



RITUALS OF DEATH AND DISPOSAL AMONG THE KARBI TRIBE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY.

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ABSTRACT Assam has the largest number of tribes within their variety in tradition, culture, attire and exotic way of life. Most tribes have their own Religion and languages. Some of their traditions are also unique and lively. The Karbis' are one of the oldest indigenous and dominant tribal groups in Assam. The Karbis' have their distinctive religious faith and practices. There is no other ritual in Karabi society that compares to the observances of the death ceremony. It is the priciest and most elaborate ceremony, in which a great number of people participated either directly or indirectly throughout the entire duration. Therefore, the present research study is a holistic attempt to know about the traditional religious rituals of death and disposal among the Karbi tribe of Assam.

KEYWORDS : Rituals, Indigenous Tradition, Culture, religion, Belief and practices.

INTRODUCTION:

Assam has the largest number of tribes within their variety in tradition, culture, dress and exotic way of life. Most tribes have their own religion and languages. Some of their traditions are also unique and lively¹. The Karbis' are one of the oldest indigenous and dominant tribal groups in Assam. They are mainly inhabited in the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam, but they are also found in the some others in the areas include Kamrup(M), Hojai, Morigaon, Nagoan, Golaghat, Karimganj, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Biswanath Chariali districts. The Karbis belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group. The Karbis' have their own distinctive religious faith and practices. There is no particular name given to the Karbi religion. The Karbi believed in the immortality of the soul and were ancestor worshipers for the appeasement of the deities and ancestors. The Karbis' observe many religious rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of pigs, birds and use of rice beer are indispensable. In addition, they believed in witchcraft and black magic. Their religious perception and practice have a deep impact on their daily livelihood activities, socio-cultural, socio-political, as well as socio-economic life. However, in the recent years, due to effects of different cultures and religious groups, especially Christianity and Hinduism, marked changes have occurred in their traditional religious practices. Therefore, the present research study is a holistic attempt to realize the Karbis' indigenous religious belief and practices, especially the death and disposal rituals of the Karbis' of Nalapara Village, Kamrup district, Assam.

OBJECTIVES:

The following primary objectives are attempted to be highlighted in this paper-

1. To know about the indigenous concept of death among the Karbis of the study area.
2. To find out the death and disposal rituals and practices of the Karbis'.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study has been done on the basis of empirical fieldwork among the Karbis' of Nalapara Village, Kamrup district, Assam. The studied village was one of the earliest settlements of the Karbi people. Various religious rituals, sacred rituals, death and birth rituals etc., are practices in their own indigenous way. To have a total understanding of the problem standard anthropological methods viz., survey schedule, personal interviews, case studies and observation methods were used to collect the necessary primary data. Data on their traditional religious belief and practices, as well as concept of death and death rituals were gathered in depth through interviews and depth group discussions with the elderly, the priest, and knowledgeable people. However, the secondary data were collected from various relevant books, journal research papers and newspaper articles, websites to enrich the paper.

Study Area And Sample:

The present study was conducted in Nalapara village situated in the Baisistha area of Kamrup District, Assam. The village is situated in the southern direction of Guwahati City. It is about 20km away from the heart of Guwahati metropolis. A total of 51 households were covered during this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The Karbis have their own religious faith and practices. There is no particular name given to Karbi religion. They called themselves as "*Hemphu Aso*" (children of *Hemphu*). The Karbi believed in the existence of soul and they are ancestors' worshiper. They propitiate the ancestors' spirits in any important occasion. Further they perform rituals known as "*Tirim Kangduk* and *Sar Anthok*" to appease and obtained the blessing from the ancestors spirits. The Karbis believed that every objects and natural phenomena has a spirits or deity. They performed rituals to appease the deities and ward of the evil effects of the said spirits and deities². The Karbis have no idols, temples or shrines but they do worship the spirits of each particular space, area or territories called '*Longri Arnam*' (territorial deities), which in Assamese in known as *than* (sacred place or groves). As animists, they believe that their surrounding is filled with many unseen spirits, some friendly and some angry. Animal sacrifice is an essential part of Karbi ritual performances, and the fowl is mainly preferred for sacrifice, while other animals include hen, pigeon, pig, goat and duck. Apart from animals, egg, rice, rice powder, the young stem of bamboo, leaves of banana, holy basil, etc. are essential ingredients of Karbi worships³.

The Karbi conception of death depends primarily on three factors, videlicet the immortality of the soul, life henceforth and revitalization. The dead, thus command as important respect as the living. The Karbis believe that the spirit of the dead have a world of their own and it's known as *Chom-Arong* or *Yama-Arong*, which literally means the megacity of *Yama* (the king of death). This *Chom-Arong* or *Yama-Arong* is supposed to be located on a hill known as *Lang Serve* lying beyond an inapproachable hill called *Mukindan-Anglong*. Unless the spirit of the dead men are sanctified with the elaborate rituals of death form called *Chomangkan*, they don't get entrance to the fated world of the spirits videlicet *Chom-Arong* or *Yama-Arong*.

In Karbi society of Nalapara village after the death of an individual the dead body is bathed and rested on a bamboo mat in courtyard. The necessary dresses and clothes are given by the family to cover the dead body. A special prepared rice and curry food (*Anjam*) are prepared by a woman known as *Uchepi* near the dead body to be offered the deceased one at cremation ground (*Tipit*). The dead body is kept in the house to allow relatives and kin members to pay their last respects to the departed. Then the villagers prepared a *changi* (bamboo bier) to carry on the dead body on the shoulders up to 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 home⁴.

The Karbis of Nalapara village, begins perform of funeral rites with the performance of *Ruh-Kehum* (bringing back to the soul from the cremation ground to the house of deceased family). This ceremony is performed first day after death occurs. This rites started a procession

headed by *Duihudi* (master drummer) with the deceased family members, relatives and other village members accompanied by the *Uchepi* starts from the house to cremation ground (*Tipit*). The drum beating on the occasion of the procession are quite grave and rhythmic. After entering the cremation ground *Uchepi* prepared special rice and curry food (*Anjam*) to offered the deceased one at cremation ground (*Tipit*). After completion of cooking, a banana leaf is placed on the ground with *Anjam* near the cremation place. *Uchepi* then instructs the departed soul through his singing that "the food stuff is ready for you and you may have it and go to your destination, and we will also return home". The relatives of the deceased present there also offered betel nut and leaves along with cash to the deceased near *Anjam*. This system is called *Banta* in karbi. When the ceremonial offering of *Anjam* is completed two karbi youth in their traditional dresses start dancing accompanied by *duihudi* by drum beating. Along with the completion of the dance the function at the ceremonial grounds come to an end.

The second day of the *Chomangkan* may be regarded as a day of rest, and no major activities were performed. In order to burn the deceased's effigy in the early hours of the fourth day, a funeral pyre known as *Therihem Kim* will need to be built on this day at the cremation ground. The youths perform *kanso pado* (the last little dance) at night.

Among the karbis, the observance of death rituals is especially significant on the third day. The male members of the deceased family members will go to a bamboo field very early in the morning with a *duihuti* to gather five numbers of bamboo to be fixed at the *langtuk* (the well). The bamboos are placed one at the centre of the courtyard and the other four at each of the four corners. The fundamental idea behind planting bamboos in the *langtuk* is to provide a garden of bamboos for the deceased to utilise in the other world. The spirit might also use *langtuk* in other worlds to go fishing. Next, the entire surface of the *langtuk* has to be covered with a piece of white cloth. This fabric has a large hole in it through which other offerings and animals that have been sacrificed are dropped to the bottom. At the *Chomangkan* grounds, the meats of the sacrificial animals and birds are cooked and consumed.

The purifying rite known as the *nonker* is done on the fourth day of the death. Family members of the host are regarded as impure throughout the death ceremony observances. They are unable to work in their field or sit down to eat with others until the *nonker* performs. The courtyards and inside rooms of the house are not swept at all during the entire ceremony. The task of purifying the house's courtyards and rooms by sweeping and sprinkling water on everything else falls to *Engijir Arlo*. Members of the homes are deemed pure as soon as the purifying ceremony is finished, and they are free to sit and eat with others. With this, the highly planned and executed funeral ceremony comes to a conclusion.

CONCLUSION:

There is no other ritual in Karabi society that compares to the observances of the death ceremony. It is the priciest and most elaborate ceremony, in which a great number of people participated either directly or indirectly throughout the entire duration. The death and funeral rites are based on their traditional religious beliefs, which affirm the existence of a dead kingdom, the immorality of the soul, and the journey of death to its final resting place.

The departed must be given their worldly belongings in order for them to live a peaceful and prosperous life in another world. In other words, this ritual can be considered an ancestor worship ritual.

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