



## **SOME TRADITIONAL RITUALS OF BIRTH, DEATH AND SHAMANIC CEREMONY CELEBRATED BY MAN TAI-TURUNG COMMUNITY OF ASSAM**

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### **Abstract:**

The **Turung Ethnic Community** is one of the smallest tribal groups inhabiting in Assam. They are known for their unique **customs, rituals, cultures and traditions**. They are recognised as **“Man (Tai-Speaking)”** in **“Amendments to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950**. In the **Upper Assam’s non-autonomous districts of Golaghat, Jorhat and autonomous district-East Karbi-Anglong**, **“Turung”** people have been living since centuries. The **“Turung”** community is one of the organs of **Six Tai groups of Assam (Tai-Ahom, Tai-Aiton, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamyang and Tai-Khamti)**. The **“Turung”** community lived for centuries on the bank of **“Tarung Hka”** in the Kachin state of Upper Burma and present-day Myanmar. Owing to some personal and political conflict, they migrated to modern-day north-east India. According to written history, they once lived in **“Mung Mao Khawchang”**. Later, during the last phase of 15<sup>th</sup> century they migrated to Sadiya by crossing Patkai Hills and stayed briefly in Tapha. Eventually, they were brought to **“Jorhat Mission Compound”** by a British officer Captain Neuvile in the year 1825. And as stated by 1891 census, total number of **“Turung”** population was 301 at that time. Through this paper some **traditional rituals of birth and death** ceremony of **Tai-Turung** Community is explored and discussed in a detail way.

**Keywords:** Turung, Customs, Rituals, traditions, History, Community etc.

### **Introduction:**

The **Turung** community call themselves **“Ibu Chumpho”** and their native place is called **“Mereng”**. And in every village, they used to have **“Pungrang Inta” (Stilt House)**. Nowadays, owing to lack of money, wood, manpower and influence of modernity; most of the **Turung** village

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*Some traditional rituals of birth, death and shamanic ceremony...*

have built “**Nga Inta**” (**Mud house**) and “**Poka Inta**” (**Concrete House**). In each village, “**Chong**” (**Buddhist Monastery**) and “**Kummu**” is built for collective prayers and monk’s habitation. In addition, the **Turung** men carry a big knife called “**Unthoo**” and wear turban on head called “**Phoombaam**” with self-woven “**Lungi**”: instead of half or long pant. Furthermore, women wear “**Mabuu**” particularly in black colour in the place of long or half pant with “**Nangot**” and “**Singket**”. They primarily live in three main districts of Assam: **Golaghat, Jorhat and East Karbi-Anglong**. In **Golaghat district**, they have been living in “**Basapathar Turung Village**” and “**Rengmai Turung Village or Rajapukhuri Turung Village**” since time immemorial. On the other hand, their abode is found in the “**Pathar Shyam Village**” (**Naak Thong or Manna**), “**Tipomia Shyam Village**” (**Bagodia**) and “**Pohukatia Shyam Village**” in the **Jorhat district**. Moreover, only one village is situated in **East Karbi-Anglong district** called “**Balipathar Turung Village**”.

Name of the village	Year of Establishment
Pathargaon (Nakthong Mereng)	1836
Balipathar Turung Mereng	1898
Tipomia Turung Mereng	1910
Rengamai Turung Mereng	1918
Pahukatia Turung Mereng	1925
Basapathar Turung Mereng	1935

(Source: “Socio-Cultural Life of the Turungs” by Ms. Bonti Rani Gogoi)

The population of **Turung community** is not more than five thousand at present. Most of the Turung villages are situated in the dens forest area and on the bank of Doyang and Dhansiri river. Their basic occupation is farming paddy and cultivating seasonal crops, fruits and vegetables. The **Turung** women are also blessed with entrepreneur spirit, they weave numerous traditional clothes by “**Handloom**” (**Dadaa**) for both domestic and commercial use. Needless to say, for numerous reasons and purposes, including job, education, and business, many **Turung** people are living in many places of the world. Furthermore, the Turung people is also rich in many culinary skills and cuisines. They prefer boil method of cooking, though owing to modernist influence they choose multiple ways of enjoying meals. The most common food is- white rice. They consume rice with green and wild vegetables. For example: Muku Mikrkhi (Bamboo Shoots), **Chingkhang Si** (Leaf Mustard), Mujja (Banana flower), Wa-Khum (Wax Gourd), Kumpak Si (Pumpkin leaf), Khomlap Si, Naichung Si, Peseng Si, Meteka Si, Leheti Si (found only during paddy cultivation season), Mutti Si (mushroom) etc. Apart from vegetables, the Turung people also enthusiastically consume various meat and fish. Their favourite meat & fish include- “**Wa-San-Si**” (Pork meat), “**Hu san Si**” (Chicken meat), “**Khaipet san Si**”, “**Nga San Si yon Ngan San Ping**” (Various fish- dry, roasted, fried and boiled).

**Discussion:**

**Birth Rites or Customs of Turung Community:**

1. **New Born Rituals (Maang-Santhe-Na-Gmoong):** Basically, a pregnant lady is not allowed to move via any transportation modes for safety and health issue. Even, pregnant women are prohibited to roam and visit in any forest or deserted place for unforeseen negative effects. In addition, traditionally, they are advised not to go below a tree called “**Aikhe**”. Moreover, a pregnant lady should refrain from any household duty or action. Simultaneously, the husband of the pregnant lady avoids killing of any animal for the children sake. In the old days, the experienced ladies of the community are expected to pay frequent visit to look after the pregnant lady. Nowadays, it has been replaced by a gynaecologist. A new born baby is carefully cleansed by lukewarm water by the family and experienced women. Afterwards, the placenta is kept under the ground and fenced by bamboo slices. Then, an elderly lady is assigned the task to wrap the new born baby with appropriate cloth. While assigning the task to wrap the new born baby, it is also kept in mind that the chosen lady has not recently lost any family member especially her husband and children. Consequently, after one week or 7<sup>th</sup> day since the birth of the child, the new born baby is brought outside of the room or house. As in old days, **Turung** houses were built by wood and bamboo. Therefore, in those days it was a custom to use wooden ladder to go to the first floor of the stilt house. In the early morning with due rituals, both father and mother will come out of the house on the seventh day. Then, the father of the child will erect a spear on the ground and the mother will have to touch the ground at least seven times with newly born baby’s thumb. At last, a mixture of egg yolk and **sticky rick (saat inneg)** is poured on the forehead, knee and ears by whispering “**Paak Paak**” for robust health in imminent future.
2. **Naming Ceremony (Ming-Sming):** the naming ceremony is celebrated colourfully. In the said event, most of the elders of the “Turung” village are cordially invited and their suggestions are welcome for naming the children especially the women who were present at the childbirth. The naming ceremony is only held if the baby and the mother is utterly in good health after a fortnight. In the said ceremony, the traditional names are chosen for the newly born baby. However, nowadays modern names are used due to influence of social-media and foreign culture. In the naming ceremony, a great feast is entertained. Thereafter, gathered guests as well as invited attendees bless the child along with mother. Then, the host offers gifts and presents of traditional cloths to them who assisted as well as attended the childbirth duration. At the end of the ceremony, the gathered people offer gifts to newly born baby via parents and family.

**Death Ritual of Tai-Turung Community: (Sangkyu)**

If a person dies, at first it is checked whether the person’s eyes are diametrically shut or not. If not then that process is done immediately. Afterwards, the two toes of deceased person are tied

together. Consequently, the gathered people inform all the family members, relatives, neighbours and villagers to see the face of the deceased for the last time. Before the last rites, family members pay respect with tearful eyes. Then, the corpse is carefully washed and new clothes are put on by the reverse side of the shirt. It is a custom to cover the dead-body with pure cotton white cloth called **“Mijjip”**. On the other hand, for final disposition, a **grave** is dug according to need for the coffin. The coffin is especially built at the same time with wood and bamboo including **“Chakhu-Tangkhn”** (it is made of plain cloth fitted to bamboo bar for smooth erection on the ground / a long flag shape figure). Besides, the youth are tasked to watch the dead body at night. At last, the dead body with coffin is carried with the help of two raw bamboos and usually the oldest son of the family moves first along with the able-men of the family, relative or villager for cremation. The oldest son will also dress in a white cloth where roasted paddy is tied at the corner of the cloth. He is also responsible for holding a big knife and burned small slices of bamboo bundle. Before cremation, a Buddhist monk is invited for performing due rituals at the graveyard. The invited Buddhist monk along with gathered people will take pledge of **“Panchsheel”** (The five precepts or five rules of training) and pray for the departed soul by a special chanting called **“Siyaho”**. Generally, two ways of burying a dead body is practised: **(a) Burning a dead body to ashes and, (b) Burying directly at the digging place with coffin**. The dead body is placed towards north-east direction. Subsequently, the invited monk will first put pieces of soil at the graveyard. Thereafter, all the gathered people will join their hands for proper burial. Upon finishing the burial activity, people will return to their respective home and some will stay at the deceased home for emotional support. On returning, it is a ritual to take heat from burning fire and washing body immediately. Furthermore, in another ritual, people are advised to step on a kind of thorny leaves to get protection from any kind of evil spirits. Since the day of burial, each evening and night till a week a religious scripture is read by the **“Pathek”** (a kind of priest who reads religious scriptures). And everyday a religious ceremony called **“Thomtra”** is observed till the sixth day of demise. Finally, on seventh day, a post-funeral reception (**Som**) is organized. In the said reception, monks as well as invited people gathered to remember the life, memory and work of the departed soul. All the visiting people are also gifted an edible bowl of food called **“Khawtek”** (**A popcorn bowl mixed with jaggery, cake and dumpling or fritter**) cooked by the family members, guests and villagers. However, if a Buddhist monk is attained nirvana, then the general custom is not followed. For a Buddhist monk, a separate ritual is done with various procedures called **“Poi-Leng”** (**Rath Yatra or Chariot festival**).

*(Birth and Death Ceremony data credited to: Mr. Yatra Shyam Turung)*

### **Shamanism: Some traditional worship and rituals of Turung Community**

1. **Natgun Natphai Worship:** Natgun Natphai is a household deity of ancestors. The Turungs worship it for the overall well-being of the family member. It is performed every year at a specific time with due preparations. Generally, it is held in evening with only family

members. The worship requires a small pig, various necessary items including earthen lamp. At present, Natgun Natphai Worship is modernized and confined to limited households.

2. **Mung Nat Worship:** The Mung Nat Worship ritual is an annual collective worshipping for the well-being and protection of the entire Turung village. The Turungs worship “Mung Nat” for the safety from any imminent and unforeseen danger such as: epidemic, pandemic, disease, natural calamity, and attack. Before “Mung Nat Worship”, a small thatched house is erected. Aftermath, at the chosen venue, all the male gather and ritual is performed. Females with little children are excluded in this ceremony. The worshippers offer essential ingredients including- pig, rice wine and flower. Consequently, an elderly male person lights an earthen lamp in the name of “Mung Nat”. Later, the blood of the sacrificed animal is thrown on the bamboo thatched house and the worshippers pray to the “Mung Nat”. Nowadays, Mung Nat Worship is rarely done owing to incessant modern lifestyle.
3. **Phun Nat Worship:** In Turung “Phun” means tree and “Nat” means ghost. Therefore, the “Phun Nat Worship” is a worshipping of spirit of the tree. The Turungs believe that it is the cause of illness of any individual. If a person falls seriously ill, then the head of the family proceeds to a nearby banyan tree with long piece of bamboo. At last, they worship the tree with various offerings to forgive them for any misdoings done unknowingly.
4. **Numum Jah Ritual:** This ritual is done to appease “Numum Jah”. Because it is believed that “Numum Jah” is responsible for causing diarrhoea and indigestion. An elderly person of the family worship to “Numum Jah” by offering a packet of plantain leaves containing a coin and some grains of rice to the spirit seeking blessing for the early recovery.
5. **Khauja Worship:** This prayer is also related to disease and illness. According to this ritual, if a person suffers from deadly disease, then it is done. The elder of the family will utter prayer in the name of the disease one to the spirit. Later, rice and vegetables are cooked and dedicated to “Khauja” and kept the food outskirts of the village.
6. **Mum Mingla Chaga:** This ritual is related to paddy cultivation and harvesting. The Turungs believe that female spirit resides in paddy. Then, an elderly lady of the family goes to the paddy field with a sickle and new woven holy cloth. Hence, according to custom, the last leaf of the paddy is taken to the granary.

### **Conclusion:**

Furthermore, as “**Turung**” coterie follows the same “Theravada Buddhism” followed by **Tai-Aiton, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamyang and Tai-Khampti**; most of their traditional festivals are identical. Notwithstanding, thanks to numerous factors, “**Turung**” clique’s traditional festivals are distinct in minimal ways. The “**Turung**” basically observe new year festival “**Poi-Sangken**”, “**Chowmoon-Kham-Poi**”, “**Mai-Ko-Shum-Phai**”, “**Madhu Purnima (Okuwa)**”, “**Fra-Lu-Poi**”, “**Mangalsitra**”, “**Kathina Poi**”, “**Poi-Leng**”, “**Me Pi**”, “**Mung-Mangla and Antre**”, “**Buddha Purnima**”, “**Kathina-Cibar Dan**”, “**Chong-Lu-Poi**”, “**Kumuu-Lu-Poi**”, “**Poi-Dun-Si**”, “**Lik-Phat**”, “**Lik-Lu-Poi**”, “**Chowmun tai Poi**”, “**Poi-Dun-Si**” and numerous “**Satang**” in an entire year etc. As a matter of fact, the birth, death and shamanic rituals of Turung community is keeping

*Some traditional rituals of birth, death and shamanic ceremony...*

“Turung” tribe apart from other societies. Moreover, the “**Turung**” community also has various festivals and rituals for **Ghost ‘Nat’**. They believe that “**Nat**” (Ghost) reside in every place. And human being’s fortune, bad luck, disease, health and well-being including household safety and child care is deeply related to “**Nat**”. Therefore, in every occasion, they worship to “**Nats**” for greater good of the household, society and village. In conclusion, undoubtedly the birth and death ceremony observed by “**Tai-Turung**” is unique in many respects. Therefore, the proper documentation must be initiated by the respective authority, stakeholder, organization, institution, researcher, explorer, community members and government. Otherwise, with the passage of time, rituals and customs of “**Tai-Turung**” will fade away or replace by popular dominant culture of world in imminent future.

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