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Old Mizo Deathways: The Cultural Construction of Death and Dying

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"In all societies, regardless of whether their customs call for festive or restrained behaviour, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences."(Huntington & Metcalf, 1979:2)

Abstract

All cultures of the world, from time immemorial have devised a response to death and dying so as to come to terms with the physical end of life. Such is the case in Mizo culture that has constructed an elaborate categorization of death and ways of dying so as to find meaning in this cessation. The article makes an effort to construct how the culture in the pre- Christian past explained death, ritualized dying and burial while making a crucial comment on the origins of Mizo belief system, identity and self definition. The signification of the dead body is analysed through these different deathways while positing it against the Christian tradition and its treatment of the dead. The construction of death reveals the values and cultural ethos that have remained a constant after having been caught up in modernity and its fundamental alterities and threat of drastic change due to forces like globalization, change in religion and the eventual evolution of time. Yet, the ultimate objective is the questioning and problematization of these concerns that are concluded to be complicitous in the crumbling of Mizo cultural values while emphasising on the continued importance of community and society.

Key words: Mizo, Culture, Death, Ritual.

I

Death is a culturally constructed idea. Because death is a reflection of sociability, rituals and beliefs surrounding the issue of death and burial must therefore be viewed as a cultural construct. Such activities and rituals highlight the most explicit moorings and values, revealing how a people conceive of itself and the world around them, its social organizations and institutions it holds dear. Many cultures of the world deal with the finality of death through a belief in a

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cycle of rebirth while some others practice rituals to redefine allegiances and relationships among the living. In the Mizo context, the cultural construction of death has always been an elaborate textualization and expression of a complex belief system preoccupied in equal proportions with both the world of the living and the dead. Recent shifts in history and belief have resulted in ritual practices and customs undergoing a huge change although the sharing of grief through social support and participation remain a constant.

The twentieth century has brought immense social and cultural changes since the coming of white missionaries and the successful establishment of Christianity. For example: the planting of an indigenous belief system by a people into Christianity or *saphun* has resulted in the eventual disappearance of a once thriving ritualistic system. This shift is reflected in notions surrounding the afterlife, eschatological beliefs, mortuary rites and certain traditions and customs. Although both the Mizo pre-Christian and the Christian tradition treat death as a 'process', a stage conceptualized and elaborated by Van Gennepin his work *Rites of Passage,*as a 'liminal' phase of rites of passage, this 'process' is without a doubt socially and culturally defined. The modern Mizo bury their dead with the belief in the Christian notion of the soul judged as either good or bad, depending on his/her actions in society thus eventually determining his/her entry into heaven or condemnation into the fiery pit of hell. Since the life lived determines the condition of the soul in the afterlife, it can also be said that the afterlife controls actions of the living. Likewise, in the pre-Christian belief system, the afterlife has great bearings upon the living. Men who have lived a righteous life and completed required social rituals for taking of titles are the *thangchhuahpa* - the only ones worthy of paradise, in this case called *pialral.* The rest of society judged as unworthy of *pialral* find themselves in the afterlife 'living' in *mitthikhua* or land of the dead.

The narrative surrounding death in the Christian world is a universal story to a large extent, sharing mortuary ritual, observation of a wake, up to the point of burial. More particularly, in the Mizo experience, Christianity has created a new landscape. By 1935, through government regulation, graveyards slowly developed into a standardised system of burial with clearly demarcated locations while simultaneously ending the traditional burial of the dead which was random and unplanned. The new regulated system succeeded in enabling the acceleration of the new Christian religion. It further resulted in rearranging and changing the attitude surrounding complex issues of mortality and corporeality. The effect of a new landscape in the mind of the modern Christian Mizo is found in the creation of a once nonexistent spatiality of the graveyard, the gravesite and cemetery while also creating a new kind of

veneration of a new Christian God rather than veneration of an ancestor. The commandment "Thou shalt not worship other Gods" has found fulfillment through the ritual of a Christian burial which effectively demoted importance of ancestors and their presence in the psyche. This further meant that the common class could now have their own loci for remembrance and expression of grief as opposed to a time when such rituals of an elaborate burial and raising of a monolith of commemoration were reserved only for Chieftains or *thangchhuahpa* - men with titles.

Many scholars have explored and studied a comprehensive comparison of transition period between pre-Christian and post-Christian Mizo society and in the North East Indian region as a whole. The common analysis is in the idea that Christianity made inroads into the entire region of the North East as a 'movement' that resulted in impacting deep-rooted change on "thinking, social life, arts and architecture, education, medical care and innumerable other services." (Subba, Puthenpurakal and Puykunnel, 2009: xv). Since many scholars have studied this transition, the examination here will henceforth focus more on death as a social and cultural phenomenon in the pre-Christian Mizo society, the treatment of the 'body' of the dead, so as to bring an analytical paradigm that illustrates Mizo culture and its many facets.

The belief system of Mizo forefathers can be said to have been a cosmological one; a rich and complex relationship that illustrates man's consciousness of the world of the living and the unseen spirit world; a world coloured with sacrifices, propitiations and interjected through interlocutors. Mizos have an elaborate categorization of death and ways of dying. Every death and way of dying determines how a body is to be buried. In the case of *hlamzuih*, an infant (usually) not more than three months old who has died is not considered as a considerable loss to his clan or village, except only to his own mother. The villagers do not hold a wake nor expect young men of the village to dig his grave. Cotton soaked in the mother's breast milk is stuffed into his mouth while an egg is placed in his hand in the hope that it will lead him into the afterlife by rolling on the pathway for him to follow. (B. Lalthangliana, 2013:109) A shallow grave is randomly dug underneath the house where the infant is placed into a large pot and buried like any other item. The lack of concern is because the child is considered a non person, its body not yet attached or given a cultural and social significance, not yet important enough for adults to lose a day's work at the jhum. No superstition is attached to *hlamzuih* nor does it require any propitiation or sacrifice. On the other hand, can this reaction interpreted as a detached demeanour towards *hlamzuih* be relooked at rather as a detached acceptance of this kind of death stemming from the belief that such a death means the infant's journey into *pialral* is assured and that they will not be catapulted at or denied entry to paradise by Pawla,

thought to be reserved for only men with distinguished titles? Or can this then also imply that the infant gets to eventually reach adulthood in *mitthikhua* since the one who does not enter *pialral* will eventually enter and live in the land of the dead?

In the case of *raicheh* which is death during child birth, the entire village observes a day of rest and work of any kind is considered taboo. The taboo surrounding this kind of dying is reflected in the fear of the wondering spirit, the danger of a chance visitation into a household from someone who has just died of *raicheh*. The stigma surrounding *raicheh* is so intricately tied to social conditioning that a woman is made to get up off her back within the next two to three days after giving birth. She is made to fetch water from the stream albeit a very light load, to prove that she has recovered from the trauma of childbirth and is healthy enough to work again. If a woman dies after this act of carrying water, no one can charge the death as *raicheh*, thus freeing the family from any other social stigma and fear that is attached to it. When *raicheh* befalls a woman, her loom, clothes and even the place she would sit, the inner sanctuary of her home where she once worked, is instantaneously treated as unclean, and touching of these belongings is considered to bring ill luck. Her body and all that has come into contact with her acquire a status of irreverence and defilement. At the knowledge of a neighbour dying from such a death, a fern is gently tucked on the outer wall near the entrance of each household in the neighbourhood to symbolise a prohibited space so as to discourage her wondering spirit from entering. Unless a cleansing ritual is observed, the shadow cast by *raicheh* is considered to permeate. It is also believed that since a *raicheh* death results in a very difficult journey towards finding *mitthikhua* for the woman so the *Cheraw* or bamboo dance is performed to help ease the pain of the perilous journey and aid in finding a pathway into the land of the dead. (Lianthanga, 1999: 22).

Likewise, in the case of *sarthi* or dying an unnatural death in a most terrible manner, be it through drowning, burning in a fire, being mauled by an animal or in the hands of another, Mizos believe such an unfortunate death is followed by another such *sarthi* unless the misfortune is broken in its path by an immediate burial. The Mizo forefathers consider *sarthi* dying as befalling only the most unfortunate and therefore the burying of the body of a person dying from any such kind of death is treated with great care so as to avoid another unnatural death from following in its wake. When a *sarhi* body is taken into the house for the wake, it is taken in foot first. The body is never placed on the bed but on the floor with the head placed towards the exit. When the body is again carried out for burial, it is carried out foot first. (Dokhuma, 2008:131)

On the other hand, a sudden and unexplained death, a death from no particular illness or reasonable cause is

called *zachhamlak* or 'deaths occurring to fulfill a hundred deaths'.This category of dying stems from the old belief that at the very least, a hundred deaths will occur within the span of a year. If this number is not fulfilled, unexplainable deaths will keep occuring in the form of what was believed to be *zachhamlak.* In the case of *sarthi* and *raicheh*, since both categories of dying are fraught with fear, the *thlaichhiah* ritual is not performed. *Thlaichhiah* involves the slaughter of various kinds of animals after a death has occurred so as to provide a feast of meat to all who come to mourn. The philosophy behind such a practice is reflective of the communal and cultural preoccupation with the desire to be useful and beneficial to relatives and clansmen from one's own dying, through the eating of meat which in itself was a rare occasion. Any individual before dying, it is said, has a last wish which is to be able to perform the *thlaichhiah* in death. But when an inauspicious death has occurred, relatives forgo the ritual altogether. Like *sarthi* and *raicheh*, burying of an individual afflicted with epilepsy or *phungzawl* casts a dark and arcane shadow over the body of the dead. The body of an epileptic / *phungzawl* when put into the grave evinces a reaction of extreme revulsion. As soon as the body is placed into the ground, witnesses of the burial immediately scatter hoping to avoid and protect themselves from the exiting spirit that is believed to have previously occupied the dead body.

These deathways do not represent all categories of death. What they do reveal is the treatment of the 'body' of the dead; its social and cultural signification and the role death plays in forging of relationships and reinforcing social institutions and social hierarchies. Not merely a body neutral or a corpse to be gotten rid of, the body is symbolic and representative of the Mizo human condition. The culture attributes meaning to the body and to rituals surrounding death to symbolise the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved; that death does not mean an end to the ties that bind the living with the dead and furthermore, practical life having a direct bearing on death and burial rituals. As compared to the Cartesian philosophy of the dualism of mind and body which has for hundreds of years informed Western epistemology, modern science and medicine, the treatment of the dead body and the corporeal body by the Mizo is different in that the body is a synthesis of both mind and body and not necessarily separate from each other. Does this synthesis stem from the belief system of Mizo forefathers being cosmogonic? Both mind and body is given equal importance as the existence of both is necessary to experience life and death. A death ritual is made complete when the body and soul of the deceased coexist. The body is not treated merely as an attachment to be shed or lacking agency. When an individual has died, the family still experiences the presence of the dead by acknowledging his presence by preparing meals, including him during meal time by placing a plate

where the dead used to sit, calling on him to join the living relatives, etc. The significance of the body therefore, both living and dead, is treated as sacred. The dead body is venerated and said to belong to both the owner of the body and the community as a whole. Since all categories of death require the presence of the community, the society as an institution is given paramount status. No family within a village can exclude community participation as mourning and death rituals cannot be conducted without the community given an agency. Likewise mourning and the pain of loss finds meaning through the acknowledgement and participation of the community.

In the rare practice known as *kuangur*, the emphasis is on the importance of the ancestor and his corporeal body, even if existing as bones only. The expensive and complex ritual, once performed only by the affluent, meant the dead was usually a Chieftain or a man who had taken titles and therefore greatly respected by his clan. The clan recognizes his status and this reciprocal relationship, powerful and influential, finds deeper meaning in rituals surrounding his death and burial. *Kuangur,* a slow drawn out process is putrefaction and decomposition of a body within the house so as to extract the bones of the beloved ancestor. His body is placed inside a hollowed out tree serving as a coffin with a constant fire lit under it to allow the body to putrefy and decay until only his bones are left behind after the bodily liquids have been removed through a hole in the bottom of the coffin. The process would take close to three months. All the while, the family was in mourning and the ritual permeated throughout the entire village. During the ritual, with the help of young men and women of the community, the relatives of the dead were to constantly provide rice beer and slaughter animals to feed the community who came to mourn the dead. (Lalchhawna, 2002:140). After the *kuangur* process, the family kept some of the bones. These bones represent the continuation of the ties that bind the past with the present, the descendants to their ancestors. The death of a man of status and the keeping of his bones enabled his living relatives and all the dead ancestors gone by to stake claim over a certain status quo. The relatives would take out the bones, once every year during the *Mim Kut* festival for the dead - wash the bones, treat it with great love and care, speak to the ancestor, tenderly oil it with pig fat oil and grieve anew while performing and reaffirming a bond with the dead. This reclaiming and restaging of status and influence within the cultural and social boundaries is an important annual performance. The integrity of the man and his body in the form of his bones becomes central to the identity of his entire clan and village. These very bones were also used for the *mitthirawp lam* ritual. Both in equal vicinity of a somber celebration of the ancestors and also an all out festive occasion, the bones which included the head and larger bones like the femur, were

covered with a cloth woven specifically for the occasion. The life size effigies made of cotton and bones of the ancestor represented the physical presence of the dead as they were placed high up on a platform, served *zu* or traditional rice wine and then carried and danced with by a large group which consisted of their close relatives and members of their village.

The intended meaning of death rituals and burial rituals seem to reflect a culture and society highly aware and conscious of social image. Both *kuangur* and *mitthirawplam* and other deathways reflect a communal and cultural expression of grief and mourning. When death occurred, mourning was self conscious and paramount. A mourner was not only cognizant of keen and observant gaze of his clan but also that of the gaze from the dead. This process of overt mourning lasted for a duration of three months, the time a dead spirit was believed to still dwell amongst their living relatives. Throughout these months, mourners were said to be in a state of *samhrampu* or bearing the demeanor of one whose relevance as a person going through the motions of grief was expressed through unkempt, unwashed hair without concern for grooming of the self. The propitiation of the dead only came to an end when the three months ended and *thlanpaih* ceremony of releasing or bidding adieu to the dead soul took place, sending the dead on his way to *mitthikhua.* Relatives and neighbors would gift cloth and fresh vegetables to the departing soul. The final day of the end of the three months was marked with great solemnity. An elder would solemnly sweep the floor of the house outward through towards the exit, all the while speaking directly to the dead, asking it to carry on his journey into *mitthikhua* and bidding a tearful farewell.

These highly ritualized and culturally constructed responses to death and dying can be said to reinvigorate social bonds and cohesion. Symbolic gesture of offering cloth to the dead for use in the afterlife, holding a wake, digging of the grave by young able bodied men or *thlanlaih,* young men sleeping in the house of the dead or *khawhar in riak* display and demonstrate this reinvigoration. Death rituals and treatment of the dead body also expresses the transfer of property and status from one generation to the next while further reestablishing lineage and kinship. MimKut, although lost to the modern Christian Mizo, was a festival once marked to commemorate the dead. Observed annually around the end of the autumn months when maize has been harvested and the yield from the jhums are aplenty, *MimKut* once featured prominently as a part of the cultural signification of the dead. The origin of this folk commemoration can be found in the tale of *Chawngvungi leh Sawngkhara*. Just like how Sawngkhara fed his dead wife Chawngvungi by sending her food offerings after the harvest of maize, the living relatives' observance of this *kut* in a way magnified the value and emphasis

placed upon family ties, clan affiliation and most importantly, continuity of relation between ancestors and future descendents.

II

In the present Mizo worldview, death and dying is informed from a modern Christian tradition. The cultural attachment to and the treatment of the dead body has changed from an old preoccupation with the dead body and its significance to the world of the living to that of the present where once the soul is detached from the corporeal body, the soul transcends the world of the living thus making the dead body irrelevant dust. It can be argued that the evolution of the dead body and its degradation into dust has contributed to creation of a disconnect from traditional rituals surrounding death and dying. This severance seems to have led to an ever decreasing need for social and communal participation when posited against that of the new Christian community. *Kuangur* and *mitthirawplam* have both lost their cultural signification and are no longer in practice. The shift in the concept of god has stripped off rituals of their cultural agency which once were deeply venerated. Other social practices like *khawhar in riak* which is the sleeping of young men in the house of the dead before the ritual of *thlanpaih* has practically come to an end in may places. Likewise many localities have witnessed the inability of young men to give their time to participate in *thlanlaih* or digging of the grave in times of a death in the neighbourhood resulting in the creation of a new class of undertakers paid to dig a grave.

It has become an inevitability that with exposure to modernism and globalization, the cultural and traditional deathways experience a certain disintegration under these powerful forces. With a rise in population and the inability to give time towards fulfilling social duties, the need of the hour is here where death and dying have become lucrative business from the selling of tomb stones, writing of plaques, printing of epitaphs, decoration of coffins and digging of graves.

The twenty-first century has immensely redefined traditional and cultural Mizo deathways. In the new modern and Christian Mizo community, constructing of deathways, for now, is a blend of the old and new. The concern though, has much to do with the crumbling and eventual perishing of Mizo identification with its cultural ethos, values of helpfulness and participation it holds dear, rather than the execution of rituals for its own sake.

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