

The Sacred Cycles of Life: Rituals, Transitions, and Community in Poumai Society

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Abstract

The life of a Poumai, inhabitant in the hill ranges of Senapati district of Manipur, northeast India is marked by various ceremonies and rituals that govern key stages, from birth to death. These practices, rooted in cultural beliefs and traditions, centre around significant life transitions, including birth, adulthood, marriage, and death. The rituals and customs reflect the Poumai Nagas' worldview, integrating spiritual beliefs, social structures, and communal ties in shaping their life cycle practices. However, the traditional customs, practices and other related aspects of this tribe have not been explored systematically. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to bring into light the practices of unique life cycle of the Poumai Nagas during birth, marriage and death. It seeks to understand, document, and preserve these traditions, while offering a nuanced portrayal of their cultural and spiritual significance. Using an ethnographic approach, the study provides an in-depth examination of these life cycle stages and their impact on the Poumai community. The research also highlights evolving aspects of the Poumai's cultural practices, revealing changes in folk habits and traditions over time, both in the past and present.

Keywords: Poumai Nagas, Birth, Marriage, Death, Ceremonies, Rituals, Customs, Cultural Beliefs, Traditional Practices.

Introduction

Arnold van Gennep's "Rites of Passage" (Pentikair, 1997) outlines three phases in these rituals: separation from a previous status, transition to a new role, and incorporation into the new status. These changes are often made public, emphasizing their significance and fostering social recognition. The social folk customs that involve societal and family rituals, such as those marking birth, marriage, and death guide individuals through life's transitions, influenced by both physical maturation and cultural norms (Dorson, 1972). In some cultures, like the Poumai, rituals guide individuals through life's stages, from birth to death.

The Poumai Nagas are an indigenous group densely populated in the Senapati district of Manipur and few populations in Nagaland Phek district of northeast India. They are simple people, faithful, honest and are known for their courage and wisdom. They are God-fearing people, however, it is difficult to generalise as to whether Nagas are animists, for the early missionaries and ethnographers have the knack of calling all the non-Christians as pagans, heathens (Hutton, 1921), infidelist or animists (MILLS, 1937) that is the belief in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting in the animate and inanimate things, which have soul. Therefore, the fundamental purpose of this study is to explore the composite nature of Poumai Naga community. The study attempts to highlight the dynamics of tradition in the lives of marginalized ethnic group like the Poumai Nagas and to make conscious about the sense of originality. It also focuses on the

changing contours of the folk habits and traditions of the community. A review of the existing literature highlights a variety of findings on Naga tribe (Johnstone, 1896), (Hodson, 1911), particularly on the Poumai Nagas (Nepuni, 2010), (James, 1990), (Pao, 2017), with many studies focusing on cultural aspect (Dorson, 1972), (Horam, 1977).

The study is qualitative research mainly based on primary sources. Based on extensive field study the data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation method. The methods of data collection include participant and non-participant observation, individual and group interaction, unstructured interview, interrogation and discussions with the people of the community. The researcher contacted the senior members of the villages who has much knowledge and experience of the Poumai tradition. Fieldwork has been completed in two phases. The first phase was carried out in July 2019, which is an important month for the Poumai as it is the season of paddy transplantation and also the celebration of *Laonii*. While the second phase in January, which is a festive month where the biggest festival of the Poumai is celebrated, known as *Thounii* or New year festival.

Result and Discussion

A set of ritual practices surrounds significant moments in the human life cycle, spanning from pregnancy and birth to death. These life-cycle rituals are tied to changes in the status of individuals within a community, society, or group. They play a role in socializing an individual into the community. As these rituals evolve, they either affirm or alter the participants' roles or status within the group. Every community holds a shared understanding of an individual's growth and integration into society, with life-cycle rituals marking key stages for both the individual and their social group. Although cultural structures vary, human life-cycle rituals are almost universally centered around birth, puberty or marriage, and death.

According to the Folklore Encyclopaedia, "birth can be characterized as a transition that is significant from both the mother's and the newborn's points of view. And rituals connected with pregnancy, birth, and maternity mark the social relations of both the mother and the infant" (Pentikair, 1997). For the baby, the most important aspect of birth is its formal acceptance into the community and the establishment of its initial social status. For the mother, birth signifies a shift from her role as a wife to that of a mother. Life-cycle rituals often focus on the individual's ability to reproduce and the social conditions that govern reproduction.

Birth Rite: The life of a Poumai is well-regulated by a variety of ceremonies and rituals that are performed to mark certain phases and occasions in his life, from birth to death. From the mother's womb, a person is involved with the rites of society.

The Poumai consider children a blessing and perform various ceremonies to ensure their health and well-being. During pregnancy, women follow specific taboos, such as avoiding going out alone or eating conjoined fruits, to prevent misfortune or twins of different genders. Birth rituals are typically led by a midwife, assisted by an elder woman. The baby is placed on a bamboo mat, washed, and the umbilical cord is cut and buried. The placenta is examined for omens about the child's future. A rooster or hen is sacrificed based on the child's gender, with specific signs believed to predict a long, prosperous life.

Naming Ceremony, which is an important ritual for newborn is performed on the day of birth or the following day. A toddler of the same sex holds a lighted bamboo and pinewood bundle while the baby sits in sunlight. It is taboo to name children after deceased grandparents who died unnaturally, as it is believed to bring misfortune. Children are initially called "*nyanya*" until named. Names may also be inspired by

the child's birth circumstances or season, such as "*Tho*" for a boy born on a holy day or "*Apao*" for a boy born during paddy planting. The ceremony concludes with a family celebration.

In the case of a male child, *laotouyu nyanou* (sanctification) is mandatory. It happens when the child turns into adolescence, marking their initiation into the *threichizii* (dormitory). This ceremony is performed during the *laonii* festival. Young men must prepare their own food, sacrifice a rooster, fetch water from a new pond, and cook with new utensils, avoiding food spills and waste. The *meshimai* (who has performed the Feast of Merit) administers the ritual, using *aalouh* and Holy Basil branches, it is dipped on the fresh water and swab to cleanse the boy while offering prayers for strength and protection. After the *laotouyu* ceremony, the boys are considered adult men, though they must adhere to strict taboos to avoid *reihravu*, a condition that causes weakness.

Betrothal and Marriage: In the Poumai community, marriages are monogamous and follow strict customs. Marrying within the same clan or phratry is prohibited, though village endogamy is preferred. Marriages to maternal cousins are allowed but not favoured, while cross-cousin marriages are viewed as inferior. Marrying two sisters by two brothers is forbidden, as it is believed to shorten the lifespan. Levirate and sorority marriages are not practiced, and marriages between individuals whose placentas were buried on the same day are taboo. Incest is strongly prohibited, with violators facing social exclusion. There is no bride price or dowry, and child marriage is rare. In the past, arranged marriages were common, and forced marriages occurred during the head-hunting era, though this practice has since stopped. Marriages usually happen in *Donii* (December) but are avoided in *Thounii* (January), as it is considered an unlucky month. Traditionally, unmarried girls shaved their heads, and a woman nearing marriage might elope to avoid the embarrassment of head shaving before returning after a short time.

The process of traditional marriage begins with dream interpretation, where twigs of holy basil are placed under the boy's pillow before the proposal to observe any omens. Once a suitable partner is found, the boy's family initiates negotiations with the girl's family. Engagement should be after the paddy transplantation, however, before August. Once engaged, it is considered taboo for the couple to communicate or meet, and believed that breaching the taboo would lead to disharmony in their relationship. To maintain this separation, their friends, particularly those from the dormitory, help ensure they do not interact. The night before the wedding, a send-off party is organized by their dormitory friends. The wedding ceremony involves many rituals, with the marriage only considered legal after the formal proceedings. The bride walks to the groom's house with a bamboo basket of clothes and rice beer, escorted by an elderly woman as it is taboo for any object to pass above her head or touch her basket during the journey. Upon arrival, the bride follows strict rituals, such as brushing her right foot over an axe at the door. The couple exchanges rice beer without physical contact, and a little boy and girl accompany them to symbolize companionship.

The couple fasts for three days after the *shahi*, during which the bride performs specific rituals, like catching aquatic insects and pretending to prepare meal. After the fast, the couple explore on the groom's properties together, symbolizing their unity. On the final day of the fast, the bride is tested on her ability to prepare a meal using new tools. On the fourth day, the couple visits the in-laws for a meal, a significant step in solidifying family relations. However, the actual marriage feast is organized by the bride's family either during *laonii* (post-transplantation festival) or *thounii* (post-harvest festival). Gifts are exchanged, and the feast is enjoyed by the groom's family and friends, with the number of gifts limited to thirty-nine, as forty is considered an omen of bad luck. Since marriage is considered sacred, divorce is rare as the couple is expected to honor their vows for life. It is also taboo for divorcees or widows to return to their

parental homes, requiring them to live in a separate, rudely built hut or isolated rooms. While widow remarriage is accepted, widows with children generally prefer not to remarry.

Death: The rituals for the death are similar to that of Christians as they are buried. These rituals are obligatory for all Poumai, regardless of social or economic status. Their beliefs about death centre on the immortality of the soul, life after death, and rebirth. The deceased's soul is believed to journey to a different realm called *themaichi*, or the land of the dead, often described as located across a river or beyond a steep mountain.

Death Rites and Rituals (*Themai Nyanou*): As a man nears death, the Poumai have a belief that the malevolent spirit drags the soul to the land of dead; thus, the relatives and friends cry and beat the walls to drive away the malevolent spirit, with a hope to bring back the soul. However, they believed that if the soul has already crossed the river or mountain, it cannot be revived. It is said that if a person allows a snake to escape its hole while trying to kill it, they will suffer more in their final moments. During death, male relatives place war weapons like shields, swords, and spears on the right side of the bed, while females have an iron walking stick placed in front to protect them on their journey.

Traditionally, a gun is fired to confirm a man's death. If death occurs in the morning, the burial happens the same day; otherwise, it takes place the next day, as burials after sunset are prohibited. The Poumai bury the deceased either within the village or outside the village gate, depending on the nature of the death. Children are buried by the fireplace to protect their bodies from domestic animals. Natural deaths (due to sickness or old age) are typically buried within the village, while unnatural deaths (suicide, murder, accidents) are buried outside the village. Today, all bodies are buried, except in the case of suicide.

The deceased is wrapped in bamboo mats without any formal rituals, as it is believed that conducting a formal ritual would cause misfortune to the deceased family. The priest begins the burial by dropping soil into the grave. The next morning, he goes to the grave and check for signs of the soul's fate where a small thatched house was built on the grave and a chick is tied to a stick the previous day as a gift from the family. It is believed that if a spider web is found rising to the sky, it signifies that the deceased has reached paradise otherwise they are believed to have been reincarnated as a housefly, which is a similar belief as Ibo tribe central Nigeria (Iralu, 2000).

As a sign of appreciation, the family honors the priest with meat, rice beer, and rice, while mourners receive meat. Before returning home, mourners wash their hands to prevent the dead's soul from following them. Title-takers are honored with decorations on their graves to reflect their status. During the death of a king, the village's renowned warrior performs the priest's duties, and the entire village mourns for a day, with all households required to attend. The final death ritual, called *trothe*, takes place a year after death, usually in January. The entire village observes the *trothe* for a day. On this day, the priest throws a dog's chain and a gourd of rice beer outside the village gate in a bamboo basket. The deceased's family must observe *trothe* to release the spirit, which is believed to remain with the family until the ceremony. However, this practice is no longer followed today.

Themes and Findings

The study highlights the central role that rituals play in the lives of the Poumai people, marking the transitions from one stage of life to another - birth, adulthood, marriage, and death. The practices are deeply connected to their beliefs in spiritual well-being, social cohesion, and the cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

1. The Birth and Childhood as Blessing and Protection: The first theme within the broader narrative is

birth and childhood, which is seen as a gift and is celebrated through a range of protective and auspicious rituals. From pregnancy to naming ceremonies, the rituals performed are meant to ensure the health, prosperity, and well-being of the child. The symbolism of names and the power of omens play a significant role in shaping the child's future. The importance of communal participation, especially from the midwives and elders, underscores the community's interconnectedness and the significance of shared responsibility in safeguarding future generations.

2. The Rite of Transitioning to Adulthood: The second theme is adulthood initiation, encapsulated in the rites of passage that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood for males, such as the *laotouyu* ceremony. This ritual is a fundamental rite of passage into manhood, with all the associated responsibilities, taboos, and symbolic actions that forge a young boy's identity within the tribe. This stage reflects not only personal growth but also societal expectations, with the individual being cleansed, blessed, and prepared for the duties they will undertake in adulthood.

3. Marriage as a Union, Sacredness, and Social Harmony: Marriage rituals in the Poumai culture form another significant theme. It is not merely the union of two individuals but a social contract between families, bound by intricate rules and taboos. Marriage is sacred, and the rites performed before, during, and after the wedding are crucial in maintaining harmony, strengthening family bonds, and ensuring the community's continuity. The strict taboos surrounding courtship, the wedding ceremony, and post-marriage rituals all reflect the importance of maintaining moral and spiritual order. The concept of marriage as a lifelong commitment is reinforced by the rare occurrences of divorce and the associated social consequences.

4. Spiritual Continuity of Death and the Afterlife: The theme of death and the afterlife in Poumai culture focuses on the rituals that guide the soul's journey beyond life. There is a strong belief in the immortality of the soul and its transition to the land of the dead. The death rites are conducted with utmost care, as the community believes that how one dies and how their body is treated influences their soul's journey. From the rituals at the time of death to the annual *trothe* ceremony, the community ensures that the deceased's soul is guided and honored. The presence of a malevolent spirit, omens, and burial rites further emphasize the Poumai's deep connection to the spiritual realm and the afterlife.

Thus, it can be seen that each major life event is accompanied by a ritual, performed with specific acts, symbols, and taboos that guide the individual through life transitions. Besides, customs and traditions serve not only to mark personal milestones but also to preserve the moral and spiritual fabric of the Poumai community. Additionally, taboos and omens are integral to the rituals, reflecting a belief in the deep connection between human actions, spiritual forces, and life outcomes. And the life-cycle rituals are collective experiences, with the community playing a significant role in both the performance and the interpretation of rituals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study offers a framework to understand how the Poumai people connect their daily lives to the spiritual and societal order through their well-regulated ceremonies and rituals. These customs are not only about individual milestones but are part of a larger communal and cosmic rhythm that connects birth, adulthood, marriage, and death in a continuous, meaningful cycle. Although many changes have taken place with the intervention of Britishers and the coming of Christianity, it is found that many rituals are still being practiced by the Poumai Naga community till today. For example, during pregnancy till the

baby is born, the mother would prefer approaching midwife rather than doctors in the hospital. Firing of gun during the death of a man and observation of genna for a day during the death is still practiced.

However, the essences of most of the Poumai tradition are becoming endangered and are almost nearing to what people would call ‘the lost tradition’. The Poumais’ have undergone social change and, due to the changing panorama of development activities, some of their cultural characteristics have disappeared. Their acculturation and assimilation with the people around them have brought changes to their life and culture. According to Gillin and Gillin, “Social changes are variations from the accepted modes of life; whether due to alterations in geographical conditions, in cultural equipment, the composition of the population or ideologies and whether brought about diffusion or invention within the group” (Gillin & Gillin., 1950)

The younger generations are no longer accessible to a fair deal of cultural memory and oral tradition. It is so because the value of the past becomes more remote and irrelevant to the current sense with constant and dynamic changes. Therefore, concrete documentation in the form of writing could be beneficial to the insiders themselves, to know about the rich cultural heritage and to give them a deeper understanding of their philosophy and worldview of their past.

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