

On the Funerary Customs among the Chakhesang Nagas

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The Chakhesang tribe comprises three major linguistic groups, namely, Chokri, Khezha and Sangtam along with a few villages speaking Sema, Rengma and Sapu or Moa. The tribe occupies the district of Phek, bounded by Zhunheboto and Tuensang in the north, Manipur and Burma in the south, Tuensang and Burma in the east and Kohima in the west. The topography is severe, full of hilly ranges which often break into a wide chaos of spurs and ridges. The villages are mostly located on the hill-tops at altitudes of one to two thousand metres.

Traditionally, the Naga belief systems, music and poetry, myths and history, etc. appear inextricably interwoven. Thus, it is necessary that one restricts one's study to certain areas and primarily to one or two topics in order that one might gain a thorough knowledge on the workings of one particular system within the tribal society. This paper is thus confined to the funerary practices that were prevalent among the Chakhesangs when they were still unaffected by factors foreign to them.

Like most of the Naga tribes, the Chakhesangs bury their dead, usually within the village or by side of the village paths.¹ However, those dying of accidents, suicides, homicidal deaths or are slain in battle are buried outside the village premises on the belief that bad luck will fall on the village were they to be buried within the village.²

The simplest form of burial is the *Mhakhrie* (among the Chokris), *Mekhru* (among the Khezhas) or *Kho-o* (among the Sapu or Maos). A burial pit is dug to about four to five feet deep at the bottom of which is the burial chamber wherein the body is interred and then covered with stone slabs. In some cases, the bottom is lined with planks, wood or logs.³

In some cases, the chamber may be dug out on one side of the burial pit and then stone slabs are placed in a leaning position to cover the chamber.

In some other cases, the burial chamber may consist of upright stone slabs with cover stones to form a box-like stone coffin or a cist.

When a relative wants to perpetuate the memory of the dead, stone platforms locally called *Kiisa Miirii* or *Renni* (by the Chokri) *Khokho* (by the Sapu or Mao) are erected over the grave.⁴ They appear tomb-

like, but more often they are just stone masonry raised to above three to four feet in circular, square or rectangular form. Sometimes, such stone structures may serve only as cenotaphs and are erected on roadside. Such erection are preceded by much feasting and elaborate rituals. They are usually erected to a dead warrior, a rich man and occasionally to the name of a woman too.

Mortuary Rituals

When a man dies, his body is washed by his son in case he has one and by a daughter in the case of a woman.⁵ The grave is dug by the clan members. A group of men, usually the grave diggers each take a handful of straw, lit from the fire from the dead man's house and douse it by the side of the burial pit. Behind them come a close relative of the deceased swinging a *Dao*, said to be clearing the path that the spirit of the dead man has to take during his journey to the land of the dead. The man is then buried along with many of his belongings, like his drinking cup, a small amount of grain, his spear, *Dao* and a freshly killed chicken and a wooden spindle in the case of a woman.⁶ An elderly clan member takes a spear and with his head covered, places a sickle in the pit.⁷ Stone slabs are then placed to cover the chamber. The rites are accompanied by the women wailing and the men cursing the evil spirits as well as consoling the spirit of the man and telling it not to be afraid.

The burial is followed by a feast in honour of the dead man by slaying boars and cattle. This feasting is described as eating of the dead man's '*Pe*', i.e., something taken in honour of the dead man.⁸ The grave diggers and escorts are later given large portions of meat. One limb of the animals slain during the feast is given to the *Honi* (dreamer), who is believed to interpret dreams and to know how and why the man died.⁹ The next morning, the *Honi* gives his reply, usually that some demon has killed him or simply that his fate has overtaken him.

Erection of a *Renni* (Memorial Stone Platform)

To build a *Ren*i or *Khokho*, rice-beer is prepared to offer it to those who help in building it. From the day rice-beer is under preparation, it is *genna* and hence strangers or visitors other than close relatives are not welcome till the completion of building the *Renni*. The rice-beer prepared is measured to the proportions of the feast to be held. It is measured according to the number of *Lekis* (earthen jars) filled. The *Lekis* are counted in odd numbers and never in even numbers. On the 7th day

since the rice-beer is prepared the *Renni*-builder produces the freshly made beer and slays some boars and cattle and the meat is offered to those who contribute their labour. While cooking the meal, it is taboo to taste it or to cook it along with vegetables. The rice-beer and the meat are eaten from banana leaves and the leftovers are taken home and given to the young ones.¹⁰

The *Renni* can be built only on odd numbered days. Stone slabs are brought by the young men and laid one upon another to form a stone platform. Upon it the skulls of the animals slaughtered during the '*Pe*' are then placed on the *Renni* along with the dead man's belongings such as his arms, sword spear, shield, *panjie* tube, wearing apparels, bamboo spirit cup, spirit gourd bottle, waist band, shells worn around the neck and arms, red cane armlets, cane leggings and dunes feather worn on the head.¹¹ A small menhir is erected over it. For warriors, boulders the size of human heads or wooden replicas representing the number of enemy heads taken in his lifetime are erected. Smaller stone chips representing the number of women whose favour he had enjoyed in his lifetime are also exhibited over the *Renni*. Effigies of tigers are erected for those who have killed tigers and effigies of men for those who have killed men are also erected. In the case of a woman, her petticoat, cloth tied over the breast, brass ornaments worn on the arm, cotton thread, *dhan*,¹² grain, pestle and mortar for cleaning rice are exhibited over the grave.

A particular ritual for purification of the *Renni* is observed called '*Renni Dizii*.' The stem of a tree locally called *Kralisii* is taken and split at the top. A plantain foliage is slit form the center and the right side of the leaf is folded over the left. The foliage is then inserted between the split *Kralisii* which is then staked over the *Renni*. This is done as a sign to ward off any ill-luck or evil spirits.¹³

In case a *Renni* is elected to a very dear departed son, the parents do not sleep together for 7 years. If they are unable to observe this rite, a close clan member and his spouse can undertake it and they are rewarded with land or rich paddy fields on completion of the rite.¹⁴

From the above, it is clear that the funerary customs exert a considerable influence on both the social and religious practices of the people. The rites and ceremonies, sacrifices and feasts, the erection of sepulchral structures all reveal that the people were not without religious or emotional sentiments. Such activities also serve as a social occasion when the clan members or even the entire populace of a village observe *genna* and participate in it.

In the inevitable process of change and exposure to new ideas, such customs in their original form have mostly disappeared except among certain sections of individuals who still revere and continue their ancestral customs. Through the rituals have for the most part been given up, many of the inherent ideals and values attached to them have however survived and have been assimilated with the Christian practices among the present Christian Nagas.

Notes & References

1. C.V.F. Haimendorf, *The Naked Nagas*, (2nd Edition, Calcutta, 1962), p.21.
2. As told by Mr. Thsiishe Khape of Kami Village.
3. H. Bareh (ed) *Gazetteer of India, Nagaland* (Kohima District, 1970), P.66.
4. It is to be noted that the Khezhas, particularly Kade Kuzha villages do not erect *Renni* or *Khokho*. The *Thobe* (resting place) or *Bedze* (erected seat) found in these areas though they look like the *Renni* or *Khokho* serve only as cenotaphs like the *Badzii* in *Chokri* area or the Angami *Badze*.
5. A.W. Davis, *Census of India*, Vol, 1 in Verrier Elwin (ed), *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century* (1969, p. 505.
6. As told by Veriino Vero of Kikriima Village.
7. *Ibid.*
8. The 'Pe' is a biological term meaning the pancreas. The funeral feast is referred to as 'Upe ti Zii' or eating of the pancreas. The *Pe* or pancreas is regarded by the people as the tenderest of meat and hence, something taken in honour of the deceased
9. The *Honi* may be a man or women who is believed to possess the power of divination and may be consulted in the events of theft, murder, etc. or other ill omens relating to natural calamities.
10. As told by Puhiiyi S. Venuh of Phek village.
11. J.Butler, *Travels in Assam*, (Reprint, Manas Publications, Delhi, 1994). pp. 150-151.
12. *Ibid.*
13. As told by Hiiveyi S. Venuh who was a participant in the erection of a Rennai in his youth.
14. *Ibid.*