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# THE DISPOSAL METHOD OF THE DEAD IN TUENSANG VILLAGE, NAGALAND

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**Abstract:** Every society disposes of the dead with great care and respect since ancient times. It is carried out with conscious effort and solemnity. Different communities follow different ways of disposing of the dead according to their cultural practices and philosophical beliefs. This paper examines the method of disposal of the deceased in Tuensang village which is inhabited by the Chang Nagas. Before their conversion to Christianity, the Changs practiced different methods of disposing of the dead, one of which involves a secondary skull burial in rock shelters. However, after embracing Christianity most of their cultural practices have been given up by them.

**Keywords:** Tuensang Village, Chang Nagas, Secondary Skull Burial

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## Introduction

Birth and death are part of human life and different communities have different ways of celebrating and mourning. As much as a new life is welcomed with great joy, the loss of life is lamented with sorrow. The custom of disposal of the dead, be it simple or complex is a characteristic of human society (Ucko :1969: 262-80). The human remains in different forms, big or small, direct or indirect evidence becomes a feature in the landscape. Human burials are found in varied

settings and are one of the most frequently encountered classes of cultural features (Binford :1971: 6-29). Archaeologists have uncovered human remains of the past belonging to different spaces and time and the material remains have been examined to understand the past. Studies on mortuary practices or burial customs were also carried out to understand the social dimensions, philosophical or religious ideas and belief system of a community (Brown 1971, Binford 1971, Carl 1995).

It is proposed to examine the methods of disposal of the dead of the Changs in Tuensang village, Tuensang district, Nagaland. The process involving secondary burial of skulls in rock shelters and the rites and rituals associated with it is the primary focus. The deposit of skulls in the rock shelters was particularly investigated and recorded from the village elders, who witnessed the process or got first-hand information from their elders. The social setup and philosophical beliefs of the Changs have also been examined.

### Study Area

Tuensang Village is in Tuensang district of Nagaland and is about five kms away from the district headquarters, Tuensang. According to the 2011 census, the village has a total population of 8,974 people, out of which the 4,643 are males while the female number 4,331. There are about 1,513 houses in Tuensang village. The village belongs to the Chang tribe of Nagaland. The Changs are a patriarchal and patrilineal society. They are divided into a number of clans. They did not have any written record of their past till the coming of the British in the early twentieth century but they have a rich oral tradition. According to this oral tradition of Tuensang village, the Changs emerged or first settled at a place called Chansang. From there, they migrated to Sangyu, then Sangpheyu and on to Tuensang village. The Changs like the rest of the Nagas established and settled in a number of villages, which are usually on the hilltops.

Tuensang village has an interesting and unique history of village formation. The village came into existence only after the coming of Christianity. In January 1979, the Tuensang Village Citizens Union was formed comprising of four villages – Chongpho, Pilashi, Lomou and Kangshou. They are also called *C khel*, *P khel*, *L khel* and *K khel* respectively. Prior to that, all the villages were independent of each other and functioned as separate villages. However, they agreed to unite under one administration and one church. Now all the four villages have come under the aegis of the

Tuensang Village Citizens Union, consisting of the President and his colleagues, who look after the affairs and welfare of the village. However, each village has a separate Village Chairman and *Goanburas* (village headman) to assist the Union and also function as an autonomous village council within their individual village. Each village has its own cultivable fields and demarcated reserved forest areas. Tuensang village is inhabited by various clans. The Kangshou, Oungh, Lomou and Chongpho-Haongang are the major clans. There are other sub-clans too.

One of the striking features of Tuensang village is the pile of skulls that are found in the rock shelters on the outskirts of the village. Nagas being considered head-hunters in the olden days and the Changs being no exception, the first thought that may come to the mind of those who encounter the skulls could be that these were the heads of the enemies of the erstwhile head-hunting days. However, the skulls found in the rock shelters at Tuensang village are the skulls of those who died a natural death.

The Changs of Tuensang village had different methods of disposal of the dead. Those who died a natural death and those in an unnatural way were disposed of differently. One of the methods of disposing of the dead is interesting and described in detail here. This method of disposing of the dead is no longer practiced in the village but the skulls are still there in the rock shelters and the people who were a part of the forsaken method of disposing of the dead are still alive recounting the different aspects of the ritual. The elders of the village were interviewed to get a detailed account of the process. The rock shelters which are located on the outskirts of the village were explored and surveyed.

### Methods of Disposal of the Deceased

The Changs practiced both platform exposure and burial of the dead. For platform exposure, the body was wrapped in cloth and mat and exposed on a *machang*, a raised bamboo platform, on the outskirts of the village. Fire was lit below to

smoke dry the body. The Changs seems to have learned the exposure method from the Aos and Konyak (Kumar 1998). The burial method was their traditional practice and the dead body was wrapped either in cloth, mat or put in a wooden coffin and placed in a grave, dug inside the kitchen of their house.

Tuensang village followed a peculiar method of disposing of the deceased till about half a century ago. After they embraced Christianity, many of their cultural practices including disposing of the dead were altered. Prior to their conversion to Christianity, when a person died, the body was buried inside the kitchen and the flesh was left to decay. When the body had decayed, it was dug out and the skull was removed from the body and kept in the clan's rock shelter where all the skulls of a clan were kept together.

When a person died, the oldest male member of the clan known as *Paoshipou* initiated the funerary rites and demarcated the area for burial inside the kitchen of the deceased's house. Then the other male members of the family helped in digging the grave and burying the dead body. The grave was hardly a meter deep and filled with earth and levelled. On top of it, a fire was lit, usually by the eldest male of the family. In order to let the body decay faster, plenty of firewood was burnt which was fetched and brought by the family members from the jungle. The body was kept buried there for about a week, after which it was dug out. The male members helped in digging out the body but cleaning was done by the womenfolk. The oldest paternal aunt called *Anye*, with the assistance of the other women, cleaned the body thoroughly and removed all the skin and flesh with a sharp bamboo knife and cleansed it with a bark of a tree locally known as *khuakphu*, which is of a soapy nature. After that, the skull was detached from the body. Then the skull was carried by the oldest paternal aunt, accompanied by the other women, to the clan's rock shelter and kept alongside the other clan members' skulls. While taking the skull to the rock shelter, they used to cry out aloud calling the names of their deceased

forefathers and entreating them to take care of the newcomer. The rest of the bones were buried again inside the kitchen. After that, depending on the status of the family, either a chicken or a pig was killed and a feast was prepared. The innards were cooked and thinly sliced ginger was put and offered, first to the deceased. The rest of the meat was cooked and shared amongst the family members and neighbours. A special package was made for the woman who had detached the skull from the body and carried to the rock shelter. The feast was the last rite for the deceased and it was believed that the soul departed after that and the deceased person's name was never called out again or addressed to.

In the olden days the clansmen used to erect a memorial of the deceased on the outskirts of the village by the side of the main road. The memorial was a stand made of bamboo where all the belongings of the deceased were hung. Food items such as rice, salt, chilly, rice beer, seeds etc., were also kept either in small baskets or wrapped in banana leaves. The memorial was erected on the first day and the offerings were given on the second day. Food prepared by the family was kept beside the grave. It was done till the final death ceremony was performed. It was believed that the dead man's soul visited the family for about a year till the last ceremony was performed (Kumar 1998).

The method of disposal in the case of accidental death was different from that for a normal death. Those who died an abnormal death were tabooed and were just buried and the skull was also not taken out. If a person died by falling off a tree or cliff, drowning, being killed by animals, etc., the dead body was not allowed to be brought inside the village. Taboo was observed for such deaths. Only the family members would go to the spot and bury the body outside the village. Women who died during delivery were just buried inside the kitchen by their husband assisted only by a few close family members. After the burial, the husband would go and stay in the field for three days and comes back discarding

all the old clothes. During his stay in the field, the family members would keep rice beer and food saying, 'we are keeping food here' without looking or talking. Those who died of diseases such as leprosy were buried in an isolated place. Deaths such as those mentioned above were tabooed and people did not participate in their burial. A number of rituals were performed by the surviving family members to prevent such death within the family in the future.

### Skull Rock Shelters

The skulls were kept according to their clan in separate rock shelters. There are four such rock shelters in Tuensang village belonging to the (i) Kangshou clan, (ii) Lomou clan, (iii) Oung clan and (iv) Chongpho-Haongang Clans. At present the Kangshou clan's rock shelter is covered by a landslide and the Chongpho-Haongang clan's rock shelter was destroyed while constructing an approach road to the village, so none of the skulls from this rock shelter are preserved. The skulls of the Lomou clan and Oung clan are still there in the rock shelters but they also seemed to be disturbed by human activities (Fig.4.1).

After performing the rites and rituals and detaching the skull from the body, the skulls were brought to the respective clan rock shelter. The skulls were kept together in the clan's rock shelter as it is their belief that way they would stay together as clansmen throughout eternity. In all the rock shelters, the skulls were kept in two separate rows according to their conduct of deeds while they were alive. On one side, the skulls of the upright and law-abiding citizens were kept and on the other side, those who flouted the laws of the village. All four rock shelters are located on the slope of the eastern side of the village facing the Küyang Kongh Mountain.

### Discussion

The practice of burying the dead body inside the kitchen was stopped about half a century ago when they realised that the practice was unhealthy. According to the villagers, the

mortality rate was very high in those days but after they stopped the practice, people's longevity increased. Christianity and the introduction of modern education brought a lot of changes in their lives and they adopted many new traditions. Nowadays in Tuensang village every *khel* has its own cemetery and whenever a member dies they bury the dead body in their cemetery after performing the Christian rites and rituals.

Change in the religious belief of the people led to a considerable change in other aspects of their cultural practices. Their perception of the soul and afterlife changed after conversion to Christianity. Belief in the existence of soul and life after death continued but in a totally different dimension. Thus the mortuary practices subsequently changed.

It was observed in Tuensang village that social bonds and cultural values are strongly adhered to even in death. The secondary burial of individual skulls with the rest of the clansmen in their respective rock shelters indicates their strong social bond and the desire to maintain cohesion even beyond death. Likewise, taboos are imposed when undesirable events occur within society, including unnatural death. People who die of unnatural death are not allowed to be buried within the clan's domain but were buried elsewhere. Maybe it was to maintain the sanctity of the community and to ward off any unpleasant happenings in the community in the days to come. The different forms of disposal of dead shows their fears and their determination to bring to a halt abnormal death.

When they were following the old method of disposing of the dead, the body was buried inside the kitchen where most of the family activities took place. The family members of the deceased had to carry out their activities while the body was still decomposing in the kitchen. It was their strong belief system and cultural practice that enabled them to go through such a gruelling situation. It was believed that the love they have for the deceased should enable them to bear the stench. It exhibits the close-knitted family ties and the love and respect they had for each other.



Fig. 4.1: Skull Rock Shelters

## Conclusion

Perhaps the skull was given more importance because the Changs believe that the head possesses special magical power and fertility power (Kumar 1998). They believe that physical death is not the end of a person's life but there is life after death where the soul continues to exist. They also believe that after death the souls go to or tread the *yem lam*, which is the dead people's road. According to their traditional belief, the future world lies in the underground called *yembukaodak*, the abode of the dead. And that was one of the reasons why they took great care in performing the funerary rites, kept grave goods and offered food to the deceased to provide a smooth passage to the other world. The practice and importance of secondary burials accorded to the deceased could have been to create a collective memory or to maintain cohesion of a social group as posited by Marion Benz.

With the change in time the mode of disposal of the deceased has changed in Tuensang village but their old traditional method still lingers in the memory of the people very vividly. The skull rock shelters stand as a memory and tangible heritage of their past cultural practice. However, the intangible heritage associated with the skull rock shelters are fast vanishing. Before the people with the age-old knowledge of such cultural practices perish it is important to document them. The various methods of disposing the dead in Tuensang village can perhaps aid as a medium in

understanding archaeological mortuary practices.

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