

## FUNERAL PRACTICES OF THE TANGSA TRIBES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH.

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### **Abstract**

Across the globe, cultures inter their dead according to religious beliefs and social customs, which have evolved significantly over time. The term "Tangsa" encompasses various sub-tribes, each with distinct languages, residing in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Most adhere to the *Rangfra* religion, except the Tikhak Tangsa, who practice Theravada Buddhism. Common burial practices include placing items like clothing, *dao* (machetes), and other possessions with the deceased, believed to transform magically for use in the afterlife. These rituals symbolize continuity into the next realm. For the Tangsa, precise execution of funeral rites is critical to avoid harm from the deceased's spirit. The ceremonies integrate death as a natural part of life, a logical counterpart to birth, with the afterlife regarded as mysterious yet not feared.

**Index terms:** Tangsa, *Chaw ha*, *Rangfra*, *Mungphi Mung*, *Ngarai Mung*.

### **Introduction**

There are various Tangsa sub-tribes, however in this paper an attempt is made to observe the funeral beliefs, rites, and rituals of the Mossang, Muklom, Tikhak, Longchang, Ronrang, Havi, Jugli, Kimsing, Lungphi, Longri, Sangwal, Sangke and Tonglim. They practice distinct methods for disposing of the dead. The Jugli bury their deceased, while the Muklom opt for cremation. The Mossang employ both burial and cremation, with some burying the body fully clothed and others with minimal or no clothing; their cremations typically involve a nearly naked body. The Longchang have designated cremation grounds, whereas the Muklom cremate near their homes.

The Tangsa believe in a heaven where ancestors live joyfully with abundance. When someone dies naturally, their soul is thought to join the ancestors in this heavenly abode. Offerings of cooked foods and various vegetable seeds are provided to the deceased, under the belief that the soul may need sustenance on its journey and seeds for cultivation in the afterlife. Conversely, souls of those who die unnaturally—such as through murder or accidents—are believed to have sinned and are destined for a miserable place called *Chaw ha* (hell), regardless of their character. Only raw foods are offered to these deceased souls.<sup>1</sup>

For a natural death, a feast is held on the fourth day, inviting villagers. A pig is sacrificed and offered in memory of the deceased. The priest offers part of the meat and rice-beer to the departed. Family members visit the paddy field to gather potatoes and arums, which are hung on a house post as offerings to aid the soul's journey to the afterlife.

In cases of accidental or unnatural death, the bereaved family, observing a period of ritual impurity, takes steps to protect against *chawthang*, an evil spirit. They encircle the house with thorny branches and pointed bamboo

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spikes. A basket is placed mouth-down over the wooden ladder at the entrance, and a fishing net is spread across it. Thorns and bamboo spikes are fixed on the main door, pointing outward. The Ronrangs cover the house's front with a large bamboo mat. The Tangsa believe these measures prevent the deceased's spirit from returning at night and troubling the family.<sup>2</sup>

According to *Rangfraism*, humans and animals are composed of two fundamental substances: the celestial substance (*Rang*) and the earthly substance (*Ha*). The fusion of these substances leads to the death of the individual. *Rangfraism* teaches that the human body is made of earthly substances, while the celestial substance is the soul, which is considered a manifestation of God.<sup>3</sup> Per the law of *Rangfraa* (Nature), everything born must die. Lamenting death is akin to questioning God's law. Thus, to love God is to accept death as an integral part of His divine order.<sup>4</sup>

### **Funeral beliefs and rites:**

#### **The Mossang**

The Mossang cremate the deceased near their home on a pyre of nine layered logs. The body, placed on its back, is stripped of clothing. The family head ignites the pyre, followed by other relatives. After cremation, ashes are gathered, covered with earth and logs, and enclosed by a fence. The deceased's personal items are offered as grave goods, alongside rice beer, cooked rice, and water placed near the grave. Mourners bathe post-burial, and a pig is sacrificed, its head offered to the deceased, with a communal meal shared among attendees. For unnatural deaths, the body is buried naked in a remote jungle location, with eyes, palms, and soles pierced by thorns to prevent the spirit from returning to harm the village. The Mossang Tangsa observe a five-day mourning period after a death.

When a person dies of old age, it is considered a natural death, termed "*lum wulum*," and the body is either buried or cremated. Unnatural deaths, such as those caused by illness, premature delivery, accidents, drowning, or suicide, are treated differently. For accidental deaths, family members stay inside the house for five days. In cases of suicide, the family abandons the house and relocates to a new one.<sup>5</sup>

After cremation, a fowl is sacrificed, cut into small pieces, and divided into nine packets with rice. Five packets are carefully sealed, while the remaining four are sealed only at the bottom. These packets are placed in a basket and kept at the front of the house. The deceased's clothes are left at the grave or cremation site. A plate of rice, vegetables, and meat is placed where the deceased used to sleep, later emptied outside. On the fifth day, food is placed in a small utensil, tied to a post at the cremation site, and left there.

#### **The Muklom**

The Muklom Tangsa cremate their dead, but bury stillborn babies. Cremations once took place in front of the house, but now occur at a designated site near the village. The body is washed and draped in red cloth for women or white for men. The oldest clan or village member lights the funeral pyre after seeking permission to avoid being haunted by the deceased's soul. A pig and a fowl are sacrificed, with the pig's head offered in the deceased's name. During the sacrifice, the deceased's ancestors' names are recited to guide the soul to heaven. The cremation ground is called *maangsattong*. Cremations typically occur after 2-3 days, allowing relatives and friends from nearby villages to pay their respects.<sup>6</sup>

#### **The Tikhak**

*Met Rui* and *Mat* mean death in Tikhak, they believe, death and birth are not opposites but part of a cycle. Death

leads to rebirth, and birth inevitably leads to death. They believe good deeds lead to *Mungphi Mung* (heavenly abode), while evil actions lead to *Ngarai Mung* (sinful world). On cremation day, old clothes are burned, and smoke is blown near the ladder to ward off evil spirits. Close relatives and sub-clan members observe three days of mourning, abstaining from outdoor activities and some household tasks.

On the ninth day, the bereaved family prepares *hai rit ju* (rice beer) to mark the final separation from the deceased. The rice beer is first offered to *Hawa* (maternal uncle). The deceased's family must provide cane and bamboo strings to bind the body for cremation, as villagers typically do not supply these, though clansmen may. Some elderly people prepare *Yak bat* (essential items) in advance, believing the *Chi Ya* (soul) may desire these and could disturb the family if they are not provided.

During the mourning period, the bereaved family must refrain from consuming salt and remain indoors, except for essential needs. In cases of unnatural death, cremation does not occur at the common cremation ground.

Historically, it was customary to offer all possessions of the deceased, which were hung or placed at the cremation ground. Valuable items such as guns, *daos*, brass objects, gongs, and traditional beads were either burned or buried with the body. Additionally, seeds of grains, arum, maize, and other crops are offered to the deceased. When transporting the body to the cremation ground, a white thread is tied to the right toe. It is believed that the day after cremation, an eagle (*Lang ya*) visits the deceased's home, and the thread helps identify the correct eagle, as it is thought to embody the deceased's spirit for a final visit. The body is carried with legs facing the house's door, using two poles made from *kiro* (tree plants). The procession includes intermittent gunfire. During cremation, observers note the smoke's formation: smoke rising straight into the sky is considered auspicious, while scattered smoke is seen as inauspicious. On the third day, three to four family members return to the cremation ground to confirm the body has been fully consumed by the fire, as the pyre is left burning on the cremation day once the flames are sufficient. If unburned remains are found, they are collected and burned at the same site.

On the day of cremation, the deceased's house is vacated, with all doors and windows opened as soon as the body is taken for cremation. The fireplace is kept clean and tidy. Those remaining at home may stay in an outer room. After returning from the cremation ground, elders inspect the fireplace for any marks or footprints. A spotless fireplace indicates the deceased's soul was content with their life and that the final rituals were performed correctly. That evening, pigs or buffaloes may be sacrificed, and their meat shared with relatives and villagers.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Longchang**

The Longchang perform elaborate funeral rituals to cremate the deceased. For natural deaths, the family sacrifices pigs, cows, or fowl based on their means, offering cooked foods, rice beer, and various seeds to the deceased. Notably, Indian-made foreign liquor is now also offered. Seeds are provided for the deceased to cultivate in the afterlife. In contrast, accidental deaths (*Saao*), deemed tragic by the Longchang Tangsa, are not fully cremated, and mourners do not wait for the funeral pyre to settle. Believing the deceased's soul haunts the house, village youths guard it by lighting a fire at the entrance for three days. On the fifth day, the family kills a pig for a feast, and on the seventh day, another pig is sacrificed to purify the family and prevent future misfortune. Upon hearing of an unnatural death, neighboring villagers hunt hollock gibbons (*Thak bai*), believing they marry the deceased's soul, causing the death, and seek revenge.

The Longsang Tangsa consider the death of a pregnant woman or death during childbirth highly inauspicious.

Historically, if a woman died after giving birth, even if the baby survived, both were cremated together, with the last recorded instance in 1953. This practice has since been abandoned by the Longsang Tangsa.<sup>8</sup> In cases of death by drowning, the body is buried on the riverbank. On a chosen day, villagers gather in a procession to seek revenge on the water spirit believed responsible. They poison the river at the drowning site, leaving affected fish to float and rot as a symbolic act of retribution.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Ronrang**

When a person dies a natural death by God's will, the Rongrang Tangsa place the body in a coffin and bury it beneath the house. The deceased's possessions, such as utensils, clothes, and tools, are hung above the grave on a bamboo pole. They believe the soul (*sija*) of honest, truthful, and God-fearing individuals ascends directly to heaven to dwell with *Rang Frah*, while the soul of a wrongdoer descends to hell.

### **The Havi**

The Havi Tangsa cremates their dead, with the pyre lit by an elderly man from the deceased's family. The cremation ground is called *shoktung*. Those who die unnaturally are cremated at the place of death. The deceased's belongings are placed on a bamboo post called *ruk* near their house. Stillborn children or those who die before their naming ceremony are buried beneath the house, and if the parents choose burial, the *Lyanghok* ceremony is not performed. The *Lyanghok* ceremony, held in December for those who died naturally, involves cutting a bit of the deceased's hair and placing it in a small bamboo tube, worn by the eldest woman of the family. During this ceremony, a final farewell is given to the departed soul. On the same day, the deceased's belongings on the *ruk* are removed, and a small makeshift hut, or *rukreng*, is built near the village to house these items. Pigs and fowls are sacrificed, a feast is held for the villagers, and the bamboo tube containing the deceased's hair is burned.

When a person dies, the Havi Tangsa announce the death to the village by firing a gun or beating a bronze dish. Upon hearing this, villagers immediately stop their agricultural work, and hunters return from the forest. The body is kept in the house for two to three days to allow relatives from nearby villages to attend the cremation. In cases of unnatural death, however, the cremation occurs on the same day, and the deceased's belongings are burned with the body. After the cremation, villagers place thorny bushes in front of their homes at night to prevent the deceased's soul from entering. The deceased's family observes a week-long mourning period called *samtong*.

### **The Jugli**

The Jugli bury those who die from accidents or unnatural causes in the forest, maintaining complete silence during the process. Such deaths are deemed inauspicious and feared, with the deceased's name avoided to prevent their soul from returning to harm the village. To ward off the soul, animals are sacrificed, and a three-day pollution period is observed. Village youth, armed with guns, surround the deceased's house to repel the soul. A small chick is sacrificed, its blood collected in two containers, and those attending the burial wash their hands with it. No death rites or ceremonies are performed for unnatural deaths.

For deaths due to old age, elaborate burial ceremonies are conducted. When an elderly person passes, a gun is fired to announce the death, followed by the sacrifice of a cock (for men) or a hen (for women) to appease the soul. The deceased's belongings are placed on the porch. Previously, burials occurred adjacent to the house, but now they take place nearby. The body is positioned with the feet facing the door. After the body is taken for burial, the house doors remain closed until the burial is complete. The deceased's belongings are placed on

a bamboo post near the grave.<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, a ritual called *walnvam* is performed. One month later, the *Kajong* rite is observed to bid a final farewell to the soul, with a three-day mourning period during which no agricultural work is done.

### **The Kimsing**

The Kimsing bury their dead typically one or two days after death. They refer to a deceased body as "*maimaa*." In the past, burials took place beneath their raised houses, but now a designated burial site is used. No food is cooked in the deceased's home until the burial is complete. The family observes a three-day mourning period, during which they refrain from working in the fields. An unnatural death, termed "*saaw na*," is usually buried at the location of death. After burial, thorny bushes are placed on the stairs of the deceased's house to prevent the soul from returning.

### **The Lungphi**

The Lungphi bury their dead on the same day, sacrificing a cow or pig and holding a feast in the deceased's honor. The deceased's clan observes an eight-day pollution period. Villagers refrain from agricultural work on the day of death. On the third day, the family and clan go fishing or hunting and clean the house. In cases of accidental death or death during pregnancy, the body is buried immediately.

### **The Longri**

The Longri have distinct burial customs. For unnatural deaths, the deceased is buried with thorns in the forest. For natural deaths, the deceased's household refrains from cooking for three days, during which relatives provide food. On the fourth day, the family gathers sour leaves from the forest to consume.

### **The Sangwal**

The Sangwal bury their dead, including stillborn babies, typically beneath their homes in a practice called *slib*. The body is kept for one day before burial to allow relatives from nearby villages to attend the ceremony. A bamboo basket containing food is hung on a pole beside the grave, as it is believed the deceased's soul consumes the food before departing for the land of the dead.

### **The Sangke**

When a person from the Sangke sub-tribes of Tangsa passes away, the body is traditionally kept in the house for a day and buried beneath the dwelling, though this practice has largely been discontinued. Following the burial, a feast featuring beef and pork is held. A small bamboo basket filled with food is hung inside the house to honor the memory of the deceased.

### **The Tonglim**

Like other Tangsa sub-tribes, the Tonglim traditionally bury their dead beneath the house, a practice called *irukhvo*. Items used by the deceased and some foods are placed in a bamboo basket and hung outside the house. A cow is sacrificed in memory of the deceased, and a feast is held, attended by all villagers.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The funeral rituals of the Tangsa are primarily conducted by the deceased's loved ones, with priests playing a minimal role, mainly interpreting omens and spiritually significant events rather than enforcing religious control. This suggests the absence of a dominant priestly authority over the tribe's religious practices. While modern cultural influences have altered some traditional Tangsa practices, they have not led to complete

assimilation. The Tangsa have preserved a cultural core that maintains their distinct identity. Like all cultures, Tangsa burial practices evolve over time, showing limited adaptation through contact with other tribes and non-tribal societies, reflecting a process of acculturation. Many Tangsa have adopted Christianity or Buddhism, incorporating these religions' rituals into their lives. Nevertheless, their burial practices continue to embody traditional values related to community, family, and humanity's role in the world, while retaining the spiritual and ritualistic essence of their culture.

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