

# rites of passage in north-east India

K. NIPUNI MAO

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## PREFACE

The study of man's life brings forth a bundle of complexities propelled by his belief and practices. The different stages of growth of a man show different traits in him, enabling his transit from one phase of life to another. Man's unique ability to reason and act upon his thoughts makes him a superior being. His sense of reasoning enables him to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong or what is good and what is bad. The belief that is ingrained in his psyche over the years, along with the experiences of his forefathers, is handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. This knowledge is further given impetus by amalgamating it with acts of ritual or performance which are held in 'sacredness' and fervent religiosity by indigenous communities.

The human life-cycle brings out very interesting aspects of ritualistic-minded man and his surrounding world. The belief in sacrifices and propitiation to the Supreme God or other subordinate gods or deities is prioritized. At times of illness, epidemics, natural calamities or thanksgiving, a ritual is initiated by the simple-minded folks to appease the god or deities. The life-cycle transitional stages practices of man brings in the cyclical phases of rites and rituals, whereby the transformation of man comes about. When observation or participation is undertaken by a person at the proper stage it brings about the completion of a given stage.

Man's closeness to his environs and the need to meet his daily requirements leads him to the agrarian culture. The agrarian practice though myriad, is induced with many rite-filled feasts and festivals and propitiation of the

spirits of *jhum* fields and the like. This ritualistic practice too follows a cyclical trend through the seasons. Thus, this becomes an important phase in the evolving life of the people.

Man is hard pressed to believe that it is the need of the hour or to gratify one's belief. Or is man just following the practices of his father and grandfather and his great-great grandfather? One has to understand the context of belief, or for that matter the necessity of the Rites of Passage and its implications. Therefore, one needs to take into account the different aspects of what makes the Rites of Passage so important to the indigenous communities of North Eastern India.

**K. Nipuni Mao**

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**K. N. Mao**

# rites of passage

## introduction

The oral tradition is an important component in the life of all tribal communities. On the whole, the myths and beliefs of these communities see them through in their life-cycle. The ritualistic practices and their social and cultural life revolve on the basis of their beliefs. Tribal communities have a strong grounded sense of beliefs wherein rituals are performed on the basis of these beliefs. One may question the source and authenticity of beliefs and how this has come to play a vital role in the tribal ways of living. The answer to this query is the oral tradition, which is passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. The beliefs of the tribal forefathers are usually based upon their actual experience which they had encountered in their life. Thus, for the tribal, the oral tradition helps in establishing their identity, culture, traditions and their ways of life.

Most ritual occasions are concerned with movement across social boundaries from one stage of life to another; infancy to childhood, childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood, adulthood to the life of a married man, life to death and other stages in a man's lifecycle and his social engagement in his lifespan. The process of transition from one stage to another is often accompanied by performance of rituals which are symbolic to the changes in status of the celebrant. It marks the passing of one stage and beginning of another.

## rites of passage

The oral tradition is a narrative or a narrative based performance, it helps to construct and maintain the

traditions and rituals of a community. This is where rites of passage are brought into play. The ethnic communities in their sense of belief perform rituals for different purposes. Life begins with birth followed by a naming ceremony, adolescence, puberty, marriage, and finally death. In tribal communities rites are performed at the time of calamities, observance of feasts and festivals, *genna*<sup>1</sup>, sickness, house warming, agrarian based rituals, and even at the point of eating and drinking

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 'rite' is an English word derived from the Latin word 'ritus' and which says that it is a 'ceremony performed by a particular group of people, often for religious purposes.' Whereas, Encyclopedia Britannica (2005, DVD) defines it as 'a prescribed form or manner governing the words or actions for a ceremony.' Different sources might have defined the term with changes in the words or word order, but the basic concept of the word 'rite' is all the same when looked from the semantic aspect of the word. The second content word of the phrase 'Passage,' is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary as 'the action of going across, through or past something.' And Encyclopedia Britannica (2005, DVD) defines it as 'a ritual associated with a crisis or a change of status (as marriage, illness, or death) for an individual.' And the basic understanding of the term is a path through which one goes.

The phrase 'rites of passage' is described in the 'Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary' as, 'a ceremony or an event that marks an important stage in somebody's life.' In a very broad sense of the term it connotes the progression of social life of a person which is phase

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<sup>1</sup> A restrictive observance of a particular day or days as taboo based on the belief of the folks, except for household chores, no other work is carried out on this day, for fear of being punished by God for non-observance or for fear of being deprived of blessings by the gods.

structured or an interval marked by different rites as life goes on. This is further emphasized by subjecting the person to all kinds of special prescriptions and proscriptions generally regarding food, clothing and movement. This actual scheme of rituals performed at a particular phase to initiate him to the next phase is what we mean by the term 'rites of passage'. These phases of the 'rites of passage' which are cyclic in nature can be schematically represented as follows;

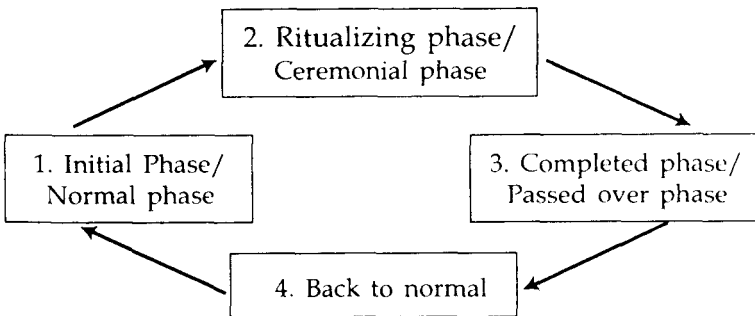


Fig. i. Rites of Passage.

**Cycle of Rituals:** The ritual-filled tribal world is one of mysticism which is unrivalled and often remains obscure from the glare of the outside world. For these people life begins with birth, followed by a ritual of birth. Life goes on in a cycle, and rituals follow in this cyclic life-cycle phenomenon. From the point of birth through the duration of life till death, rituals are seemingly or un-seemingly attached to tribal life.

*Box 1 (one).* Indicates the latent period where the person is yet to be initiated and it is at this stage that preparations are made for the actual ritual to take place in the next phase. It is in this phase that materials which are to be used during the ritual are gathered.

*Box 2 (two).* After the initial phase of preparation, the actual ritualizing phase begins where the ceremonies are performed. The number of days of the actual ceremony differs in tune with the rites of passage concerned. The festivity as well as the food or the eating habits of the person(s) differs in consonance with the rites that are performed.

*Box 3 (three).* When the actual rituals are performed, the performer(s) undergo(es) a ritualistic bath or shed old clothes for new ones which are symbolic of being cleansed or starting life afresh. There is usually an ablution in one way or the other which brings an end or the closing phase of a ritual.

*Box 4 (four).* The preparation, the ritualizing and the ablution are all done. Life begins normally once again, but with a change in the social domain, knowing that the person has entered a new phase of life, and yet knowing well that a different rite awaits him in the future, but all for the progression of life within the community.

The above mentioned stages are the same for almost all the tribal communities in the North Eastern part of India. There may be variants and the stereotype of a rite may differ in nature but there will not be a total overhaul of the system or the Rites of Passage. We will now look into the different types of rites of passage across a section of communities that inhabit the different states of North East India.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Tracing the actual genealogy of a community or communities is almost impossible in the tribal world. Myths revolve or are passed from generation to generation as an upkeep of beliefs amongst tribal communities. Tribal culture and knowledge need to be documented and preserved. The different genres of the oral tradition are a

dying art for many of the communities. Therefore it is necessary to document and cull out the best possible semantic aspects of these practices. The research will certainly be a challenge, yet it will be a worthwhile task for the sake of posterity and contributing to the preservation of our once rich cultural heritage.

## **CONCLUSION**

It certainly would be interesting to unravel the practice at different stages of the tribal life, yet without ruffling their life at any point. The exercise to research and document this important aspect of actual practice by the tribal community would be worth the task for the future generations as well as for posterity. The onslaught of modernity is fast gaining ground in the unsophisticated world of the tribals. Therefore, the need to document and preserve these rituals is an urgent call of the present time, hence our efforts.

## About the Book

North East India has always been known as a land with diverse and rich cultures. These cultures though similar in many aspects also have their own distinct rites and rituals which are performed when an individual moves from one stage in life to another. Rites of passage are life-cycle rituals that are performed for individuals at the time of birth, naming of a child, the passage of an individual from the stage of adolescence to adulthood, marriage and death.

This volume is a study of the rites of passage of a few communities taken from all of the eight North Eastern states. Though most of the rites performed by these communities may be similar in certain aspects, they also have their own unique features and characteristics. Some communities engage priests to conduct these rites while others are performed by an elder member of the family. These rites usually involve propitiation of good and evil spirits which in most cases includes sacrificial offerings. These are sometimes followed by certain observations or restrictions that the concerned individuals or family needs to observe. There are also rituals that are performed as thanksgiving at the time of a patient's recovery or a bountiful harvest. Apart from these rites of passage, certain agrarian based rituals are also performed by these communities at the time of selecting a plot for *jhuming*, sowing of seeds, transplanting or at the end of the harvest season. These rites and rituals vary from the ordinary to the extremely bizarre and sometimes end with festivity accompanied by feasting, drinking and song and dance.

Though the North East may be a land of diverse and unique cultures many of these are soon disappearing due to the fact that most of these tribal cultures follow an oral tradition and do not have a written script to preserve their age old traditions. They have also faced the onslaught of globalisation, modernisation and materialism. The spread of Christianity among tribal communities of the region has also led to the decline of practitioners of indigenous culture and tradition.

This book is an attempt to document the 'Rites of Passage' of these traditional indigenous communities and to bring out the intricate details of these practices that are still followed by the tribes of the region. This volume will be useful to the students, researchers and other readers who have an interest in the subject. The author has made an attempt to bring to light the rites of passage in the tribal communities of this region. There are still many aspects which have not been touched and communities that have not been studied. Further research and comprehensive study is essential.

## About the Author

Mr. K. Nipuni Mao is the youngest son of Shri. H. KaisŸ and Mrs. A. Nina. He is a resident of Senapati, Manipur. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.

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