https://doi.org/10.65734/tgi.ssei.avp.ijcsss.ti.26.29.4

Traditional Burial Practices of The Maring Community of Manipur

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Abstract

This study examines the traditional burial practices of the Maring community of Manipur and explores their ritual, symbolic, and social significance. Mortuary rituals among indigenous societies often express cultural beliefs about death, the afterlife, and the relationship between the living and the deceased. Among the Maring, burial practices represent an important cultural institution that reflects cosmological beliefs, kinship relations, and social organization. The research documents key stages of the funeral process, including the washing of the body, ritual dressing (*Khangka*), preparation of grave goods, burial performance, and post-burial offerings.

Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach based on oral testimonies and descriptive field observations, the study analyses these practices through anthropological perspectives such as Van Gennep's concept of rites of passage and Durkheim's theory of ritual and social solidarity. The findings suggest that Maring mortuary rituals guide the deceased symbolically toward the afterlife (*Khiya Ram*) while reinforcing collective identity and moral order within the community.

The study also highlights the role of material culture in burial rituals. Objects such as bamboo baskets, ceremonial flags, ornaments, and food offerings serve as markers of social status and memory. Through these practices, mortuary rituals not only preserve tradition but also express the cultural identity of the Maring people. The study therefore emphasizes the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous ritual traditions in Northeast India.

Keywords: Maring community, burial rituals, rites of passage, symbolic anthropology, material culture, Northeast India.

Introduction

The ways in which societies respond to death often reveal some of their deepest cultural values. Funeral and burial practices are not only about mourning the dead; they also express ideas about kinship, morality, continuity, and belonging. Across cultures, rituals surrounding death help communities deal with grief while also reaffirming social bonds and shared beliefs. In Northeast India, where diverse tribal traditions continue to shape everyday life, mortuary practices remain an important part of cultural identity. Among the Maring community of Manipur, burial rituals involve a series of carefully observed customs. These include washing and dressing the body, preparing grave goods, performing ceremonial acts, and making offerings after burial. Each stage carries symbolic meaning and reflects long-standing cultural understandings about death and the afterlife.

This paper attempts to bring together descriptive accounts of Maring burial traditions with broader anthropological interpretation. One aim is simply to document these practices in a more organized way, since the community has received limited academic attention compared to some neighbouring groups. Another aim is to explore what these rituals reveal about social relationships, hierarchy, memory, and belief. The study also considers how such traditions are changing today under the influence of Christianity, migration, economic pressures, and modern lifestyles.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Describe the traditional burial practices of the Maring community.
2. Understand the symbolic and social meanings associated with these rituals.
3. Compare Maring mortuary customs with those of neighboring tribal communities.
4. Highlight the importance of preserving indigenous ritual traditions and encouraging further research.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This study is primarily based on qualitative research methods. Information was gathered through oral testimony, ethnographic description, community discussions, and reference to secondary literature dealing with mortuary rituals and Northeast Indian tribal traditions.

Sources of Information

Much of the material comes from conversations with community elders and ritual specialists familiar with Maring customs. These discussions helped clarify the sequence of rituals and the meanings attached to particular practices. In some cases, participant observation and community reports also contributed to the reconstruction of ritual stages.

Secondary sources, including anthropological studies and ethnography, placed Maring burial traditions within a broader comparative and theoretical framework.

Ethical Concerns

The subject was approached respectfully. Verbal consent from individuals was obtained who shared information about ritual practices. Sensitive details that may be considered private or culturally restricted have not been included. The paper also recognizes the ethical responsibility involved in documenting indigenous traditions, especially those connected to death and spirituality.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies largely on oral accounts and descriptive interpretation. It does not include detailed statistical data or long-term field observations. Consequently, discussions regarding historical change and transformation remain limited and would benefit from further research.

Review of Literature

Mortuary rituals have long been an important subject in anthropology. (Hertz 1960) viewed funeral rituals as collective responses to the disruption caused by death, while (Gennep, 1960) examined such practices through his theory of rites of passage. According to (Gennep, 1960), rituals surrounding death usually involve stages of separation, transition, and incorporation.

Gilsenan & Turner (1976) later expanded these ideas by focusing on liminality and *communitas*, especially the temporary social conditions created

during ritual periods. Symbolic anthropologists such as Geertz (1973) encouraged the interpretation of rituals as systems of meaning, whereas structuralist scholars like Lévi-strauss examined the symbolic oppositions embedded within ritual life.

In the context of Northeast India, scholars such as Hutton (1921, 1922) (1963), Elwin, (1964), and Jamir, (2004) documented different forms of tribal mortuary practices. More recent studies have also explored how funeral traditions are adapting to changing religious beliefs, migration, market economies, and state institutions.

Despite these contributions, smaller communities like the Maring have not received significant focused attention. For this reason, documenting Maring burial traditions is valuable not only from an ethnographic perspective but also for preserving cultural knowledge that may gradually disappear.

Traditional Burial Practices of the Maring Community

Washing and Preparation of the Body

When a person dies, the body is washed with warm water as part of the initial funeral preparation. During this process, a one-rupee coin is placed in the water. After the washing is complete, the coin is taken by the grave diggers and used symbolically in relation to the burial ground. Community elders describe this practice as part of the transition between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Khangka: Dressing the Deceased

The ritual dressing of the dead is known as *Khangka*. Men and women are dressed according to customary traditions that reflect both identity and social belonging.

Men are typically dressed with items such as:

- *Murshum* (white turban)
- *Khap* (bamboo earrings)
- *Bongbal* (white shawl worn diagonally)
- *Lingkham* (white dhoti)



Photo 1: Bongbal

Women are dressed with:

- *Lingkhang* (white turban)
- *Khrumkral* (ornamental earrings)
- *Rulsum* necklace
- *Phikham* (white mekhla with black outer cloth)



Photo 2: Lingkhang



Photo 3: Khrumkhral



Photo 4: Phikham



Photo 5: Rulsum

One striking feature is the redistribution of certain ornaments before burial, especially the *Rulsum* necklace. Part of it may remain with the deceased, while the rest are passed on to relatives. In this way, the funeral also connects to inheritance, kinship continuity, and memory.

Grave Goods and Social Status

Burial goods vary depending on gender and social position. Men are often buried with six traditional garments, while women are buried with five. Individuals who held important social roles within the village (Lhangsha, Khullak, Khulpu, Meilampu, Pipa) may receive additional ceremonial items such as ritual flags (Thral), cut into parts (one flag into five parts, the other into four), tools also called *Shonmansham, Shoncham, Louhin* (spade), Cheipak (stick) and portions of mithun meat placed inside bamboo baskets. These distinctions suggest that social identity does not end with death. Burial practices continue to reflect hierarchy, prestige, and community recognition. Women who are wives of certain office holders may be buried with *Phimui Markup,* a pointed bamboo cover with black cloth.



Photo 6: Thral



Phot 7: Shoncham and Shonmansham

Bamboo Basket and Khing Khai

The body is wrapped in white cloth and placed inside a bamboo basket woven to fit the size of the deceased. Ideally, the bamboo should come from plants cultivated by the person during their lifetime. When this is not possible, the family obtains bamboo through a customary exchange system known as *Khing Khai*. This practice carries symbolic importance because it links one's

productive life with one's final journey after death. The material used in burial is therefore not random; it carries social and personal meaning.



Photo 8: Bamboo Basket



Photo 9: Ripui

Grave construction and Burial Ceremony

Graves are generally located away from the main settlement area. The structure of the grave is narrow at the top and wider below. Specific clan members perform designated roles during the burial process. For instance, the Tanem clan leader receives the head of the deceased, while the maternal uncle receives the legs. Objects associated with the deceased are placed beside the body, and a lamp is lit near the head to guide the soul toward *Khiya Ram*, the afterlife. Musical instruments such as drums and gongs (*Pung drums, Dar gongs, mithun horns*) are also played, creating an atmosphere that is both solemn and communal.



Photo 10: Dar and Pung



Photo 11: Mithun Horn

Post-Burial Rituals

After the burial, family members construct a small hut and bamboo fence near the grave. Food offerings, usually rice and fish, are brought for several days. An

Omna or stool is also placed there so that the spirit may symbolically sit and partake in the offerings. These rituals suggest that the relationship between the living and the dead is not believed to end immediately after burial. Instead, connections continue through remembrance, offerings, and ritual care.

Table 1: *Stages of Maring Burial Ritual*

Stage	**Ritual Activity**	**Participants**	**Symbolic Meaning**
Preparation	Washing of body	Family members	Purification before transition
Dressing (Khangka)	Ritual clothing and ornaments	Kin and elders	Cultural identity
Grave preparation	Digging grave and preparing bamboo basket	Grave diggers	Preparation for afterlife
Burial	Placement of body and goods	Clan leaders	Social recognition
Post-burial offerings	Food served for three days	Family	Continued relationship with spirit

Table 2: *Grave Goods and Ritual Provisions by Sex and Social Status among the Maring Community*

Category of Deceased	Clothing / Body Adornment	Ritual Objects / Tools	Food Offerings	Special Symbolic Items	Social Meaning
Adult Male (ordinary status)	Murshum (white turban); Khap (bamboo earring); Bongbal (white shawl); Lingkham (white dhoti); six traditional garments	Louhin (spade); Cheipak (stick)	Three portions of mithun meat wrapped in leaves	Bamboo basket (Phaibu) containing burial goods	Represents preparation for the journey to the afterlife and continuation of masculine social roles
Adult Male (village authority: Khullak, Khulpu, Meilampu, Pipa, Lhangsha)	Same as above with additional ceremonial attire	Same tools as ordinary male burial	Mithun meat offerings in bamboo basket	Thral ceremonial flags (white with red and black stripes) cut into ritual portions	Symbolizes social authority and recognition of leadership status even after death
Adult Female (ordinary status)	Lingkhang (bamboo turban); Khrumkral (beetle-carapace earrings); Rulsum necklace; Phikham (white mekhla) with black outer cloth; five garments	Axe; small spade	Food offerings (rice, fish)	Phaibu bamboo basket for grave goods	Reflects women's role in household economy and kinship continuity

Adult Female (wife of Lhangsha)	Same as above	Same as above	Same offerings	Phimui Markup (pointed bamboo cover with black cloth)	Indicates marital association with ritual authority
All deceased persons	Body wrapped in white cloth	Wooden planks beneath body	Rice and fish offerings for three days after burial	Lamp placed near the head to guide the soul to *Khiya Ram*	Represents transition from earthly life to the afterlife
Post-burial ritual provisions	—	—	Rice and fish served at grave for three days	Small hut with Omna (stool) for spirit	Maintains symbolic relationship between living family and deceased spirit

Analytical Discussion

Rites of Passage and Transition

Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage is clearly visible in Maring funeral practices. The washing of the body marks separation from ordinary life, while the dressing rituals and placement inside the bamboo basket represent a liminal stage between life and death. Burial and post-burial offerings finally mark incorporation into the ancestral realm. At the same time, Maring rituals involve more than spiritual transition. They also regulate inheritance, redistribute material objects, and reinforce kinship obligations.

Rituals and Social Solidarity

Emile Durkheim (1915) argued that rituals strengthen collective identity, and this can be seen in the communal nature of Maring funerals. Family members, clan leaders, and villagers all participate in different ways. Mourning is therefore not experienced privately alone but shared collectively. Still, these ceremonies also reveal social differences. The burial arrangements

for respected leaders and ritual authorities show that hierarchy and status continue to matter even after death.

Symbolism and Meaning

Many aspects of the ritual carry symbolic meaning. White clothing, lamps, bamboo baskets, food offerings, and burial spaces outside the village all express ideas about purity, transition, and separation. Seen together, these practices form a broader symbolic system through which the community understands life, death, and continuity.

Materiality and Gender

Objects used during funerals are not simply decorative. They preserve memory, communicate identity, and connect the deceased with social relationships formed during life. Gender differences are also significant. Men's funerary rituals often emphasize authority and public roles, while women's rituals appear more closely connected to kinship and household continuity. These distinctions reflect broader social patterns within the community itself.

Ritual Change in Contemporary Times

Like many indigenous traditions, Maring burial practices are gradually changing. Christianity, migration, modern education, and economic pressures have influenced the way rituals are performed today. Certain traditional materials may be harder to obtain, and some customary practices are becoming less common among younger generations. Yet despite these changes, many ritual elements continue to survive. Even when adapted, they remain important expressions of identity and cultural memory.

Comparative Perspective

Maring burial customs share similarities with the practices of neighboring communities such as the Angami, Ao, and Garo peoples. Grave goods, food offerings, communal mourning, and beliefs concerning the soul's journey appear across several tribal traditions in Northeast India.

At the same time, certain practices remain distinctly Maring, especially the ritual use of bamboo baskets, the *Khing Khai* exchange system, and the ceremonial responsibilities assigned to clan members. These local variations show how funeral traditions are shaped by specific ecological, social, and cultural conditions.

Table 3: *Comparative Mortuary Practices in Northeast India*

Community	Burial Type	Grave Goods	Post-Burial Rituals	Key Symbolism
Maring	Earth burial with bamboo basket	Tools, ornaments, Mithun meat	Food offerings for three days	Journey to Khiya Ram
Angami Naga	Burial with grave goods	Personal belongings	Commemorative rituals	Social status
Ao Naga	Burial or secondary rites	Ritual items	Mourning period	Soul transition
Garo	Burial with ritual offerings	Household items	Post-funeral ceremonies	Ancestor connection

Implications for Theory and Practice

The Maring case suggests that mortuary rituals cannot be explained adequately through a single theory. A fuller understanding requires attention to symbolism, social structure, material culture, kinship, and ritual performance together. These rituals also function as important social mechanisms. They preserve memory, regulate social obligations, reinforce authority, and maintain symbolic ties between the living and the dead. From a practical perspective, there is an urgent need for documentation and preservation. Community-led efforts, oral archives, and cultural initiatives may help ensure that these traditions continue to be remembered and understood by future generations.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is still considerable scope for deeper research on Maring mortuary traditions, especially since many aspects of these practices remain insufficiently documented. Future studies could benefit from longer periods of field engagement in order to observe how rituals are changing across generations and under changing social conditions.

More detailed attention may also be given to ritual objects such as *Thral*, *Rulsum*, and *Ripui* bamboo baskets. Their materials, methods of preparation,

circulation within kin groups, and symbolic value deserve closer examination than they have received so far. Another area that requires fuller exploration is the role of women within funeral practices. Questions related to inheritance, ritual participation, and women's responsibilities within mortuary customs could provide important insights into gender relations within Maring society.

Research examining the relationship between customary practices and state institutions may also prove valuable, particularly in relation to heritage preservation, legal recognition, and cultural policy. As traditional practices continue to change, there is a growing need to understand how communities negotiate between customary law and modern administrative frameworks.

Finally, future documentation efforts should ideally involve the community itself more actively. Collaborative projects such as oral history recording, audiovisual archives, and locally maintained cultural records may help preserve these traditions in ways that are both respectful and sustainable.

Conclusion

The burial practices of the Maring community represent far more than a set of funeral customs. They bring together belief, memory, kinship, material culture, and social identity in ways that continue to shape community life. Through ritual actions, symbolic objects, and collective participation, these traditions create continuity between generations and maintain connections between the living and the dead. Understanding them therefore requires sensitivity not only to ritual performance but also to the social and emotional worlds that give those rituals meaning. At a time when many indigenous traditions are facing rapid change, documenting and preserving Maring mortuary practices remains both academically important and culturally necessary.

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