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Continuity And change in Hmar Death Rituals and Afterlife Beliefs: A Study of Pre-and Post-Christian Influences

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Abstract

The Hmar, an indigenous ethnic group predominantly inhabiting regions of Northeast India – particularly in Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, and Assam-possess a rich cultural heritage with deeply rooted customs and rituals. Among these, death rituals hold significant importance, reflecting both spirituals' beliefs and communal values. In Hmar culture, death is not seen as a cessation of life, but rather a transition to another realm, often involving the belief in the continuation of the soul and its journey to the world of the dead. This perspective aligns with both traditional and Christian views. Traditionally guided by animistic cosmology, the Hmar conceptualized death as a passage to mithi huo the land of the dead, with the possibility of eventual ascent to pielral (paradise) for the valorous and honourable. For the Hmar elders, whose lives were shaped by agricultural labor and substinence, the vision of heaven was a place where physical toil ceased and abundance prevailed. It is imagined as a realm where one would find eternal rest and plentiful food-a simple yet profoundly meaningful continuation of earthly comforts. The nature and scale of a person's funeral are not only influenced by the way a person lived their life but also by the manner of their death. In the wake of British colonization and the advent of Christianity in the early 20th century, the Hmar society experienced a profound transformation, especially in their approach to death and the afterlife. Hmar spiritual life was characterized by polytheism, featuring a pantheon of spirits and deities who were believed to dwell in nature and interact with the living world. While many overtly animistic practices have ceased, some traditional customs surrounding death and mourning have been adapted to fit within the Christian framework. By examining ritual practices, cosmological beliefs, and their transformation over time, this paper highlights both cultural resilience and religious adaptation.

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Introduction

Estimated to be around 200,000-300,000, the Hmars are a Scheduled Tribe belonging to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of India. The term Hmar carries multiple meanings within the cultural and linguistic context of the Hmar people. It can denote north, suggesting a directional orientation possibly tied to migratory or geographic identity. Additionally, it refers to the traditional practice of tying one's hair in a knot. British colonial administrator and ethnographer, Lt. J. Shakespeare recorded that the word Hmar was originally used by the Chins in the form Mar, indicating a linguistic evolution influenced by interactions among related tribes in the region. The Hmars are believed to be descendants of Manmasi, a revered figure often cited as the progenitor of the Hmar lineage. They traced their origin back to Sinlung, a place thought to be located in present-day China.

Among the Hmar people, elders traditionally refer to death with the expressions 'vanvawm chang' or 'thlafam chang'. The former, 'vanvawm chang', conveys the notion of 'ascending to glory' or 'entering a place of honour', reflecting a belief in a dignified afterlife. The latter, thlafam chang, poetically denotes the 'departure of the soul', emphasizing the metaphysical transition from the physical realm to the spiritual. These expressions encapsulate the Hmar community's reverent and spiritually nuanced understanding of death.

Indigenous Beliefs

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Hmar community adhered to animistic beliefs. They believed that the world was inhabited by spirits ,both benevolent and malevolent, and that nature itself was alive with spiritual presence. Elements of the natural environment such as large trees, fallen tree trunks, rivers, forests, prominent rock formations, and creatures like pythons are traditionally regarded as being inhabited or possessed by spirits, while they uphold a belief in a supreme deity called *Pathien*, sacrificial offerings are directed toward the various spirits believed to dwell within these natural entities.

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The cultural and social life of the Hmars was deeply interwoven with their religious believes and practices. In the context of death, religion occupies a central and inextricable role. Ms. Lalremsiem posits that within the context of a tribal society such as that of the Hmars, the boundaries between religious, social, political spheres are not distinctly defined. This suggests that within Hmar society, the domains of religion, social organization, and political structures are not viewed as separate or autonomous spheres but rather function as an integrated whole.

The Hmars are deeply religious community, traditionally venerating for principle deties. Pathien tak which is regarded as the one true God. Khawzing governs weather, misfortune and disease. Khuonu Khuopa is seen as the guardian of human life, while Vanhrit hold the power to conceive and grant children. They recognize 8 principal types of spirits within their believe system, namely: Phung, Khuovang, Khawchawm, Zasam, Khawhrite, Nelhauvarawi, and Lasi. Sacrificial offereings, known as Inthawina, were conducted by the Thiempu (shamans) to appease malevolent spirits believed to be the cause of misfortunes such as illness, death and natural calamities. These rituals were considered essential for restoring balance and protecting the community from harm. In contrast, benevolent spirits were worshipped to invoke blessings, ensure good health, and promote general well-being. Additionally, ancestral spirits were venerated through a ritual practice called pi pu raubiek, in which the souls of deceased forebears were invoked to blessed and protect their descendants. These practices reflect the deeply spiritual worldview of the Hmars, in which the sacred and the everyday were inseparably linked.

Traditional Classifications of Death and Funeral Customs

The patterns of mortality among the Hmars may be broadly classified into five distinct categories;

1. **Hlamzuia thi Premature** death or an infant who does not survive beyond 90 days . Such deaths are subject to specific ritual restrictions; the body is not permitted to remain overnight and is to be interred the same day. Only close family members and intimate friends are allowed to attend. The responsibility for grave preparation falls down upon the val upa and the paternal makpa. Furthermore, the deceased is not granted burial in the community graveyard; instead; interment takes place within the household premises, reflecting cultural perception of the death as incomplete or impure,

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2. **Ramte thi** Death of an infant under one year. In such case, the deceased is interred following adult burial practices If the infant's grandmother is alive, she carries the body to the grave using a cloth cradle across her chest. In the absence of the grandmother, this role is fulfilled by the child's aunt.,

3. **Thi tha Natural** death. This refers to a natural death, typically due to old age or illness. Upon death, the body is bathed, laid in a supine position, and placed with the head resting near the veranda. As customary expression of condolence, *laibung* (kinsmen) bring *zubel* (local liquor), and an animal is slaughtered. Specific portions of the meat Are distributed; the *far le zuor* (sisters and female cousins) receive designated parts, while the *pu* is given the chuck.

If death occurs before noon, burial takes place on the same day. It it occurs after noon; the body is kept overnight. During this vigil, close relatives and local youths stay at the funeral home under the guidance of the *val upa* and *nunghak upa*. A *thangko* (messenger) is sent to inform distant relatives. Upon arrival, if the deceased is a *pasaltha* (brave man), the mourners perform a ritual shout of honour, an exclamatory declaration of lineage and bravery, sometimes invoking ancestral names and personal feats;

'*Lala tupa ka nih....ka nih. I pa'n ka pa ngam lo, I nu'n ka nu ngam lo. Nangin kei mi ngam lo,Takchapa'*, while ceremonially marking or striking the side of the entrance door as a symbolic gesture of respect and valour.

Grave preparation is undertaken by the thlangvals (young) unmarried men in the morning, while the nunghaks (young unmarried women) support the effort by serving tea and snacks. In contemporary practice, certain traditional elements have been modified; the slaughtering of animals is often omitted, and liquor is now commonly replaced by tea, which is shared among attendees during the funeral gathering

1. Mitha thi

Death of eminent individuals. The ritual practices surrounding Mitha thi closely parallel to thi tha. In such instances, young men of the village are tasked with gathering bamboo or firewood essential for burial arrangements. Additionally, the nunghaks are responsible for collecting one cup of rice from each household as a collective offering to support the bereaved family. The construction of the Hlang, a traditional bamboo stretcher used to carry the body, is undertaken by the village elders.

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Young unmarried women, under the supervision of the makpa a man who has married into the clan of the deceased contribute by collecting three logs of wood. In Cases involving the separation of a married couple, these young women collect five strands of wood as a gesture of sympathy toward the affected party. The far le zour traditionally cover the deceased's body with a black cloth, marking the solemnity of death and the transition into the afterlife.

2. Thi sie or Sar thi

Unnatural death. Unnatural deaths referred to as *thi sie* such as suicide, drowning, burning, murder, animal attacks, or childbirth related deaths, are considered deeply abominable within the community. Among these, death by wild animal is regarded as the most severe, while death during childbirth is the most feared. Bodies of those who die unnatural deaths are not kept in the home overnight, reflecting both ritual impurity and communal fear. In cases of *raiche thi*,it is believed that the deceased woman's spirit roams from house to house, inviting people to share her fate. To ward off this spirit, households hang tree branches above the entrance door as a form of spiritual barrier. During such periods, young women avoid fetching water, fearing that the deceased's spirit may seized them or bring the same misfortune. The soul of the woman is thought to travel a harsh and obstructed path to *mithi khuo*; therefore, an axe is buried with her to symbolically aid her journey.

MITHI KHUO AND PIELRAL; THE TRADITIONAL HMAR CONCEPTION OF THE AFTERLIFE

Two central concepts of the belief system of the hmar were *mithi khuo* and *pielral*, which together formed the axis of the Hmar eschatological imagination.

Mithi Khuo The Land of The Dead

Mithi khuo literally translated as 'village of the dead', was conceived as a parallel realm where souls of the deceased resided after death. It was not a place of eternal reward or punishment, but rather a continuation of life in another form. In *mithi khuo*,individuals maintained a shadow-like existence, engaging in everyday activities similar to their earthly lives, though in a spiritual dimension. What made *mithi khuo* distict is that everything in it was considered '*puopa*', a hmar term meaning not real or lacking authenticity. Even the fragrant plant *lengmaser* (East India mint) is referred to as *mithi lengmaser*, reflecting that nothing in *mithi khuo* is original. This term has

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remarkably persisted even after the community's conversion to Christianity, showing how deeply embedded these older beliefs remain in everyday language and cultural memory.

The path to *mithi khuo* is believed to be filled with ridges, steep climbs, and difficult terrain. The soul of a wrongdoer would struggle along this harsh journey, while the soul of a good person would pass smoothly without hardship, reflecting the moral weight of one's actions in life. The souls of deceased children are thought to face difficulties in *mithi khuo*.To aid them, families prepare special meals which are ritually placed on the grave by a priest in a ceremony known as *pakhum*. Along the approach to *mithi khuo*, an enigmatic figure known as *Pawla/ Thalthawngpu* customarily positions himself by the roadside, bearing an oversized catapult and conducts ritualized inspection of passing youths discerning those who are unattached or without romantic partners. Upon identifying individuals who lack such bonds, he proceeds to strike them using his catapult which manifests as al localized, pustular infection whose painful symptoms the affected individuals are compelled to endure throughout their time in *mithi khuo*.

The journey to *mithi khuo* the land of the dead is believed to traverse significant spiritual landmarks, beginning with *hri dil*,followed by *hringlang tlang*. From the vantage point of *hringlang tlang*, the soul is said to gaze back upon the world of the living, experiencing profound longing and nostalgia. Continuing along the path, the soul arrives at *luonglo tui*, a mystical spring whose waters, once consumed, are believed to dispel all feelings of earthly attachment and emotional yearning. Along this luminal route also grows a flower known as *hawilo par*, whose symbolic significance is deeply embedded in Hmar belief. When this flower is plucked and placed behind the ear, it is said to eradicate any lingering sense of nostalgia or desire for the mortal realm marking the soul's final severance from the world of the living and its full transition into the spiritual domain.

At the threshold of *mithi khuo*, stands a guardian figure known as *Kulsamnu/Sanu*. She is traditionally depicted as a woman infested with numerous lice, and no soul is permitted to pass without first assisting in the search for these lice. She however holds no control over the souls of infants and *thangsuo* persons.

Pielral Paradise And Faisa Ring; A Vision of Rest in The Afterlife Pielral, the hmar equivalent of paradise was the more desirable afterlife destination. It is conceived as a realm above *mithi khuo*. Reserved only for the few who had lived exemplary lives, *pielral* represented an elevated

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plane of existence characterized by peace, honor, and eternal rest. Unlike *mithi khuo*, which was a general destination, *pielral* was exclusive. Entry was believed to be earned by performing great deeds in life. Such heroic accomplishments include the killing of formidable animals such as elephants, wild boars, wild bisons, eer, bears, tigers, lemurs, hawks, and the venomous snake known as *rulngan*. These acts are considered markers of valor and social prestige. They are held in high esteem even during their lifetime and are hence publicly honoured with *tawnlairang* special head gear and *puondum* (black cloth) on the occasion of communal feasting called *inchawng* hosted by the accomplished individual. These distinguished persons are regarded as *thangsuo* and are believed to reside in eternal ease, free from labor. They are granted direct entry into pielral, bypassing *mithi khuo* and its arduous path.

One of the most meaningful concepts rooted in these traditional beliefs is *faisa ring*, which refers to the notion of living from or benefitting by the labor of others. It is a vision of the afterlife where the soul of the *thangsuo* persons would no longer have to labor, as the soul has earned its rest. This view of the afterlife was not about material rewards but about freedom from the burdens of physical work and suffering. According to this belief, after a lifetime of toil, especially in a harsh, agrarian environment, the soul would journey to a place where labor ceased, and peace prevailed.

Christian Conversion and Cultural Transformation The arrival of missionaries in the early 1900s-particularly from the Welsh Presbyterian and Baptist missions-led to rapid Christianization of the hmar people. Concepts of Heaven and hell replaced *mithi khuo* and *pieral*. Traditional beliefs in ancestral spirits and sacrificial rituals – once central to appeasing spirits were now rejected and were replaced by the theological emphasis on the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Churches replaced clan and village authorities in managing death rituals. Practices such as *famzar, theirielkhang*, and *thi tin* were discontinued following the introduction of Christianity. Pastors and church elders conducted services, and burial took place in organized cemeteries. Funeral rites now include singing of hymns, scripture reading, and prayer, replacing traditional wailing and sacrifice.

Cultural Continuity and Syncretism Although certain traditional death practices such as *famzar, siepei, lukhawng, sehrawn, raubuk, tleiriel, dailungum, thlan tuibuok, thleirielkhang, thi tin* have gradually disappeared over time, several elements of pre-Christian cultural practices persisted, albeit in adapted forms.

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Burial Possessions While Christian beliefs have influenced the Hmar, the tradition of interring personal belongings with the deceased persists, highlighting the resilience of traditional funerary practices. Even in contemporary times, it is common for personal belongings of the deceased such as clothing, tools, ornaments, or items of sentimental value to be interred alongside the body.

PU ZU *Pu zu* was a traditional Hmar practice in which a grandfather (*pu*) as an expression of condolence and affection of his grandchild offered *zu* (local rice liquor) to his *laibunghai*. In this context, *zu* served not merely as a drink, but as a symbolic expression of empathy, and generational bonding. With the spread of Christianity among the Hmars, however, this practice underwent a significant transformation. Given the Christian list approval of alcohol consumption, *zu* is often replaced with tea. While the material aspect of the ritual changed, the core intends of *pu zu* – to console and connect with one's descendants in times of sorrow remains preserved.

Mithi Lumeng *Mithi lumeng* is a longstanding Hmar mourning practice that continues to be observed in contemporary times. This term refers to the custom where local youths gather at the home of the deceased and keep vigil typically for a period of three nights following the death. This act of staying overnight is a culturally significant expression of condolence meant to offer emotional support and companionship to the bereaved family during their time of mourning.

While modern influences and Christianity have reshaped many traditional customs, *ithi lumeng* remains largely intact, often incorporating Christian elements such as scripture reading and spiritual songs.

Sawm Inriek *Sawm inriek* is a profound mourning practice which involved young men from the village or locality taking on a significant role in the mourning process by staying at the house of the deceased for an extended period – often lasting for a month or more. During this mourning period, these young men would assist the bereaved family in a variety of practical and emotional ways. Their duties might include helping with household chores, collecting firewood, fetching water, preparing food, etc, By sharing in the burdens of daily life, they allowed the grieving family the space to mourn without the added strain of immediate survival needs. Although the practice had evolved over time, the core principals of *sawm inriek* remain evident. Today, while the duration may be shorter and the form more flexible, young people in Hmar community still come together to support families in mourning through acts of service, prayer, and presence.

Vanram: The Reimagining of Pielral

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The concepts of *mithi khuo* and *pielral* survive metaphorically. Phrases invoking *pielral* are still used in Christian hymns and condolence messages, blending past and present. Songs such as

"Pielral ka ngai ka Lal lengna,

Lungngai um nawna ram mawi chu", and;

"Aw ka chak ie pielral ram mawi,

Thonawk nauhai tuollai an lengna" notably retains the term *pielral*, highlighting the persistence of pre-Christian cosmological ideas. In traditional Hmar believe, *pielral* was not a universally accessible realm; rather, it was a sacred after life reserved for the *thangsuo*. Entry into *pielral* required the performance of specific valorous and socially esteemed deeds, such as *sesun inchawng* (the staying of a large animal in the wild), *intieng* and *ramtienga thangsuo*. In contrast, following the advent of Christianity, *pielral* was reinterpreted within a Christian theological framework as a representation of heaven – a place accessible to all who accepted Christ, regardless of their earthly deeds. This transformation illustrates a dynamic process of religious adaptation, where in traditional beliefs are recontextualized within new spiritual paradigms, maintaining cultural continuity while embracing doctrinal change.

Role Of The Church

One of the most notable changes bought about by Christianity particularly in the context of death is the replacement of the *thiempu* (Shamans) by Christian authorities such as Church elders, Pastors, and ordained ministers. In pre-Christian Hmar belief, the *thiempu* played a central role in that rituals. They were regarded as spiritual intermediaries who conducted essential rights to guide the soul of the deceased safely to *mithi khuo* ensuring that the soul did not linger among the living or fall prey to malevolent forces with the widespread acceptance of Christianity, however, this role underwent a profound transformation. The spiritual responsibilities were held by the *thiempu* were gradually assumed by the Christian leaders, who began to officiate funeral services, lead prayers, and provide theological guidance grounded in biblical doctrines.

An important element of this Christianized mourning process is the communal support extended to the bereaved family by the Church. In some Churches, on the first Sunday following the death, a special prayer service is held during the regular Church gathering to remember the deceased and to offer spiritual and emotional support to the grieving family. This collective act of remembrance

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reinforces the community's role in mourning and reflects the Christian emphasis on fellowship, compassion, and shared faith in life after death.

Thangko Through Time

Thangko is a traditional Hmar death related custom in which a messenger typically a young man is send to inform distant family members or relatives of a death in the community. The *thangko* was expected to convey the message in a calm and measured tone, carefully choosing his words to minimize shock or emotional distress for the recipient. His role required maturity, respect, and an understanding of social dynamics surrounding death and mourning in Hmar society. However, with the advent of modernization and the influence of Christianity, the practice of *thangko* has undergone significant transformation. The Christianization of the Hmar community bought with it not only new technological paradigms but also broader cultural and technological shifts. In contemporary Hmar communities, the physical dispatched of a messenger has become increasingly rare. Instead, death announcements are now commonly made through modern communication channels, including phone calls, text messaging and other social media platforms. While the immediacy and reach of modern technology have enhanced communication, the transition from traditional *thangko* to digital announcements reflects a shift in the emotional and relational dimensions of mourning. The personal touch once embodied by the messenger has, in many cases been replaced by impersonal notifications, often lacking the emotional consideration
that characterized the original practice. This evolution illustrates how cultural practices can be preserved in spirit, even as their modes of expression transform over time.

Conclusion

The religious transformation of the Hmar people brought about a profound shift in their conception of afterlife and their understanding of the spiritual world. Through missionary activity, embracing a monotheistic faith centered on the belief in one sovereign God. The elaborated practices that had once been performed to appease spirits were increasingly seen as incompatible with Christian teachings and were systematically abandoned. The shedding of Christ's blood served as the ultimate atonement for sin, rendering obsolute any further need for sacrifices to placate spiritual beings. Death rituals that once emphasized negotiating with the spirit world were replaced by Christian funery practices focused on celebrating the life of the deceased and affirming the hope

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of resurrection. Practices such as community involvement, collective labor, and feasing remain central to social life, reflecting enduring cultural values of mutual support, hospitality and solidarity. Linguistic and ritual continuity underscores this syncretic process. Certain pre-Christian terms related to the afterlife such as *pielral*, spirits *khuonu*, and the soul are still in use, albeit sometimes recontextualized within Christian frameworks, showing how traditional concepts persists symbolically. In conclusion, the Hmar experience of religious transformation illustrates how communities navigate the boundaries between continuity and change.

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