

Death Rituals among the Sartangs of Arunachal Pradesh

Sanjeeb Barman^a, Anga Padu^b

^aPhD Research Scholar, ^bAssociate Professor, Department of Education, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh- 791112, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Abstract

Death in the human society is inevitable without which the circle of life is incomplete. Death ritual among the tribal society is considered to be an important part of their tradition which is reflected in their culture. The practice of death ritual is significant as it is done to send the spirit to the afterlife and to protect the family from evils. Like any other tribe the Sartangs also have their unique pattern of performing rituals for the dead which can be viewed in three categories; natural death, unnatural death and infant's death, the death rituals to be followed depends on the cause of death. At the time of natural death the Sartangs hold the funeral for three days followed by Gebo, at the time of unnatural death the funeral lasts for one day while in case of an infant's death the Sartangs hold no such funeral.

KEYWORDS: Death rituals, Sartangs, Arunachal Pradesh.

1.1.Introduction:

The last rites of a person in the tribal society is considered to be an important and integral part of the tribal custom and tradition, which passes down from generation to generation, it is where the friends, relatives and family members pay homage and offer prayers for the departed soul. Every tribal society have their own unique death rituals, whenever someone dies in the tribal society, family, relatives, friends behave in a structured pattern adhering to the cultural guidelines of the particular tribe. Death rituals in the tribal society exhibit their cultural blueprint. Some tribal community view funerals as a place to mourn while others consider funeral as celebrations as it will grant a gateway to the departed soul for afterlife. The Sartangs are a small tribe primarily found in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, their settlement is primarily concentrated in four villages namely Rahung, Salari, Jerigaon and Khoina. Traditionally the Sartangs were indigenous, however, with the passage of time, the Sartangs have also adopted themselves according to their surroundings a portion of the Sartangs who are closer to the Monpa Tribe have adopted Buddhism while the remaining who are close to the Sajolang (Miji) follow the ancient tribal practices, in the recent times a small portion of the Sartangs have also started the practice of Christianity. This paper focuses on the death rituals followed by the indigenous Sartangs.

1.2.Classification of Death Rituals:

- **Natural death:** When someone dies of natural causes, the Sartangs holds the Rituals for three days and the body is buried in the village burial ground (Jumbu).
- **Unnatural death:** In the Sartang tribe if someone dies due to unnatural causes, the funeral lasts for one day and the body is buried in a separate burial ground.

- **Death of Infant (Dale):** In case of the death of an infant, the family does not hold any funerals they bury the dead body in the burial ground.

1.3. Death Rituals among the Sartangs in case of natural Death:

Humans are mortal beings, one who has taken birth on this earth, has to leave this place one day, the cause and the time of death may differ, however death is a universal truth, which no one can evade. However, the loss of a soul has a devastating effect on the family and friends. When a member of the Sartang family dies because of natural causes, the news of the dead is shared with the village elder (Goba), the elder then spreads the news among the villagers.

The funeral of the Sartangs are done in two phases, the first phase is called “Haro” which last for three days and is done immediately after the announcement of the dead. The second phase is called as “Gebo” which is done six months or 1 year after Haro. During Haro, the family calls and offer food to the spirit (Aawong) of the dead (Jiee), in the first day the Jiee is prepared for burial, the body is given new clothes without washing the body; the Sartangs believe in animal sacrifice to appease the gods, therefore they usually sacrifice a cow which is done by “Sithangu” (uncle of the deceased) during Haro.

The Sartangs carry the body to the Jumbu in bamboo stretches, all the members of the family and people from the village irrespective of gender may take part in the funeral procession, while taking the body, the Sartang priest (Chikhjee) chants their prayers for the soul’s peace. The funeral procession is led by the maternal uncle of the deceased (Basu) in order to protect the dead from the evil spirits while taking the body to the graveyard. The Basu’s face is painted black, he wears attire called as ‘Aari’ and carries traditional sword (Handu) and multiple bamboo sticks (Jukh). At the time of the inhumation, the family members stake eatables most commonly rice and fish for the dead’s journey to the afterlife.

The final burial will be done by the uncle of the deceased (Sithangu), however if the deceased was a married female, the burial will be done by her brother (Aaya).

On the second day the family members mourns for the dead followed by prayers on the third day for the departed soul. Throughout the process of Haro, the family members offer food for the spirit of the dead usually near their home kitchen area before anybody eats in the family. During Haro, the family members are not allowed to play music and dance and are restricted not to leave their home.

Once the process of Haro is complete, the family prepares for the final phase of the funeral process ‘Gebo’ which is done 6 or 1 year after Haro depending upon the family. The Sartangs believe that the rituals of Gebo are done to bid final farewell to the spirit and to send the spirit (Aawong) to its respective place in heaven. Gebo typically lasts for one day, in which the Sartang priest (Romo) say prayers for the spirit’s eternal peace and to protect the family members from evil spirits. During Gebo, usually a cow is sacrificed and the friends and members of the village are offered food.

1.4. Death Rituals among the Sartangs in case of unnatural Death:

When a member of the family dies of unnatural cause among the Sartangs, the funeral lasts for one day which is termed as 'Jonaha' and the body is immediately buried on the same day on a separate burial ground, during 'Jonaha' the village members will clean the village this process is called as 'Sohoting'. The Sartangs believe that when someone dies of unnatural cause, the evil spirits might haunt the family and the village; therefore to eliminate the evil spirits from the village and to protect the family members, the Sartangs holds prayers called as 'Mohoting'. After Jonaha, the family will prepare for 'Jonasa' which should be done 2 or 3 days after Jonaha. The Jonasa is conducted primarily to send the spirit to heaven and for the safe passage a cow is usually sacrificed to please the gods. Once the rituals are over, the family members of the deceased have to adhere to some food restrictions for a year, this process is called 'HIM', for a whole year the family members will not be allowed to eat wild meat, fish and certain plants which have red stem such as sugarcane, banana blossom, mushroom etc.

1.5. Infant's Death:

When an infant, who has not learned to speak yet, dies, the Sartangs does not hold any rituals for the dead. The infant is immediately buried in the village burial ground (Jumbu). The family members mourns for the dead, however no rituals are performed for the spirit.

1.6. Conclusion:

The death rituals among the Sartangs is considered to be an integral part of their traditions which have been passed down from generation to generation; however with the passage of time these practices have been costumed which slightly varies from village to village. At the present times only the indigenous Sartangs mostly settled in Khoina and Jerigaon are performing the indigenous death rituals; those Sartangs who have taken Buddhism and Christianity perform the death rituals according to the prescribed norms of their respective religions.

Acknowledgement:

The Authors extends their gratitude to Mr. Chawang Tashi Matadu, President, All Sartang Students' Union (ASSU), Khoina Village, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh for sparing his valuable time to provide the authors the necessary details needed to write this paper.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000165-000>
- John, S. S., & Pulu, M. (2015). Funeral traditions of the Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. *Humankind*, 11, 81-98.

- Kashyap, P., & Kalita, J. K. (2022). A study of folk traditions of the Deuri tribe associated with birth and death. *Journal of positive school psychology*, 6 (3), 9035-9039.
- Khandu, P. [@PemakhaduBJP]. (2018, September 15). *Sartang is one of the smallest tribe in Arunachal with only 3000 people. They follow Buddhism with animistic practices. Here are few glimpses of their culture clicked during Tang festival at Salari in West Kameng Dist.* @PMOIndia @MinOfCultureGoI @tourismgoi #ColoursOfArunachal [tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/pemakhadubjp/status/1040868172667252736?lang=en>
- Matadu, T. C. (2023, May 5). Interview on the death rituals of Sartangs [Telephonic interview]. Barman, S. (Interviewer).
- Zaman, A. (2015). Mortuary Rite Among the Mishing Tribe in a Rural Context of Assam. *Cultural and Religious studies*, 3(4), 177-184. doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2015.04.001