



The Anal Concept of Afterlife: Understanding ‘Ath\pam’ (Abode of the dead)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the indigenous concept of afterlife among the Anal tribe of Manipur, India, focusing on ‘Ath\pam’, the believed abode of the dead. Through Folk tales, rituals and ceremonies, this study delves into the Anal understanding of the afterlife shedding light on the cultural and spiritual significance of ‘Ath\pam’. This study also reveals the unique features of Anal indigenous eschatology and the intricate relationships between the living and the dead. The Anal forefathers believed that life on earth is not the final existence. They conceived a world after death. The kind of life lived there at Ath\pam is determined by the life live here on earth. This indigenous idea of afterlife remained the moral-ethical principles of the Anal society.

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Introduction

The Anal tribe is one of the oldest indigenous tribe of Manipur in the Northeastern part of India. It is also one of the thirty three recognized scheduled tribes of Manipur. The Anal language falls under the Tibeto-Burman languages family of the Mongoloid race. They mostly live in Chandel district which is



situated in the South Eastern part of Manipur. There is a small population of the Anals inhabiting Sagaing sub- division of Myanmar, though their exact population is not known. As a result of recent migration, there are some Anal people settled in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Imphal. Prior to their present settlement they were believed to be known as Pakans¹.

From the early part of the 20th century, few Anal people began to established contact with Christian faith. Gradually, Christian population among the Anals increased despite severe resistance and persecution. Today, 99% of the Anal people are Christian.

Objective of the paper

This paper aims to explore and provide a comprehensive overview of the ancient concept of afterlife among the Anal tribe and highlighting its relevance to contemporary human condition.

Religious beliefs and practice

The Anal foreparents do not have exact term for religion as we understand today. To every Anal, religion would mean living a spontaneous awareness of the presence of a divine creator or a supreme god under whom the belief of the existence of many other lesser gods and goddesses known as ‘Letal’.

The fear of the ‘unknown forces’ was the basic indigenous belief of the Anals that human beings were not the only being in the universe but behind every ordinary things and daily event there is a spirit power. Religion was their daily routine of life and their very existence. It can be said that religion played an important role in their socio-cultural, economic and political life. According to Capt. Rajendra Singh (1981:74), “the religion of the Anals was a product of their customary laws under which there was no social evil in those days”.

Since there is no written literature, it is difficult to give correct account of the origin of their indigenous concept of religion. However, in order to trace the beginning and development of their religion, Khelhring (2021:21) has rightly highlighted the importance of relying through the medium of folklores and folksongs. In his work, Khelhring has mentioned that before the advent of Christianity in the Anal society, forefathers of the Anal were professing a primal religion called “Pakanpano” meaning “pakanism” which was an unwritten jurisprudence, which encompassed code of conduct for the activities of an individual Anal and, that of social, religious, cultural, political agricultural and judiciary systems of the Anal society as well.



The concept of God

The indigenous concept of God among the Anals was not clear as of our understanding today. They did not recognize the existence of the creator of the universe. However, they seldom uttered the name of the creator God. According to Sumpi John (1995:463), the word 'Ido' meaning white was used to address the Supreme God and 'Ivum' meant black for the evil, which the people were very afraid of. All good deeds and blessings are attributed to the work of Ido, and all evil and mischievous things, to 'Ivum'. The foreparents of Anal never thought of Ido as an angry or punishing God, rather they thought of him as a righteous God. He was considered to be the God of justice.

In due course of time, people understood that there was nothing wrong in pronouncing the name of God, and so they started using 'Asathi Pavanthi'. 'Asa' means earth, 'Pavan' means heaven and 'Thi' means to see. The literal translation of 'Asathi Pavanthi' means the Supreme God who looks after the whole universe. Later, 'Asathi Pavanthi' was modified as 'Asapavan' by the early Christian converts of the tribe to address the Almighty God. One of the key contributors to the coinage of this word was Shri Bs Volshung, retired teacher of Tampi Village, Chakpikarong Sub-Division (Ruwndar, 1995:133-134). The translation of 'Asapavan' would be the 'Creator of heaven and earth' or 'ahlipavan esamcha'. Asapavan was believed to stay in heaven and saw everything from above. What people could not decide or understand was considered to be in Asapavan's hand. His name was only occasionally mentioned for instance, if someone was treated unjustly he would say "let heaven judge it" or 'Asapavan vajol]o chanaka'.

Asapavan was believed to be a compassionate and benevolent God. He was acknowledged as omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient God. However, the strange concept about the Anal foreparents was that, they never thought of the creator God intervening in their everyday life. They imagined God only for the final judgement not in this present world but life after death.

In other words, Asapavan was believed to be in charge of human souls 'Pa]hathi' only after death.

The concept of soul

In Anal soul is known as 'Pa]hathi'. The Anal foreparents believed that the soul comes from Asapavan who is the source of all creations. They considered the soul immortal. Even after the death of a person, the soul was believed to be loitering around the village, though it is not visible, till the final funeral rite 'Ath't'n' is solemnized by the family members. This post death ceremony is generally performed at the



end of one year. But in the case of unnatural death 'Athi' suicide, this ceremony is not performed. After the solemnization of 'Ath\ piit\ n', the soul is believed to have gone to 'Ath\ pam' abode of the death permanently where judgment is made according to the person's deed during life time.

The Anals believed that the route to 'Ath\ pam' is via-Tangsuwngbung which is supposed to be situated in the south-western side of the present Anal area and is believed to be the place once inhabited by the foreparents. It is because of the west ward journey of the souls of the dead, that their heads are turned towards west while burying. (Ruwndar,1995:143). According to one Anal legend, on the way to 'Ath\ pam', there is a judge called Chomningtho who decides the place for each soul. A good soul or a sinless person's soul goes straight to 'Pavanpam' heaven (Singh,1981:78). On the other hand, the soul of sinner was sent to 'Lungkong' hell which is the kingdom of eternal misery and sorrows. The souls of sinners took the form of Aren[-Arepa male and female ghosts. The souls of the sinners were not reborn (Sardar,1997:109). The belief was that the good deeds of a person would be rewarded afterlife and the sinners to get the wrath of God. Anything that was not considered by the customary laws of the Anal was a sin. The soul of the sinner was believed to have suffered continuous tortured in 'Ath\ pam'.

Let me bring in the following story from one of the folktales of the Anal tribe to illustrate the concept of afterlife at 'Ath\ pam'.

The story of Hring]hem

Back in the good old days, there lived a handsome bachelor called Hring]hem. He married a beautiful young lady named Bong]`ng to be his beloved wife. He performed all the customary rituals, as a Pakan man would have to take a wife, and settled happily.

Hring]hem and Bong]`ng cleared a patch of forest area for jhum field and cultivated cotton. Unfortunately, before they could harvest, Bong]`ng fell sick all of a sudden and succumbed to her sickness. Hring]hem, helpless and grieved as he could be, continued to care for the field. One fine day he found out that, some ripe cotton from his field were plucked. Searched as he may, he could not find any sign or track of man or beast. The theft continued sometimes alternately or after every two days. So he decided to keep a vigil. Soon enough, on one such vigil he chanced to see 'Lisel' a Marten plucking the ripe cotton balls. Hring]hem watched in wonder as the Marten plucked the cotton balls in a hurried way and readied its yoke to go home. Acting swiftly, Hring]hem caught the thief at the right time. On being asked as to why he was stealing the cotton, the Marten replied in fear saying, "I am send by your



wife Bong]ng from the Land of death to collect the cotton balls. Release me, for I have a long way to go and am already late”. To this, Hring]hem replied, “I will never let you free unless you take me to where my wife is”. Marten further said, “Hring]hem, you belong to the land of the living; your wife now belongs to the land of death. No one from the land of the living can come to the land of Death or the other way round. There is a sea of Death that flows between the two lands, no living being can cross that. And at the crossroad of the two lands, you will see a crippled bird dancing. Seeing the bird you will definitely laugh, and you will be pushed back o the land of the Living. “No words of explanation could deter the mind of Hring]hem. So they prepared to journey towards the land of the Death.

Hring]hem somehow crossed the Sea of Death by clinging on the tail of the Marten. After marching much further into the land of Death that they came upon the place of the dancing crippled bird. There were none who could control their laughter. However, Hring]hem controlled his laughter and so they let him passed The Land of Death. Immediately after arriving in the Land of Death, he searched for the residence of his wife, but could not locate it. On calling his wife’s name, she would response, but he could not see her in person. This went on and at last he gave up the idea of meeting his wife. But in course of looking for his wife he encountered many strange sights that he was eager to understand.

In the land of death he saw that some people acted like a ladder over the stream and people passed to and fro over it. These people acted like the ladder with many difficulties and the suffering which they were going through were for eternity. When Hring]hem asked the reason behind it, he was told that when these people were living in the land of living, they stole the wood from the ladder of the others. That was the reason why they are acting like a ladder in this land of the death. Some people carried a pot of water on their head but went about asking people for water saying, “please give me water, I am thirsty”. These were the people who refused to give water to the thirsty people when they were living in the land of living. Some people carried a wood fire burned in the grate over their head, but went about shivering, ‘I am cold to death, I am cold to death’. These were the people who refused to give fire to the needy. Some men were seen sleeping embracing a thorny wooden lump. These were men who violated marital fidelity. Some women were seen naked; these were the one who were involved with someone else’s husband. Some men were saying, “we are working for gold”. But at the end gets nothing. These were the people who borrowed charcoal in the land of living and entered the land of the death without repaying the debt. Hring]hem could see many such sufferings that people were going through in the land of the death for the wrongs that they have done while they were in the land of the living. And those who did good deeds in the land of the living were rewarded in the land of the death².



Hring]hem then returned to the land of the living and narrated all that he had seen and experienced in the land of the death. Upon learning of his encounter and experience, people became much careful in their conduct lest they shall have to suffer afterlife. As mentioned by Capt. Rajendra Singh in his work (1981:74), Anal people were very chaste with high moral outlook: stealing, cheating and dishonesty was not there. The system of 'Ebumcha' meaning service to others was practiced and in time of need, villagers turned up to help without expecting any reward. Before the advent of Christianity to the Anal society this story and its ethical teaching guides the way of life of the Community.

Conclusion

The Anal indigenous religion did not have a sacred text or written scriptures. However, the religious ethos is deeply ingrained in their beliefs and became an integral part of their Community and Culture. There was a spontaneous awareness of the presence of a divine creator 'Asapavan' and the world of creation as the manifestation of the Supreme God. Based on their believed in the final judgement of every soul according to one's deed at 'Ath\pam', they embodied a culture of moral and ethical integrity. A man ought to remain chaste. Likewise, dishonesty, aggression, stealing, disrespect were considered a sin.

In a world increasingly marked by conflict, division and devastation, the moral ethical teachings based on the story of Hring]hem remain deeply relevant. By turning to these teachings, different communities can find the moral and spiritual guidance necessary to heal and work towards fostering a more compassionate, equitable and peaceful world.

Notes

1. The word 'Anal' was never mentioned in the legends and folk tales of the people. Rather 'Pakan' was used for the identification of the tribe in the legends and folktales. In this paper 'Anal' and 'Pakan' are used interchangeably.
2. The folktale 'The story of Hring]hem' is translated from John, Sumpi.(2014). Ar`ngki Pakan Hin Pemin (Collection of Folk Tales, Proverbs & Others), South Delhi: Author.

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