

Tradition in Transition: The Impact of Modernization on Death Rituals in Tawang

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Abstract—Scholars have often debated the change and continuity in tradition with the advent of modernization. Modernization has profoundly altered mortuary practices around the world, reshaping the death rituals. The trends of education, mobility, individualism, secularization and ecological-political pressures have impacted the continuity in the originality of the death rituals passed down from generations. Tawang, a home to the second largest Buddhist monastery in the world is located strategically, sharing borders to Bhutan and Tibet. Tawang is an important center of cultural, religious, and geopolitical resonance. However, the study of the transition in tradition with the impact of modernization on death rituals is a less documented subject. Hence, this paper attempts to fill the research gape, which will be helpful in navigating the evolving changes from past to the present. The paper starts with a brief discussion on the scholarly works on tradition in transition in contexts of modernization, followed by the discussion on the death rituals in Tawang, wherein the age-old death rituals and the contemporary changes and challenges are highlighted.

I. TRADITION IN TRANSITION AND DEATH

“Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed”, in the words of Antoine Lavoiser describes tradition in transition. Scholars studying religion and anthropology put forth that Tradition is not static but inherently dynamic. As per the Oxford Dictionary is defined as a custom, belief or way of doing something that has continued from the past to the present, where as transition represents the actual living of the process where the established beliefs, customs and practices evolve with time in which death rituals too are a part. Edward Shils states that tradition involves “continuity with the past,” in continuity with the evolving change.ⁱ Eric Hobsbawm in his work *The*

Invention of Tradition, co-edited with Terence Ranger, defines “invented traditions”, highlighting how tradition is crafted and fabricated with modernization in order to preserve them.ⁱⁱ Both Edward Shils and Eric Hobsbawm present the view that under the modernization, the traditions originally created in the past experience transitions with the occurring changes in the world in order to preserve and bring continuity in the traditions. Death often perceived negatively in the society is inevitable and plays an important role in the construction of both religious beliefs and traditional practices. Death Rituals exists in every culture playing an integral role in the society, serving multifaceted roles in aiding individuals and communities in navigating complex loss. Its cultural and social significance echos through the cultural values, beliefs about life, death and the afterlife, more importantly it reaffirms their shared identity and continuity in traditions. Emile Durkheim suggests that collective rituals generate collective consciousness, including funerals. He holds the view that rituals serve as a means of reinforcing social solidarity.ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage provides structured transitions of the rituals of death that is in three stages: separation, liminality and incorporation, these stages mark the transformation for both the deceased and the mourners.^{iv} Robert Hertz expanding on van Gennep’s view of death rituals emphasizes on the transformative nature of death rituals. Hertz refers to the rituals as a medium of to regain equilibrium in the society, guiding both the deceased and the living through a process of social reintegration. Derving a contemporary perspective on death rituals, Robert A. Neimeyer describes those rituals provide a structured means for individuals to express grief, find closure, and maintaining social bonds, facilitating emotional healing and adaptation.^v Death Rituals have been a

part of the history of civilization of Man, the coming of modernization and urbanization has impacted the society not only on a societal but also on individual levels in all aspects of life. To a great extent today modernity in a way has brought mobilization and on the other hand has created distance in which individuals have resorted to function and practice the age-old traditions in a modern way. The modern ways have also influenced the change in perspective and facilitated the conduct of the cultural practices with technological involvements. Death Rituals are surrounded by different beliefs, cultures and religion, varying from countries to countries, and culture to culture, the practice of death rituals are also followed by meaningful beliefs such as the Tibetan and Mongolian sky burial practices, in Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, where the deceased is placed on a mountain top to be consumed by vultures, this death ritual holds a significant meaning which teaches impermanence and returning the body to nature. In Madagascar, Famadihana or turning of the bones involves exhuming ancestors every few years, rewrapping remains, and dancing to honor their memory. This practice emphasizes on ancestral continuity and familial bonds. The fantasy Coffins of Ghana among the Ga people, elaborate interesting carvings shaped like animals, vehicles, or objects meaningful to the deceased, these carvings symbolizing status, identity and celebration of life. The Irish Wakes feature open coffins, storytelling, food, music, and keening. This ritual serves therapeutic, social and community-reinforcing roles. Death ritual practices around the world are different and unique expressing meanings that may be contrasting to one another, to some extent particular death rituals appear unacceptable to one culture but every ritual practiced accommodates the religious and cultural values. What's important to understand is the adaptation of the old traditions in the evolving social change. In the Indian context among the Hindus, cremation emphasizes the belief in reincarnation, ancestral cycles and continuity beyond death. During covid-19, an adjustment in the rites can be observed shifting funeral logistics, reducing gatherings, and the use of digital media in conducting and witnessing ceremonies. In urban contexts, certain rituals merge traditional symbolism with contemporary constraints. These practices illustrate how tradition in transition survives by transforming arrangements, reinterpreting symbolism and shaping

old traditions with present realities. The Impact of modernization has had both positive and negative consequences, introducing a complex process of transformations socially, politically and culturally, creating shifts from community centric societies to individualism.

II. TAWANG: DEATH RITUALS AND MODERNIZATION

Tawang, nestled in Arunachal Pradesh is home to the Monpa, and a pilgrimage hub of Tibetan-Buddhism. Buddhism as a religion in Tawang has existed since the 7th century CE, merging with indigenous Bon traditions. The iconic Tawang Monastery, founded in 1680-81 by Merag Lama and Lodre Gyatso under the 5th Dalai Lama's direction, belongs to the Gelug School of Mahayana Buddhism. It is also the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. Tawang is the largest and vibrant center of Buddhist study, ritual and cultural identity. The meaning of the name Tawang itself signifies its deep rooted cultural and religious importance, where "Ta" means horse and "Wang" means chosen. It is believed that the land of the Monpas was chosen by the horse of Merag Lama Lodre Gyatso. Tawang being known for its deep cultural and religious ties, has also encountered the changes in its traditional functioning with modernization.

The Monpa prior to the introduction of Buddhism, followed their own religion called Bon, which is an indigenous religion in Tibet as well. The adaptation of Buddhism did not mean entirely rejecting their old religion Bon, they blended a number of Bon deities into the Buddhist pantheon, worshipped in the Buddhist rituals. The Monpa people hold strong belief in karma which means that any action or deed, good or bad with mind, body or speech will have a corresponding result. The belief in Karma being the central worldview of the Monpa people also shapes the rituals related to life, death and rebirth cycles.^{vi}

Monpas view death as the transition of the soul into an intermediate state known as Bardo, that lasts up to forty-nine days. In the forty-nine days, rites are performed to guide the deceased's consciousness towards a favourable rebirth. There are four types of death rituals, to conduct which pre-cremation rites include consultation of the Jambeyang, a Lama astrologer who determines the auspicious time,

associated with the process of consulting astrology, social standing, health status which decides the disposal method and the location for funeral rites. The preparation of the death rituals reflects belief in the afterlife, where people in offerings being Khadas (silk scarves) food items, amulets, and items for the afterlife. An image of Buddha is also placed near the deceased, and a ghee lamp is lit until disposal. The body is carried to the disposal location involving prostrations and ceremonies led by monks.

The four methods of disposal are:

1. Water burial: In this the body of the deceased is cut into 108 by a person referred to as Thrampa and commonly immersed in the river Tawang Chu which is typically considered the most spiritually meritorious, the body parts are immersed one by one as a cremation.
2. Mountain cave burial: is usually practiced in the death of an infant. The tiny body is encased in a wooden box, and is carried to high up in the mountains and laid to rest inside a cave.
3. Cremation: Cremation is similar to the Hindu death ritual, where the body is burned as cremation however Many do not opt for it as they believe that it would defile/disrupt the sacred space of the deities if not properly conducted by revered lamas. Therefore, cremation is usually performed only for high- ranking lamas and other affluent people.
4. Burial: This method of disposal is often associated with cases involving leprosy or infectious diseases, or of criminals.

Of the aforementioned methods, the conventional way of disposal of a Monpa body is the water burial. The ancient practice of water burial by the Monpas lies in the belief that by releasing the deceased into the river, their remains would nourish aquatic life, thereby accumulating spiritual merit for the departed soul. This death ritual highlights the idea that life, death and rebirth are part of the natural cycle and reflects the karmic belief that the physical body is returned to nature guiding the soul towards rebirth. The Monpa Death rituals rooted in Buddhist cosmology and indigenous traditions, are symbolic to purity, environmental consciousness and the afterlife.^{vii}

Modernization in Tawang has catalysed both conscious reforms and inadvertent erosion of Monpa death rituals, creating shifts in the death rituals. The forces of modernization like the introduction of

education, developing infrastructure and mobility have brought rapid changes to socio-economic structure in Tawang. The improvement in connectivity has aided the people in pursuing schooling, healthcare and modern amenities in and outside the region, exposing the younger generations to modern perspectives of livelihood and traditions.^{viii} As a result, today's Monpa youth are absorbing a more modern outlook and chasing urban opportunities, leading to less young aspirants joining astrology or body-segmentation roles. This has led to a decline in the number of trained Thrampas, making it tough to uphold ancestral customs.

With urbanisation and changing societal values and lifestyles, there has also been call for reforms to better align with environmental conservation. In 2010, the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh Dorjee Khandu initiated reforms in the river-based death rituals concerning the environmental issues of disposing dissected body parts in the river. The chief minister also advocated for electric crematories to preserve rivers and woodland ecosystems. Late Khandu's advocacy thus led to the establishment of an electric crematorium thereby offering a more eco-friendly and efficient alternative. However, the operation of the crematorium is facing delays due to lack of high voltage power supply, and also of the very fact that Tawang faces electric shortages almost throughout the year. Along with the technical issues, there seems to be skepticism among certain local villagers especially the older generation who are uncertain about the modernisation in age-old traditional practices.

Though the undergoing changes are actively influencing shifts in traditions in death rituals, the Monpas continue to preserve their identity and traditions through institutions linked to the monastery, where oral history, ritual chants, and Thangka paintings remain taught by elder generations. Attempts are also made to keep the generation in contact to their identity, culture and tradition through revival of handmade papers, hand-written scripts and crafts. Religious festivals like Losar and Torgya remain occasions of cultural consciousness and promotion of traditions. It can be said that modernization accompanied by education, infrastructure, tourism and digital exposure in Tawang has brought challenges in preserving the traditional death rituals, as many factors involving socio-political, economic consciousness

have emerged. However, the Monpas have embraced their tradition in transition by implementing a continuity in the age-old traditions with accepting modifications with regards to the modern constraints

in conducts that still resonates and reflects their socio-economic and their socio-cultural commitments.

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