



## MORTUARY RITES OF THE TAI-KHAMTIS OF ASSAM

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### **Abstract**

*The Tai-Khamtis, professing Theravada form of Buddhism is one of the culturally rich tribe of Assam. Mortuary rite forms an essential part of their way of life. They followed cremation and burial methods in disposal of death. In the death of prominent monks, they celebrate poileng (chariot festival). The study tries to focus on the traditional methods of the disposal of death among the Khamtis highlighting various rites associate with it. The study reveals that their mortuary rites are more or less similar to the Buddhists of South-East Asia. The study of cultural heritage of the Buddhist tribes of northeast India is significant to have better understanding India's relations with South-East Asian countries in a proper perspective.*

**Key words:** *Assam, Tai-Khamtis, poileng, Buddhism, South-East Asia.*

### **Methodology**

The present problem is located on customary practices relating to the death rituals of the Tai-Khamtis of Assam. Materials for the study were derived from primary and secondary sources. The sources of information relevant to the study were mostly obtained from personal interviews during the course of field study with the learned and aged persons of the society. Secondary data in forms of books, research articles, journals, govt. Gazetteer are consulted to supplement the qualitative data. Both descriptive and analytical methods of research are followed to achieve the objectives of the problem.

### **Introduction**

The customs related to final disposition of death, extending support to the bereaved, offering respect and mourning the deceased etc vary from culture to culture. Cultural values, social norms, religious belief and practices etc reflected in the mortuary rites of a particular society. Mortuary rites form an important part of the cultural life of the Tai-Khamtis. Their death rituals are performed as per Buddhist manner including indigenous practices. As far as the method of the disposal of death among the Khamtis is concerned, they follow both burial and funeral manner. Cremation of corpse is the rule of the society. The mortuary rites of the Khamtis require active co-operation of the villagers across the sex and age limit. On the death of a prominent monk, they celebrate poileng ceremony in colourful ways. The mortuary rites of the Khamtis resemble more or less with the people of South-East Asia.

### **Discussion**

The Tai-Khamtis are an enterprising tribe of Assam. They belong to Shan stock of the Tai race. They follow Theravada form of Buddhism after Burmese school. They are one of the microscopic minority tribes of Assam concentrated in six villages under Narayanpur Revenue Circle of Lakhimpur district. At present, their population is around one thousand. Their tangible and intangible cultural heritage bears traits of South-East Asian culture. Their religion, art and culture, belief and practices, material culture, way of life etc are immensely influenced by South-East Asian countries in general and Myanmar in particular.

As already stated, the Khamtis follow both funeral and burial manner in the disposal of death. When a person dies, the corpse inside the house is immediately brought to the northern part of the house placing the head towards north. The body is laid in supine position. Upper garments of the corpse are put off and the body is washed by the elderly male persons. Contrary to the practice with living persons, the body is washed from feet upward to head. The deceased is then dressed in new clothes but a reversal from ordinary practice. Some clothing may be put on back to front; even the turban is also rounded in the wrong direction. After complete



dressing, the body is covered from head to feet with a *fa mai* (*challeng chaddur*). Some coins are placed on eyes and mouth whilst some are wrapped on the four corners of the *fa mai*. The person who wraps the coins may say 'This is for crossing the river'. The dead body is covered with mosquito net. Tray of burning incense sticks, candles and a pitcher containing *nam metta* (purified water) are placed above the head of the corpse. Sometimes the dead body is kept for two or three days for the arrival of the sons, daughter in laws and Buddhist monk, presence of whom is essential for the disposal of the death.

The people who come to console the bereaved family offer floral tribute, puffed rice and wrap coins in the four corners of the white *chaddur*. The door of the granary is covered with a white cloth so that the *khon* (essence of life) of the grain may not be taken away by the deceased soul. Community service is very necessary for the smooth conduct of the whole process. Relatives and villagers volunteered the works. The young boys of the village collect firewood and bamboo required for burning of the corpse. The aged males prepare coffin while the women busy in collecting flowers, puffed rice and receive guest. Once the message of the death is communicated the villagers of adjoining areas flock to the bereaved house, while coming they carry a *dao* or knife in their hands. From the time of death till the day of funeral, a steady stream of visitors passes through the household and they are fed by relatives, who not only cook their meals but also make arrangements for the funeral, feed the guests, feast the monks and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The elder son or son-in law along with the villagers have to go to cremation ground (*sang kheng/pa-saa*) of the village to prepare the funeral pyre (*faw haang*). Every village have community grave site normally in the eastern direction. After clearing the spot, the plot of land must first be bought with a pair of betel nut and a token money by the son or son-in-law. In making the *ti faw haang* i.e. funeral pyre, three hard pairs of the branches of trees are cross planted projecting the upside wide over which seven steps of firewood bed is prepared signifying the seven stages of Heaven above the Earth, if one can cross, as per popular believe, reaches the *nirvana* i.e. salvation. Like other Tais, the Khamtis place their dead in an oblong wooden coffin decorated with colourful papers.

A daughter of the deceased cooks boiled rice and curry for the departed soul. While preparing food everything should be of reversed of the normal procedure, such as if she is a right handed, food should be prepared with her left hand. The utensil used for the same should not be used in future domestic works. The boiled rice and curry is to place on a platform of about 5 feet high made of four bamboo poles erected in the northern side of the house.

After completion of the arrangements, Buddhist monks are invited. The people gathered at the moment have *panchasila* and prayed for the well being of the departed soul in his next world. Buddhist monks chant verses from *mangala sutta*. People blessed the departed soul with flower and puffed rice. Before putting the corpse in the coffin an elderly person weaves inside the coffin seven times with a *khek* (fishing trap made of bamboo) and thorny branches so that the deceased person should not take away the *khon* of any living being of the family member.

The dead body is placed in the coffin with the head pointing towards northern direction and sealed it knelling the wooden plank. The dead body is usually carried away from the house after 12 of noon. When the coffin has to be carried out of the house, a hole is made in the door/window/wall of the northern side and sometimes it is lowered with the help of a ladder with four rungs, specially made for that occasion. Amongst all Tai people house ladders have an uneven number of rungs and only ladder for lowering of a coffin has an even number in order to prevent the wandering spirits from entering the house. The uneven number of rungs on an ordinary ladder may be seen as a traditional protection against evil spirits.<sup>2</sup>

When the coffin is carried away from the house it must touch and break down the platform of bamboo having boiled rice and curry meant for the deceased soul. Thereafter the coffin is safely placed upon a bamboo frame



which is made up of eight pieces, two short ones supporting the ‘feet’ part of the coffin, another two under the ‘head’, two long bearers on the right side and another two long one on the left. The coffin is fastened with the bamboo frame with the help of rope made up of white thread. A bamboo canopy (*soung*) is placed on the coffin and covered with white *chaddur*. Son, son-in-laws and relatives have the frame with its burden on their shoulders. In case of the person of higher rank, the corpse is carried in a decorated cart.

The relatives remain in the house seal the wall/door/window through which the corpse was set out. It is the custom that the sealed portion will not to be destroyed or renovated at least for three or four years. As soon as the corpse is taken out from the house the process of cleaning the house starts. The daughter of the deceased washes the house with water. The ritual is known as *laang-huein* (*laang*=cleaning, *huein* = house).

The funeral procession walks in single file leading by a person with *phun khey* (burning sticks). He is followed by the priest (*Chao Cherey/Pathek*) carrying *tan khon* (flag in miniature), sacred books, trays, flowers, puffed rice etc. The procession is started with the firing of gunshot or burning of cracker so as to make the people aware of the coming of the procession. On the way, women shower flowers and puffed rice. When the procession reached the site, the coffin is placed on the funeral pyre with its head towards north. If a person is of high status, one *chong kham* (golden umbrella) is generally kept on the head side. All the people accompanied the procession put the firewood in the funeral pyre. Some of them lit candles, incense sticks and throw flowers and puffed rice in the funeral pyre. With the arrival of the Buddhist monks, a short function is held. The Chao Cherey leads the function. The monks will recite *panchasila* and the people will follow them. After taking *panchasila* the monks recite verses from the sacred book *Loka Samathi*.

Sometimes the monks recite their verses touching the sacred white thread that is connected with the coffin instead of their hands directly in the coffin. The custom of connecting the coffin or bier with a thread and letting some ritually superior persons hold this thread is remarkably wide spread in the southern Buddhism which is done to convey merit to the deceased. Among the Buddhist Thai of Thailand a thread hangs out of the coffin and this is touched by Buddhist monks whilst they chant suitable texts in the evening.<sup>3</sup> The elder son of the deceased will lit the funeral pyre with the help of *phun khey* (burning sticks). The monks and the ladies, young boys and girls depart from the site once the funeral pyre is caught by fire. The elderly persons and the members of the family remain till the end of the work. After complete burning down the corpse, water is poured to extinguish the fire. At that moment the daughter who performed the work of cleaning the house (*laang huein*) has to collect seven pieces of fragmented bone from the ashes and put it in an earthen pitcher. Other persons present on the occasion build a small mound out of the ashes and the earthen pitcher is placed on it and its mouth is covered with a bowl. The mound is enclosed with a square size bamboo fence.

Cremation is widespread amongst most of the western and southern groups of Tai speakers who have accepted Buddhism. The custom amongst the southern groups of placing charred bone fragments and ashes under a pyramidal structure may also be regarded as evidence for a wish to find resting place for the mortal remains.<sup>4</sup> Over a century ago, E.T. Dalton has mentioned that the Khamtis grave sites were surmounted by conically shaped tumuli which, when first constructed diminish from the base to the apex in a series of steps; the earth being kept in position by bamboo matting round the step.<sup>5</sup>

After cleaning the spot all of them returned home. They leave the ground via a place where thorny bush grows and they jump over some thorny branches. Upon returning to the house, a big fire is made just outside the boundary and the people who attend the rite cross the fire and warm their body. To ward off the evil spirit, the participants are required to touch the purification water (*nam-metta*).

On the day that a death occurs it is ‘*wan kam*’ a taboo day for the whole village and all works to be stopped. There will be no de-husking of rice and working. Till the completion of the ritual they do not go to field and



abstain from any commercial activities. Duration of pollution period extend up to seven days. No marry making or community activities are performed during those mourning period.

In the evening the elderly persons gathered in the bereaved house. The Chao Cheray of the village reads and interprets chapters from the sacred texts such as *Abhidhamma*, tale of the *Jatakas* etc. The recitation of the holy books in the evening continued till the completion of the last day rites *saom loung* (final mortuary rite). Till the last day of the rite, members of the family observed *kaan* (restriction). They do not go to field and involved in trade. During this period they do not kill any creature. Till the seventh day rites *saom loung*, family members, son-in-laws, kinsmen, clan members performed *saom-on* (subsidiary mortuary rite) on daily basis in mutual co-operation. The second day rite 'saom-on' is performed by the bereaved family. At the outset of rites, the hosts have to engage a priest, *Chao cheray* who will lead the functions. Buddhist monks and villagers are invited for the whole rites through a messenger called *Chao-pachao*.

In the second day morning, a rite of *saom on* is held. *Chao cheray*, villagers and monks come to the bereaved house for community prayer (*kham-sin-thom-tra*). In similar manner the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Saom-on* rites are shared by the son-in-laws, daughter-in-laws, kinsmen, relatives and friends. It is important to note that the Khamtis believe that the spirit of the deceased do not leave the house till the end of the final rites. Therefore, to satisfy the deceased soul, every early morning food is prepared and it is offered by the spouse of the deceased or by *Chao cheray* chanting mantras (*woi-fi*) for the well being of the departed soul. The day before the monks are called in to recite *paritta* to finally send the soul to its next abode, the spouse of the deceased calls the ghost to the house to be witness to the ceremony.<sup>6</sup>

On the sixth day, villagers, relatives and friends visit to solace the bereaved family. They bring raw rice, vegetables, fruits, juice, candles, incense sticks, sacred books (*lik*) and some cash money. A person volunteers to records the list of the persons, their monetary contributions and sacred books offered for the occasion. It is a customary practice among the Khamtis to donate sacred books (*lik*) on the occasion. Donation of sacred book is considered as an important meritorious work. These texts are donated to the Buddhist monastery on the last day of the ritual along with a sheet of the list of the texts as documentary evidence. The food items and other articles are kept in two separate baskets made of bamboo called *song-khong-lu* of which one is dedicated to monks and another is for the use of the family for the next day feast.

On the day of *saom-loung* (final rite) guests gathered the bereaved house in the morning. Prior to the ritual, the *Chao cheray* offers food to propitiate the departed soul. With the arrival of the monks the main function begins. In any meritorious function the presence of five monks and more is required. The *Chao cheray* leads the function. In the beginning of the function, the *Chao cheray* offers the materials and religious texts to the monks on behalf of the host. The five precept, *panchasila* is offered where after that *devas* are invoked which is followed by the sermons of the monks. The monks recite *mangala suk*, *metta-suk*, *latana-suk* etc as per the Buddhist norms. A white sacred thread (*mai*) is bound to the materials and the chief monk touches the thread at the time of delivering sermons. Following the sermon, the water libation is performed by the Chao Cheray with a view to transfer the merit to the deceased soul. According to customary rule, the function of community prayer (*kham-sin-thom-tra*) must end by 12 noon. At the end of the function monks are provided foods and community feast starts.

Kondinya has mentioned about the significance of the funeral rituals of the Khamtis. He writes that the funeral ritual is little different in content from any other Buddhist ceremonies. The Buddhist rituals which comprise the bulk of Khamti death and funeral ceremonies have two intended functions. First, fearful that the ghost of the deceased may cause them harm, the survivors hope that rituals will speed the ghost on its path to its next rebirth. Second, desiring to provide the deceased with the best possible rebirth, the survivors attempt to acquire, and then transfer to the deceased, merit sufficient to ensure this possibility.<sup>7</sup>



After the feast, the priest, sons of the deceased along with relatives go to the cremation ground (*ti faw haang/sang kheng*). There, they erect five wooden small poles about 4 to 5 feet in height, four on the four corner of the grave and one in the middle. These poles are called *lak fai* which are enameled in red colour. The main *lak fai* is placed in the middle. The shape of the main *lak fai* vary from clan to clan. A bamboo or wooden fence is erected keeping the four *lak fai*'s at the corners. Funeral masts (*fa-laga*) are projected on the bamboo poles in the corners of the fence. The custom of projecting funeral masts in the grave site is wide spread amongst the Shan, the white and black Tai, the Nung Tai and other Tais of South-East Asia.<sup>8</sup>

After returning from the grave, the purification of the daughter (who washed the house (*lung huein*) is held. The priest, Chao cheray smeared the yolk of a boiled egg on the head, forehead, cheek, ears of the daughter chanting some verses from the texts. Sons and other members offer gifts including cattle to the daughter who performed (*lung huein*) ritual. Thereafter, *phuk-mai* is held in which the priest blesses the family members by tying white thread round the wrists to ward off any fear from the deceased soul. At last, Chao Cheray is honoured with varieties of articles and cash money for the services he rendered during the entire process.

After few days, another purification ceremony is held. Monks and villagers are invited, community prayer is held. Goods are donated to monks, feast is held, the premise is made sacred by sprinkling the holy water (*nam metta*). Thus, practically ends the cremation ceremony.

In case of death of a child below 10 years of age burial method is adopted without any ceremony. The corpse is wrapped by bamboo mat and carried to the grave (*Sang kheng/pasaa*) by family members and kinsmen. Child's belongings such as shirt, lungi (*fanoi*), clothes (*fa*) are donated to degraded poor families.

In case of the person who committed suicide (*taay ket*), died in accident (*taay-hai*), inauspicious death (*taay hoong*), victim of the diseases like small pox, cholera etc. and pregnant women who lose their lives during delivery of an issue are buried immediately without any ceremony.

If a person who has committed suicide (*taay ket*) by hanging himself, body is wrapped with bamboo mat and tied in a bamboo pole and carried to the graveyard to bury in the same day of the incident. The Khamtis believe in numerous categories of spirits. The spirit from the people who died in a violent manner is called *phi taay hoong*. The category of *phi taay hoong* is known in central Thailand and also indicates generally those who died inauspiciously.<sup>9</sup>

The death of a pregnant woman is considered the greatest misfortune and necessary measures are taken to ward off the danger from the spirit (*phi*). The Namkhan Shan believe that the spirit of the dead woman becomes a malignant ghost, who may return to hunt her husband's home and torment him, unless precautions are taken to keep her away.<sup>10</sup> A similar belief is common in central Thailand.<sup>11</sup>

In case of the death of pregnant woman, the Khamtis believe that her *khon* (essence of life) has not gone to another world and still roams about in distress. This *khon* is called *khon-waang* (roaming spirit). The Shans of Burma called such *khon* as *phi hung phi wang*. The spirit (*phi hung phi wang*) supposed to cause the violent death of a person whom it enters.<sup>12</sup> The Laotian prescribes that when a pregnant woman dies her body should not remain a single night in her house. If she dies during night, she has to be buried that same night. The husband carries torn clothing and these are placed next to the corpse, together with betel and packets of rice while he asks her not to harm him and not to torment him.<sup>13</sup>

Cremation of the Buddhist monk among the Khamtis is a matter of merit discussion. In social hierarchy the monks of the *Bapu Chang* (monastery) are the most revered persons in the society next to the Raja. The death of the persons attached to the *Bapuchang* is considered to be sacred. Therefore, the death rite of a monk is performed in a festive mood. The Khamtis celebrated *poileng* festival on the occasion of a prominent monk's



death. The word '*poileng*' derives from two words i.e. '*poi*' and '*leng*' respectively. The term '*poi*' means festival and '*leng*' means chariot. So, the festival is known as the chariot festival.

In fact, this is a festival for observance of the mortuary rites of the monks. This festival is believed to have originated from the death of Gautama. It is believed that participation in *poileng* is a meritorious work and a person is blessed and he may attain *nippan* (nirvan) if he has a privilege to attend seven numbers of *poileng* ceremonies.<sup>14</sup>

If the ceremony is to be done after few months, the corpse is preserved by a special means. The dead body is wrapped with a cloth that soaked in paraffin. Preservation is done with the help of bee wax, tobacco leaves, rice husk, lime etc. Large amount of tobacco leaves, lime and rice husk is collected and then it is mixed well together. After mixing, it is applied to the corpse. Huge amount of bee wax is heated in a large vessel. When wax is dissolved the torn clothes are soaked into that hot wax vessel. Then it is used for wrapping the dead body and finally it is laid into the coffin. The coffin is kept in temporarily constructed mortuary. The preserved corpse is kept there for 5 to 7 months before celebration of *poileng* festival. Prior to the final cremation, villagers got constructed a special chariot (*leng*) which is essential for the rite. In general, chariot is made from wooden plank with six pairs of big wooden wheels, beautifully painted in red, yellow and maroon colour.

The cremation ceremony of the monks (*poi leng*) is marked with the pulling of chariot, religious prayer and discussions, playing traditional performing art (*pya pung*), exhibition, playing traditional games etc. In general, *poileng* is celebrated in three days programme. Pulling of chariot and the tug of war between men and women where women are expected to get win are important parts of *poi leng*.

After the tug of war, villagers arrange fire wood to make funeral pyre (*ti fow haang*). The coffin is then taken out of the chariot and placed it on the funeral pyre keeping the head toward north. After burning down the corpse, the ashes and fragmented bones are collected and buried at the place of the cremation in the cemetery.

Next day, community prayer is held in the morning. People made liberal charity both in cash and kinds on the occasion. Various articles such as sacred text (*lik*), yellow clothes (*sangkan*), sacred hanging (*taan khon*), food items, fruits etc. are donated to the monk ungrudgingly. After the prayer and religious discussions, community feast is held. Thus, the ceremony comes to an end. The programme and duration of the ceremony depends upon the local environment, socio-economic condition of the people as well as the position of the deceased in the society. *Poileng* is a festival that unites the Khamtis under one umbrella and strong social solidarity are seen among the Khamtis during the celebration of the *poileng* festival.

## Conclusion

The study of the mortuary rite of the Khamtis reveals that both cremation and burial methods are prevalent in the society. Mortuary rites are followed with utmost care so that there is no harm to the bereaved family by the spirit and departed soul may attain nirvana. The mortuary rites of the Khamtis requires active co-operation of the villagers across the sex and age limit. It was an occasion where physical and financial assistance is sought for from the members of the clan and from other relatives in performing the rites. The custom to donate sacred text is a unique feature of the rituals. Cremation of the prominent monk (*poileng*) is the most significant mortuary rite of the Khamtis. People consider it as an act of meritorious work; hence it is celebrated in a colourful ways. The role of monks is very important in the entire process; the mortuary rites become incomplete without co-operation of the monks. The mortuary rites of the Khamtis resemble more or less with the people of South-East Asia. In fact, people of India have a shared cultural heritage with South-East Asia. In this aspect, Govt. of India can use soft power resources as a means of foreign policy in terms of its relations with South-East Asian nations. Living Theravada Buddhism is an important part of Indian culture. The tangible and intangible Buddhist heritage of the Khamtis reflects historical and cultural linkages with South-East Asia. A



comprehensive analysis of the Buddhist heritage is essential to have better understanding of India's relations with South-East Asia.

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