



Yolmo Funeral at Homeland and Abroad

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Abstract

This essay writes about the funeral rituals of the Yolmo tribe, in the north-eastern Himalayas. It discusses how migration over the mountainous terrains has been a part of the history of these Buddhist tribe and about their cultural mixing with the Tamangs and the Sherpas briefly. Yet the observation of the death rituals by this tribe follow the inscriptions in the Buddhist scriptures passed down the generations through the oral tradition. The essay also attempts to compare the funeral rituals of the Yolmos with some other tribes in South Africa and elsewhere.

Keywords: *yolmo, bardo, migration*

Originally belonging to the Himalayan ranges of Nepal, the Yolmopas are one of the many ethnic tribes of Nepal. Basically, Yolmo is a name of a place in the north-eastern Himalayan areas of Nepal, and the people residing in this region are called Yolmopas. They have a very rich religious history concerning their myth of origin. The great Guru Padmasambhava Himself is believed to have prophesized about the origin, location and sacredness of the land. There are even many stories related to the discovery of this hidden land. The Yolmopas are primarily monks, who with evolving times and circumstances, migrated from their place of origin, married women from other communities like the Tamang's and Sherpa's, and settled in places like Helambu and around. It is believed that the Yolmopas, in several groups, migrated to India during the two World Wars. While some of them settled in places like Pashupatinagar, Illam, etc., many of them settled in Darjeeling. Today, Darjeeling has to its history attached a hundred-and-three-year old monastery named "Magh-Dhog" (war and peace) built by one of the earliest Yolmo monk who migrated to India



from Nepal. The Yolmopas are Tibetan Buddhist by religion and it is their rich religious ceremonies that complement their cultural activities. The Yolmopas have a very distinct funeral ritual which rests as a significant part of their folklore. It has in it a form of dance and song very peculiar of the custom. This practice of the funeral ritual exists since time immemorial till date.

Man's life is divided into three important phases which completes his sojourn on earth. It begins with the birth phase, followed by marriage, and then ultimately the death phase. Each phase has certain rituals associated with it. The death phase is marked by an elaborate tradition of religious duties and other. The Yolmo community residing in the Helambu region such as Langtang and Tarkeyang practice the tradition of death ceremony in the most orthodox but authentic manner, following what is inscribed in the holy Buddhist scriptures and what has come down as oral tradition from the ancestors.

The tradition of singing and dancing during the funeral ceremony is also known in countries like South Africa, Great Britain, etc. for instance, the Akan and Abanyole people of Ghana practice similar customs of singing and dancing during the funeral ceremony. The Abanyole people believe that the spirit of the dead person journeys to another life and meets other members of the community in the *emakombe*, the world of spirits. Hence, for the Abanyole people the funeral ritual is an act of seeing off the dead to their next abode. In their funeral song they are heard saying *khekhukobanga omukhana wefwe* ('we are now escorting our sister') or *kobe papa nomulembe* ('escorting dad in peace'). They believe that escorting the dead is obligatory and everybody must be involved. Hence every individual of the community participates in the funeral ritual mandatorily.

Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of Existence. (Mbiti 1969)

Yet another Ghanaian community named Akan celebrates the death occasion in similar fashion. The most common musical type is called the *Adowa*, performed by the women in chorus. Although this form was performed only during funerals, it is now performed anywhere as recreational music.



There is an oral history attached to its origin. Further, the *Adowa* contains songs of mourning and even condolences. Thus, we analyze how almost every tribal community has their own tradition of performing the funeral ritual including some or the other form of song and dance.

Similarly, the Yolmo community also incorporates the tradition of singing and dancing in their funeral ritual. The famous “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” known as the *Bardo* is a vital part of this ceremony. The *Bardo* presents a detailed and complete picture of the after-death state. It contains thorough guidance and practices related to transforming the understanding of human life on earth, prepares one to see death as a means to liberation, helps one recognize and comprehend death when it arrives and helps those who are dying and the bereaved. The funeral ritual in the Yolmo community extends till the forty-ninth day. It is also referred to as the purification ceremony. However, the first seven days are marked as important ones. It is the time when the bereaved family prepares for the final moment. The monk begins the proceedings from the monastery to the house of the dead where they accept the effigy of the dead made of dough and butter. The monks walk back to the monastery with a group of followers dancing and singing. A purification rite is performed by the monks, while mourners outside continue with their prayers. They chant and sing aloud the mantra of Avalokiteswara, *Om mane peme hun re*. After the purification ceremony, the prayer outside continues. Men and women move in a circular dance reciting prayers and this continues till midnight. The primary reason behind dancing and chanting prayers is quite amusing. This has a story of its own.

The natives believe that the tradition of singing and dancing while chanting the religious mantra was ordained by a religious Guru, named Guru Chewang of Tibet. He noticed that the people of that region did not engage in religious tasks like chanting religious mantra or the name of God. Moreover, they did not have any other activity to entertain themselves with. Hence, by blending both the issues together Guru Chewang added music into the simple chanting of mantra. As music has the power to attract any class of people, the ignorant crowds too were pulled towards it. Hence, the tradition of singing and dancing in the name of the dead and for the well-being of people began with this holy initiation by guru Chewang. This remains the native reason behind the musical



performance since it became the only form of entertainment in the region. Thereafter, people found the chanting easy and entertaining. This tradition came to be known as the *Mani Chepa*, where *mani* means the mantra and *chepa* means dance. *Chepa* could also mean entertainment.

What began as a simple measure to incline people towards religious activity, turned into becoming a vital part of their culture. The *Mani Chepa* is very unique to the Yolmopas because no other Tibetan Buddhist community has this tradition in their funeral ritual. It is like a guide to the dead in his journey of afterlife. The tune of the *mani* is melancholic, so powerful that it brings tears to the listeners. Every individual around is moved to tears hearing it. The *mani* is started by the head lama (monk) referred to as the *Nyendo*. No ordinary monk can become or take the place of the *Nyendo*. One has to be highly and religiously qualified. The head lama will lead the *mani* by invoking the name of Guru Tsheky Wangchuk followed by calling out the name of the dead. This is followed by women who chant the mantra of Avalokiteswara, *Om mani peme hun re*. The women are always the ones who set the pitch and tune for the entire *Mani Chepa*. After the *Mani Chepa*, men and women form a group and start singing and dancing in a circle. The religious song that declares the end of *Mani Chepa* is called *Tashi Cholge*. This form of singing and dancing is called the *Shyabru*. The *Shyabru* is a normal and occasional dance form performed in many other cultural activities like marriage, New Year celebration, birth celebration, etc. here, the *Shyabru* is performed after the *Mani Chepa*. It has many connotations attached to it.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the dead extends to the forty ninth day. The entire period is also called the purification period. Prayers and other religious rituals work as an aid for the dead. They help the dead to leave the physical body and move forward for the journey of the afterlife. The purpose of *Shyabru* is not strictly religious. It is a form which is performed in any cultural or religious occasion. *Shyabru* here stands for entertainment. Just as *Shyabru* implies a regular dance form performed in any occasion, so, this being performed during the funeral period also symbolizes the need to have a normal life. It is a kind of custom which helps bring the bereaved family back to normalcy. It signifies the necessity to return to a happy life. It is also a reflection of the teachings of Lord Buddha on the transience of life. Lord Buddha asserted that death is not the



end of life. When a being takes birth, so is he prepared to die. Hence, the dead along with the bereaved should not for long keep mourning about the loss. The *Bardo* says that a long period of mourning will only hamper the journey of the dead. Hence, the earlier one accepts the loss, the better for all.

The *Shaybru* continues till the next morning. The songs in *Shyabru* may not be a specific one. It varies from religious songs to common, wedding songs. Most often the songs sung are, *Changlu*, *Chomlu*, etc. *Changlu* can be broken into *Chang-lu*, where *Chang* means a local drink and *Lu* means song. This song is sung in sitting or standing position accompanied by the rhythmic circular dance. *Chomlu* is similar to the *Dohori* of Nepali culture where men and women sing simultaneously along with the dance steps. The funeral ceremony is filled with such religious and cultural practices. The *Mani Chepa* is an example of how cultural traditions stimulate community bonding and formation of social identity. In fact, such folkloric customs uncover the dynamics of social identity.

The Yolmopas have this distinct funeral culture which sets them quite aside from the other Tibetan Buddhists. They believe that they are the blessed ones to have been ordained to practice such a divine culture. One can still witness such a funeral tradition in the regions of Yolmo in north-eastern Nepal. However, with changing time and circumstances, the Yolmopas were forced to migrate either to India or to other foreign nations. Moreover, there were many other factors which gave way to their lost or misplaced identity. This led to a decline in the practice of their old cultural traditions.

The primary reason which displaced the cultural identity of the Yolmopas was lack of basic education. The Yolmo region or Helambu in Nepal was a backward region which did not promote education even after the rise of democracy in the nation. Hence, the Yolmo people adopted the identity of the more prestigious Sherpas of the Solokhambhu area. They came to be known as Helambu Sherpa which inevitably affected their original culture and identity. Moreover, the Yolmo people who came to India did establish one of the oldest Yolmo monasteries in Darjeeling



named “Magh Ghog” in the year 1914. However, different place and challenging times made it complex for the Yolmo people to maintain their tradition intact. Gradually, new, altered customs and traditions crept in. The original and authentic religious and cultural practices were either forgotten or adjusted with time and circumstance. Hence, the funeral tradition which the Yolmo people of India and abroad follow is different than which is practiced by the Yolmo of Helambu. The Yolmopas of India do not have an elaborate funeral ceremony. They neither make any effigy of the dead nor do they engage in the traditional *Shaybru*. The *Mani Chepa* is shortened to just chanting of the *Mani*. Hence, a lot of differences or rather alterations have been a part of the traditional Yolmo funeral ceremony as it passed from its native land to migrated nations. With such underlying factors, the original customs could not either be practiced or preserved. These traditions seem dying with the old. Today, it is quite a task to capture such rich and authentic practices which determine our ancestral origin and identity. It is difficult to study them and bring them to the mainstream forum because it is not practiced anymore.

As a part of an ongoing research work, the prime aim of the work so done will be to capture such original and authentic cultural practices and bring it to the forefront. With every passing year the world is losing its older generations who are the real tradition keepers, the sole reservoirs of ancient culture. Before time kills this opportunity, every individual must move forward by walking a little backwards, to preserve that which is the rich living libraries of the past.

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