

Short Communication

Bathing of the deceased person: An Ethnoarchaeological study of Gender and Funeral Rites of the Koutruk of Manipur (India)

Anish Singh Kangabam' M.C. Arunkumar

Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal-795003 (India)

Corresponding Author: - anishkangabam66@gmail.com

Abstract

The main goal of ethnoarchaeologists is to observe and study the human phenomena of discard pattern and residue formation in order to understand the relationship between behaviour and material residue. When a person is dead, the body does not simply go to the ground naturally but went in association with cultural practices. The study of funeral rites is not only studying the material remains that were collected from the burial site or surrounding area, but also the practices that are related to the intentional treatment of death. Also, gender plays their specific role in such practices. The present ethnoarchaeological study focuses on the studying of bathing ceremony of the deceased which is a part of funeral rites. It is an attempt to understand the meaningful practices of funeral rites among the scheduled caste group of the Meitei who lived in the Koutruk village, Imphal west district, Manipur (India). From the study, it was found that there is traditional way of bathing the death body by the Koutruk people. And also, the significance of gender is seen in the funeral rites.

Keywords: Ethnoarchaeologists, Bathing, Funeral rites, Gender, Koutruk, Manipur

Introduction

Archaeology is the study of human past through material remains. Archaeological evidences are incomplete and fragmentary. To be able to understand the meaning of archaeological evidence and reconstruct the culture of past societies, it is necessary to study the living simple societies that are non-industrialized. Hence, there is need for ethnoarchaeological study. Ethnoarchaeology may be defined as the study, from an archaeological perspective, of material culture based on verbal information about artifacts obtained from person, or their direct descendants, who were involved with the productions (Oswalt, 1974). It is also defined as the direct observation field study of the form, manufacture, distribution, meaning, and use of artifacts and their institutional setting and social unit correlates among the living, non-industrial peoples for the purpose of constructing better explanatory models to aid archaeological analogy and inference (Stanislawski, 1974). As the ethnographic methods and observations have a long

history of use by workers concerned with the reconstruction of prehistoric human behaviour and cultural patterns based on archaeological data (Stiles, 1977), ethnographic studies plays an important place in archaeologists still today.

The Koutruk people believe that there is life after dead and the released soul of the death went to a spiritual place. There is certain connection with the living and the welfare of the deceased soul in the spiritual place. The burial practices perform by the people play as an important means for the welfare of the deceased soul. Otherwise, if the survivors treated the deceased body with bad manner, then the soul will not stay in peace and also in return the survivors will also suffer from misfortune. Such beliefs manipulate the way of burial practices among the Koutruk people.

The burial ceremony cannot be performed by the family members only. It is a community work which is carried out by the family members, neighbors, relatives, friends and other villagers. The people who came to participate the funeral ceremony will took various important roles to make the ceremony successful. The successful ceremony here means the ceremony must be performing in proper manner according to their tradition. It was found that both men and women have their important place in running the system of the society. This study focuses on the bathing ceremony of the deceased which is the first stage of the burial practices among the Koutruk People, Manipur.

Materials and Methods

In this study, both primary and secondary data are used. Primary data were collected from the Koutruk village through pilot survey, rapport establishment and informal interview. Secondary data are from the book and other online sources.

The People

Koutruk village is located in the north-western side of the Imphal West District, Manipur. It is surrounded by Senjam Chirang in the north, Kadangban in the south, Phumlou in the east and Bethel in the west. The village is inhabited by the Meitei Caste community (Loi). Meitei Caste communities are of Mongoloid stock. The people of Koutruk are mostly farmers, distillers and pig rearers. About the origin and name of the village there is a story that in course of her journey Phouoibee Lairembi (the Goddess of crops) forgot to reach the village, so the village is known as Koutruk, derived from the word 'Kaothokpa' meaning forgotten.

About the origin of the people, it was believed that the peoples were migrated from the Nongmaijing Ching in the early times and settled in this village. It was also believed that the people belong to the main surname namely Ningthoujam, Leishangthem and Thounaojam were coming and form this village for the first time. After forming this village, different small surname living in this village were migrated from various region.

Bathing of the Deceased

Both men and women have their importance in the society from various aspects. After the death of a person, bathing of the deceased as a part of funeral rites is found to be performing in many communities across the world. The Koutruk people also perform the bathing of the deceased as a part of funeral. They have their unique traditional way of treating the dead body. This paper is an attempt to understand the traditional way of bathing the deceased person and also the importance of gender in such cultural practices.

The funeral rites of Koutruk people constituted by various stages and bathing of the deceased is the first stage. There are certain arrangements before the bathing of the deceased. The bathing ceremony is taken place in the courtyard. Just after the death of a person, the family member was trying to make the body of the deceased person to sit on a chair in the courtyard. The deceased must be in sitting position while bathing and must maintain its posture until the bathing is done. In order to prevent the death body from falling and make the death body to stay in its sitting position, someone is going to hold and support the death body so as to maintain the posture till the bathing is over. The death body is then kept ready for bathing ceremony. Meanwhile, the family member prepares warm water for bathing. They used warm water as they show their care and love towards the person even though he/she is already detached from them. They warm the water in their house somewhere at the kitchen or backyard. They also use “Chenggee” (water that washed rice) to clean the body of the deceased considering that bathing with “Chenggee” as worthy. The bathing is done by the one of the family member of the deceased.

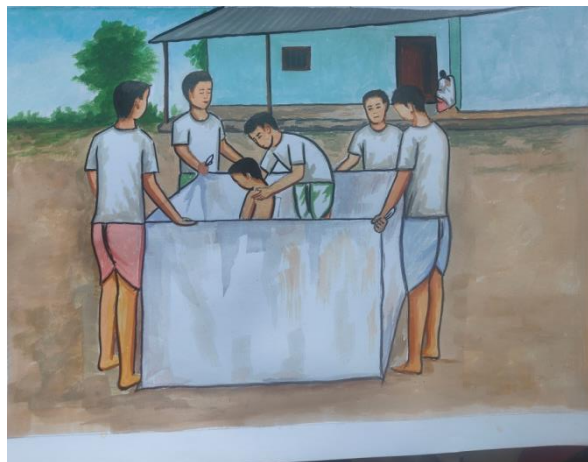


Figure: - Bathing of the deceased (drawn by Tulu Elangbam)

In bathing the deceased, the bathing scene is surrounded in all the four directions (like four wall of a room) by a white cloth in such a way that the bathing scene is not visible by others. There were four people for holding the white cloth. Each one of them was standing in the corner and

firmly held the cloth in their hands. The four people who are holding the cloth were the family members or the close kins of the deceased. There is no particular age for these people but usually done by elders. Moreover, if the gender of the deceased is female then all the bathing activities were done by women only. And if it is male then all the bathing activities were done by men only. Here, it is evident of respecting the body of the person even after the dead.

Results

From the study, it was found that the Koutruk people have their meaningful traditional way of treating the dead body as a part of their cultural system. The people believed that treating the deceased body in good manner will help the deceased soul to stay peacefully in the spiritual place. Bathing with “*Chenggee*” shows the disposal of death is done with great care but not just simply bathing. The act of surrounding the deceased person by white cloth in all the four directions indicates the respect of the body of a person even after dead. Moreover, the importance of gender in cultural practices is also evident in this study.

Conclusions

Careful and systematic ethno-archaeological research on bathing of the deceased can make significant contributions to the understanding of the past societies. The consideration of the meaning of male and female in cultural practices constitutes a useful ethnographic analogy for investigating the importance of gender role in the past societies.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. M.C. Arunkumar, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University for the guidance in this research work and Tulu Elangbam for the picture. At the same time, I would like extend my thankfulness to the people of Koutruk village for their support and help during my work.

References

- Oswalt, W.H. (1974). Ethnoarchaeology. In *Ethnoarchaeology* (eds) C.B. Donnan & C.W. Clewlow. Monograph IV, Institute of Archaeology, UCLA.
- Stanislowski, M.B. (1974). The relationships of ethnoarchaeology, traditional and systems archaeology. In *Ethnoarchaeology* (eds) C.B. Donnan & C.W. Clewlow, Monograph IV, Institute of Archaeology, UCLA.
- Stiles, Daniel (April, 1977). Ethnoarchaeology: A discussion of methods and applications. *Man*, New series. 12(1):87-103.