



Music on Spiritual Approach in Meitei Death Rituals



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Abstract

Among the Meitei people of Manipur, music holds a central place in death rituals, functioning as both a spiritual offering and a cultural expression of collective healing. These ceremonies transform the experience of grief into a ritualistic celebration, where music and hymns are performed as acts of devotion for the auspicious passage of the departed soul. The singing of traditional songs invokes prayers to guide the deceased toward salvation while fostering resilience and emotional strength within the bereaved family. The performance creates an atmosphere of mutual bonding among relatives, neighbors, and community members, reinforcing social solidarity in moments of loss. The hymns and songs emphasize the inevitable cycle of birth and death, softening sorrow with melodies that bring forth sweet memories and acceptance. In doing so, they provide psychological comfort and mental well-being, transforming mourning into a spiritually uplifting experience. For the Meitei community, the role of music in death rituals is not only an emblem of auspiciousness but also a medium of healing, guidance, and collective resilience, ensuring that sorrow is met with faith, unity, and spiritual strength.

Keywords: Death Ritual, Music, Meitei, Society, Mental Wellbeing

Research Paper

Introduction

Death, as the ultimate cessation of biological functions, is both an inevitable natural event and one of humanity's most profound existential experiences. Across civilizations, societies have framed death not merely as an end but as a transformative passage into another realm of existence. This universal reality has inspired elaborate cultural and spiritual practices intended to honour the dead, console the bereaved, and reaffirm the community's collective identity.

Among the Meitei people of Manipur, this passage is marked by deeply symbolic and highly ritualized ceremonies where music plays a pivotal role. The Meiteis believe that life is animated by the Thawai (soul or Atama), and death occurs when the Thawai permanently departs from the Hakchang (physical body) (Anilkanta). This belief forms the spiritual foundation of their death rituals, which are not seen as endings but

as guided journeys of the soul toward the divine realm.

Within this worldview, ritual music becomes a sacred medium for facilitating this journey. The Meitei death rituals — encompassing Potloiba (cremation), Dasha Hon, Asthi Sanchay, Shraddha, and the first death anniversary (Kumon Phiroi) — are all accompanied by structured performances of Sankirtan (devotional music and hymns) (Lakpati). These performances serve multiple interconnected functions: they sanctify the ritual space, provide emotional catharsis to the bereaved, and symbolically guide the departed soul toward spiritual liberation (moksha) or auspicious rebirth.

Furthermore, the communal participation of relatives, neighbours, and ritual specialists (Beita and Purohitis) fosters social solidarity and collective resilience, transforming personal grief into a shared experience of spiritual uplift. The Meitei death rituals thus operate on psychological, cultural, and spiritual planes — helping

individuals reconcile with mortality while preserving the continuity of ancestral heritage and values. Understanding this unique interplay between music and mourning provides deeper insight into the Meitei worldview and its emphasis on harmony between life, death, and community.

Death Ritual



Fig: Death Procession at Imphal West, Manipur (offering music with one Meitei Pung player and vocalist, the photograph is click by Soibam Monica Chanu during her field work.)

Across cultures worldwide, death has long been accompanied by ritual practices aimed at ensuring the safe passage of the soul to the divine realm. These rituals—comprising rites, offerings, prayers, and symbolic ceremonies — are believed to guide the etheric body (Atama or soul) toward the Supreme Lord. The Meitei community of Manipur has preserved its own distinctive and deeply spiritual system of death rituals, which reflect their belief in the continuity of life beyond death.

After death, the Meiteis traditionally dispose of the physical body by four classical methods: Meigi Potloi (cremation — fire), Leipakki Potloi (Burial), Eshingi Potloi submergence in water, and Nungshit ki Potloi (Disposal through air) (Singh 623). In contemporary practice, cremation and burial are most common, and both are accompanied by ritual music. Before the body is taken for cremation or burial, traditional vocalists and drummers perform mourning songs, commemorating the deceased and affirming the universal cycle of life and death. Simultaneously, the Purohit (Brahman) and Beita (spirit guide) perform sacred rites, offering flowers, Rice, Sant, Candles, Dakshina, and Heirukpana to Lord Vishnu (Anilkanta). After these rites, the body is ceremonially escorted to the cremation or burial site with musical accompaniment.

Duty of the Beita: The Beita holds a vital role throughout the death ritual. When a person approaches their final

stage, a Maiba or Beita is called to offer spiritual care, prayers for salvation, and ritual guidance. The Beita thus initiates the spiritual process even before death, ensuring the soul's smooth transition.

Dasha Hon



Fig: Dasha Hon (the photograph is click by Soibam Monica Chanu during Dasha Hon)

Following cremation, the Dasha Hon ritual is held daily in the deceased's home or a designated hall. A Purohit, Pungyeiba Ama (A Pung player), and at least two vocalists lead the ceremony, joined by family members and community elders. The Purohit recites from the Bhagawad Puran and offers moral discourses (Prabachan), while the family offers fruits, flowers, and Dakshina to Supreme Lord for the peace and bliss of the departed soul (Nimai). This ritual helps guide the minds of grieving family members toward spiritual acceptance.

Selected Sankirtan Verses

*“Harinam nattana chanjafam leiroi
Kali jibagi lanbinaba leiroi
Tanglaba mapokni mahei yalhalla
Mamlaba taibangni hanthana khallu
Matam kaya lelle angang oina
Oijaba khangdana sannaduna
Mathot karakle akiba leirude
Erangda luptuna harinam solhoude
Ahal oirakle sagei chaorakle
Echa eshu nungshi thourina pulle
Punshi loirakle aroiba matam lakle
Loina hundoklamle mongfamda hiple
Kari oina pokpa kanasu khangdre
Karmana lamjingle pokpadi soidre
Hangjou thijou lambi hallakpa naidaba
Magi charan nakta lengdana leijaba
Ningjou nijou kari apamba khanduna*



*Changjafam nijafam oibani harina
Chanbiheiba mingthol fangkiba harini
Ninglaga nangna kari fangdani
Urakhini eshu, pairakhini cheisu
Khangnei pumnamaksu hek hek kaowe eisu
Yengningi fajaba, kaongamde oidaba
Thangamde louningba, eigisu natraba
Nungaibani khalli, achumbabu kaohalli,
Kaohannaba silli, kaodabana lalli
Apambana chumm, panthungfam yammi,
Khanluraga mammi, mamnaba semi.”(Singh 151-152)*

Summary

The living world created by Hari (Supreme Lord) is filled with illusions. One forgets the mortality of life and is careless of the life after death. Childhood, youth, and old age are often wasted in ignorance, pleasures, and worldly ties. One is always deepened in selfish personal desires, which are temporary. One's life is blurred by the materialistic decisions one makes. The song urges to accompany Hari all the time to attain salvation.

Asthi Sanchay: The Asthi Sanchay (bone collection) ritual is generally performed on the third day after death among Brahman families and the fifth day among Preta and Kshetriya families. Its purpose is to ensure the spiritual elevation of the deceased's soul. During this ritual, Sankirtan music accompanies prayers offered by the Purohit, Beita, relatives, and neighbours. A small piece of bone (Asthi) is retrieved from the forehead region of the cremated remains and stored safely until the ritual day. The Beita guides its ceremonial retrieval from the crematorium, after which it is purified with milk, offered with ghee, fruits, and flowers, and carried in a peaceful procession to the main ritual hall while singing Nam Taka. The Asthi is also called Chintamani.

Sankirtan Verses

*“Shri Krishna cheitanaya ningjadana
Lanbini jibabu kanan
Houkhre matam khanghoudene
Kari oiruni khangdrene
Shri Krishna cheitanaya Sonja ningjadana
Tanglaba mapokpu manghanlene
Pangmanliko manghanle
Eigi haiba langna uplina.”(Singh 148)*

Summary

The song urges us to pray to Lord Krishna all the time. Our mortal life is temporary, and the enjoyments,

pleasures, and ties we have while living are useless. The truest path is to remember the Lord, as he is the destiny and the guide to destiny.

Materials used to keep Asthi: The materials used to preserve the Asthi include one golden cloth, seven silk threads, one Bhojpatra leaf, one Chandi, some Shyamdhuli, one leaf of Sana Khongnang, and one garland (Devi 128).

Shraddha Ceremony



Fig: Shraddha (Sankirtan Performance by Two Meitei Pung Player and Sankirtan Vocalists, the photograph is click by Soibam Monica Chanu during her field work)

The Shraddha ceremony marks the final and most significant stage of the Meitei death rituals. Conducted on the concluding day of the mourning period, it symbolizes the formal release of the departed soul (Atama) and its acceptance into the heavenly abode of the Supreme Lord. On this day, the bereaved family offers fruits, flowers, and sweets as sacred offerings, accompanied by devotional Sankirtan performances intended to bring peace, bliss, and spiritual liberation to the soul. Through song, the lead vocalist recalls the life, virtues, and contributions of the deceased while simultaneously praising the Supreme Lord and narrating His divine manifestations in the mortal world (Lakpati).

Traditionally, the Shraddha is performed on the seventh day for a deceased child, Brahman, or Kshetriya; on the eleventh day for an elderly Brahman; on the thirteenth day for a Preta; and on the fourteenth day for a Khetri (Devi 118).

Ritual Structure: The day begins with the Bheg Katpa ritual, during which the Purohit ceremoniously brings an idol of Shri Shri Gouranga Maha Prabhu to the main function hall (Nimai). The Arangpham arranges ritual offerings such as Dup, Dip, Pan, fruits, flowers, dakshina, clothes, and Sandesh. (Nimai)



A sacred Sheija is then prepared for the departed soul. It consists of a white cloth laid on a mat, on which are placed symbolic items of earthly comfort—new clothes, a pillow, and a blanket—signifying the material needs of life. Family members, relatives, and kin offer flowers and dakshina to Lord Vishnu through Shri Shri Gouranga Maha Prabhu (Nimai). Throughout this ceremony, Sankirtan continues as a vital devotional element.

Performers and Ritual Elements: The ritual concludes with Chira Ushob, a grand feast offered by the family to all performers and attendees. The main Sankirtan ensemble comprises: Esheihanba – lead vocalist, Duhar – associate vocalist, Khonpangba and Khonmei – assistants to lead and associate singers, Pungyeiba – Pung players (Pung- Manipuri Percussion Instrument) (2), Moibung Khongba – conch blower, Mandap Mapu – presider of the ritual, Beita – spiritual guide of the deceased soul. Performers wear white dhoti and Kokyet Achouba (a distinctive Meitei turban). As the performance proceeds, they receive ritual honors: Bori phi and Naam with Lei Chandan and Dakshina during Boriba; Phi yai during the mid-ceremony; Kokyet Macha; and finally Phi Aroiba (closing cloth) with Naam, Lei Chandan, and Dip. Each performer receives five ritual cloths in total by the end.

Usually commencing in the afternoon, the Sankirtan concludes around 3:00–3:30 pm. In its final segment, the Beita steps to the center of the hall to spiritually release the soul, symbolically guiding it to Baikuntha (the abode of the Supreme Lord). As the ceremony ends, the family distributes Sandesh and dakshina to all attending devotees as a token of gratitude and blessing.

Kumon Phiroi (First Death Anniversary)

Kumon Phiroi is a significant memorial ritual performed exactly one year after a person's death. It marks the completion of the mourning cycle and serves as both a spiritual offering and a celebration of remembrance.

Offerings to Lainingthou Sanamahi: The ritual begins with the preparation of a shida (sacred offering) to Lainingthou Sanamahi, revered as the supreme household deity of the Meiteis. The shida includes rice and assorted vegetables such as cauliflower, pumpkin, tomato, brinjal, beans, mutter dal, urad dal, and moong dal, along with dip, dhup, and dakshina. This offering, conducted inside the home at the Sanamahi Kachin (a sacred altar in the southwest corner of the house), symbolizes prayers for divine protection, blessings, and spiritual guidance for the departed soul.

Main Ritual at the Mandap: Following this household worship, the main ceremonial function takes place in the courtyard, community hall, or Mandap under the guidance of the Arangpham (ritual arranger) (Nimai). A symbolic Sheija is prepared—decorated with white cloth and placed with new garments, a pillow, and a blanket representing the necessities of worldly life. A seat is also arranged for Lord Cheitanya Maha Prabhu near the Sheija, adorned with dup, dip, Panatanga, fruits, flowers, and other offerings. The family and gathered relatives offer flowers and dakshina to both Lord Cheitanya and the symbolic soul of the deceased represented by the Sheija. Throughout this ritual, devotional Sankirtan is performed, creating a sacred and uplifting atmosphere (Anilkanta).

The ceremony concludes with a grand communal feast offered to all relatives, friends, and attendees. This shared meal strengthens social bonds and nurtures a sense of solidarity, mutual support, and cultural continuity within the community—transforming grief into collective healing and reaffirming the enduring ties between the living and the departed.

Methodology

The study adopts a socio-cultural research framework to explore the role of music in Meitei death rituals and its influence on the mental and spiritual well-being of the community. A qualitative research design was followed to record the nuances of emotional expression and ritual meaning embedded in these ceremonies. Primary data were collected through field observation, interviews, and discussions with Beita (ritual specialists), Purohits (priests), and Sankirtan performers who actively participate in Meitei death rituals. Informal interactions with family members and participants of various ceremonies such as Ashti, Dasha Hon, Shradha and Kumon Phiroi were also conducted to understand the symbolic function of music and its role in emotional healing.

Research Design and Data Collection

Ethnographic methods formed the core of the research approach. Extensive fieldwork was conducted in selected localities of Manipur where traditional Meitei death rituals are still actively practiced. Data were collected through participant observation, field surveys, and in-depth interviews. The interviews involved multiple stakeholders, including ritual specialists, Purohits (Brahman priests), Sankirtan performers (vocalists, Meitei Pung player, and conch players), family members of the deceased, and community



elders. These interactions provided first-hand insights into the ritual structure, symbolism, and the perceived psychological and spiritual effects of musical elements during mourning.

The primary data consisted of field notes, recorded observations, and verbatim interview transcripts. Secondary data, such as books, scholarly articles and reliable online resources, were used to contextualize and triangulate the primary findings. All qualitative data were coded thematically and analyzed using interpretive techniques to identify recurring patterns and cultural meanings related to music's role in grief processing, emotional regulation, and social solidarity during Meitei death rituals.

Ethical Considerations consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and observations. Care was taken to respect cultural sensitivities surrounding death and mourning practices throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

The study reveals that music serves as the spiritual and emotional nucleus of Meitei death rituals, permeating every stage of the ceremonial sequence and shaping the collective experience of grief, remembrance, and cultural continuity. Its role extends far beyond aesthetic expression, functioning as a structured and sacred medium that transforms mourning into an act of devotion and renewal.

Observations from the field confirm that it is virtually impossible to perform any component of Meitei death rituals—be it cremation, burial, Dasha Hon, Asthi Sanchay, Shraddha, or Kumon Phiroi—without the presence of ritual music, primarily in the form of Sankirtan. This musical framework provides the emotional scaffolding upon which the ritual unfolds, allowing family members to externalize grief in a culturally sanctioned manner and to gradually shift their emotional state from despair to spiritual acceptance.

The rhythmic drumming, melodic chants, and devotional hymns sung by the Eshaihanba, Duhar, Pungyeiba, and other ensemble members act as catalysts for emotional catharsis, helping mourners confront the finality of death while simultaneously evoking the continuity of the soul. This therapeutic function aligns with the Meitei worldview that death is not an end but a transition of the Atama (soul) from the Hakchang (body) to a higher spiritual plane or to a renewed birth in a better realm. Participants consistently expressed that the musical components imbue the rituals with a sense of serenity,

order, and divine presence, which alleviates mental distress and fosters resilience during the acute period of bereavement.

Beyond their emotional function, the songs are imbued with sacred narratives that reinforce philosophical themes central to Meitei cosmology—the impermanence of human life, the cyclical nature of birth and death, the vastness of the cosmic order, and the moral imperative to live harmoniously. These symbolic dimensions strengthen faith and provide a framework through which death can be interpreted not as an abrupt rupture but as part of an eternal continuum.

Moreover, the collective and participatory character of these musical rituals strengthens kinship bonds and community solidarity. Events such as the Shraddha and Kumon Phiroi ceremonies bring together extended families, neighbours, and ritual specialists in a shared space of remembrance, thereby reaffirming social ties and mutual support systems. The communal singing, offering of dakshina, and shared feasting transform the ritual space into a site of collective healing, where grief is distributed across the community rather than borne individually.

This communal participation not only helps the bereaved family cope with their loss but also affirms the continuity of social and cultural heritage, as younger generations witness and inherit these ancestral practices. Crucially, when these ceremonies are performed meticulously under the guidance of the Beita (spirit guide) and Purohit (priest), they instil in the family a profound sense of spiritual fulfilment and cultural duty accomplished.

This holistic role of music—as an emotional balm, a spiritual guide, and a social glue—demonstrates that Meitei death rituals are not merely memorial events but deeply integrative cultural systems that reconcile individuals to mortality while sustaining the moral and emotional fabric of their community.

The findings of this study reaffirm the centrality of music in Meitei death rituals, highlighting its multifaceted role as an emotional, spiritual, and social instrument. These results align with broader ethnomusicological scholarship, which recognises that music often serves as a cultural mechanism for mediating grief and reinforcing communal bonds during rites of passage. In the Meitei context, Sankirtan music emerges not simply as an accompaniment but as the ritual's structural backbone—an indispensable vehicle through which the community transforms loss into spiritual continuity and collective healing.



The emotional dimension of this role is particularly striking. As observed during fieldwork, the rhythmic and melodic flow of Sankirtan provided mourners with a culturally sanctioned channel to express grief while preventing emotional fragmentation. This resonates with research in music therapy and thanatology, which suggests that musical ritual can regulate affective states and reduce psychological distress during bereavement. The Meitei practice validates this premise: by embedding mourning within a musical framework, it enables participants to externalise sorrow and gradually transition to acceptance. This process underscores the therapeutic function of ritual music as a psychosocial support system, one that harmonises inner emotional turbulence with outer communal order.

Spiritually, the results indicate that music operates as a conduit between the material and transcendental realms, a belief deeply rooted in Meitei cosmology. The chants and hymns are perceived not merely as symbolic gestures but as active forces guiding the Atama toward Baikuntha (the divine abode) or toward auspicious rebirth. This aligns with anthropological theories of ritual efficacy, which argue that symbolic performance gains its power from collective belief and emotional investment. The Beita's role as a spiritual mediator further enhances this efficacy by ritually orchestrating the release of the soul, supported by the communal energy of the performers and attendees. Thus, the music embodies both sacred narrative and spiritual technology, shaping the community's metaphysical engagement with death.

Equally significant are the social implications of these rituals. Ceremonies such as Shradha and Kumon Phiroi not only commemorate the deceased but also renew kinship and neighbourhood ties. By gathering extended families, neighbours, and ritual specialists in shared spaces of remembrance, these events reinforce social cohesion and continuity. This aligns with Durkheimian perspectives on ritual, which emphasise its role in reaffirming collective identity and solidarity, especially in moments of social disruption like death.

The feast (Chira Ushob) and distribution of Dakshina further transform mourning into a community-strengthening act, ensuring that grief is diffused across a supportive network rather than borne in isolation. Such collective participation imparts a sense of belonging and cultural continuity, crucial for sustaining communal resilience.

Ultimately, these insights suggest that Meitei death rituals function as an integrated system where music binds together the psychological, spiritual, and socio-cultural dimensions of bereavement. Far from being peripheral embellishments, musical performances constitute the core through which grief is reconciled, the soul is sanctified, and society reaffirms its moral and emotional fabric. Preserving these traditions is therefore not only vital for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also for sustaining the community's mental and spiritual well-being in the face of mortality.

Conclusion

The death rituals of the Meitei community of Manipur embody a profound synthesis of spiritual belief, emotional expression, and cultural continuity, with music occupying a central and indispensable role. Far from being mere ceremonial formalities, these rituals serve as transformative processes that guide the soul (Atama) of the deceased towards spiritual liberation while simultaneously offering psychological solace to the bereaved.

Through structured sequences of hymns, drumming, and devotional Sankirtan, music channels grief into collective remembrance, allowing individuals to move from personal sorrow to spiritual acceptance. This musical dimension not only honors the departed but also strengthens kinship ties, reinforcing the shared cultural memory and identity of the Meitei people.

By engaging family members, ritual specialists, and the broader community, these ceremonies cultivate social solidarity, which is vital for the resilience and continuity of any society. Moreover, they remind participants of the impermanence of life and the importance of living with harmony, compassion, and moral responsibility.

In this way, Meitei death rituals demonstrate how traditional music can function as both a spiritual medium and a psychosocial support system, nurturing emotional well-being while preserving cultural heritage. As custodians of ancestral values, such practices must be safeguarded and transmitted to future generations, for they not only sanctify the passage of the dead but also enrich the living with a deeper sense of meaning, connectedness, and peace.

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