

Talah Thobo: A Study on the Funerary Rites of the Liangmai

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Abstract: Death is inevitable, and it is a universal phenomenon that has different meanings and practices across cultures. Like many communities around the world, the Liangmai also considers death as one of the important life cycles of a human. They also believe in the migration of souls or *hiunah* to *Charuiram* (the land of the dead) after physical death. The idea of the next world is deeply rooted in the religious and cultural practices of the people. As such, their beliefs are reflected in some of their funerary practices, such as the offering of food and drink to the deceased and the use of traditional rituals to guide the soul to its final resting place. They also perform a common ritual known as *talaha thonbo* for all the deaths that occurred in a year during the festival *Chakea Ngee*. All these practices are important in ensuring that the soul has a peaceful transition to the afterlife. Thus, a funeral rite is considered to be of great importance in Liangmai culture. The study aims to provide insights into Liangmai's funerary rituals and performances and the belief system associated with them. It also highlights the various ceremonies and offerings performed to ensure a smooth transition of the soul to *Charuiram* (the land of the dead). Furthermore, the beliefs associated with the final journey into *Charuiram* are also elaborately discussed.

Keywords: Chakea Ngee, Charuiram, Nkhondin Mataiboh, Talah thonbo

1. INTRODUCTION

For the Liangmai, death is considered the departure of a soul from its temporary dwelling. This belief is rooted in the idea that the soul will continue to exist in another realm, and therefore death is not seen as an end but rather a transition. Death allows the souls to be eternally 'free from the bondage' (Devi, 2004: 104). The Liangmai cosmology is divided into two realities: the living realm called *Kadiiri* and the land of the dead, or *charuiram*. They also believe that *Apou Charawang* (the Supreme Being), looks after both realms. The concept of *charuiram* is deeply rooted in Liangmai mythology and is believed to be an abode of pure and righteous souls. It is said that those who have lived a pure and virtuous life are granted entry into *Charuiram*. The immoral are denied entry, forcing them to wander around the realm of the living and cause havoc. Later on, such souls will be transformed into dew and finally vanish in the air. However, for the righteous, their soul will transit into another realm and undergo at least eight transmigrations before finally being incarnated as the butterfly. As such, the Liangmai do not have a notion of heaven or hell as widely found in some dominant religious systems around the world.

Liangmai also recognized the presence of the soul, or *pahiunah* which dwells on all the living bodies. As a result of physical death, the soul will be free and move to another realm, *charuiram*. It is because of this belief that the soul is considered to be still alive even after the death of an individual. As such, food and drinks are served daily to the deceased's soul by the family members until they perform a final funerary rite known as *talaha thonbo* for all the dead souls during the *Chakea Ngee* festival. The deceased's soul needs to be guided by the living toward its new destination; thus, elaborate rituals are performed during the funeral rites for the smooth transition of the soul into another world. The death ritual of the Liangmai follows a unique way of presenting their traditions and practices. Every dead soul will be given a final ritual known as *Talah thonbo* at the end of the year. The *Talah thonbo* ritual is performed to ensure that the soul of the deceased is at peace and does not return to cause harm. It involves offerings of food, drinks, and other items to appease the spirit and seek forgiveness for any wrongdoings committed during their lifetime. This is seen as a way of honoring and respecting the deceased's journey into the next realm. This study is based on participant observation and interview methods in an attempt to understand the customary practices of the funerary rites of the Liangmai.

2. A BRIEF NOTE ON THE LIANGMAI

The Liangmai constituted an important ethnic community in North East India. The term Liangmai refers to "Liang" meaning 'one group, and "Mai" meaning people. Thus, Liangmai means "one group of people." They occupied a vast area of land between 24° 92' N and 25° 68' N and longitudes 93° 32' E and 93° 94' E, spreading across the states of Manipur and Nagaland. Liangmai mainly inhabits the district of Tamenglong, and Senapati, Kangpokpi, and other small groups are also found in other parts of Manipur. In

Nagaland, they are found in the district of Paren. The Liangmai also concentrated sparsely in the Halflong area of Assam. They speak a language called Lianglad or Liangmai. The total population of Liangmai is about 64,608, of which 48,373 live in Manipur and 16,235 in Nagaland (2001 census).

The Liangmai tribe's migration history remains a topic of debate among scholars, with some claiming it to be from China and others from Mongolian regions. Kaikhamang, in his book "Langmai Lungwangbo Racham Khatdi Talungzai", maintains that they moved out of China and settled at Siangluang, which he believes to be somewhere in present-day Arunachal Pradesh. After which they moved to Makhaing (presently in Mao, Manipur) (Daimai, 2018:2-3). Another scholar, Dichamang Pamei, also subscribes to the same notion. However, according to Pamei, the place Siangluang is considered somewhere in China (Pamei, 2016:3). Another scholar, Maisuangdibou, maintains that the Liangmai migrated from Mongolian regions (not necessarily present Mongolia) somewhere in the 7th century BC, during the early construction of the Great Wall of China (Maisuangdibou, 2015:10). Despite the claims and counterclaims from a different scholar, as there are no written scripts, the tribe's history of the migration is established through oral literature such as folk songs, folk tales, folk sayings, etc. The Liangmai are listed as a Scheduled Tribe in accordance with the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011, Indian Constitution.

The Liangmai are communitarian, and there is no system of class or caste among the people (Maisuangdibou 2015: 20). The Liangmai tribe's social structure is based on patriarchal values and has a matrimonial system that follows both endogamy and exogamy. Liangmai is an agrarian society, and most of their cultural practices, including their festivals and celebrations, revolve around agricultural activities. Their traditional economy is based on shifting cultivation, hunting, and fishing, but with the passage of time, they have also adopted modern agriculture practices. Additionally, the Liangmai people have a strong belief in animism, which plays a significant role in their daily lives and cultural practices. Despite facing modernization and outside influences, the Liangmai have managed to preserve their unique cultural identity and continue to pass down their traditions from generation to generation. They have a rich cultural heritage and are known for their folk songs, dances, and handicrafts.

3. CHAKEA NGEE OVER VIEW

Chakea Ngee is celebrated for three days during the month of *Chakeahiu* (December) and marks the final fiesta of the year. During *Chakea Ngee*, people gather to celebrate the end of the year, reflect on their achievements, and give thanks for the blessings received throughout the year. The festival is a celebration of dual purpose, viz., for the dead and the living. Primarily, the festival is celebrated by the living as a festival of thanksgiving to *Apou Charawang* (the Supreme Being) for his blessings during the year. They will perform dances, sing, and organize different games. The festival also marks *takum charii* or the end of the year. During the festival, people gather to offer food and drinks to the spirits of their ancestors. In other words, this festival is an important cultural event for the Liangmai people and is celebrated with great enthusiasm. It provides an opportunity for the community to come together and honor their ancestors while also celebrating the end of the year and new beginnings. Furthermore, a final rite of passage known as *Talah-thonbo* is performed for every individual who has died during the year. As mentioned above, the festival *Chakea Ngee* is celebrated for two important reasons: for the living and the dead. However, this paper discussed the aspect relating to the death rituals.

4. DEATH RITUALS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Death is the last rite of passage for an individual. Like many communities around the world, The Liangmai also considers death as one of the important life cycles of a human. They treat the dead body with the highest respect and follow various procedures until the burial ceremony. The entire process of the 'ritual journey' can last for months in some cases (Hagjer, 2022: 2). When a person dies, they will immediately kill a rooster known as *kaphakrui* and hang it near the corpse. It is believed that the sacrificed rooster will go and tell the people of *Charuiram* (the land of the dead) about their arrival. Someone close to the family or close relatives will inform the people by *Makiabo* (yelling). In some cases, they will 'beat a drum' announcing the death of someone of 'high status' (Kaikhamang, 2018:66). On hearing the announcement, young boys will go to the jungle and collect a creeper called *Nkiang* (which is locally found). On their return, they will smash the plant and bathe the dead body[i]. The head of the child will be shaved; in the case of a male, they will perform *rinbo* (shaving the lower part of the head) (Tunchapbo, 2012; 57). After this, the body will be wrapped in a new cloth and placed on the bed. They will also place *maruisii* (a kind of seed found in the wild) near the corpse. On the death of a person, the Liangmai will kill an animal known as *Chagengübo*[ii]. This is done to show respect to the deceased. The animal to be killed depends on the economic condition of the family or on the instructions of the deceased person before their death. In the meanwhile, some adults will go towards the 'village vicinity' and prepare a coffin from fine wood (Kaikhamang, 2018:66). In the meantime, the nail of the pointing finger of the deceased will be cut off, pressed on the ginger, and given to someone responsible in the family.



Figure 1.: *Chahiu*

The ginger is considered and believed to be the soul of death person, or *chahiu*. Therefore, they will keep it safe; they will wrap it in a piece of cloth and carry it on their waist. This practice is a part of the cultural belief that the soul of the deceased will remain in the ginger until it is transferred to *charuiram*. It is also believed that carrying the ginger will protect the family from any harm or evil spirits. The Liangmai believe that even after the death of a person, the soul is still alive. They will offer food and wine till they perform *Talah thonbo* (disposal of items) on *Chakea Ngee*, this practice is called *Tadiak khaibo*. The corpse will be placed on a bed until the coffin is ready. As the corpse is placed inside the coffin, they will perform an omen, '*Nkhondin mataibo or Tatingden Mataibo* (Niumai, 2019: 75). To perform this omen, they will tie the coffin with *nkhariang* (basket strap), beat the coffin using *taphuakbon* (a kind of leaf locally found), and lift the coffin. This is done to know which god took the life of a deceased person. A young man will ask about every suspicious god or spirit and lift the coffin at the same time. If the coffin feels heavy, it means that the god they are asking about is responsible for the death. If it feels light, they will move on to the next god until they find the one responsible. As he lifts, he will say, "*debo rah niu natu lubo lo? Tadui rah, maluangra, etc... niu weh sai langkuangkum masenbilo* [Which god takes your life? Water Gods, Mountain Gods, etc... If it is, let it be as light as cotton.] [Literal translation]. The omen is believed to help identify the cause of death and prevent similar deaths from happening in the future. It is a significant ritual and is performed with the utmost respect and reverence for the deceased.

People will gather around the corpse as a sign of accompaniment and love to the deceased person. Young boys and girls will sit awake the whole night, accompanying the bereaved family and singing different songs to keep the environment lively. The next day, as the sun rises, young boys will prepare a grave for the burial. The burial site is usually carefully chosen and the deceased family will choose a leader who is a close companion of the deceased person or any person from a different clan to perform *charao ranbo* (clearing the grave site). It is usually done by choosing a site for burial and cleaning the site. As he marks the site, he will pronounce "*Kadih parah kasabo marealo, tasing tatuh kasabo niu khamdulo*" (let this land be free from any evil) [literal translation]. Following this, the leader will dig out some of the earth using a spade, and the rest will follow. There are three types of grave practices used by the Liangmai: *rouding* (vertical grave), *raophi* (horizontal grave), and *chariirao* (war grave). *Rouding* is a type of grave where the coffin is placed in a vertical position and the grave is dug to about 5 feet and again to about 6 feet to the south. The second type is the *Raophi*, whose style is similar to the first but is dug about 3 feet to the south side to place the coffin in a horizontal position. *Chariirao* of the last type is the most simple and common practice. In this type, they will first dig about 6 to 7 feet deep and again remove earth about 2 feet deep to accommodate the coffin.

When everything is prepared, they will proceed to the burial site with the coffin facing its head towards the south. On reaching the burial site, the priest will perform the burial rites of the individual by invoking *Apou charawang* (the Supreme Being). He will light up a thatch and throw it into the grave. It is believed that the soul will use the thatch as the flame on the way to *Charuiram*. The priest then performs another ritual by throwing a paddy into the pit eight times. However, the last one is for the deceased soul (Pamai, 2017: 47). The throwing of grain symbolizes that the soul will have a prosperous life in *chariuram*. Then, two youths will move inside the grave and place the coffin and other items in accordance with their value and ritual implications. Important items and belongings of the deceased will also be buried with them. If the deceased is a man, items like a spear, knife, bow, and arrows will be kept. In the case of a female, some items like a basket, weaving materials, a shawl, etc. are kept alongside the coffin and included in the burial. Finally, the priest will perform another ritual by pouring wine and offering food on the grave. With this, the burial ritual comes to an end; however, the final ritual *Talah thonbo* still waits to be performed on *Chakea Ngee*.

5. TALAH THONBOH

Talah thonbo (the disposal of items) is a ritualistic activity performed on the final day of *Chakea Ngee*. During *talah thonbo*, items are disposed of, symbolizing the end of their earthly journey and the beginning of their spiritual one. This ritual is an important part of funerary rites performance ensuring the grand departure of the deceased souls to the *Charuiram* (land of the dead). On the final day of the festival *Chakea Ngee*, the elders will come ho-hoing to all the families where deaths have occurred during the year. The families will offer *talah* (items including rice, wine, and *chahiu*) placed on *mariukuang* (winnower). Then they will move towards the north village gate five times, performing the *kasai malai* (movement of the dead)[iii]. Following that, they will proceed to the ritual site near the southern gate of the village called *talah thonphung* (site of *talah* disposal), and perform a ritual. The *singku* (priest) will distribute *tagai* (a kind of grass locally found) to every individual and have them place it between their fingers and behind their ears. He will then pronounce a ritual saying, “Hey! *Naliudi Thainai ra nalam tammide, aliudi aliu lam tam mide. Nalam tamjiu tadsulo karingmai tuh soudiakjiu. Nangdi atuh mari phuitaloh, aliu di marii phui lakde*” (Hey! Oh all you dead, from today on, go to your own place and leave the living here. Do not look back as we do the same.) [Literal translation]. As soon as he finishes, he will throw the *talah* from



Figure 2.: *Talah*

mariukuang. The site will be fenced with sharpened bamboo facing south. It is believed that the dead soul could not cross the fence after the performance *talah thonbo*. After this, they will return to the village. On the way, the *singku* will say, “*thainai gasu kasaimai paliu lam tam mine, kaphui niu mide*” (the dead have gone to their place; it’s taboo for anyone to weep for the dead again) [literal translation]. The family members will perform a final ritual called ‘*Chahiuphumboh*’ (the burying of *Chahiu*). They will dig out a piece of land on top of the grave and bury the *chahiu* (a piece of ginger-containing nail). They will offer wine and other edible platelets. After the ritual, they will place a slab of stone called a *charaotuh* (gravestone). When all this is done, every villager will bathe and put on new clothes, gather at *chawangphung* (the king’s courtyard), and celebrate another level of the festival known as *karing ngee* (festival of living).

6. PASSAGE TO CHARUIRAM

The concept of another world is deeply rooted in the cultural-religious practice of the Liangmai. The Liangmai believe in the existence of the afterworld, or *Charuiram* (land of the dead). The afterworld is believed to be a place where the spirits of the dead reside and continue to influence the living world. The Liangmai also believe in ancestor worship and perform rituals to communicate with their ancestors in the afterworld. As such, when someone dies, the living prepares every necessity for the soul so that it will be able to enter the *Charuiram*. Souls that fail to enter the *Charuiram* stay back on *kadii* in spirit forms and cause trouble for the family and people.

The idea of the other world of the Liangmai can be studied by understanding their beliefs and practices. An in-depth study into their cosmology and concept, it is found that there are different stages or hurdles to be overcome by the soul to reach *Charuiram*. The Liangmai tries to bring out this philosophy in the real world using different elements and objects found in their surroundings. There are six different steps on the way to *Charuiram*. They are namely: *chahiubung*, *mathakphung*, *chakahdui*, *ntupui*, *charah-buitung*, and *charah-takung*. After the performance of *talah thonbo*

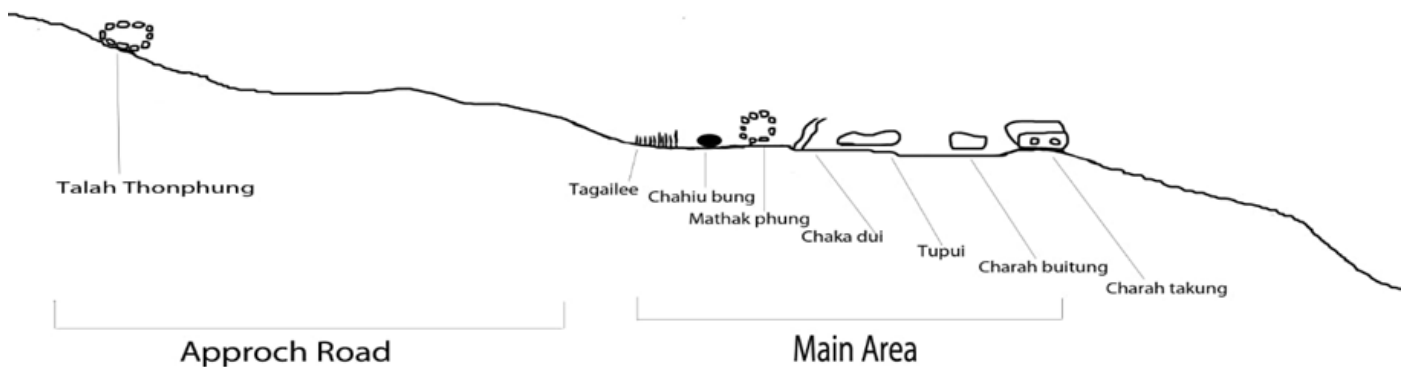


Figure 3.- Charui Npui (Passage to the Next World)

the souls will leave the *kadii* and move on to the journey towards *charuiram*. As the souls move down, they will meet *chahiubung*. *Chahiubung* is a mirror that is found abundantly. Every soul will pick the best to take along on their journey. It is said that there is a continuous war on the journey. As such, if one is choosy in their choice, they will be killed in the war. After picking up the *chahiubung* for themselves, they will meet at another place called *mathakbam*. *Mathakbam* is a place where every soul comes and rests before proceeding toward the *charuiram*. They will unwrap their food packets and eat them. Therefore, the Liangmai offer different edible items during *Talah thonbo* and *chahiu phumbo*. After the grand feast, they will move on to the next place, called *Chakahdui* River. This river divides the *kadii* and *charuiram*. As they reach it, they will find a tree called *taluibang/chiuuibang* and a *tajuang tanpou* (old monkey) waiting for them. *Tajuang tanpao* will help them cross the river. If someone is not married, he will mock them[iv]. In the case of women, he will sleep with them. After they cross the *chakahdui*, they will meet *tupui*. She will ask them to look for a louse in her hair. However, when they try to look for it, they will find caterpillars instead. Therefore, to trick *tupui*, they will break *maruisi*. After which they will meet *Charah Buitung*. Every animal killed for *chagengiibo* will be tied here. Finally they will meet *charah takung*. They will jump and fly to *Charuidi* / the land of the dead. *Charuiram* is believed to be alternate realities that exist alongside the physical world, and *Charah Takung* is considered the gateway to the afterlife. The act of jumping and flying to *Charuidi* symbolizes the journey of the soul from the physical world to the land of the dead.

7. CHANGES AND CONTINUITY

Many practices and traditions have lost their traces in the midst of modernity and rapid development. Most of the traditional practices have been abandoned by the people for various reasons. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Liangmai had experienced a paradigm shift in their cultural practices. This shift was primarily due to the influence of Christianity and the impact of British colonialism in the region. As a result, many of their traditional rituals and beliefs were replaced with Christian practices and Western culture. With the introduction of Christianity among the people, there has been a tussle between the newly converted Christian and the traditional practitioner. As Pamei recorded in his book "*Tingbenpatbo Racham*" he writes "...who had been following the traditional religion becomes a Christian for any reason, and his name is recorded in the church register, certain physical changes must follow. If he was a male: (i) he must get a European-style haircut; (ii) if available, his loin cloth will be replaced by a half-pant or shorts; (iii) the traditional ornaments he wore around his knees-*kakeng* or *phaisang*, necklaces, earring, bracelets, bangle, and other embellishments must be discarded". (Pamei, 2016: 146). With more people converting to the new religion, there was a gradual change in the outlook toward their culture. This excerpt highlights the cultural impact of religious conversion and how it led to changes in traditional practices. It also suggests that the adoption of European-style clothing and grooming was seen as a symbol of embracing Christianity. Furthermore, many of the items and artifacts were destroyed, believing it was sin and depravity. However, on the other hand, modernity took root among the people. Now one can see an interlacing between cultural practices and Christian tenets. This has led to the emergence of unique expressions of faith and spirituality among the Liangmai. These expressions often reflect a rich and diverse tapestry of religious traditions. Most of the death rituals are seen as abandoned by the people, while some are retained if not modified to suit the teaching. With the change in their belief system, many cultural practices are no longer practiced by the people. However, one can still see the traditional practices among the people who still follow their indigenous religion. Despite the changes in belief systems, death rituals remain an important aspect of cultural heritage and identity for the Liangmai. These practices often serve as a way to honor and remember loved ones who have passed away.

8. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, the performance of the death ritual is complicated and takes place in very unique ways among the Liangmai. It takes a very long period with elaborate rites and rituals to complete its final ceremony. The death ritual is considered one of the

most important events in the Liangmai community, as it is believed to help the deceased person's soul transition to the afterlife. The process involves various stages, including mourning, offerings, and prayers, which are carried out by family members and community members. The death ritual starts the moment death occurs. Every vital activity related to the burial ceremony and ritual is performed. In the Liangmai society, it is seen that there are two levels of performing death rituals: family level and community level. The family level covers the entire process from the time of death until the burial of the deceased. Every expense and other necessary expenses are borne by the deceased's family. On the other hand, the community level is performed by the village council and covers the post-burial rituals known as *Talah thonbo*. At this level, death rituals are performed in general. As a result, they will plan a mass ritual for every deceased person who dies in a given year. Thus, *talaha thonbo* is one of the vital activities in the funerary rites of the Liangmai. Among the Liangmai performing the final death ritual ranges from a day to several months as they wait for the final ritual *talaha thonbo* during *Chakea Ngee*. Furthermore, the *chahiu* /ginger will also be buried after the ritual, symbolizing that the soul has gone to its proper place. *Chakea Ngee* not only gives a sense of merriment and feasting to the people but also gives a way to honor the dead that is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious practices of the Liangmai.

End Notes

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- [i] They consider it a detergent in the land of the dead. It signifies a spiritual bath before entering *charuiram*.
 [ii] In some villages, *chagengiibo* is also performed on the second day of the *chakea* festival in the name of the deceased person.
 [iii] They will move around the village ten times; however, the number will be counted oddly. They believe the odd number system is used in *Charuiram*.
 [iv] Unmarried bachelors will be advised to steal or take *tagai* (a kind of tall grass found locally). It is believed that the sound of *tagai* can deceive the *tajuangtanpao* as he approaches *chakhadui*.

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