Traditional Customs in Illness, Cure, Death and Burial of Dawei Ethnic Group in Longlon Township, Dawei District, Taninthayi Region

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Abstract

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely of disease or infirmity. (WHO, 1948) When everyone falls sick, they are cured by western medicine and folk medicine. Only when he is healthy, his mind will be in a state of happiness. Therefore, health is an essential factor for a man to live. Dawei ethnic group still uses their traditional folk medicine. There is a belief in spirit for curing. Then, there are some traditions that other ethnic groups do not perform in funerary rite. The aim of the research is to reveal how they maintain their traditional custom in illness, cure, death and burial. The objectives of the research are to explore how they cure with what folk medicines and how they perform funeral rites handed down one generation after another. Functional theory was used to write the paper. In this research method as qualitative research method, individual depth interview, focus group discussion and key informant interview were used.

Introduction

Dawei ethnic group living in Longlon Township had their origin in King Thamanta in about Myanmar era 113 (Yadana (Dawei), 2008). It is said that since the king’s reign, the sick has been cured by folk medicine, or by witch-doctors offering or the spirits. It is believed that when they are ill, they are possessed by evil forces, witch, ghost or goblin. There is spirit worship in Dawei. In funerary rite, there are specific terms and customs such as ‘master of the death’ or to local term ‘Mathasaya’ (စိန်သစ်) and 'corpse guard' or 'yelonkhan' (ရှေးဟောင်) that are alien to other tribes. Although Dawei ethnic group belongs to the nine stocks of Bamar, they have different concepts when compared with Bamar nationals. Consequently, a research on Dawei ethnic group those living in Longlon Township, Taninthayi Region has been done with the aim to reveal how they have maintained their tradition with respect to hygienic factors, death and burial. The objectives of this research are to explore how they cure their illness with folk medicines, and how they perform funeral rites handed down one generation after another. Functional theory was used to write the paper. Methodology used in this research included qualitative research method, individual depth interview, focus group discussion and key informant interview.

Geography of Longlon Township

Location, Area and Boundary

Longlon Township, Dawei District, Taninthayi Region is situated in the middle of Taninthayi, the coastal strip that just like a leg in the southernmost part of the Union of Myanmar. The town lies 13° 23” North Latitude 24° 8” and East Longitude 98° 13”. Longlon Township is on the southeast of Yangon and it is far 397 miles from Yangon and 250 feet above sea level. And it is far 12 miles from the south of Dawei town. Longlon Township includes in the Longlon peninsula on the west bank of Dawei River. Longlon Township situated Dawei River on the east, Bay of Bengal on the west, Myanmar Sea on the south and Rephyu Township on the north. Longlon directly joins with Dawei town, the capital city of Taninthayi Region through Kamyawkin Bridge. Longlon Township is a peninsula, and it is long from north to south but narrow towards south. There are four townships in Dawei district. They are Dawei, Rephyu, Longlon and Thayetchaung. The area of Longlon is 44 miles from north to south and 12 miles at the widest part from east to west. It is 355.92 square miles wide.

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Longlon Township is one of the most populated towns in Dawei district. Most of the population is Dawei nationals but other national groups rarely settle there.

**Stratigraphy**

Longlon Township is narrow from east to west and long from north to south. So stratigraphy of the township is a leveled ground but among hills and valleys, rivers and streams meander and pass. There is arranged Taungnyo mountain range that blocks the Bay of Bengal on the west.

**Weather**

Although Longlon Township is in the Dry zone, the weather becomes mild by the presence of Bay of Bengal. It is one of the most rain-falling towns.

**Health and Care**

As Longlon has a high rainfall and is infested with mosquitoes, the most infected diseases are malaria, dysentery, diarrhea, cold and cough, etc. When one suffers from malaria, he pounds the leaves of 'kukko' and sips the juice or swallows the 'bladder of chicken'. They believe that should they eat banana, the malaria recurs. When he suffers from dysentery, he eats leaves of 'daweihmaing' in the form salad. When they catch cold, they boil betel leaves, ginger and jiggery and sip it. They even use medicine that medical practitioners compounded.

Dawei nationals living in Longlon Township are Buddhists. It is found that there is traditional worship of spirits. When they fall sick, they are treated by witch doctors and medical practitioners, with folk medicine and worship of spirits. It is believed that when a man becomes ill, he is careful by evils, witch, ghost and goblin and when a child is sick, he is also seized by nat.

If he is seized by the evil, he performs 'theminsapyitchin’, (ə r i p ) a regional term. It means that making offering of spirit food in a small basket is to placate the spirit. After the offer is done, the evil spirits leave and the sick man recovers.

When the children fall sick, they are bewitched by 'lower spirit'. (ə t ) The lower spirit is evil Nat or demon. When the demigod is offered with some kinds of offertories, it is believed that they relieve immediately.

Dawei ethnics also use trees, vines, fruits and leaves to compound medicines that handed down from forefathers. They are leaves of Chiretta, leaves of morning glory, Aloe vera, Eupatorium odoratum, soap acacia, tamarind, Cassia siamea, asafetida, mud cell built by wasp, etc.

Before and after delivery, mothers use such traditional medicine as turmeric, pepper and leaves of jack fruit. After the turmeric is ground, they smear their body to feel their skin soft and supple. If they sip turmeric juice, they are free from unexcreted waste matter. To get ample mother’s milk, they sip pepper soup or soup of jack-fruit leaves.

Long ago, when illness occurred, they were treated by witch doctor, medicine man and doctor. Shaman or medicine man treats the patient through incantation but he does not use medicine. Doctors cure them with traditional medicine as well as Western medicine at present. The folk come and tend at the dispensary in the village. If the disease is not relieved, they go to the General Hospital. When there is operation, they are hospitalized and cured completely.
Death and Burial

Preparation of Funeral

In Longlon Township, there is no coffin shop. Planks are not bought beforehand. If so, it is believed that ill luck would befall. When a man dies, wood is at once bought to make a coffin. Neighbors and friends in the village give a hand. The poor family of the deceased swathe the corpse with mat and carried it to the graveyard. Although Dawei ethnic group use coffin for carrying, they do not bury the corpse with the coffin. They burn the coffin. In entombing, the tomb is made beforehand and the corpse together with the coffin is buried. The corpse is carried to the side of the central room of the house or in the living room and deposited on a matted-bed. The body of the dead is wrapped with clothes and faces are covered with towel. The bier is not ornamented with tinsel paper but with clothes of the deceased pinned down by nails and cane. Before starting the procession, the corpse is put into the coffin after one has striken the triangle gong.

When a man dies in the village, the family informs the headman. He announces this by striking the drum made from a hollowed log to get help from the villagers. 'Mathasaya' or 'master of the death' gets to the house of the deceased one and starts performing funerary paraphernalia.

'Mathasaya' or 'master of the death' is the one who performs the funerary matters voluntarily in the village. So he is always in the house of the departed so as to carry out such tasks. Near the dead body there is 'yelonkhan' called 'corpse guard'. Anyone who is much loved by the deceased or does not engage household chores specifically is regarded to be qualified as 'yelonkhan'. Long ago, a 'yelonkhan' wrapped the head with white cloth and wore white clothes. Nowadays, in spite of wrapping the head with white cloth, he just wears white shirt. He is prevented from touching anything in the house or asking for at his will. Only when the inmates of the house serve him, he has his meals. As he always stays near the corpse 'swam', alms food has been offered to the monks on the seventh day of a dead man's demise, duties of a 'yelonkhan' has completed. Then the clothes that he wore are donated to the monastery. Monks use the clothes for some purposes.

When one dies of illness, a 'yelonkhan' performs all matters, washes the dead body and puts on new clothes. It is done so as to be beautiful to the people's sight. If the clothes are front buttoned, the body is worn in wrong position. But the clothes are hooded, the right part is sheared and the body is worn so as to be clothed easily. A 'yelonkhan' bathes the corpse and makes it look good. If others do such things, it may be contrary to the traditions prescribed. If so, bad luck will befall to the village or the bereaved. So he does with caution.

The body is kept for three days and buried. But according to agedness, ailment and weather condition, the corpse is kept for five or seven days. The legs of the body are placed towards the staircase and on the day of the funeral the dead body is carried through foot direction. Long ago, between the teeth one mat or 25 pyas was placed as ferry money but nowadays 50 or 100 kyats notes are put. When the corpse is put into the coffin, not only two big toes but two thumbs of the dead man are tied. It is believed that the dead man could not run. Breaking the pot in the funeral procession means separation of the bereaved and the deceased. Since the day of the departure till just before the funeral the meals are served for the dead one. On the day of the funeral a packet of rice and curry is placed on the coffin. It is done by master of the death.

Funeral Rite

In the morning of fixed day for the funeral, those sent by 'the master of the death' go to the cemetery and dig the pit. In doing so, after the spot has been chosen, they start digging at
the spot where the hoe drops from their shoulders. If the spot is changed for digging, it is believed, the next one would likely die.

The rite starts between from twelve noon till one hour in the afternoon but on account of the weather condition it changes. The bier was carried and accompanied by pony carts, bullock carts, and some men. Monks went to the graveyard before the funeral. The coffin was carried on the shoulders of the men. At the top of the procession was two men striking the triangle gong and then followed carts loaded by troupe and bowl of offertory and the bier carried by men. Then, a great crowd followed the relatives, friends and neighbors. The rear of the line was the cart of troupe. Accompanying the funeral with two troupe meant as the dead man who experienced the sickness in life had freed from those sufferings so that he could go to the other shore happily with two bands. In funerary rite, some inmates in the house burnt mat, pillow, blanket, mosquito net and some clothes and they cleaned the house.

At the cemetery, the coffin is brought from the leg side and turn round the rest-house in clock-wise and the legs are placed towards the entrance. Then the people vowed for 'Triple Gem' for the deceased and they listened to the sermon given by the monk. Taking vows of the triple gem means to accrue merit on behalf of the dead man. Then, the coffin is taken to the pit outside the rest-house. The coffin is paced beside the pit and the body was looped at the chest and bottom of the body and the corpse was lifted and lowered into the pit. Members of the family and relatives threw a handful of earth. It means that the dead could know the participation of members. Then twigs and thorns were put on the tomb so that dogs and pigs could not scavenge. Then goods such as clothes and other belongings were put in the pit and a bowl of offertory was given. Relatives distributed things such as cheroot or box of matches to those who accompanied the funeral. Those who returned from the cemetery washed their face and hands with water or shampoo.

On the day of the funeral villagers were invited to come and listen to the dhamma of monk at the alms food dedicated to the dead person on the seventh day of his demise with cheroots, candles, etc.

In the evening before the seventh day, 'master of the death' went to the graveyard and summoned the spirit of the dead man. Before summoning he lit candles at the village shrine and he beseeched the guardian gods to let the spirit enter the village or town so as to be shared with merit by the bereaved. On the next day after the sermon was heard, they said, 'May you go to higher abode,' and a branch was thrown near the monastery. Some families donate dedicating to the deceased so that the departed could accrue merit for a week. When a pet animal was dead, a donation was made on behalf of the animal.

For those who died of a disease alms were offered for the dead. But for those who died in childbirth or sudden death such an offering was done. Without suffering any ailment a certain man dies of an unexpected cause, it is known as sudden death. Long ago, if anyone was dead outside the village, the body was not allowed to bring the corpse back into the village. But now, after a bowl of offertory was donated to the guardian god of the village the dead body was able to be taken in the village. There are different spots for ordinary and unexpected deaths. When a person dies in accident, he was buried with glass shreds. It was done so as to prevent from uncovering the pit for witchcraft purposes. But those who passed away with heart attack or sudden illness were buried immediately in the ordinary spot of the cemetery. When an infant died at the moment of delivery, the body was put in an earthen pot and dug at once. It means that he could not befall such mishaps in the next life but would live long.

Ceremonial photographs such as wedding, ordination and graduation etc., are put backwards or covered with cloth. As these photographs were taken to be auspicious, it does not
concern with inauspicious occasions. When parents of the monks who are regarded to be noble die, they are covered with golden umbrellas.

In the quarter before the funeral was done when another person died, the latter was buried first. On the moment of the New Year if a man dies he is immediately buried to prevent from occurring the next year. In other words, the dead body is dug in the ground on the last day of the Old Year so that a certain inauspicious event may not happen in the New Year. Long ago, young and adult persons were dead they were interned but if old people were dead they were cremated with firewood. When the dead persons were interned, they were oriented to the east which is place as the sun rises in the east.

As Dawei nationals are Buddhists, they hold a Pongyi Byan (โปงยีบ้าน), a mendicant's funeral pompously. The funeral is laid for at least one month or year and in time of prosperity they hold the rite. The coffin is varnished with glass mosaic and gold leaves according to dignity and title of the monk. The corpse of the monk was venerated by chanting Pali discourses and singing funeral songs or dirge extolling the virtues of the departed monk. The two elephants were to take the coffin after bowing down the dead body three times. In time of cremation, firewood and sandalwood and other aromatic substances were used for the funeral pyre. Pieces of bones and ashes were put in a gilded pot and the pot was drifted in the water or entombed in a pagoda. It was done to venerate the monk and not to offend by going over the ashes. The final rite of the deceased monk was held magnificently. There entertained dramatic troupes, non-dramatic performances, puppet shows and narration of religious or historical stories by a single person affecting various roles.

**Conclusion**

Although Dawei ethnic living in Longlon Township, Dawei District, Taninthayi region are Buddhists, they believe in spirits. In studying the traditions and customs of Dawei ethnic group there are different conceptions according to time and space. Some traditions have been handed down one generation after another. Concerning funeral rite, a striking characteristic of Dawei ethnic is that they do not prepare wood for coffin beforehand. Only when a person dies, wood is immediately bought and a coffin is made. Some poor families wrap the body with white cloth and buried. In burying, the coffin is not put in the ground. But it is burnt. Now, in towns the body is cremated. Near the corpse there are ‘master of the death’ and ‘yelonkhan’ or corpse guard. So, Dawei ethnic has a certain superstition dealing with dead people.

In brief, Dawei ethnic of Longlon Township, Dawei District, Taninthayi Region, still practices their own traditional customs in illness, cure and funerals. They live harmoniously and peacefully. In addition, they co-operate one another in communal activities. By presenting social activities of Dawei ethnic, other ethnics may know and respect to their social institutions, customs and how they maintain their traditions.

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