lived in Europe and the Middle East and may even reach back to Peking man, almost one-half million years ago. Wallace (1966) also describes the ritual handling of the dead body by the Neanderthals. According to him, they buried their dead members in caves with great care. Grave goods like tools and ornaments were often placed with the body. Burial with tools may have been related to the belief that the dead individual requires those implements in the next life or for his/her journey to the other world. There are evidence of prehistoric burials with fossil pollens suggesting used of flowers by the mourners as a part of the mortuary ceremony. Animal bones and skulls found near many of the graves suggest the possibility of funerary feasts. Wallace described Cro Magnon implements manufactured from human bone: these objects may have been used in a magical ritual "to control, to secure the good will of, or to acquire the virtues of the departed..." (Wallace 1966: 228). A human specimen unearthed in the Zagros Mountains of north-eastern Iraq contained fossil pollen of prehistoric flowers. "Perhaps the mourners had covered the corpse with flowers as part of a mortuary ceremony. The flowers may have been symbolic of rebirth, an expression of magic by imitation" (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 336-337). Archaeological findings have revealed that even the early men possessed techniques of disposal of the dead. The archaeological records include the Neanderthal burials where animal bones and flint tools were put alongside corpses (Campbell 1992). In many cases "bodies were arranged along an east-west axis, perhaps a possible association with the rising or setting sun" (Campbell 1992:422).

Wilson (1954:239) put it concisely that the funeral prevented "madness", allowing the mourners to "express their grief and put it all behind them". Mandelbaum (1959) observed that death rituals among the Kota of south India bring people together at moments of crisis. It reminds them of their responsibilities to the dead, to the bereaved and to others in the society. He points to the cohesion of the immediate family at this time, as relatives console the mourners and give material aid. Other Kotas, and also non-Kotas who knew the deceased lend their presence and assistance, creating a wider integration. Physical death does not, all at once, convince people that a person has died. Images of her/him persist. Her/his connections to society are too strong to sever in a moment. The acknowledgement comes slowly. Death not only involves the extinction of the physical body, but also the blotting of social identity. When a person dies, the society loses in her/him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself. Ritual is a collective response to this attack (Hertz 1960). For Radcliff-Brown (1968), death rituals are the collective expressions of feeling appropriate to the situation. In this common display of emotion, individuals signal their commitment to each other and to the society itself. And thus, rituals function to affirm the social bond. Frazer (1976:113) also maintained that "the worship of the human death has been one of the commonest and most influential forms of natural religion, perhaps the commonest and most influential of all". Mortuary rituals promote the solidarity of the group. Huntington and Metcalf (1979:2) observed that,

*In all societies, regardless of whether their customs call for festive or restrained behaviour, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death and fundamental social and cultural values are revealed.*

Bloch and Parry (1982) believe that in many cultures, death is interpreted or understood to be a source of life and mortuary observances are therefore often permeated by symbols of rebirth and regeneration. Geertz (1973) also believes that death and its rituals not only reflect social values but are an important force in shaping them. Durkheim (1995) drew from ethnographic data on the mortuary customs of Australian Aborigines and believed that rituals, including mortuary observances had the primary effect of revigorating social cohesion and renewing common social values. Thus, death rituals are one of the oldest universal human behaviours with its multiple social and cultural significance expressed by the surviving members to a dead individual, and also enlighten the belief system of a cultural group.

## Death Rituals among the Meitei People

In every society, when an individual dies, family members, relatives, friends and neighbours respond in structured, patterned behavioural ways to death. The modes of treatment and disposal of the dead body are determined by cultural guidelines. It also prescribes specific behavioural patterns and a period of mourning for family members and close relatives. Like other life-cycle rituals, Meitei death ritual can also be discussed in three distinctive phases, those of separation → transition → incorporation. The first stage of separation is marked by the death of an individual, the separation of the soul from the body. The soul leaves the body and the individual is separated from the living world. Then the soul (*Thawai*) is in between the two worlds of the living and the dead. The soul is in this transition phase, it can neither return to the world of the living nor can it join that of the dead until proper rites are performed by the living members. These three distinctive phases affect the surviving members. After the death of an individual, the members are separated from death. The separation of a social relationship, loss of someone represents this first phase, a transition phase until proper rites are performed. During this transition phase, they have dietary restrictions, they do not take fish and meat symbolising their loss and grief; in some cases, particularly among the Meitei Hindus, close men members of the deceased's family shaved their heads expressing their loss. The whole *Sagei* (lineage group) is also considered ritually unclean<sup>1</sup> during this mourning period and its members abstain from making offerings to the household deities and taking a direct part in the religious ceremonies of the community. After performing the proper rites, the members are reintegrated into the society and household deities are sanctified.

Gennep (1960:148) noted the social status aspects of a mourning ritual saying, "the length of the period (of mourning) increases with the closeness of the social tie to the deceased and with the higher social standing of the dead person; if the dead man was a chief, the suspension affects the entire society". He also highlighted the fact that individuals are often considered to be composed of several components, each of which may have a different fate after death. The purpose of the destruction of the corpse whether through cremation, burial, decomposition etc. "is to separate the components, the various bodies and souls" (p. 164). A similar case is also observed among the Meitei people. The higher degree of ritual restrictions such as ritual impurity and dietary restrictions signifies closure relationship with the deceased. In Meitei traditional belief, the human body (*Hakchang*) is made up of five elements: Mei, Esing, Nungsit, Leipak and Atiya (fire, water, air, earth, and sky respectively), a living principle called *Thawai* (the soul) and *Thawai Mee* (the shadow of the soul). Death is the separation of the *Thawai* (soul) from its dwelling place, the *Hakchang* (body), and it is called *Nongkaba*, meaning going up to the *Nong* (sky) or *Lairamlen* (abode of the gods). When a person dies, her /his soul gets reunited as the scent of flower in the garden of the supreme almighty: this is called *Nongtaiba*, where

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1 The coming of a new member to a *Sagei* (birth) or the departure (death) of a member from a *Sagei* disturbs the normal ritual state and results in a state of ritual impurity.

Nong is the original abode of the soul and Taiba is a reunion. The body goes back to its original abode, to the place where it originates from, to the earth. The body is thus buried (after cremation) in the earth (*Leipak*): this is called *Leitaiba* from *Lei*-mother earth and *Taiba*-union. Thus, when an individual dies, all the elements that constitute the mortal body get united with the mother earth again and the soul goes up to its original abode where the supreme almighty dwells.

The Meitei people, except Meitei Christians who do not believe in rebirth, believe in the immortality and transmigration of the soul. Death is regarded as the separation of the soul from the body with a transmigration into a new body (Kulachandra 1967). After a person dies, her/his soul stays with the ancestors in the land of death where the supreme almighty lives: it is called *Lairamlan*, the abode of the gods. So, the Meitei people perform death rituals in order to give a right path to the *Lairamlan* and for the liberation of the departed soul. It is also performed to ensure that the departed soul gets a new body in a human birth in the case of natural deaths and to avoid reoccurring in the case of unnatural deaths such as suicides, children died during infancy, women died in childbirth etc. There is no concept of heaven and hell in Meitei indigenous religion. There is only the *Lairamlan*, the land of gods to where the soul goes after a person dies. The soul gets reborn as a human if the person had good deeds during her/his lifetime otherwise the soul gets reborn in 'lower forms of life' such as animals, insects etc. A slightly similar case is found among the Vietnamese people. Unlike in Buddhism, there is an absence of notions of karma, rebirth and salvation among the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese souls are believed to return to the realm of the ancestors following the performance of death rituals and because of their divine powers, continue to affect their descendant's lives (Phan 1993). However, there is the concept of *Swarga* (heaven) and *Narak* (hell) among the other groups, Hindus, Christians and Meitei Buddhists. Present-day death rituals of the Meiteis are different from those practiced once. It is well known that up to the advent of Hinduism, the dead was buried and a royal chronicle mentions the enactment by King Khagemba (1597-1692) of a rule that the dead was to be buried outside the enclosures of the houses (Bhagyachandra 1991).

The present-day death rituals of the Meiteis, except Meitei Christians, is a composite practice, a syncretism of indigenous Meitei religion practices and Hinduism. There are slight variations in the components, procedures and style of the rituals among the peoples who follow Hinduism and indigenous religion. The Meiteis who follow Buddhism perform their life-cycle rituals akin to those of the indigenous religion followers. There are five distinct stages in the death rituals both in Hindu and indigenous tradition: (i) funeral rites (cremation), (ii) *Mangani Leihun*, *Aasti Sanchaya* (floral offerings of the 5<sup>th</sup> day) in Meitei Hindu tradition, (iii) *Lalna Thouram*, *Shraddha* (ritual of departure) among the Meitei Hindus, (iv) *Thagi Chak Pijaba* (monthly food offering) and (v) *Kumon Phiroi* (first death anniversary). Meitei Christians have a separate structure of ritual in funeral and memorial service.

### **(i) Funeral Rites**

Normally funeral rites, the cremation of the dead is done on the day of the death. It is done on the next day if the death occurs at night or in some special cases such as waiting for the close kin's arrival or disputes about the death or death in distant places etc. In any case, cremation takes place as soon as the matter resolved. After the death of an individual, the corpse is taken by the close kins outside the house; the legs of the corpse look forward as if walking out at the southern side of the *Manggol* (open veranda) of the house on a mat covered by a white cloth. Then the body is bathed and dressed with white cloths, and then put in a coffin, also covered by a white cloth. Cremation takes usually place at a specific place or by the riverside, but today it is generally done at local crematoriums which are constructed for this purpose. Some fruits, a *Paana Tangga* (betel nut and leaves) and a coin are offered

by the Maiba (indigenous religious functionary) or Brahmin priest in the case of Meitei Hindus, at the cremation place. It is considered as buying that land for the ritual. The funeral pyre is made by piling up seven layers of firewood. It represents the seven clans (*Salais*) of Meitei. One Meitei Hindu said it also signifies the seven days of a week. Some informants, both Hinduism and Sanamahi followers reported that the number of layers of firewood may decrease or increase according to the need but their number should be odd. Four bamboo poles are erected on the side of the fuel logs a little away and a *Thakan* (canopy) is raised over the fuel logs. These four poles represent the lords *Thangjing*, *Marjing*, *Wangbren* and *Koubru*, the four guardian deities of the four directions; west, east, south and north respectively.

The corpse is carried around the funeral pyre three times in the clockwise direction by the family members and close kins. After the completion of the three rounds, the coffin is laid on the pyre. The Maiba or Brahmin priest offer fruits, flowers, rice (uncooked) etc., to the ancestors of the departed soul and pray so that the soul may merge with the ancestors and the supreme almighty. Then the Maiba or Brahmin priest invokes the god of fire and worship the deity by offering fruits and flowers with chants. The pyre is lit by the man next kin of the deceased. He also initiates the use of a *Humai* (a kind of fan) to increase the fire by blowing three times. A *humai* is made from an old Yangkok (bamboo crafted winnowing fan) by attaching a long bamboo handle. Men may stay until the body is completely consumed by fire but women, children and immediate family members leave after the fire has started. This ritual is accompanied by the funeral song performed by the *Pung Yeiba* and *Esei Sakpa* (ritual drummer and singer). The funeral song of *Sanamahi* followers speaks of the appeal made by the kinsmen and relatives to the departed soul for its return in the next life in the family. They also sing homage to the supreme almighty for the peaceful union and stay of the departed soul in the heavenly abode. Ritual singers of Meitei Hindus sing about the departed soul, her/his union with the deities in the Bengali and Sanskrit languages. The remains of the cremation are buried in a funeral ditch on the northern side of the pyre or the direction in which the corpse's head lay. Then the ditch is labelled and watered. After that, a handful of mustard seeds are sown upon it. It is for the purification of the funeral place. The place is considered sanctified when the seeds germinate and grow.

All the people who attended the cremation take a bath with sacred water sanctified with Tairel, Pungphai leaves, Tulsi leaves in the case of Meitei Hindus. They are also sanctified by someone carrying fire to keep away the evil spirits at the gates before entering their homes. Only then, they are permitted to enter the courtyard and change their wet clothes. Before the family mourners arrive home it is essential that all the cooking pots and utensils are cleaned and the whole house is purified by mopping it with water. The whole family and *Sagei* (lineage) except for small children have dietary restrictions until the *Lalna Thouram* or *Shraddha*. During this period they are prohibited from eating any kind of fish and meat, be it fresh, dry or fermented. They only take simple vegetarian food during these mourning days. It symbolises their condolences to the departed soul. In some cases, surviving family member(s) give up certain food items for their lifetime which was loved by the deceased member. It is a sign of remembrance, honour and sacrifice for the departed soul. I have come across informants, both men and women, who have given up certain food items such as bamboo shoot, rohu fish, egg, Yongchak (tree bean) etc. for their departed family member who loved those food items.

Meitei Christians bury their dead. They believe it is the proper way to reintegrate to the earth, to the place we all came from. Unlike other religious groups, they do not try to perform the funeral rite as soon as possible. They always wait for the close kin members, relatives, friends etc. before the burial. They always prefer to bury their dead unless they are objected by non-Christian members of their locality or village. The body is given a bath and dressed up well before putting into the coffin. The funeral service is conducted by a minister. Prayers are conducted for the departed soul and living

members. They also make offering prayers with flowers. After some days, generally in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> day, a memorial service is held where relatives, friends, locality members etc. are invited. This service is also conducted by a pastor or minister. Prayers are conducted for the departed soul and living members. Attending mass is served with food items by the host. The concerned family may also hold memorial services later according to their wish at their convenient time. But it is not considered obligatory.

### **(ii) Mangani Leihun**

This ritual is also known as Leihun in short among the Sanamahi and Buddhism followers and Aasti Sanchaya, shortly Aasti among the Meitei Hindus. It is observed on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of death. The family members and relatives go to the cremation place led by the ritual drummer and singers in this ritual. The Maiba picks up five small pieces of dirt from the Mangpham (burial place) and put on five circular plantain leaves. It is called *Thawai Mi Kouba*, calling back the soul of the deceased. Then the Maiba offers fruits, betel nut and leaves, ritual lamp, *Mengkruk* (scented crystal powder) and flowers to the departed soul. Family members and others also make their offerings with flowers to the burial place led by the men elder members. Those five pieces of dirt from the burial place signify the five elements of the soul of the dead. They are tied to a white cloth, which is tied to the *Thoubu's* (the host, chief mourner) neck and returns to the ritual place with others. After reaching the courtyard, the Maiba removes the cloth from the Thoubu and place it in the middle of the ritual place on a plantain leaf. Then, offerings are made by the family members, friends, relatives and others who attend the ritual. With this, the ritual of *Leihun Tamba* concludes. In Meitei Hindu tradition, the Brahmin priest picks up small remains of bone from the cremation instead of dirt and similar offerings are made. Those bone pieces are kept in a secure place after the ritual until they are dropped in one of the Hindu pilgrimage sites such as Nabadweep, Vrindavan, Puri, Haridwar etc. at a later date when the family members visit them. They give those bone fragments to other people, friends or relatives if they cannot visit those places.

### **(iii) Lalna Thouram or Shraddha**

The ritual of *Lalna Thouram* is also commonly known as *Sorat*, a derivative of the term *Shraddha*. This rite is the threshold of the death ritual. After the completion of this ritual, the soul is believed to ascend to the land of the dead. Dietary restrictions of the close surviving members are also lifted after this rite. The whole *Sagei* which was polluted (ritually) after the death is also sanctified and returns to the normal ritual status after this rite. This rite is observed on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the death in the case of Sanamahi and Buddhism followers while Meitei Hindus perform it on the 13<sup>th</sup> (for non-Brahmins) or 14<sup>th</sup> (for Brahmins) day. The ritual starts at morning around 8-9 am. Offerings are made to the supreme almighty and the departed soul by a Maiba or Brahmin priest in this morning session. The afternoon session of the ritual starts around 2 pm in the afternoon. The *Arangpham* (organiser of ritual items in rituals and ceremonies) sanctifies ritual performers (drummer and singers) and other attending mass before starting the ritual. It is called *Lei-Langba* (*Lei-Chandan* in Meitei Hindu tradition). It is for the formal reception and sanctification of the people for the ritual. The ritual performers (drummer and singers) and Maiba or Brahmin priest are offered cloth by the *Thoubu* (host) along with a betel nut and leaves to each of them. After this offering, the ritual singing begins. Like in any other rituals, ritual performers of the Sanamahi religion sing in the Manipuri language while those of Hinduism sing in the Bengali and Sanskrit languages. Offerings are also made to them by the host and those attending mass in cash and clothes. A feast with fish curry is served by the host in the night, which is called *Nga-Tangba*, tasting of fish curry. Locality elders, close kins and those who took part in the cremation are generally invited for this feast. This feast formally marks the end of the dietary restrictions of the

surviving members. In some cases, there is no afternoon session with ritual singing. In those cases, the ritual concludes with a feast after the proper offerings and prayers of the morning session.

#### ***(iv) Thagi Chak Pijaba***

*Thagi Chak Pijaba* literally means the monthly offering of food items. This rite is also known as *Thagi Utsav*, the monthly feast by the Meitei Hindus. It is observed on the day (lunar) of the death for each month until the ritual of *Kumon Phiroi* (first death anniversary) for one year. According to their capability and wish, a family can also perform this rite on alternate months instead of every month. Local elders, relatives and friends are invited for this feast. Cooked food items are prepared by a Meitei cook or Brahmin in the case of the Meitei Hindus are offered to the supreme almighty and the departed soul in this rite before serving to those attending mass. The food is made of vegetarian items. This rite is becoming uncommon both in rural and urban areas. However, it was found to be more common in the rural areas. Now the majority of the families observe it three or four times instead of observing every month of the year. One informant, a fifty-six years old man said, "It's not about what we can or can't afford. It's not about caring or not caring about his (his deceased father) soul either. We just feel it is ok to do what is acceptable without elaborating everything". The major theme of this ritual is to remember the departed soul and make offerings for the soul until the ritual of *Phiroi*, till the soul gets a new life.

#### ***(v) Kumon Phiroi***

This ritual is commonly known as *Phiroi*. It is observed on the day of the death anniversary following Meitei lunar calendar. A *Phambal* (platform) is made in the middle of the courtyard for this ritual. Offerings are made to this platform with fruits, flowers, betel nut and leaves, candle, scents sticks etc. by a Maiba or Brahmin priest. Family members and relatives of the deceased also make their offerings. After that, cooked food items with several dishes are offered to the *Phambal*. Then the rite of *Meira Katpa*, offering scented ritual fire, is observed by a Maiba or Brahmin priest. The ritual concludes with a feast with family members, relatives and all the others present at the ritual. In Meitei tradition, it is believed the human body gets to rest when the individual dies but its soul goes on. After the completion of one year, the departed soul gets a new birth to a new body. The ritual of *Kumon Phiroi* is an observation for the well-being and prosperity of the new birth by praying and offering to the supreme almighty. After this *Phiroi* ritual the family may also perform a ritual of a similar kind with the offering of food items in the coming years or in their convenient times. Those rituals are known as *Kumons*, death anniversaries. The rites of death anniversary are not obligatory and uncommon among the common people.

People continue to perform those rituals because they believe in them. They express people's belief about the existence of the soul and its passage after death. The death is not the end in their belief system. The soul leaves the body after a person dies and it goes on. People perform those rituals for the surviving soul. Surviving members also get some kind of solace after performing those necessary rituals for the departed soul. One man informant of sixty-two years said, "Every human being wants to live. No one wants to die. So, death cannot be the end. There has to be something after death. We perform those activities because we believe death is not the end". Those rituals are also part of their social identity. They make them who they are and express what they believe in. They give a sense of belongingness, a sense of identity to the people to their social group. There is no stark difference in the structure of those rituals among the urban and rural population in all religious groups, although they tend to be more elaborate in the rural area than in urban area.

Life-cycle rituals not only mark the passage of one's life from one stage to the next, but also hold the members of the Meitei society together. Family units, relatives, friends, neighbours, local members take part in these rituals and help the concerned family. These rituals unite the family units which otherwise are busy with their own lives. Family units, relatives, friends, neighbours, local members come together as a composite unit to take part and share the joy or grief of the concerned family during life-cycle rituals. It is considered very important to take part in these rituals : society expects that the family members, relatives, friends, neighbours, local members extend their active presence in these rituals and staying away from these rituals signifies the deepest disconnection of social ties between them. Disconnection of all social ties of a family with another family or families is expressed in terms of non-participation in these rituals. For instance, when the family of 'A' says, their family no longer takes part in the life-cycle rituals of family 'B', that means they are completely disconnected socially. All social ties have broken between them and they are now just like complete strangers who do not really care about one another even in the case of death. Thus, life-cycle rituals among the Meitei people not only mark the passage of one stage of life to another but also build up social relationships and keep those relationships alive and functioning.

## Conclusion

Rituals are instrumental parts of every religion. Life-cycle rituals are rituals which mark the transition from one stage of life to another. In life, there are times when not much seem to happen and change and other periods when our lives undergo a drastic change, after which nothing is quite the same as before. These life events, changes of status are often marked by rituals. Rituals surrounding birth, initiation, marriage and death are examples of these life-cycle rituals. Birth, marriage and death rituals are important life-cycle rituals performed by the Meitei people of Manipur. Like other life-cycle rituals, Meitei death ritual can also be discussed in three distinctive phases, those of separation → transition → incorporation. The Meitei people perform death rituals in order to give the departed soul a right path to the land of gods; they are also performed to ensure that the departed soul gets a new body in a human birth in the cases of natural deaths and to avoid reoccurring in the cases of unnatural deaths. There are five distinct stages in the death ritual of the Meiteis. They are funeral rites (cremation), *Mangani Leihun* (floral offering of the 5<sup>th</sup> day), *Lalna Thouram* (ritual of departure), *Thagi Chak Pijaba* (monthly food offering) and *Kumon Phiroyi* (first death anniversary). These rituals express people's belief such as the existence of the soul and its passage after death. Surviving members also get some kind of solace after performing those necessary rituals for the departed soul. Those rituals are also part of their social identity. They make them who they are and express what they believe in. Family units, relatives, friends, neighbours, local members take part in these rituals and help the concerned family. Thus, death rituals among the Meitei people not only mark the passage of one stage of life to another but also build up social relationships and keep those relationships alive and functioning.

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