

## DEATH AND DISPOSAL AMONG THE HILL KARBIS OF DEITHOR VILLAGE, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

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In human society there are certain events which occurs only once during the life time of an individual among which death is one. It is one of the indispensable crises events and is indispensable part in human life. Death is always associated with care and disposal of the corpse where various exotic customs and traditions are observed by different societies and communities of the world. The Karbis of the present study area also have some elaborate parochial belief system regarding the event of the death, rebirth as well care and disposal of the corpse. In this present endeavour an attempt has been made to study about the different facets of the event of death and disposal among the Hill Karbis in a rural context.

### INTRODUCTION

Death is an integral event in human life which means the end of life of an individual along with its bodily functions. It is one of the indispensable aspect of many traditions and organizations and is an important feature of every culture and civilization of the world. In common parlance death refers to the moment at which life ends. When death occurs to an individual it requires drawing precise conceptual boundaries between life and death. Life of an individual is defined on the basis of consciousness and when consciousness cease, a person is said to have died. Bloch (2007, 149) mentioned all human cultures attached a central place to interpreting the processes of human existence. Among these, reproduction and the representation of death,

with the associated practices which these representations entail are always of the great importance.

Death describes a situation where something has ceased to functioned and in human society it is life. This is followed by care of the dead as well as afterlife and disposal of it upon the onset of death. Disposal of human corpse is often defined as the practice of dealing with the dead and practises regarding corpse disposal, is integrally a religious part of every culture and civilization. There are many integral aspects of culture related with the death and disposal of corpses, which have intricate relation with the religion of that culture.

Death and disposal are integral element of each culture and it has a cavernous relation with religious belief system of the society. Elaborate ethnographic study of a particular community regarding the customs, rituals, taboos, etc., related with death and disposal were carried out by different scholars like Frazer (1870), Karsten (1905), Stack and Lyall (1908), Van Gennep (1960), Medhi (1980), Mills (1980), Bordoloi (1984), Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur and Saikia (1987), Playfair (1998), Gurdon (2002), Endle (2007), etc and they also focus on the corelation of religious beliefs and practices regarding death with social life. Death is one of the important crises period in human society which invariably occur during the lifecycle of an individual. It has an integral relation with religion, especially with rites and rituals through which the departed soul is appeased with the intervention of supernatural. In every society there are certain customs related to death as well as disposal of the corpse which reflect the parochial belief system associated with the event. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the pattern of disposal of death, integral religious rites and rituals among the Hill Karbis of Deithor Village, Karbi Anglong, Assam.

## **THE PEOPLE**

The Karbis mentioned as the Mikir in the Constitution Order of the Government of India, are one of the major indigenous communities in Northeast India and especially in the hill areas of Assam. They prefer to call themselves Karbi, and sometimes Arleng. The Karbis are the principal indigenous community in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam. Besides Karbi Anglong, they are also found in Dima Hasao District, Kamrup, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Biswanath Chariali Districts of Assam, Balijan circle of Papumpare District in Arunachal Pradesh, Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi and East Khasi Hills districts in Meghalaya, and Dimapur District in Nagaland. Most of the Karbis still practice

their traditional belief system, which is animistic in Karbi Hong–Hari called “Hemphu–Mukrang”, however, there are also Karbi Christians. The practitioners of traditional worship believe in reincarnation and honour the ancestors. The Karbis mainly speak their native language, i.e. The Karbi language and the Assamese language. However, Karbis are well versed in Assamese which they use as a lingua–franca to communicate with other indigenous Assamese communities. Many of the Plain Karbis even use Assamese as their mother tongue. The Karbis are a patrilineal society. They are composed of five major clans or kur. They are Engti (Lijang), Terang (Hanjang), Inghi (Ejang), Teron (Kronjang) and Timung (Tungjang) which are again divided into many sub–clans. These clans are exogamous, in other words, marriages between members of the same clan are not allowed because they consider these as brother and sister among themselves. But marriage between cousin (marriage between a man and the daughter of his mother’s brother) is highly favored and so is love marriage.

The Karbis celebrate many festivals. Among them Hacha–Kekan, Chojun, Rongker, Peng Karkli, Thoi Asor Rit Asor, Botor Kekur, are such festival held around the year and some of them at specific time of the year. Botor kekur is celebrated for the purpose to request to God to grace the earth with rain so that crops could be sown. Rongker is celebrated either on 5 January or on 5 February as per the convenience of the villager as a thanksgiving to god and asking their assurance to protect them from any evil harm that may happen to the whole village. The Chomangkan (also known as *thi–karbi*) is a festival unique to the Karbis. It is actually a ceremony performed by a family for the peace and the safe passage of the soul of family members who died recently or long ago and never to celebrate them again.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of the present study are to study about the–

- (i) Concept of death among the Karbis of the study area.
- (ii) The care and disposal of the corpse.
- (iii) The customs and rituals observe in relation with the dead.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is an empirical one and standard anthropological methods viz., non participant observation, household survey schedule, unstructured interview and

case studies were used during the field investigation. Data gathered from one individual/informant is cross checked with other individual/informant in order to verify the authenticity of the information.

## **CONCEPT OF DEATH AMONG THE KARBIS**

The Karbi concept of death depends primarily on three factors, namely, the immortality of the soul, life hereafter and rebirth. The dead, therefore, command as much respect as the living. The Karbis believe that the spirits of the dead have a world of their own and it is known as *Chom–Arong* or the city of the king of death. This *Chom–Arong* is supposed to be located on a hill known as *Lang Serve* lying beyond an inaccessible hill called Mukindong Anglong. Unless the spirits of the dead men are sanctified with the elaborate rituals of *Chomangkan*, meaning the death ceremony, they do not get admittance to the destined world of the spirits, namely, *Chom–Arong*. *Chomangkan* ceremony is, therefore, performed with a view to enabling the roaming spirits of the dead persons to enter into their proper abode. But *Chom–Arong* is not a resting place of the souls of the dead forever. It is simply a temporary resting place and the period of rest varies from spirit to spirit. The Karbis believe that the spirit of a dead man is reborn in the same family. When the rebirth in the same family is not a practicable proposition, the spirit might take its birth in a family belonging to the same clan. That is why, a new born child is very often named after a person of the family whose death took place quite some time ago of the birth of the child. The reason for repetitions of the same names among the members of the same family may be ascribed to this.

It is believed that in the bygone days there had been only a very thin barrier between the dead and the living and the spirits of the dead could pay visits to their relative at their will in the shape of shadows or images called *Arjan*. According to an anecdote prevalent in the Karbi society, this bond of contact was snapped for good owing to the lack of proper mannerism and understanding on the part of a daughter-in-law of a particular family.

## **CONCEPT OF SOUL AND SPIRIT**

Ancestor spirit or *tirim* plays an important role in traditional Karbi belief system and they are propitiated in regular intervals. Beginning with the symbolic offering prayer known as *Chamburukso bar kipi* (alcohol offering) and the private ritual offering of feasts called *tirim kachinduk* (ancestor veneration) to the most elaborately organized

*chojun* (ancestor eat–drink), Karbis continue to invoke their ancestor spirit since time long past. Because Karbis maintain strong belief that ancestor spirit takes active part in the lives of the living descendents and in order to continue receiving their blessings, they must be duly propitiated by way of arranging elaborate regular feasts to which immediate kith and kin from both the male and female lineages are compulsory invited and sumptuously treated.

### **THE CARE OF THE CORPSE**

Death can also be described in many ways. It has also been define that departure of soul from the body is death. Death means when a person becomes breathless or lifeless that he is declare as death. It is also believe that the body dies but the soul lives on as the soul in immortal. People believe that the body dies but the soul is unseen that leaves the human body once it dies and return again in another human form within the same clan which is being considered as rebirth by the Karbi people. It is also believed by the Karbi people that there are two kinds of death as given below:–

- (i) *Thi Kungri* (natural death)
- (ii) *Thi kapalangno* (Unnatural or premature death)

According to the traditional of the Karbi community the death caused by disease or old aged is treated as normal or natural death called *Thi Kungri* in Karbi. The death caused by leprosy, drowning in water, suicide, burnt by fire and accidents, killed by animal are treated us unnatural death called *Thi Kapalangno*. However such kind of death is needed to be purification after his or her death. It is believed that a man after his/her death his/her death goes to *Chomarong* (Heaven/other world). So therefore death is a way to other world.

In earlier days the Karbis of Langthat village didn't have the rules to bury or burn their dead one. When death occurs the corpse used to keep at house for relatives and neighbours to pay homage to departed soul and to sympathize the bereaved family. After that they carry the corpse to jungle and do the last rite. Knowing that a member will die soon the experienced family members prepares them psychologically and materially. Kith and kin from both within and outside the village are informed for the last sight and for necessary help and guidance. As soon as death occurs the members of the family are loudly wailing. The message is sent to the family members and relatives to participate in the last rite. Generally, when someone dies, the villagers

suspend their works immediately for the day and throng to pay homage to the departed soul and to sympathize the bereaved family.

In case of death occurs they gather the corpse clothes and things in a room. After that the corpse is taken out of the house and placed on *pira* (kind of low stool) and tonsure the corpse hairs and bathed and then a new pair of cloths is brought for corpse to wear. The corpse is laid down and kept in a separate room for about three days so that the relatives and neighbors can pay the last homage. During the entire time, some old women known as *charhepi* keeps on singing some songs because they believe that this can lead the deceased soul towards heaven. They keep on singing day and night until the corpse was taken to the cremation ground. The family members & relatives of the corpse used to give the special foods & rice beer to the corpse for the last time and used to put *tamul-paan* (betel nuts and leaf) upon the corpse to pay homage. The entire rituals are performed by the *charhepi*.

## DISPOSAL OF THE CORPSE

In human society the attitude of death is reflected in the way funeral ceremonies are carried out. In Karbi society after the death of an individual the corpse is used to carry on a *changi* (bamboo bier) on the shoulders of the men from its family and relatives upto cremation ground, they take three rounds of the pyre, after that the corpse used to place upon pyre facing the head towards east and feet towards west. The family members of the corpse have to take *jura* (a lump of wood meant to ignite fire) and ignite the pyre. When the corpse got half burned, all the people present there put sticks and wood in the fire saying *dam pamenon*, which means to leave peacefully. After coming from the cremation ground, they have used to take rice and tulsi leaves as per their traditional purification rituals before entering the deceased home.

The person who died in an accident are termed as *akhusbi* that means they are not a symbol of happiness and are impure so they are not cremated, on the contrary they are buried in the ground or placed in a grave. There is a different disposal ground for accidentally dead ones, and that is generally located on the riverside or stream side only. After the death of the person, their relatives and the priests (Deori) go to the disposal ground and collect the ashes (*Asthi*) and perform some rituals and make it pure and burn out the ashes. Afterwards, the dead ones accepted to be pure. Besides, the pregnant women who died are not cremated like the others; rather customarily they are buried in a grave. If the women had a dead foetus of eight

months/ nine months in her womb, then the same is also taken out and placed near by its mother's grave. The unborn dead foetus is also believed to be impure and have to rescue. After their deaths, they are taken to the burial places as soon as possible. They are not allowed to stay long in their residential units.

The Karbis believe that *Thireng Wangreng* (gateway between earth and *chom arong*) visits *chom arong* (village of *Tirim* meant for dead people) frequently. In the chomangkan ceremony, while making offerings to the dead, frantic calls made to the soul in heaven to come down to earth to receive the offerings. *Wangrengs* held in south and when his activities were described with great gusto, the people think that the soul has received the offer because *Thirang wangreng* is the only link between heaven and earth.

The chomangkan ceremonies are of three types, harne, langtuk, and kanphlaphla. Of the three, the harne is the highest and the langtuk stand in the middle. The kanphlaphla is an ordinary one people who can afford are entitled to the highest type of the chomangkan. It is actually a ceremony performed by a family for the peace and the safe passage of the soul of family members who died recently or long ago and never to celebrate them again.

The inhabitants of Langthat Sarthe Teron village have so far followed only the kanphlaphla ceremony. As the ceremony is a very costly and important affair, according to the head priest of the Langthat Sarthe Teron village said that the people could witness only a few chomangkan ceremonies in the village. As all the inhabitants of Langthat Sarthe Teron village are basically agriculturist, they are not wealthy to perform the Langthat and Harne chomangkan. The prevalent form of chomangkan is the kanphlaphla.

## CONCLUSION

From the present study it has been found that death and integral mortuary rituals play a very significant role among the Karbis of Deithor village. They have a strong traditional belief. Their socio-religious practices show all the ingredient of their tradition, which are strongly and strictly practiced irrespective of the modern influences on the other parts of their life. Death ritual is one of their traditional rituals, which is yet untouched by the modern forces. The main notion behind celebration of death rituals is to appease the dead and the cause attributed for his/her death. The first thing being observed is that participation to rituals itself mean for sharing of sorrow and happiness. The participation of people gives the deceased

family strength and emotional support. It is through the feast given to the villagers they try to communicate the deceased. They were also seen worshipping the dead ones at regular intervals at their family level.

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