

Tripuri Tribes: An Ethnographic Study of Death Practices and Mystical Beliefs

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Abstract- Tripura is home to 19 indigenous tribes known as Tripuri and among them, seven tribes namely Jamatia, Debbarma, Reang, Noatia, Ochai, Murasing, Koloï and Tripura almost share similar traditions, particularly when it comes to death rituals including the final wishes of the dying, the bathing ceremony, cremation practices and the mourning period, demonstrating a common cultural approach to honouring the deceased. The article explores the death practices and mystical beliefs of the Tripuri tribes of Tripura, emphasizing the rituals surrounding death, mourning and the afterlife. The tribes believe in the cyclical rebirth of the soul, where a deceased person's actions determine their next life. The dying individual expresses final wishes and after death, a series of significant rituals take place, including a bathing ceremony, food offerings and cremation. The article details these practices, such as the use of sacred firewood, the importance of the giri (wooden representation of the deceased) and the unique stone-hitting ritual. The mourning period, lasting twelve days, concludes with the sraddha ceremony, where food is offered to the deceased and the final rites are performed, symbolizing the soul's journey and release from the human realm. The practices also vary for babies and pregnant women, with burials instead of cremations.

Keywords: Tripuri Tribes, Death Practices, Mystical Beliefs, Final Wishes, Bathing Ceremony, Food Offering, Cremation Ritual, Giri, Stone hitting Ceremony, Sraddha Ceremony, Mourning Period.

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, the customs surrounding the births and deaths of mankind are seen and accepted as natural parts of life. There is no one who can escape death and as mortal beings, mankind will inevitably encounter the God of Death, regardless of their efforts to attain immortality. There are instances in history where men have attempted to achieve immortality but failed, such as Emperor Qin Shi Huang (1st Emperor of China). He desperately sought immortality and sent thousands of physicians and soldiers to find a cure for old age.

However, he ultimately died from poisoning caused by taking mercury as a remedy to stay young. Mankind, being mortal, can only achieve immortality through either a curse or a blessing from the Divine. For example, Ashwathama, one of the Kauravas, is believed to still roam the earth after being cursed by Krishna, while Hanuman, a devotee of Shri Ram, is considered immortal. No wonder that mankind cannot achieve immortality. However, the Tripuri tribes believe in the cyclical rebirth of the soul (transmigration of the soul), holding that a deceased person will be reborn based on their actions during their lifetime. This belief likely explains the famous sayings among the tribes:

"In my next life, let me be born into a wealthy family," "I must have done something in my previous life, so now I suffer," and "He was good in his previous life, as he is filled with good luck". Such beliefs shape the tribe's perspective on life, fate, and the afterlife.

2. WISH OF A DYING MAN

Despite the lack of proper medicine and healthcare centres and the slim chance of a cure, family members still take their sick loved ones to the hospital. In reality, however, those who are gravely ill often prefer to stay with their family and choose to pass away in their presence. It is a tradition among the tribes that when a family member is nearing the end of their life, they are always brought back to the house. The dying person often express their wishes regarding where their ashes should be scattered and request to meet a distant relative whom they hold dear. The family members do their best to fulfil the dying person's wishes. Upon the person's passing, if none of the deceased's sons are present, then the closest relatives are called upon to close the eyes and straighten the hands. After this, a traditional lamp (Benga Ni Chati- Light of the new couple) used during the wedding ceremony is lit above

their head, along with incense. All distant relatives are informed of the passing and are requested to attend the funeral in person to say their final goodbyes.

The deceased's body is kept in the same room until the arrival of the last relative. It is a tradition that every person who pays their respects to the deceased places a rupee notes of any denomination on the deceased's chest. The total amount is later wrapped in a piece of cloth and counted during the cremation process. This amount is then used to perform the Shradha ritual on the 13th day after the cremation. During my time as a research scholar, I had the opportunity to witness the ceremony where the total amount of funds collected was counted during the cremation of the respected man, Raja Singh Jamatia of Lokai Para. One group would tend the fire while another group counted the amount. The total recorded amount during that cremation was Rs. 48,760 (forty-eight thousand seven hundred and sixty). This amount is later used in the Shradha ritual.

Coming back to the deceased man, once all the relatives and villagers finished paying their respects, the body is prepared for the bathing ceremony.

3. BATHING CEREMONY

One of the sons or daughters would warm up three pots of water while the body is being prepared for bathing. When the water is warm enough, the deceased is taken out wearing the same clothes he had put on during his demise. He is then made to sit on a wooden chair and it is mandatory for every family member to pour at least a drop of water on the deceased. During the bathing ceremony three family members hold the deceased while the other bathe him with a soap. It is important to note that the bathing ceremony is not merely a formality, but it holds immense significance. Bathing the dead symbolizes purification and aids the soul's transition to the afterlife. The ritual 'Twi Tukukromani' (bathing ceremony) is so important that every relative and villager tries to reach the deceased's house before the ceremony is over. Water used during

the ceremony to bathe the deceased body is collected from the sacred rivers, specifically from a river that has never dried up or in simpler terms, an ever-flowing river.

The ceremony is a preliminary preparation of the body for cremation. This practice reflects the belief in spiritual liberation and the cyclical nature of life and death. After completing the bathing ritual, the deceased man is dressed in new clothes and then placed in a bamboo basket called a 'Talai'. During the placement of the deceased's body, it is important to note that no curtains not even 'Dangdal' (Bamboo stem used for drying clothes) are to be above the deceased's body and hence, no are pandals are being built and the deceased is laid in an open-air. It is a belief among the tribes that even a slight covering or shadow from an artificial structure will hinder the soul of the deceased and make them unhappy. Therefore, no pandals or artificial coverings are allowed over the Talai, ensuring that the deceased remains under the open sky. Once the body has been placed in the Talai, the next ceremony, known as 'Maikhwai Barokmani' (ritual of offering to the deceased), takes place.

4. MAIKHWLAI BAROKMANI RITUAL

Maikhwai Barokmani is a ritual of offering food to the deceased. Three plates of food, filled with the favourite dishes of the deceased and delicacies of the tribe, are placed at the foot of the deceased. Ochai then makes a small palm-shaped hole about seven inches deep in the ground and places a banana leaf over it, creating a tumbler shape to contain the water. Ochai then chants the mantra and calls upon the eldest son to perform the ritual. The eldest son kneels down, bows his head and as instructed, takes a bit of offering from one of the plates. He then places it on the banana leaf, repeating this process three times with offerings from each plate. Afterward, he bows down, stands up and scoops water from the small pit made by ochai and sprinkles the water three times on the deceased body. Next, the daughter also does the same thing.

Mantra used during the offering

Doh, ang Hingya

Doh, phaijadi

Jejaga phanw tongdi

Purbo tongbw

Poshchim tongbw

Uttor tongbw

Dokkhin tongbw

Baba-ni mai chosa chadi

Ama-ni twi khosa nungdi

Bongso ni chuwak khopsa nungdi

Bongso ni posa khopsa chadi

Bongso ni Rambophol chosa chadi

Bongso ni ri no yachakdi

Chabaiya, nungbaiya

Kwrwng kwrwng, Kwswnng kwswnng

Khe tongjadi ayang par o

It is impossible for me to come walking.

Please come,

Wherever you are.

Be in the East,

Be in the West,

Be in the North,

Be in the South.

Eat a handful of rice from the offering of our father,

Drink a glass of water from the offering of our mother,

Drink a glass of rice beer from the offering of the relatives,

Eat a handful of sacred offering from the relatives,

Eat a piece of banana, an offering from the relatives,

Accept the clothes from the relatives.

May you be filled with an abundance of food,

Let there be no pain or suffering,

Find peace and happiness beyond (Trans. Mine)



Note: Each offering is marked by pouring the offering three times onto the ground just beneath the feet of the deceased.

The mantra as a whole holds significant cultural and spiritual meaning, particularly in the context of afterlife and offerings. Here's an interpretation of its significance:

1. Invocation of Presence: The mantra calls upon the deceased, requesting them to be present during the offering, regardless of their location, emphasizing the belief in the spirit's omnipresence and connection with the living. This is reflected in the lines: "Please come, wherever you are" and "Be in the East", "Be in the West", "Be in the North", "Be in the South."
2. Offering Respect and Sustenance: The mantra mentions offerings from the close ones, the father, mother, and relatives symbolizing the importance of familial bonds and the continuation of respect for ancestors. It highlights the belief that these offerings, such as rice, water, rice beer and clothing nourish the spirit of the deceased, ensuring their peaceful passage.
3. Blessings for the Afterlife: The phrases "Let you be filled with abundance of food," "Let there be no pain or suffering," and "Let you be peaceful, filled with happiness on the other side" are prayers for the well-being of the departed in the afterlife. They reflect the hope for a peaceful transition to the spiritual realm, free from suffering.

4. Symbolism of Sacred Offerings: Items like rice, water, rice beer, bananas and clothing hold sacred value in many cultures and here they represent both sustenance and respect. The act of offering these items serves as a ritual to honor the deceased and ensure their comfort in the afterlife.

In essence, this mantra invites and honor the spirit of the deceased, ensuring their well-being on their journey to the afterlife and expressing deep reverence for their memory.

After the food offerings, ochai instructs all the villagers and relatives to take a final look at the deceased's face before the body is taken for cremation. The wife, family members, relatives and villagers gather to pay their last respects. Next, the ochai directs the relatives to lift the Talai, once the Talai is raised, it is rotated three times counterclockwise while the eldest son lies flat beneath it and rolls three times on the ground. Finally, the body is taken for cremation.

5. CREMATION

For the purpose of cremation, it is necessary for every family within the village to contribute firewood, which is taken care by the Luku. The wood used to build a pyre is placed in a crisscross manner, one above the other, until it reaches a height of seven feet with seven steps, facing north and south. The deceased's body, upon reaching the cremation ground, is lifted and

placed on the pyre along with the Talai. The men atop the pyre then flip the deceased with his face facing downward before removing the worn clothing. Removal of the clothing is necessary to prevent it from sticking to the skin, which can make the cremation process challenging. However, if the son requests that the clothing not be removed, then his request is being respected. Removing the clothes does not mean removing the clothing entirely. Instead, the clothing being worn is cut in half in the middle, allowing the fire to directly consume the deceased body.



With the deceased's body on top of the pyre, the eldest son is called upon by ochai to perform the final rite of feeding the fire into the pyre. First, a small fire is made about fifteen feet away from the pyre. The fire is then lit on a strap of three bamboo tied together and handed over to the eldest son. The eldest son along with the relatives then circles the pyre counterclockwise three times, feeding the fire to the pyre on the completion of each circle. During the cremation process, the fire is fed towards the head first, then towards the middle and finally at the bottom or feet of the deceased. After completing the circle and feeding the fire, every person present at the cremation ground adds firewood to the pyre before returning home. Around twenty villagers still remain at the cremation ground to complete the cremation process until the deceased is fully turned into ashes. There are instances where certain body parts fail to burn despite the huge pyre and continuous feeding of the firewood. Another important aspect of the tribe's tradition If a pregnant woman dies, her

unborn child is removed and buried at the cremation ground itself, while the mother is cremated.

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In such cases, the tribe believes that this is the work of witches and proceeds to chop off the unburned body parts using an axe until they are reduced to ashes. While returning from the cremation ground, all of the villagers take a piece of mud and then tie it along with a vine or a creeper. The tribes believe that by doing so, they can prevent the evil spirit from the cremation ground from following them. Another thing to note is that the cremation ground of the tribe is always located on the other side of a river. The tribe believes that the river acts as a border line, preventing any spirits from the cremation ground from crossing over. The villagers, upon returning, bathe in the river, wash their clothes and come back to the house fully soaked. After the cremation, the next step is to collect the ashes and a round bone from the knee called the patella. These bones are collected because they are known to never fully melt.

On the following morning, before sunrise, the family members, along with ochai, go to the cremation ground. They collect the ashes and bones and then build a small hut out of straw. They place a mud pot filled with water and hang a piece of white cloth. The tribe believes that the soul will quench its thirst from the pot for the twelve days until the Sharadha is complete. The family then returns home after bathing

and performing the cleansing ritual of being sprinkled with water before entering the house. The bones and ashes are then kept in a small bamboo container until the shraddha. Next comes the days of mourning.

6. MOURNING PERIOD

The days from the cremation until the sraddha is known as 'Nerachi Chamani Sal' (eating of only boiled vegetables), the term is metaphorical meaning that, these are days of mourning and that eating meat will be seen as an enjoyment, thus it is prohibited. During days of mourning, all the male relatives of the deceased will eat only Nerachi, however the female relatives will eat Nerachi only for three days. The reason for the female relatives to mourn only for the three days is due to the importance given in the use of surname. The concept of coverture can be brought to light. According to Oxford Language,

"Coverture is the legal status of a married woman, considered to be under her husband's protection and authority."

Allgor says.

"A female baby was identified by her father and later, after marriage, by her husband's identity. Under coverture, a husband and wife became "one" through marriage. It sounds romantic, but the "one" was the husband she became and this is the phrase "legally dead." So, it's not that women take the last names of their husbands, as we commonly think; it's that they become part of the husband's family."

During these twelve days, the villagers take turn to stay in the house of the deceased until the mourning days are over. This is done to support the family and to encourage them to not lose heart or feel helpless. It is not that the villagers will take food in the house of the deceased, they take their meals in their own house before the approach of the evening and then stays with the family until the next morning whereas the other villagers stay in the deceased's house till mid night and then return back home. This will continue until the sraddha is over. The distant female relatives, who stay far off will perform the ritual of 'Nerachi Baimani' (breaking of the three days mourning). The distant female relative would perform this ritual on her own and would serve the ritual meals to the village elder. Many distant female relatives would perform this ritual on their own for it is impossible for them to come

during the sraddha. Finally on the 13th day the sraddha ceremony is being performed.

7. SRADDHA

Starting from the 7th day, the villagers come together to build the pandal for the sraddha rituals. The construction of the pandal is completely free and is a custom among the tribe that everyone should be present to help the family in every way possible. Many villagers willingly sponsor items such as sacks of potatoes, kilos of onions, meat, fish, etc. Most of the time, the only thing the owner needs to provide is rice, as most of other items are covered through donations or sponsorship by the village people and distant relatives. After the pandal is built, a small gathering is held by the villagers on the 11th night. The storekeeper, known as Badari is selected to be in charge of all the food items. The amount of food being less or getting wasted depends on him. The owner hands him everything required for the sraddha and the owner himself needs permission from Badari to take anything from the storehouse. For the Badari, on the day of the sraddha, it is necessary for him to remain inside the storehouse. He must be present in the storeroom for the entire twenty-four hours until the sraddha is completed. Even to taste a plate of curry requires his permission, he holds an important position on that particular day.

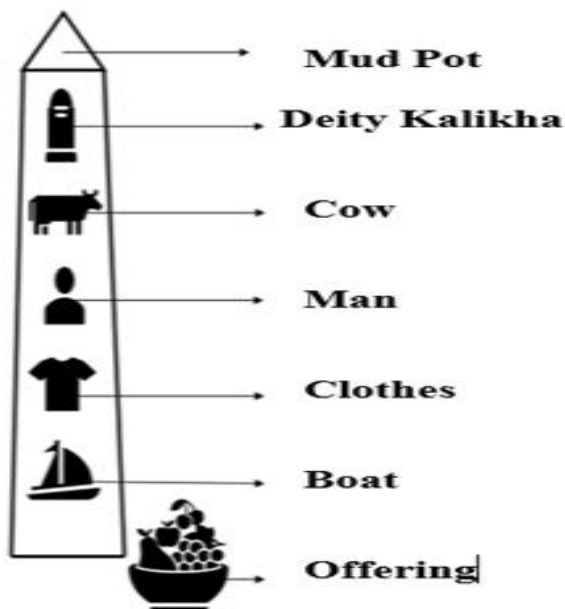
In terms of sraddha ceremony, in comparison to the other tribes there is a slight difference in the Jamatia tribe. Unlike the other tribes where the khadols of the village visit each house and extend invitations, the sraddha ceremony in the Jamatia tribe is open to all and persons from any village or tribe can attend the ceremony. It is necessary for Badari to be present, as a guest of not less than eight hundred is expected during the sraddha. The preparation for the ceremony starts five days in advance and certain dishes are prepared in advance on the 11th night, such as frying the fish, cutting the vegetables and preparing the spices. On the day of the sraddha, the first ritual performed is called "Giri Tisamani".

8. GIRI TISAMANI (RITUAL OF GIRI)

Giri represents the deceased man. It is a curved wooden log and can only be carved from three types

of trees: amla, banyan and wild fig. These woods are considered sacred by the tribe and therefore; to represent the deceased man, it requires a sacred tree. The curving of the giri cannot simply be done, before cutting the tree, the carver needs to perform puja to the two deities, Thunairok and Bonirok (God of the Jungles), only then the Giri be curved. Another important thing to note is that not just anyone can inherit the giri. It requires a specific family heredity, as only those from the bloodline of previous generations can inherit and carry the giri. Even an ochai is unable to inherit the Giri, only those with the rightful bloodline can.

Model of Giri



Coming back to the ceremony, the giri is laid down on a mat covered with white cloth and the bones of the deceased are placed near it. After performing the cleansing ritual known as Lampra, ochai instructs the eldest son to lift the giri and plant it in the designated location for the offering ceremony. After the planting of the giri, ochai performs the ritual of Maikhwai Barok Mani (offering food to the deceased). The eldest son, along with his siblings, makes an offering three times in a row by lying flat on the ground and paying respect to the deceased who now sit in the form of a giri. Ochai finally completes the offering ritual and then directs all of the male bloodline to sit in a circle to perform the ritual of 'Holong Tokmani' (Stone hitting ceremony).

9. HOLONG TOKMANI (STONE HITTING RITUAL)

When all of the deceased's male bloodline, known as "Satai," are seated, the Holong Tokmani ritual starts. Ochai hands a plate filled with a bitter leaf along with other offerings and places a round white thin thread like rope around the right ear of the male relative. Then, he takes a stone, places it above his forehead and strikes it three times with his dow, while chanting the mantra.



<i>Ah, haiya doh</i>	<i>Yes, let it be done</i>
<i>Ayouk kolok wngdi</i>	<i>May you have a long life</i>
<i>Bongsho kolok wngdi</i>	<i>Let your generation be numerous</i>
<i>Gusti teibw phuwardi</i>	<i>Let your relatives be numerous</i>

(Trans. Mine)

Ochai continues the ritual until no male relatives remain. It is mandatory for male relatives to wear a thin, round white thread on their right ear until the Giri Lamokmani ritual is completed. A key aspect of this ritual, as previously mentioned, is that only males from the deceased's direct bloodline can participate. This excludes individuals such as the deceased's younger sister's son, grandmother's younger sister, or aunt's son from taking part in the stone-hitting ceremony. Participation is strictly limited to male descendants from the paternal lineage, regardless of the number of generations. This is why male relatives place great importance on this ritual. It is almost like unable to attend the wedding ceremony is acceptable; however, their presence at this ritual is essential.

After the completion of the ritual, each male relative is given a small portion of kwkha (a bitter preparation). It is mandatory for them to eat it, as eating the kwkha signifies the end of their Nerasi (mourning period) and indicates that they can now resume eating regular food. Every individual present at the sraddha is given kwkha before the sraddha meal. Following the completion of the stone-hitting ceremony, the sraddha meal is finally served. This meal holds deep significance, symbolizing the final blessing of the relatives and villagers for the departed through the meal of condolence. It also serves as a moment for everyone to come together, sharing memories and paying their final respects to the departed.

10. GIRI LAMOKMANI (THE FINAL FAREWELL)

On the morning following the arrival of the village elders, the ochai first performs the Lampra puja, a cleansing ritual. He then asks the sons and daughters of the deceased to gather around the giri and pay their final respects. After chanting the mantras, the ochai instructs the eldest son to place the giri on his shoulder and they all circle three complete anti-clock rounds before proceeding to the river. Once they reach the riverbank, giri is fixed into the ground and a small straw roof is constructed on top of it. The ochai then instructs the son to pour the ashes and bones into the river, thus completing the final rite. It is important to note that the tribe believes the soul of the deceased finally departs from the human world on the 13th day after the giri is fixed and the bones are poured into the river. The group then returns to the house, where they undergo a purification ritual involving the sprinkling of water. The elders, helpers, family members, and the ochai then partake in their 13th-day sraddha meal and bid farewell.

11. FINDINGS

1. Death Rituals and Transmigration of the Soul.

- The tribes hold a strong belief in the cyclical rebirth of the soul (transmigration).
- Death is not considered an end but a transition, with rebirth determined by past actions (karma).
- Common sayings reflect this belief, such as, *"I must have done something in my previous life, so now I suffer."*

2. The Final Wish of a Dying Person.

- Despite limited healthcare, families take their dying relatives to hospitals, but most prefer to pass away at home. The dying person expresses their last wishes, often regarding where their ashes should be scattered or meeting loved ones.
- The Benga Ni Chati (wedding lamp) is lit above their head to symbolize their spiritual transition.

3. Bathing Ceremony.

- The deceased undergoes a ritualistic bathing ceremony to purify the soul for the afterlife.
- Water is collected from sacred rivers, as running water is believed to hold spiritual significance.
- The deceased is dressed in new clothes and placed in a Talai (bamboo basket), ensuring an open-air setting, as artificial coverings are believed to hinder the soul's journey.

4. Offerings to the Deceased (Maikhwai Barokmani).

- Food offerings are made to honor the deceased, symbolizing nourishment for the afterlife.
- The eldest son and daughter participate in offering rituals under the guidance of an Ochai (spiritual leader).

5. Cremation Rituals.

- Each family in the village contributes firewood for the pyre.
- The body is placed face-down to facilitate complete cremation.
- Any unburned body parts are chopped off to prevent interference from witchcraft.
- A river separates the cremation ground from the village, believed to act as a spiritual barrier.

6. Collection of Ashes and Mourning Period.

- Bones are collected on the following morning and kept for 12 days until the shraddha (final rites).
- A mud pot with water is placed in a small hut at the cremation ground to quench the soul's thirst.
- Mourning involves eating only boiled vegetables (Nerachi Chamani Sal), symbolizing detachment from indulgences.

7. The Sraddha Ceremony (Final Rites).

- Villagers build a pandal for the ritual, and many contribute food donations.
- The Badari (storekeeper) manages the food supply, ensuring that meals are provided to the large gathering.
- Unlike other tribes, the Jamatia tribe allows open attendance, with hundreds of guests participating.

8. Giri Tisamani & Holong Tokmani Rituals.

- A Giri (wooden log) carved from sacred trees (amla, banyan, or wild fig) represents the deceased.
- Only individuals with the rightful bloodline can curve the Giri.
- Male blood relatives participate in the Holong Tokmani (stone-hitting ritual), a tradition in which the stone is struck only on the forehead of the male bloodline of the deceased.

12. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

1. Language and Translation Limitations.

- The primary language spoken by the Tripuri tribes is Kokborok, while the research findings are presented in English.
- Certain cultural and ritualistic terms do not have direct English equivalents, leading to potential loss of meaning during translation.
- Some idiomatic expressions and spiritual concepts embedded in oral traditions may not be accurately conveyed in English, affecting the depth of interpretation.

2. Limited Sample Size and Regional Scope.

- The study primarily focuses on specific subgroups of the Tripuri tribes (Jamatia, Debbarma, Reang, etc.), which may not fully represent the entire spectrum of Tripuri death rituals practiced across different clans and regions.
- Variations in rituals due to local adaptations and modern influences were not extensively covered, which may lead to an incomplete understanding of evolving traditions.

3. Secrecy and Restricted Access to Rituals.

- Some aspects of Tripuri death rituals are considered sacred and restricted, meaning certain

rituals and chants were not fully disclosed by community elders.

- The reluctance of some participants to discuss mystical elements, such as witchcraft or spirit beliefs, led to gaps in the data.

13. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

To build upon the findings of this study, future research could explore the following areas to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Tripuri death rituals and mystical beliefs:

1. Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Ritual Language.

- A detailed linguistic study comparing the original Kokborok ritual chants with their English translations to identify semantic shifts and cultural gaps in meaning.
- Documentation of untranslatable words related to mystical beliefs, with explanations of their cultural significance.

2. Cross Comparisons.

- A comparative study of death rituals across different Tripuri sub-tribes, such as the Jamatia, Debbarma, Reang, and Noatia, to understand variations in rites, beliefs, and ancestral worship.
- Examination of how different indigenous groups in Northeast India (e.g., Mizo, Naga, Khasi) perform similar or contrasting death rituals and mystical practices.

14. CONCLUSION

As a whole, the death rituals and mystical beliefs of the Tripuri tribes reflect a deep reverence for the cyclical nature of life and the afterlife. Their customs, from the final wishes of the dying to the final funeral rites, emphasize the importance of spiritual purification, familial bonds and community involvement. Each ritual, whether it is the bathing ceremony, cremation or the Sraddha, serves as a means of guiding the soul beyond the mortal realm while reinforcing the tribe's collective identity and traditions. These customs also highlight the significance of ancestral connections, as seen in the Holong Tokmani ritual, which limits participation to the male bloodline and in the sacred practice of

preserving and collecting the deceased's ashes. The emphasis on unbroken lineage, purification and the appeasement of spirits reveals the Tripuri tribes' deep-rooted belief in the balance between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Despite the influence of modernization, these traditions continued to be practiced, preserving the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Tripuri people. They serve not only as a farewell to the departed but also as a reaffirmation of life, ensuring that the deceased find peace in the afterlife while the living continue to honor their legacy.

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