Exploring the Healing Power of Death Rituals : A Study from Social Work Perspective in Birendranagar Municipality of Surkhet, Nepal

Radhika Paneru

Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur (Nepal) E-mail:<paneruradhika4@gmail.com>

Abstract

This study explored the significant role of death rituals in facilitating coping mechanisms for bereavement and fostering social cohesion within communities. Employing qualitative research methods, it investigated the perceptions and experiences of individuals participating in death rituals in Birendranagar, Surkhet District, Western Nepal. Through in-depth interviews and observational fieldwork, the study explored how death rituals served as a means of support, comfort, and activity diversion for grieving individuals, ultimately contributing to the reduction of associated stress. Findings revealed that death rituals functioned as a platform for sharing emotions, connecting individuals across lineage boundaries, and reinforcing community bonds. Despite economic considerations, the spiritual and emotional significance of these rituals took precedence, emphasizing the pursuit of peace and satisfaction for the bereaved family. Overall, this study underscored the enduring relevance and impact of death rituals in navigating grief and loss, affirming their interconnectedness with social work practice and their role as a form of action law that regulated societal behaviour.

Keywords

Perception, Death ritual, Healing process, Birendranagar.

11

Exploring the Healing Power of Death Rituals : A Study from Social Work Perspective in Birendranagar Municipality of Surkhet, Nepal

1. Introduction

Death is binary opposition of life which is truth that happens in every family, (Atwater, C., 2000). During the death of individual, death ritual is a compulsory process of human life that performs in family while pass away the family member with involving of kinship, relatives, friends, neighbours, community people and all recognized individuals. It is transitional condition where family member become in stress mentally. At this movement involving in ritual process, individual engagement may support to overcome from the grief that performs in the collective form. Every recognized people provide the aid in the death ritual process. Social workers work with a range of people in different contexts. Although the modality, objectives, and duration of the session vary depending on the client and practice environment, some similarities cut across these variations. Applying formal procedures to the process is one method to handle ending, better (Gutheil, 1993).

This paper focussed on death ritual process as a healing process from the eye of social work. The death rituals assist individuals during the transition period. Understanding about death rituals helps one grasp the essence of human life existence and how the rituals aid in healing process from social work perspective (Canda et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to investigate people's perceptions of death rituals as a form of psychosocial therapy during the transitional period of human life. To achieve this objective, fieldwork was conducted to gather data from individuals who have participated in death rituals in Birendranagar, Surkhet District, Western Nepal. The study focused on addressing several key research questions pertaining to how individuals perceive death rituals as a healing process, particularly from a social work perspective.

2. Review of Literature

Ends are difficult occurrences. When something ends, the overwhelming emotion may be either happy (like a college graduation) or sad (as a death). But these results frequently come with complicated feelings. When a loved one passes away, the grieving family may also experience relief that their misery and pain are ended. Given the complexity of endings and the overwhelmingly negative connotations of terminations, it is not unexpected that social workers frequently struggle with this aspect of practice (Gutheil, 1993).

Rituals are cultural tools that help maintain social order and give insight into the complex and contradictory features of human existence in a particular socio-cultural setting. Our life and our life cycle are patterned by rituals (Koller, 1989). Rituals disclose the deepest level of mutual meanings and values. Giving the group structure and stability while implementing change (Turner & Abrahams, 2017).

Myth and Rituals can only conversion from a powerful statement of contradiction or opposition to a lesser or partially filtered version of that message (Levi-Strauss, 1963). It was employed to explain the social existence and power of religious concepts, which were based on either emotional experiences or pseudoscientific reasons or mythical (Bell, 1992).

Rites aid sentimental or sensitive determinations. It creates background in which individuals can exchange emotive tightness that formalities help participant manage with affective state. It takes as means of dealing with powerful emotion (Rappaport, 1971). It provides communication and sharing environment which support to those individuals for the overcome of transitional condition (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), whereas, it has lately been discovered by symbolic anthropologists to be essential to the dynamics of "culture" (McLaren, 1999).

Funeral rituals are symbolic acts that offer the bereaved positive and fulfilling experiences. Funeral customs serve as a bridge between one social status and another for the bereaved (Danforth, 1982). Death rituals are prescribed order conducting with help of collective forms (Smith & Bird, 2000). The neighbourhood and the grieving family's relatives handle every home task. Death rituals is a cultural practice providing of psychosocial aid for bereavement (Young et al., 1997).

Death is difficulties incident that condition helping and coping with the problems of death and dying through rituals. Various cultures have rite to take care and make acceptance of death and dying (Kübler-Ross,1973). Rituals have therapeutic effects (Imbe-Black, 1991). Ritual is therapy for the bereaved offers particularly effective ways to deal with "grief work" and could be an effective complement to traditional systems of counselling and psychotherapy (Rando, 1985).

According to the American Psychological Dictionary, psychological treatment designed to help an individual with emotional or behavioural disturbances adjust to situations that require social interaction with members of the family, work group, community, or any other social unit (APA Dictionary, 2022). The focus of treatment is on psychosocial difficulties as they relate to possible problem scenarios. The goal of this therapy is to assist a patient with emotional difficulties in adjusting to their new environment and acquiring the social skills required to connect positively with family, co-workers, or other social groups (Sam, 2013).

The term "psychosocial therapy" refers to a specific, formal contact with a client in whom a therapeutic relationship is formed and maintained to help the client overcome or lessen particular emotional, mental, or social difficulties and achieve specific well-being goals (Childress, 2000). Psychosocial therapy is a subtype of psychotherapy places special emphasis on how the patient and their surroundings interact (Vera & Speight, 2003).

All societies have practiced ritual, and ritual systems have an important role in influencing clients' lives. Rituals can take on new forms and meanings that are both therapeutic and adaptive or, at least on some levels and for some of the actors, destructive and maladaptive (Laird, 1984). In order to difficulties, human value must seek healing, the psychosocial needs of those who are at risk and in vulnerable situations require care and healing that does not place the responsibility on the sufferer. The collaboration of individuals with peers and helpers in a self-healing and self-empowering process, however, is where the healing takes place rather than the hands of a specialist (Lee, 2001).

Social work is helping process to those individuals who are in sensitive condition and needy. The strength base practice method to circumstance managing with people with severe mental disturb-

ances. Extremely importance sources of strength are cultural and personal stories, narratives and knowledge. Cultural approaches to healing may provide the source for the stimulation and revitalization of energies and possibilities. Cultural accounts may provide motivation and implication to overcome from mentally disturbances (Saleebey, 1996).

Face-to-face encounters demand a shared attention focus, which can generate feelings of collective solidarity and the sacred symbols that go along with them, such as a person's "face," which act as moral restraints on individual behaviour (Collins, 1993). A ritual creates face-to-face connection when two or more actors are physically present, there is mutual awareness between the actors, a common point of attention, and a common emotional state. These components help people act together and improve their emotional energy. Solidarity is strengthened through increases in emotional strength (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). In social work, debate and discussion are a means to address the issue of mentally ill individuals, which helps to explore the inner suffering of individual (Canda et al., 2019), provides the opportunity through death ritual.

Culture from around the world deals with several models for understanding the relationship among mysticism, therapeutic and disorder. For more than 100000 years and still today in many cultures, Shamans or medicine people who look after the wellbeing of their communities have had the knowledge of healing. Cultural healers provided aid to individuals long before western science-based therapies existed. Today, about 70% to 90% of the people world-wide try to practitioners of nonapathetic traditions of practice. These therapists combine the function of healing with spiritual leadership (Young & Koopsen, 2010).

The work of Native/Aboriginal traditional healers in psycho-social intervention has recently drawn a lot of attention. Many Native Americans and Aboriginal Canadians hold the opinion that psychology has failed them and is even seen as a tool of societal control and hegemony. They also think that their current difficulties are related to previous and present traumas. Because of this, more and more Aboriginal people are seeking psychological healing through traditional practices. In this study, Aboriginal healers and their patients took part during one interviews and group discussions about their perspectives on the circumstances they believe are

beneficial for bringing about positive changes in behaviour, cognitions, and emotions (McCabe, 2007).

In Midwest and the other in a mid-Atlantic state, research revealed that religion and spirituality as significant in their personal lives, it found a greater need for a focus on religion and spirituality in the social work curriculum and its practice. Religion and spirituality have a positive influence on individual in social work practice, with interventions with clients that are spiritually oriented receiving relatively high approval while using (Sheridan & Hemert, 1999).

Many earlier studies have shown that while social work is a profession that aids those who require assistance, death rites offer the resources needed to overcome stress and mental disorders. Through group effort, assembles neighbours and relatives, narrates the stories (Garunpuran) by priest, collaboration in household act, interaction among the people, attention towards the miserable individual and communication are the strong declaration that supports therapeutic practice for needy. Thus, ritual can change an individual's mental faculties. Ritual is a form of coping.

The above-mentioned literatures help people realize that ritual is a crucial technique in the healing process. Rituals are frequently used in daily life to indicate transitions. Social workers can strengthen their practice by employing ritual knowledge while using work-related transition strategies (Gutheil, 1993). According to the conclusive findings of earlier research, the majority of authors from various nations base their studies on various rituals including death rituals are therapeutic techniques for treating mental disorders in the healing process of human being. However, some people dismiss literature as myth, mysticism, and religious ideas that lead people to romanticism rather than the truth. Therefore, the death ritual as psychosocial therapy is helping to decrease the mental disturbance of the miserable individual.

3. Methodology

This study based on experiences of the people who have earlier performed in death ritual. I used the qualitative data with both descriptive and exploratory research design to achieve the purpose of the study. The study focused more on exploring the therapeutic practice in term of ritual from the social work perspective by using in-depth interview. Inhabitant of Birendranagar- 8, Surkhet, was the

universe of the study. I selected the five participants using purposive sampling who have the experiences and knowledge regarding to the death rituals and data were taken through informal interviews using semi, and open-ended question. In addition to that, I observed thirteen days death rituals too. Finally, I carried a thematic analysis to analyze the description and experience of people on their views regarding with issues.

4. Data Presentation and Interpretation

Death ritual is found in various. There are no similarities between cultures. Its significance is also difference among and within group, community, caste, time and space and beliefs to it in variance (Braun & Nichols, 1997). In this context, I have found different perception of individual who involved in death ritual in Birendranagar regarding to the issues of death ritual. The field work conducted in Birendranagar revealed that, most of the people were Hindu culture. For instance, Prakash Khadka (Pseudonym), 53 years old inhabitant of Birendranagar municipality ward no. 8 who is a Journalist as well as bereavement from middle class family of Hindu community stated in his words :

> I lost my 27-year-old daughter, and it led me to participate in the death ritual process two months ago. With the advent of modernization, globalization, urbanization, and development, the frequency of death seems to be on the rise each day. As a result, people have come to accept it as a common occurrence in human life. Despite the new media's insistence on approaching death with ease, I've observed that society as a whole is not quite ready to embrace this notion. In the past, death was viewed as a natural part of life, and communities would come together to mourn, drawing support from kinship, relatives, and neighbours. However, today's younger generation seems less inclined to accept and perform traditional death rituals compared to their predecessors.
>
> Everything seems to have changed over the past 50 years, including the way goods are exchanged for money. The influence of the economic system has seeped into the fabric of death rituals, altering them to suit the interests of a mixed society. Rituals are continuously modified and adapted, sometimes in the name of progress, leading to a departure from

their original form. Despite these changes, rituals still play a crucial role in helping communities adjust to loss.

Through my engagement in the death ritual process, I've come to contemplate the existence of life after death. The physical body, composed of the five elements (Pancha Tattwa), is a tangible reality rather than a mere myth. While death may be accepted as a fact of life, its essence is often felt through symbolic representations. This acknowledgment of the mystical aspects of the universe is sometimes overshadowed by materialistic pursuits such as wealth, power, and social status, contributing to a sense of confusion. Despite these challenges, I've found solace in the support of rituals, which have been endorsed by science for their role in helping individuals cope with stress and find peace.

The response of the Prakash Khadka has provided the clear picture how modern people perceive the stress of death in our community. The people are taking the death tragedy as a natural phenomenon which is happening in every day or frequently in the society. Death ritual is modifying according to the process of modernization although it is believed that there is existence of life even after death. Similarly, Sila Chaudhary (Pseudonym), 36 years old, inhabitant of Birendranagar municipality ward no. 8 the bereavement recalled :

I lost my father-in-law a month ago, which left me feeling sad. We performed the nine-day death ritual according to our religious and cultural customs. Each day, we invited Pitri (ancestral spirits) into our home and maintained ties with the divine. Every ninth day, we conducted a fire ritual, adhering to our cultural practices. During this period, many tasks were carried out in accordance with our traditions. Fulfilling these duties, especially when relatives, friends, kin, and neighbours visited, provided solace and distracted from the pain of my father-in-law's passing. When visitors inquired about the circumstances of his death, I shared our experience. I remained occupied with the tasks required during the ritual period, which helped to alleviate sorrow. Serving traditional food to guests and receiving suggestions on how to honour our Pitri brought joy and relief. Interacting with visitors energized us and lifted our spirits. Engaging in the nine-day death ritual prevented me from dwelling on sadness.

The response of Sila Chaudhary provided that how death ritual plays the vital role for reducing the pains and misery of the death person in the family through engagement in the rituals and family members, relatives, friends and neighbours support emotionally reduction the tragic stress of family members. Likewise, Dependra B. K. (Pseudonym) 43-year-old inhabitant of Birendranagar Municipality stated :

> I lost my mother 45 days ago, which left me feeling utterly tragic. During that time, I received empathy and sympathy from my relatives, neighbours, and even unfamiliar individuals, which strengthened me psychologically and helped me cope with the pain. I performed the ritual meticulously under the guidance of the priest, as it serves as a tribute to our parents and ancestors. Performing the death ritual in honour of my mother was not difficult for me because of her significant contributions to my life. In moments when we struggle to comprehend life and the world scientifically, emotions run high. Collective work serves as a source of energy in our lives. Ritual practices foster integration and cohesion within family, kinship, neighbours, and the wider community. Even those not directly connected to my family participated in the rituals, embracing the Nepalese tradition of 'Marda Parda,' which symbolizes collective support.
>
> Ritual practices also aid in conflict management, reducing disagreement and encouraging reconciliation. They foster a sense of responsibility and promote individual maturity as social beings. The gathering of community members during funeral rituals helped socialize me and alleviate stress. 'Garun Puran,' akin to an 'Action Law,' is a religious text that guides us to refrain from negative deeds in the name of 'pap' (sin) and 'punya' (virtue), yet it exhibits gender discrimination. Hence, it warrants revision to address its shortcomings.

The logical arguments of Dependra BK, death ritual functions as the means of healing stress and mechanism of social cohesion and conflict management but it should be reformed only its negative aspects which are based on superstitious practices. Furthermore, Kumari Gautam (Pseudonym) in habitant of Birendranagar municipality stated :

> I lost my mother-in-law one month ago, which caused immense stress for our family. We performed the death ritual according to

the norms outlined in religious texts (Sastra), worshipping without skepticism. During the worship and Pinda Daan, we believed that fulfilling these rituals would bring happiness to our Pitri (ancestors) and support their salvation. The collective gathering of our family, relatives, and neighbours during this time, and their proactive involvement in household tasks without our direction, highlighted the importance of social capital during times of bereavement.

The collective strength provided by the community energized us, even amidst our sadness. Through the ritual, I witnessed the integration of distant relatives into our lineage, fostering a sense of unity. The absence of leisure time was compensated by the energy gained from participating in the ritual process. Involvement in the rituals made each family member feel responsible, mature, and morally grounded, contributing to their social development.

Death rituals serve as a platform for sharing culture and collective work, emphasizing the importance of sharing sorrow and pain. Sharing experiences with visitors helped us find solace and realize that grief is a universal experience. I observed that death rituals are prioritized over other rituals, serving as a means of sharing sorrow (Dhuka sharing culture). The absence of participation from kinship, neighbours, and community members in the death ritual led to feelings of sadness, touchedness, and strained relationships, highlighting the significance of these rituals in fostering community ties.

The response of Kumari Gautam provided the clear picture of the healing the stress through rituals and informal counselling and sharing the pains by the relatives and neighbour during the mourning period. Similarly, a death ritual makes the more responsible to the elder son and daughter or family members. Forty-Four years old Bindra Kuamri Thapa (Pseudonym) inhabitant Birendranagar municipality-8, reveals her stress and healing during the death ritual of 20 years old son Dev G.C. who died from cancer. She shared her feeling as stated below :

When I lost my son, I experienced deep tragedy and stress. Controlling my emotions felt nearly impossible, and I felt utterly alone, as if I had lost everything. However, gradually, neighbours and relatives began to visit me at home, sharing their

sorrows and pains, which helped alleviate some of my stress. Additionally, after four days, listening to Garun Puran provided me with relief.

Relatives who visited me often reminded me that death is an inevitable part of human life, and our souls never truly die, so acceptance is key. The ritual helped me regulate my emotions and realize the importance of societal support during such challenging times. Interacting with visitors brought me comfort, but I struggled when I was alone.

Despite not having strong relationships with some neighbours and relatives in the past, they still came to meet me, demonstrating the power of community support. During the death ritual, the focus was not on expenses but on finding peace and satisfaction through the salvation of the deceased soul. It is believed that the more guests, relatives, and neighborus we can accommodate, the happier the soul of the ancestor will be. The growth of Satabiu (Seven types of seeds) is seen as an indication of the deceased soul's salvation.

Therefore, death rituals serve as a means of sharing pain and suffering to ease stress. I did not find the thirteen-day ritual boring or challenging because I believed that performing it perfectly is essential for the soul to find rest. In my experience, a supernatural bond ties society together. Society is indispensable for living as a social being, more so than money and property.

The response of Bindra Kumari Thapa provided the clear picture of the healing the stress through rituals and informal counselling and sharing the pains by the relatives and neighbour during the mourning period. Similarly, death ritual makes the more engagement which supported to forget the pains and misery. Death ritual made the realization about the need of the society.

5. Findings

The findings of this study may be summarized as under :

» An interaction with in the family members, relatives and neighbours is the key to overcome the stress of bereavement in rituals performance.

» Ritual process provided involvement in ritual performance to make busy which helps to forget sorrow, misery and pain of bereavement family.

‣ It was found that the entire respondent responded that death ritual functions as reducing the gap between the neighbours and bereavement family.

‣ It maintains the social cohesion among the people of society in tragic situation

‣ Death ritual becomes platform for the sharing pains and tragic sufferings.

‣ Ritual process explores linage and connects with unidentified linage

‣ Death ritual has more focused on human relationship and group function

‣ Bereavement family members feel earning social capital even in losing the family members.

‣ All the case studies revealed that economic dimensions did not matter regarding to economic burden rather all the respondents were concerted for effective performing the rituals for salvation of soul of the dead body that can provide satisfaction and peace to family members too.

‣ Death ritual creates humanity and human existence

‣ Ritual is action law which control and regulate the society.

6. Conclusion

This study shows the significant role of death rituals in coping with bereavement and fostering social cohesion within communities. Through interactions with family members, relatives, and neighbours, individuals are able to find support and solace during times of grief, thereby reducing the stress associated with loss. Ritual participation provides a sense of purpose and activity, diverting attention from sorrow and pain.

Furthermore, death rituals serve as a bridge between bereaved families and their neighbours, narrowing the gap and maintaining social cohesion within society. These rituals offer a platform for sharing and processing feelings of sadness and tragedy, connecting individuals across lineage boundaries. The focus of death rituals on human relationships and group functions highlights their importance in fostering community bonds and reinforcing social capital, even amidst loss. Economic considerations take a backseat to the spiritual and emotional significance of performing rituals for the

salvation of the deceased soul, demonstrating the priority placed on achieving peace and satisfaction for the bereaved family.

Ultimately, death rituals contribute to the creation and preservation of humanity and human existence, serving as a form of action law that regulates and controls societal behaviour. Thus, the study affirms the enduring relevance and impact of death rituals in navigating the complexities of grief and loss within society. The study concludes that death rituals are interconnected with social work practice, offering avenues for problem-solving through interaction, communication, sharing, aid, group work, and community participation.

References

Braun, K. L., & Nichols, R., "Death and dying in four Asian American cultures : A descriptive study", *Death Studies*, 21(4), 1997, 327.

Campos-Castillo, C., & Hitlin, S., "Copresence : Revisiting a building block for social interaction theories", *Sociological Theory*, 31(2), 2013, 168-192.

Canda, E. R., Furman, L. D., & Canda, H. J., *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice : The Heart of Helping*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2019.

Childress, C. A., "Ethical issues in providing online psychotherapeutic interventions", *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 2(1), 2000, e792.

Collins, R., "Emotional energy as the common denominator of rational action", *Rationality and Society*, 5(2), 1993, 203-230.

Danforth, L. M., *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1982.

Fiese, B. H., & Kline, C. A., "Development of the Family Ritual Questionnaire : Initial reliability and validation studies", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 6(3), 1993, 290.

Gutheil, I. A., "Rituals and termination procedures", *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 63(2),1993, 163-176.

Imber-Black, E., "Rituals and the healing process", F. Walsh & M. McGoldrick (eds.), *Living Beyond Loss : Death in the Family*, New York: Norton and Company, 1991, 207-223.

Kollar, N. R., "Rituals and the disenfranchised griever", *Liturgy*, 9(2), 1990, 71-80.

Kübler-Ross, E., *On Death and Dying*, New York : Routledge, 1973.

Laird, J., "Sorcerers, shamans, and social workers : The use of ritual in social work practice", *Social Work*, 29(2), 1984, 123-129.

Lee, J. A., *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice*, Columbia, USA and Chichester, West Sussex : Columbia University Press, 2001.

Lévi-Strauss, C., *Structural Anthropology* (Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf), New York : Basic Books, 1963.

McCabe, G. H., "The healing path : A culture and community-derived indigenous therapy model", *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 44, no. 2 (2007): 148.

N., Sam M. S., "PSYCHOSOCIAL THERAPY", *PsychologyDictionary.org*, April 28, 2013.

Rando, T. A., "Creating therapeutic rituals in the psychotherapy of the bereaved", *Psychotherapy : Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 22(2), 1985, 236.

Rappaport, R. A., "Ritual, sanctity, and cybernetics 1", *American Anthropologist*, 73(1), 1971, 59-76.

Romanoff, B. D., "Rituals and the grieving process", *Death Studies*, 22(8), 1998, 697-711.

Saleebey, D., "The strengths perspective in social work practice : Extensions and cautions", *Social Work*, 41(3), 1996, 296-305.

Sheridan, M. J., & Hemert, K. A. V., "The role of religion and spirituality in social work education and practice : A survey of student views and experiences", *Journal of Social Work Education*, 35(1), 1999, 125-141.

Smith, E. A., & Bird, R. L. B., "Turtle hunting and tombstone opening: Public generosity as costly signaling", *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 21(4), 2000, 245-261.

Turner, V., & Abrahams, R. D., *The Ritual Process : Structure and Anti-structure*, New York : Routledge, 2017.

Vera, E. M., & Speight, S. L., "Multicultural competence, social justice, and counseling psychology : Expanding our roles", *The Counseling Psychologist*, 31(3), 2003, 253-272.

Wolin, S. J., & Bennett, L. A., "Family rituals", *Family Process*, 23(3), 1984, 401-420.

Young, B., Parkes, C. M., & Laungani, P., *Death and Bereavement across Cultures*, London : Routledge, 1997.

Young, C., & Koopsen, C., *Spirituality, Health, and Healing : An integrative approach*, Massachusetts : Jones & Bartlett Publishers, 2010.   ★