



Child Birth Rituals Among Ngalongs (Western Bhutan).

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the beliefs, practices and ritual surrounding the birth of the child amongst Ngalong people of western Bhutan. The Ngalop are people of Tibetan origin who migrated to Bhutan as early as the ninth century. Ngalops are often simply identified as Bhutanese. In Bhutan childbirth is a very important occasion that is intertwined with their religious beliefs, notions of reincarnation, and the ritual surrounding death and birth. This is reflected in their fertility rituals and phallic symbols seen throughout the landscape. In rural Bhutan, babies are traditionally delivered at home and mothers are given home remedies to regain their strength. Rituals are performed to lessen the danger and cleanse the impurities associated with birth. This paper briefly discusses some of the traditional ceremonies following birth, such as fertility rituals, traditional notion of conception, dreams, the three day ceremony, babies first day out, the naming ceremony, the baby's horoscope (ketsi), and first ceremonial haircut.

KEYWORDS

child birth, rituals, horoscope, reincarnation, ceremony

Bhutan is a beautiful mountainous country with high altitude valley separated by deep gorges and cliffs. Due to its geographical location it is very difficult to build roads and have proper access to the hospitals. This is one of the primary reason for Child births at homes especially in the rural areas of Bhutan. Ritual activity is a means to assure good childbirth conducted to protect the mother and child from evil spirits which is intertwined with the religious beliefs, notions of reincarnation and the rituals surrounding death and birth.

Methodology

The primary data were collected using interviews, which were mainly unstructured with primary informants such as a monk, an astrologer, a Dzongkha teacher and few older women who had experienced childbirth in a village. Some of the interviews were recorded and transcribed from Dzongkha to English. This paper is based on oral sources. I have tried to maintain the structure of paper to best convey the ideas as expressed to me by the respondents.

Reincarnation and Traditional Notions of Conception

In Bhutan, notions of conception and childbirth are intertwined with Buddhist religious beliefs, particularly the notion of reincarnation. Their traditional cosmology is based upon the beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism, in which earth is only one of five realms of existence that also includes a number of heavens and hells. According to these beliefs, a soul (sem) can be born anywhere in the six realms of rebirth, realm of human beings (mie yul); (yul means village/place) realm of animals (simchen yul), realm of hungry ghosts realm of demigods (lhu yul), the realm of gods (lha yul), and a number of different hells (neywa). Which realm the soul is born into depends upon on its karma, or the accumulation of good deeds (gey wa) and bad deeds (mee gey wa) in its previous lives.

Fertility Rituals

The outside walls of the of houses are painted with phallus symbols of different sizes, shapes and colors. Sometimes the paintings of phalluses are erect and ejaculating. Phalluses are also craved out of wood and hung on the corners of roofs, in the four directions. In addition to promoting fertility, they also serve to ward off evil spirits and the evil eye. People paint and hang phallic symbols on the house because it is believed that Lam Drukpa Kuenley or Divine Madman, defeated the evil spirits and demons, and liberated people from their ignorance with his "thunderbolt of wisdom", which took the form of a phallus. In order to promote fertility, women may visit the monastery to receive fertility blessings from a monk, or have the monks perform prayers to promote fertility.

Dreams and Childbirth

Interpreting signs in ones dreams (neey-lam) is a common activity associated with pregnancy and childbirth. When a mother has a dream about finding pearls, rings, earrings, or cats eye jewelry (zhey) it is believed that this may indicate that she is pregnant. Other dreams that may indicate a pregnancy include a pot getting filled with water, or a mother eating fruits. There are other dreams that are believed to represent the sex of the baby such as jewels and ornaments in dreams will be a female, and a statue of a god, swords (pata) or any other manly objects, then it is believed to be a male child.

Ritual Activity during Pregnancy

Ritual activities are performed to keep a pregnant mother and her unborn child safe which are recommended by a tsep (astrologer), and diagnosed and performed by a monk or traditional healer. Some rituals such as (jabzhey) are performed to cleanse the environment of evil spirits and maintain good health where butter lamps have to be offered to god. The frequency of cleansing rituals depends upon the health of the mother and her unborn child, although as the delivery nears, a jabzhey ritual is often performed to ensure a safe pregnancy.

The Process of Child Birth

Traditionally, Bhutanese women gave birth in their homes, with the role of the midwife performed by a mother or elder female family member. The woman's sisters, relatives and female friends offer their assistance and support during a pregnancy. While the mother is in labor, a small ritual called denthab may be performed to drive away evil spirits or ill intentions that may cause difficulties during child birth.

When the baby is born, it is wrapped in the father's clothes if it is a boy, and the mothers clothes if it is a girl. The baby is washed in lukewarm water and wrapped in cloth to keep the baby warm. The baby is then fed butter and butter is rubbed on its forehead, which is believed to give the baby a long and healthy life. The mother is encouraged to drink as much hot butter as possible to help her regain her strength. Then the mother takes a bath in hot water, to ease the pain of childbirth. The mother is also given a traditional alcoholic drink called chang-khey, which consists of fermented alcohol mixed with butter and eggs. They believe that it helps the mother produce more milk, and helps her sleep.

Cleansing Ritual (labsang) and Ceremonial visit by Friends and Family

On the 4th day after birth cleansing ritual called labsang is

conducted to purify the baby and cleanse the defilements (dip) caused by birth. Until this is performed, the mother is not allowed to interact with outsiders, and guests are not allowed to visit the house. Labsang is usually performed by a single monk/lama, it is mainly to purify the defilements (dip) caused by birth. There are different labsangs for different occasions like labsang to clean the defilement (dip) caused by death, marriage etc. The lama or the monk first chants in the altar room then he sprinkles the holy water (theichu) all over the house as well as in the surrounding of the house. The mother then takes a hot stone bath to wash away the defilement (dip), and is able to resume eating meat. After the labsang ritual is performed, family, neighbors, and friends also begin to make visit to the house, to welcome the baby into the community, bringing food and gifts to the mother.

Taking the Baby out of the House for the first time

The baby's first trip out of the house is to a local temple. It is custom for the parents to consult an astrologer in order to find an auspicious day to make the trip. The baby is washed, fed and dressed in new clothes, while the baby's head is wrapped in white woolen cloth. Its nose or forehead is marked with black soot, to communicate to malicious spirits that the child is too ugly to be one of their victims. Family members will exit accompany the baby with a number of symbolic items, which include a religious text (any religious text), a chorten (small one), a statue of a god (any god), wheat flour and butter and beetle nut (doma or zhudey).

Getting the Baby's Ketsi (astrological birth chart)

Shortly after the birth, most parents will visit an astrologer (tsip), to have them write up a detailed astrological chart (ketsi or kekar) on the child. The ketsi is a detailed description of the instructions that that person (or his parents) needs to follow in order to be successful and have a happy life. Traditionally the ketsi was written on desho (paper made out of daphne bark) and is normally around three and half pages long. It tells about the previous life of the child and why it was born in this world. It also tells us about the future of the child, whether the baby will be successful, what sickness or major obstacles it will encounter. More importantly it includes the time and type of rituals that must be performed in order to clear any obstacles that one encounters in life. To find out the baby's astrological chart (ketsi) the astrologer (tsip) needs the birth year of both the parents, the baby's day of the birth, the precise time of the birth, and year of the birth.

Naming the Baby

Naming the child is an important life event, which will identify and form an association with the wellbeing of the person throughout their life. Most children receive a religious name (cho-ge ming) from a high Monk known as (Lama, Tulkus or Rimpoché). People should receive names from a Lama or Rimpoché because they are believed to have the ability to see what name will fit with a particular child.

The Baby's 1st Ceremonial Hair Cut

According to traditional beliefs, the baby's first hair (ta-phey) cut is considered an offering to the triple gem (kenchosum) of Buddhism, and a vow (geny gee dhom ba) that the baby will not indulge in any evil miss deeds throughout its life. The event is considered a very important occasion (tendral zang-po), the parents must also consult an astrologer to find an auspicious day (zakar) to cut the baby's hair. After the haircut, the parents take a few stands and have it sewn into an amulet (song-kho) that is worn by the child to guard against evil spirits and ensure prosperity and good luck.

Conclusion

Childbirth is a very important occasion that is intertwined with their religious beliefs, notions of reincarnation, and the ritual surrounding death and birth. In rural Bhutan, babies are traditionally delivered at home and many rituals were performed to lessen the danger and cleanse the impurities associated with birth and are still important to a majority of the people throughout Bhutan, particularly in rural areas.

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