

Buddhist Tāmāñs Funerals: Nirvana as an Ultimate Goal of Rituals

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Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to describe Buddhist way of funeral rituals of Tāmāñs, who are the biggest Buddhist indigenous ethnic people of Nepal. They believe cycles of life, reincarnation, good deeds and enlightenment. The rituals that take place around death and funerals are to help the deceased to die in peaceful mind and get nirvana i.e. salvation. They believe in reincarnation and the freeing of the soul. To them, the death is a natural part of the cycle of life and how a person acts throughout their life will determine their future lives after death through reincarnation. Therefore, the death should occur in a calm and peaceful environment with family in attendance. The ultimate goal is to liberate from life and rebirth so they can reach the state of nirvana. To achieve this, they must get rid themselves of worldly desires and all notions of self, ultimately attaining total enlightenment. In the research conducted area, the dead body is found to have been either cremated or buried in ridge. The Buddhist monks i.e. Lamas lead the ceremony. The mourning periods are usually 3rd, 7th, 21st or 49th day after the death of a person. The mourners wear white strips of cloth during the mourning period.

Keywords: Bārdo, Ghevā, Thundā Sorvā, Bhab Cakra, Nirvana

Introduction

Everybody is familiar with the word "Funeral" which means the practice of disposing of the dead body by any means. This samskāra i.e. custom evolved not only to express sorrow or grief but also to comfort the living and honor the dead. The most common samskāras are associated with birth, marriage, and death, which no one can escape. The funeral ceremony is

the last samskāra, which is done by his nearest relatives and with which he closes the chapter of his worldly carrier.

All the religion of the world has included funeral custom as an important part of their religion and funeral is usually a religious service. Religions all over the world considered that death is only the end of one stage of life and the beginning of another. Some people believe in a new life after death while others believe that the spirit would return to inhabit the body. The followers of the first type insist on destroying the dead body by various means (like Hindus, Buddhists) whereas the followers of the second type say that the dead body has to be preserved (like Christian, Muslim, and Jews). Although they seem to have two different ideas as to what to do with a dead body, they all have similar practices for funerals like the announcement of the death, preparation of the body for the procession, religious services, and disposal (Poudyal & Ghimire, 1998).

The Samskāra is also considered as a religious and social duty as a debt contracted through coming into existence in the community and remaining as a member. The debt is to be paid to the gods who protect and favour us, the ancestors to whom we owe our existence, and our fellow humans with whom we share joys and sorrows. All this is possible only if we perform all the Samskāras. The performance of funeral sacrament is the debt paid to ancestors to whom we owe our lives.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research article is to describe Buddhist way of funeral rituals of Tāmāns, who are the biggest Buddhist indigenous ethnic people of Nepal.

Methodology

In depth interview, participant observation and case study are done as primary sources. Likewise, the authentic written materials of Tāmāns and non Tāmāns scholars are reviewed critically as secondary sources. As tertiary sources, the Wikipedia, encyclopaedia

and internet *You Tube* are also consulted. Qualitative research design is utilized for this research. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling are taken for exploration.

Results and Discussions

Concept of Death

Death is the end of life. Life is formed from blood and flesh, which is nourished by food and water. He/she should be taken care of by Lāmā, Bombo, and Laptavā in case they become ill. They consult Lāmā or Bombo (Hall, 1982). Lāmā reads Holy Scriptures to please the deities. Bombo exorcises the evil spirits to heal the sick person. To soothe Kul deities, *Laptavā* performs ritual rites. When the sick person dies, they think that the deceased person's time is over to stay and live in the earthly world (*Jambulīna*). They call the corpse "*Chende*".

Types of Death Ritual

Death ritual varies according to economic status, geographical variation, and religious practice among Tāmāns. There are many ways of death rituals.

Water Burial

People who believe in disposing of the dead bodies in a stream of running water throw the corpse in running water to make it sink to the bottom of the water by a possible and acceptable means. This kind of funeral is usually prevalent among the Buddhists of the Himalayan Countries like Bhutan, Sikkim, Northern Nepal, and Laddākh. Though this kind of burial is not recognized by the Nepālese Hindus, it is still prevalent in different parts of India.

Sky Burial

It may be hard to believe, but there are still some communities in the world who believe that leaving the dead in an open space is the best way of disposal. The Sioux Indians of North America place their dead on the high platforms. Some groups of aborigines, the original

inhabitants of Australia, leave dead bodies on trees. The Parasis, a religious group, who mainly live in India, take the dead to a special place called the tower of silence to be fed to the birds and animals. The Parasis believe that the earth, water, and fire are sacred and must not be polluted by any kind of impurities such as the funerals. This mode is still prevalent in Tibet and northern Nepāl among the Lāmā Buddhists (Ash, 1990).

Under Grave

This is the most common method of disposing dead bodies all over the world. Burial is most popular among Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people because they believe that one day the dead will rise again like seed or God will come to take them to heaven on the judgment day. This mode is followed by the Buddhists in a few special cases only. For Buddhists, burial is not for preserving the dead bodies.

The burial was common in the beginning when the fire was not in the control of men. The people of that time thought that they were continuously in danger of being victimized by fearful evil spirits, which were believed to reside mainly in the dead bodies. The presence of these spirits was felt by men mainly through epidemics and similar other disasters affecting men and their belongings, which constituted the basis of religious practices.

Cremation

The practice of reducing a corpse to ashes by burning it down is called cremation. Buddhists consider cremation as one of the sacred rituals. Tāmāñs had a practice of cremation or burial to the dead body. Well –to- do people call Lāmā and consult them and cremate them in the ridge, on the other hand, poor people, they bury without calling Lāmā. In Tāmāñs, they follow Lāmāism in their death ritual consulting Tibetān calendar and they determine what steps should be taken according to the calendar. In their death ritual, they bury, cremate, throw the corpse in the river, feed by the dismembering the dead body to the vulture (Coster, 2010).

Phovā

Main Lāmā recites mantras and other functions to get rid of sins of the dead, which is called "Phovā". It is a ritual to bring out from six universes, "*BhabCakra*." Some people go to purchase or collect these materials. Main Lāmā and other Lāmās go on ritual.

When "Phovā" is done, they believe he/she will be born in heaven on lotus flower in the realm of Amitābh Buddha. There are four types of Phovā in Tāmāna rituals. They are *LungguPhovā*, *Tulku Phovā*, *Chen Thāp Phovā*, and *Thampala Phovā*. *Lunggu Phovā* is done when the dead person was alive. *Tulku Phovā* is like *Lunggu Phovā*. After the death of a person, the outer life goes, and inner life will remain when *Chen Thāp Phovā* is done. The person won't be alive again after this *Phovā*. *Thampalā Phovā* is done after the death of a person. The deceased person is kept with his head facing north and mouth facing west (Bhattarai, 1999).

Bārdo

Phovā can be done in two phases according to Buddhist tradition of reciting "*Bārdo*."

They are:

Chirkai Bārdo

This is the first phase of *Bārdo*. If the ritual of *Phovā* is done well, it isn't necessary to be done. In this ritual, the Lāmā reminds about the death of the person, who is going to die. He informs the person about his impending death, and talks about precaution for salvation from this vicious cycle of worldly sorrows (*Bhab Cakra*).

Choni Bārdo

After the death of a person, he will awake within three or four days. He will see peaceful and angry gods for 14 days. He will see peaceful gods for 7 days and resentful angry gods for 7 days. Due to the evil deeds of the dead person, he can't see peaceful gods and he will be

punished by the god of death (Yama). The recitation of this "Bārdo" helps him/her not to go to rebirth again (Yü, 1949).

Unless the deceased person understands the *Bārdo* wisdom, he won't see where he will be reborn again. The dead person will reincarnate under his deeds, upon the different places i.e., heaven, earth, or hell. The person sees the sexual intercourse between man and woman. He will get rebirth and the same-sex according to his/her preference of male or female after seeing the sexual intercourse. The dead person will get salvation if his soul goes through this palate. Otherwise, he will be reborn on different worlds (*Loks*) according to the way the soul goes at the time of death. "*Bārdo*" means intermission between life and death. The end of this life after death and before the beginning of new life, the Lāmā Purohits recites the "*BārdoThodal*" religious ritual. They inform about "*Bhaba Cakra*" to the person, who is going to die, and tries to send him into heaven. In the case of an already dead person, they make a "*Jyampar or Minjyāna* ", which is a flag on the dead man, and burn it down (Lopez, 2011).

In the Tāmāña ritual, the *Phovā* is done before cremation or burial of the dead body. While doing *Phovā*, Lāmā keeps the dead body with head facing north and south west. With the help of a Lāmāic tool (*Bajra*) and broom's stick, they pluck out the turf of hair on the crown of the head. In some places, they tie the white strip of clothing on the head and try to do the *Phovā*. After this ritual, they think that the deceased person will not be evil spirits and will have abode on heaven. *Phovā* is done to remove sins from birth to death of the dead person. It is believed that the *Phovā* ritual should be done before the death of a person. In the case of the death of a person, Bārdo ritual text is recited. While reciting this scripture, the sound should reach the dead person's ear. If there is no corpse near by the dead person's bed or his overused articles, to let the departed overhear them, the Lāmā recites the scripture,

trying to impart the knowledge to get salvation from "*Bhab Cakra*" i.e. wheel of life (Tamang, 2066).

Lāmā purifies the water of the urn (*Bhumbā*) and sprinkles the holy water on the corpse. The Ganbās of the village bath the dead body by *Artemisia dubia* (*surchende*; *TitePāti*) to purge sins, which is called "*KhuisThuisol*". The ornaments and other articles are removed from the body and white cloth is put on. Then, the family of the demised person put the new clothes on the corpse. The married woman's dead body is put on the same clothes which she had brought on the auspicious occasion of marriage. But the clothes stitched by a needle of bamboo will be worn upside down. Then the corpse is kept in a sitting pose along with a white cloth. The well-to-do people put on a religious strip of cloth (*Dharma Kātro*; *Krui Lābā*). Before this action, the dead body is garlanded with a white scarf (*Khādā*), put on vermilion powder (*Avir*) on the head, shoulder, and oil on the body. They light incense stick beside the dead body and keep a mixture of the boiled egg and turmeric powder. They also keep one pound (*mana*) of rice with a coin for the expense required to go to heaven.

The Lāmās initiate a death ritual, which is called "*Hro Chekā*". Lāmā makes *Tormā* (the image of deity with boiled rice), which is called *Thui Chimbu* "(Cyañaresi). They make six Solmo of rice" i.e., "*Makten*", Lāmā recites religious scriptures, playing funeral songs reciting mantras, light the butter lamp (*Batti*), and perform religious function on the altar (*Yagyayagādi*) according to the Buddhist ritual. On this occasion, the neighbours bring rice, lentil, curry, eggs and put on the spot and Lāmā recites from "*Bārdo Thodal*" and put the crown ("*GyālbāRinā*") on the dead body's head. Lāmās perform pūjās of "*Thui Chimbu Ceñaresi*" and they wish his/her spirit to be united with their ancestors. Lāmā also put "*Lugu Dhugu*," "*Sipākhorlo*" *Bhab Cakra Thānkā* on the wall near the dead body. Lāmā recites Veda incessantly along with playing Lāmāic musical instruments on the function.

Cār Dām is indispensable among Tāmāns. Without Cār Dām, death ritual isn't initiated. In the *Cār Dām*, the *Khukri* (curved Nepalese knife) and a scythe are kept for a male and a female respectively. In the case of a married woman's death before Cār Dām, the natal family (*Māiti*) finishes "*Cār Dām*" and then the death ritual follows. At night, the family members' married sisters light 108 butter lamp (*Nānasāl*; *Bātti*) "which is called "*Karme*" and they burn the 1000 butter lamp (*Gyāmjo*). Then the family members and married sisters and daughters and their family kneel their knees to pay homage to the dead person (*Syākpā*). In the same place, *Phovā* is done by *Lāmā* before the death procession. In Tāmāns there is no practice for taking the corpse to the river bank for cremation or burial. The dead body is taken to highlands for cremation, which is called a graveyard (*Cihān Dāndā*"; *Dhusāgād*). Their deceased soul goes to heaven if they take their dead body to uplands for the salvation of the dead; the *Lāmā* starts to recite the prayer "*Molam*". The process of death ritual is called "*novā*".

The corpse is kept home according to the economic status of the family. They consult *Lāmā* for the cremation. The *Lāmā* observes auspicious day matching year (*Lho*), nature (*Khām*), and determines the day of the cremation or burial (Tamang, 2064). It is believed that the dead body is not taken there alone on Monday, and it seeks another person from the family or neighbourhood. Therefore, Tāmāns make another dummy corpse and take the dead body for cremation. Generally, the death procession occurs in the day time. One night the dead body is kept at home for religious scripture reciting. In the case of a married woman, the corpse isn't taken for cremation until a natal family member (*Māiti*) arrives there. Women also participate in death procession. They return before setting the fire to the corpse putting a coin (*paisā*) to the corpse and engage for service on the distribution of water, tea, local beer, or alcoholic beverage to the participants of the death procession.

Ghevā

The Ghevā is the last death ritual among Tāmāña folks. After the cremation of the dead body, the Lāmā, brothers, and other kinsfolk assemble to determine the date of the purification ritual, "Ghevā". It is called "*Kulchyāng*". They fix the date with the advice of Lāmā. "Thāmlā Ghevā" is done for the community.

To make easy management of Ghevā, they formulate the division of labour on this Ghevā day. They assign certain rights, duties, and responsibilities of the designated posts. Among Tāmāña folks, "*Supachyu Syegu*" Ghevā is done on the 49th day of the departed person. Generally, they arrange Ghevā on 13th, 21st, or 35th day according to the suitable economic situation of the bereaved family. They arrange "Dunci Nevār" once a week and 7 times whenever they do the Ghevā ritual.

They make the residual bone of the dead (Astu) into dust and mix it with Ghee and butter lamp (Batti) and light them at Namobuddha (Tāgmā Lhuichyān), Bauddha (Jyāruñakhashyor), and Svayambhu (Phāvāsimbu) on 49th day or Caitra pūrnimā. One of the family members doesn't lift the purification until burning the butter lamp (Batti) after novā (N. shrād), a ceremony in honour of and for the benefit of the deceased by offering water, cooked food in their names (Tamang, 2069).

Types of Ghevā

According to Lāmāic religious scripture, they will get equal outcomes if they do small or big Ghevā. Ghevā can be done according to economic status. On account of the need to make extensive preparations for the completion of a Ghevā; the Tāmāñs have organized social institution to handle this matter (Tamang, 2010).

First of all, Bonbo performs Sergem to get over unpleasant events. He performs pūjā to Dimlalā (clan deity), Nhyānbo (nāg), Chenbo (serpent; nāgin), mhāng (ghost), and Sime Bhume. Then, Lāmā Sprinkles the urn's (Bhumbā) water for "*chiyopā*" and Salangsi (pūjā of

soil) and they start to cook food there. Then, the household member and Tāmbā go to Dājāna taking Sagun to main Lāmā. It is called "Chyokāprebā." The etymological meaning "Chyokā" means to study and "prebā" to dedicate. Therefore, the responsibility is given to the Lāmā for salvation according to Tāmāna Rimthim.

After the termination of the ritual function of Sibāghur, all Lāmās go to Dājāna except one. The next day, they go to bring Sibāghur to Dājāna wearing mosaic attires and playing musical instruments. The son- in- law carries Sibāghur and Lāmā precedes blowing conch playing musical instruments accompanying their dances. It is called "Sibāghurtebā" (take out corpse). When they take Sibāghur to Dājāna, the relatives cry like mourning. The Sibāghur is made alike a dead man or woman putting their clothes and the residue of the dead (Astu) is kept inside it (Lama, 2013).

Thundā Sorvā

Among Tāmāna folks, they bid farewell to the departed soul for the last time, which is called ThundāSorvā. On this occasion, the family members, in-law- families, and neighbors offer grains and money for farewell. It is done as the last phase of "Ghevā" and the duty of son- in- law is very crucial. On this occasion, the son in law carries a cloth bag (Tyāna). Members of in-law families and neighbors give rice, fruits, money, and clothes. They also give him/her lifetime preferences such as tobacco, cigarette, alcohol, and local beer for a voyage to Amitābh Lok. Then, the son in law utters the person's name that gives the articles one by one and requests the dead person to accept the goods and fare for the voyage of Amitābh Lok. All the participants offer their gifts in the name of a deceased person. Among the Tāmāna folks, they believe that the deceased person will get the gifts given to him/her by son in law (Tamang, 2068).

Lift of Impurity

In the Tāmāna community, the Lāmā lifts the impurity of the dead in three days. They touch the salt and oil. It is called "ñovā". Lāmā transfers the residue of bone to another place and reminds the dead thinking he is alive. He bids the dead to stay, where he is kept eating the food, which is provided him/her. Therefore, unmarried people, poor people, and women's small purification rite (Ghevā) are done in three days and they touch the salt, oil, and meat. And then, they arrange purification rite (Ghevā) when they can perform. The fruits and foods are given to the image of the dead (Nep. Astu) and light is kept burning at night, so the Tāmāns regard the dead person as alive until the Ghevā is completed.

The Lāmā takes the residue of the bone of the dead, i.e. Ruibā; Astu (Lama, 2069) every week from the spot and perform pūjā and recites the religious scripture, which is called "Dunciñovā". In the 7th week, the big Ghevā is arranged. Thus, Tāmāns perform ño in three days, Dunci/ Nevār in a week, and Ghevā in 49 days. Mar. /Apr. (Caitra), Aug./Sep. (Bhādra), and Dec./Jan. (Paush) are thought to be auspicious months for Ghevā. Tāmāns follow precaution while doing Ghevā. Otherwise, the dead person turns into evil spirits. After Ghevā on the name of the dead, the butter lamp is burnt at TāgmāLhuicyān (Namo Buddha) or Jyāruñakhasyōr (Baudha) or Phāwasimbu (Svayambhu) for three years. After the death ritual, they keep the dead body's residue (Astu) and make a Buddhist shrine or monument (Stupa /Māne). Some people issue the souvenir of the dead person.

Conclusion

After the advent of democracy in 1990 A.D., the ethnic resurgence instilled zeal and hope among the indigenous ethnic people of Nepal. Tamangs have also initiated to reform their ritual according to Buddhist traditions. Their rituals are guided by Panc Sila and Buddhist precepts. Like Hamlet's predicament, the shaving of the head, offering *dagbatti* to the parents and use of a white strip of cloth on the head by the son of the deceased were some

paradoxical things among Lamas and common Tamang folks. Lama claims that *dagbatti* should be given to his clients by himself. Shaving hair, covering head by a white cloth, avoiding salt and oil in the mourning period are Hindu traditions. They want to keep away their rituals from Hindus influence for 250 years. As matter of fact, the common folks in the rural areas are following their age old practice. The sacrifice of goat or buffalo has been obsolete especially on the death of Tamang funeral day and big death purification feast as well (Tamang, 2070).

Tāmāña culture is the pivot of Lāmā, Tāmbā, and Bombo traditions. Lāmā cannot uplift the death pollution alone, and he gets the help of Tāmbā and Bombo. Tāmāña social organization, Gheḍuña is formed by Lāmā but he takes the help of Tāmbā and Bombo too. The *Gheḍuña* organization organizes the *Ghevā* function collectively. On the death of a Tāmāña member, the kith and kin of Tāmāñs help the deceased's family. The practice of gifts is different from one society to another society. In some places, they raise rice, local beer, alcoholic drinks, cold drinks, fruits, noodles, and the fund of Rs.50-250. The role of Lāmā is immense. After the death of the person, the Phovā is carried out by Lāmā. On the death of Bombo or Laptavā, another Bombo or Lāptavā makes the purification rite i.e., Silsi. Then Lāmā performs the ritual of the dead. Therefore, Tāmāña culture blends three pillars i.e., Lāmā, Tāmbā, and Bombo social institution, which is guided by Buddhism as well as primitive Bonism.

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