

REFLECTIONS ON ANCESTOR WORSHIP; A CASE STUDY OF POE KAYIN PEOPLE LIVING IN KAMAPAR VILLAGE, KUNGYANGONE TOWNSHIP, YANGON REGION

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Abstract

Poe Kayin people who reside in Kamapar village celebrate the ceremonies of paying homage to the late ancestors. They hold it for the good of their business, health and education. Every member of the family has to take part in the ceremony. This study was viewed from religious anthropology perspectives and conducting qualitative ethnographic field approach. The aim of the search is to explain the essential theme of the ritual of Poe Kayin people's ancestor worship. The objectives are to reveal the importance of paying homage to the ancestors in social affairs and well-being of the Kayin people, to learn the procedures of the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors and to record the ritual of worshipping the ancestors for the next generations. The data was collected and performed by key informant interview, in-depth interview, participant observation and focus group interview. Young people come back home at the time of propitiation of the spirits of the ancestors. Therefore they are not used to the service of the spiritual medium and they should learn the rituals. Actually ancestor worship ceremony is a small family gathering of home coming children. In addition, all the family members can worship their late ancestor together. Besides they get together for breakfast, lunch and dinner and treat the villagers with rice and curry. Such rituals should be handed down from generation to generation to preserve family and ethnic unity.

Keywords: celebrate, paying homage, ceremony, ancestors

Introduction

Religion may be regarded as the beliefs and patterns of behavior by which human try to deal with what they view as important problems that cannot be solved with known technology or organizational techniques. To overcome these limitations, people turn to the manipulation of supernatural beings and power.

Religion consists of various rituals- prayers, songs, dances, offerings, and sacrifices- people enact to try to manipulate supernatural beings and powers to their advantage. These beings and power may consist of gods and goddesses, ancestral and other spirits or impersonal powers, either by themselves or in various combinations (Haviland, 2007).

Ancestor worship is found in many forms in cultures throughout the world, Veneration of ancestors is regarded as a means through which an individual can assure his or her own immortality. It is perhaps the world's oldest religion. Some anthropologists theorize that it grew out of belief in some societies that dead people still exist in some form because they appear in dreams. Ancestor worship involves the belief the dead live on as spirits and that it is the responsibility of their family members and descendants to make sure that are well taken care of. If they are not, they may come back and cause trouble to the family member and descendants that have ignored or disrespected them.

In Myanmar and other places, special reverence is accorded a family's ancestors. This practice, known as the family cult or cult of the ancestors is derived from the belief that after death the spirits of the departed continued to influence the world of the living.

This ancestor worship is very deeply rooted in Kayin Buddhist community and still very much alive today. It has long been a key religious belief and practice in Poe Kayin community. Perhaps the ultimate qualification to become an ancestor is death. Death is the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is however not the only criteria. Not

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all dead people are considered as ancestors. Generally speaking, the ancestors are the deceased who were once members of the social group of a clan. Only parents, grandparents, great grandparents can qualify as ancestors. Young boys and girls who die cannot become ancestors.

A. Research Questions

What role does ancestor worship play in Poe Kayin Community?

What are the beliefs of your ancestors?

How do you worship your ancestors?

Who are the ancestors?

B. Research Aim and Objectives

Aim

To explain the essential theme of the ritual of Poe Kayin people's ancestor worship.

Objectives

To reveal the importance of paying homage to the ancestors in social affairs and well-being of the Kayin people.

To learn the procedures of the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors.

To record the ritual of worshipping the ancestors for the next generations.

Research Methodology

This study was viewed from religious anthropological perspectives and conducted qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork approach. In field study, data were collected by key informant interview, In-depth Interview, Focus group interview and participant Observation.

Location and Area

The sub-ethnic group of Kayin people named Po-Kayin reside in the villages called Kamapar, Towkyaung, Mankaleik, kyauikpat, Ingut, Wakauktaw, Kyarkhat, which are located in Kungyangon Township, Yangon Region, Kungyangon Township is situated near the river called Toe River, 34 miles away from Yangon in its southern part, 9 miles away from Kawhmu, and eight miles away from Ingarpu which is on the opposite side of Dedaye River. Its area is 28,827 square miles. Kamapar village is located in north-eastern part of Kungyangon which is more than 800 feet above sea level.



Population, Household and Villages

There are seven wards, 43 village-tracts, 118 villages, 5 sub-districts in Kungyangon Township. The Kamapar village-tract where Po-Kayins are residing has 1,404 household, 1,376 houses, and the total population is 5,824 with males (3,187) and females (2,637).



The entrance of the village

Transportation

Kamapar village is situated in Kungyangone Township, Yangon region. It is located on the left hand side of the Yangon. Dedaye- Pyapon-Bogalay motorway. It can be reached by motorway. If one wants to visit Kamapar village he or she has to cross the Hlaing River by a ferry boat to Dala. From Dala if he or she takes one of the buses which go to Pyapon, Dedaye, Bogalay and Kyaiklat, he or she gets off at Kamapar village. Ferry boat fare is one hundred kyats and bus fare to Kamapar village is two thousand kyats.

The traditional customs of ancestor worship

According to the interviews, it is learnt that the Poe Kayin people who reside in Kamapar village profess Buddhism. Since they are Buddhists, they celebrate the ceremony of paying homage to their late ancestors to beg their pardon thinking that they have done something wrong to the forebears. If the forebears are still living, they can take part in the place of ancestors.

Formerly, the custom of ancestors worship was meant for the health of the family members. Later it was also meant for successful business. Nowadays, it is meant for children's education.

Nobody knows exactly when ancestor worship began. They hold the ceremony in order not to break the tradition. Concerning the oral history of ancestors worship, a seventy year old man said,

"Once upon a time, one of the Kayin kings had a number of offspring. They usually eat their meals in a big circular tray on a stand together. When the children are grown up they became lords at remote places. When they could not come back to their parents, they get together at home and have the meals with their family. At the same time, they dedicated the feast to their ancestors. In order to beg their pardon, they also drank hand cleaning water, and foot cleaning water at the fast."

Ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors is not held by the living family members regularly. Some people do it annually whereas some people do it three years a time depending on their financial situation. When they are faced with social issues or when they overcome their social issues, they hold it and say prayers for success. Sometimes, when they achieve their objective, they hold it twice a year.

A woman who is sixty three years old said,

"In this village, a Poe Kayin damsel married a Hindu lad and they earn their living by breeding cattle. Then they moved to another place. They regularly came back to Kamapar village with their grandchildren to pay homage to the ancestors in order not to break the tradition."

Poe Kayin people who reside in Kamapar village earn their living by cultivating rice and betel leaves. The villagers cooperate on not only in agriculture but also in paying homage to the ancestors. They are well experienced in the ceremony.

The elderly Poe Kayin people help in agricultural work as much as they can. However, they no longer lead the family in business depending on their children's subsidization. They never lead the ceremony but they take part as the elders. Concerning the traditional ceremony, an old man who is seventy two years of age said,

"Since we profess Buddhism, we do not want to kill chickens as well as pigs committing a sin. As for the young people, they hold it to be healthy and wealthy."

Concerning the importance of the ceremony, a man who is forty years old said,

"For the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors (Inkhine), four chickens and two pigs are killed. We know that we have committed a sin. In spite of that, we had to do it in order to wipe out the social issues."

Only a few young Poe Kayin earn their living by traditional agriculture. They are now working for governmental departments and companies in Yangon and Mandalay. Some go to foreign countries, for example South Korea to work there. When their families inform them, they come back home and take part in the ceremony. Although they participate in it, they are not eager to do so.

There are three spiritual mediums who can lead the ceremony in the village. At present one of the three spiritual medium is taking responsibility. If he passes away, some difficulties may arise later because the other two spiritual mediums are not accustomed to the ceremony. A home coming Poe Kayin youth worker who is twenty five years old said,

“While I was working overseas, I sent money to my family regularly and to hold the ceremony without fail on behalf of me. This year I come back home to pay homage to my ancestors myself.”

When some of the villagers are faced with social issues, they go to the village spiritual medium and do what he instructs if he sees that it is necessary. Some people do not go to the spiritual medium and pay homage to the ancestors with his help.

Ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors is very costly. The cost of the ceremony is based on the size of the pig. It varies three hundred thousand *Kyat* to five hundred thousand *Kyat*. (Myanmar Currency) If the villagers do not have sufficient money to hold ceremony, they make a promise that they will do it when they have enough money. Some of the money for the ceremony is packed in a white cloth and placed on the altar. It is known as “*Koegyin*”. The money is meant for the ancestors. It is usually done by the spiritual medium or head of the family.



Koegyin

As soon as they achieve the objective, they consult the spiritual medium and arrange to hold the ceremony. All the family members have to take part in the ceremony. If someone is late for the ceremony, he or she cannot enter the house while the ceremony is in progress. He or she can enter the house only when the ceremony is over.

Although they have achieved the objectives, if they do not hold the ceremony, they are warned three times. It is said that if they don't hold the ceremony in spite of the warning, they can get into trouble. It is also said that if they promise to hold the ceremony when the circumstances permit, they can achieve their objectives.

In a family, when both the parents are not still living, the eldest son or daughter has to lead the ceremony. Married son or daughter who lives separately can hold it at their homes. However they cannot go to their parents' homes and hold it. If they want to hold it at their parents' home, they must give twenty thousand kyats or thirty thousand kyats to them. Some people who marry twice have to hold the ceremony for the children of first marriage so that the children of second marriage can pay homage to the ancestors.

The responsibilities of a spiritual medium

Since Poe Kayin people who reside in Kamapar village are accustomed to the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors, they are well experienced. The spiritual medium is the instructor

of the ceremony. A spiritual medium must be a man. He must be a person who abides by the religious precepts. He must be fluent in Poe Kayin language and knowledge about the ritual. He also earns his living by traditional agriculture. He must refrain from drinking alcohol. As a result a spiritual medium is a rare species. He can hand down to young generation but no one is interested in it. While paying homage to the ancestors, one who is eager to know can learn the procedures practically from the spiritual medium. Age is not limited. One can be a spiritual medium after his wife reaches the menopause. There are three generations of spiritual medium in the village. The present spiritual medium has had twenty nine years of service. The spiritual medium who is fifty nine years old said,

“Actually the service is meant for the aged persons .I have been a spiritual medium since I was thirty years of age. I was admitted because I was knowledgeable about the ritual although I was young.”

The honorarium for the spiritual medium is two thousand kyats or three thousand kyats and a viss of pork. The procedure of the ceremony is different from that of the neighboring villages.

Holding the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors

In Poe Kayin language, the ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors is called “*Pet-in-Khine*”. It means the ceremony of begging the late ancestors, pardon if their children have insulted them unintentionally when they were young. Other Kayin people call it ‘*Nat-sar-dae*’. Poe Kayin people of Kampar do not like the term. They say it is to that pay respect to the late ancestors. If their old parents are still living, the children take place in front of the stage and pay respect according to the proceeding days. They do not hold the ceremony during the Buddhist lent, on Wednesday, full moon day, the last waning day and the 8th waxing day. If there is an emergency case, they may hold it during the Buddhist lent.

First of all, the head of the family has to consult the spiritual medium and choose the date. The date depends on the free time of the spiritual medium and the family members. There are three mediums who know the procedures. But only one is in service. Sometimes, he has to serve four ceremonies in a day.

After the date has been fixed, the spiritual medium asks the “*Phu-thein-kyar*” spirit which dwells on the dry tree stump in the field outside the village to invite the spirits of the ancestors. The “*Phu-thein-kyar*” spirit has two assistants. One can invite the ancestors in heaven and another can invite the ancestors in the lower abode. The spiritual medium himself goes to the stump and asks them to invite the ancestors in the afternoon or in the evening.

Before the day of the ceremony, the altar of the house is cleaned up. Then the spiritual medium asks permission from the home spirit, door spirit, staircase spirit, garden spirit, village spirit, the outside of the village spirit and four guardian spirits to allow the spirits of the ancestors to enter the house.

One day ahead of the ceremony, the house owner makes obeisance to *U Shin Gyi* spirit in order to be free from danger. Anybody can make obeisance to *U Shin Gyi* spirit without sex discrimination and age limitation. The only thing is woman can make it only after menstruation. Steamed glutinous rice and coconut which are placed in three plates with three candles are offered to *U Shin Gyi* spirit in the evening or at night. The ceremony of paying homage to the ancestors takes two days. On the first day the hostess pays homage to her ancestors. She does it once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Chicken is meant for the morning and pork is meant for the afternoon. She starts the ceremony at 6 a.m or 7 a.m.

The offertories are prepared before the spiritual medium’s arrival. The villagers come and help in the preparation. First of all, cooked rice is offered to Lord Buddha. Then a cock and a hen

are killed by wrapping them tightly with strip of bamboo to prevent open wounds. The cock and the hen can be homebred or bought. The chickens must be grown up and free from wounds. Then their stomachs are cut and their entrails are picked out and the chickens are boiled. Their nails must not be cut. Killing and cooking chickens and pigs are done by the family members and relatives.

The entrails of the cock and hen are tied with a strip of bamboo separately and boiled without salt. After they have been boiled, they are put into the respective stomach again. Then a bamboo tray is overturned, two banana leaves are spread out on it and the tray is put on the leaves. After that cooked rice is put in the middle of the two chickens. The boiled hen is on the left side and the boiled cock is on the right side in the form of crouching. Two betel quids including betel leaf, tobacco, slaked lime and betel nut, a glass of water and a kindled candle are put in the aluminium tray. The tray is put in front of the altar. The living parents and grandparents are seated at the head of the house. On behalf of the late ancestors, their old clothes are put at the head of the house. The spiritual medium puts the sandalwood scented water into a glass and spray it onto Lord Buddha and then onto the tray. After that he invites the late ancestors to join the family and have the meals, begs their pardon if the young people committed something wrong physically, verbally and mentally, he has to say two times before, and after the candle fire dies out. When the candle fire dies out, cooked rice, chicken and betel quid are packed in banana leaf and serves the food to the ancestors first as a gesture of respect. Then the spiritual medium and all the family members eat the food in ascending order using the left hands owing to different lives. If the parents and grandparents are still living, their hand washing water are drunk by their children and grandchildren in order to be free from misdeed. After the homage, contributors, invited guests and villagers are entertained to rice, pork curry and chicken salad. Chicken is made salad using onion, chilli and salt without oil. The ceremonial curry depends on the donor's financial situation. Sometimes pork curry is mixed with potato or pumpkin.



Preparation with chicken of the ceremony of the paying homage to the ancestor

After the morning ceremony is over, afternoon ceremony is prepared. First of all, the head of a female pig is hit with an axe to kill and its bristle is shared. Then its head, hands, legs and tail are cut. Then its abdomen is cut and its entrails are picked out. The nape meat, rib, head, hip meat, hands and legs are set aside for the ceremony. After cleaning them all, they are boiled without salt. Local people believe that if the meat is not well done, the ceremony is not successful. If the ceremony is unsuccessful, they celebrate it again at their convenient time. The bile is picked out from the entrails and boiled separately. Two leaves of banana are spread out in the bamboo tray.

A big bowl is placed on the tray. The head, nape meat, rib, hip meat, hands, legs and tail are placed in the bowl. A glass of water, two betel quids and a lighted candle are offered to the ancestors by the spiritual medium. As soon as the candle light dies out, the food is served to the ancestors first as a gesture of respect.



Preparation with pork of the ceremony of the paying homage to the ancestor

Cooked rice, pork curry and betel leaves are packed and set aside. Morning chicken packet and afternoon pork packet are put into the bamboo woven by the spiritual medium himself and wrapped with cotton thread. Wrapping with the cotton thread is meant by the ancestors' different lives. These are the gifts for the ancestors and "*Phu-thein-kya*" spirit who resides at the dry stump outside the village.

Local people believe that if someone is impertinent to "*Phu-thein-kya*", he or she gets into trouble. Once, a child grabbed the gifts meant for "*Phu-thein-kya*" spirit and ancestors while the spiritual medium was offering. No sooner had the child grabbed the parcels than he suffered from stomachache and passed away. Every Poe Kayin pays respect to "*Phu-thein-kya*" spirit.

When the afternoon worship is over, boiled pork is mixed with onion and chilli powder to make salad without oil. Invited guests are fed for the second time. The villagers are given pork and they can cook it as they like. In this way the ceremony is over for the first day. The host and hostess cannot use the bamboo tray, the aluminium tray and the bowl again for the next day. They have to finish the rice and curry up on the first day.

The second day is meant for the ceremony of the husband's ancestors. On that day, the wife's relatives must not come. The ancestral spirits of the husband's parents and grandparents are invited and paid homage. The morning ceremony is the same as the wife's first day arrangement. The pig used in the afternoon ceremony is a male pig. The afternoon ceremony is also the same as the wife's first day arrangement. On these days, the family members have to retrain from drinking alcohol. The drunk men must not come to the ceremony because their parents and grandparents dislike it. Nevertheless they can come and have the meals at lunch time. The number of ceremony is variable every year. One year, seventy pigs were used to propitiate the spirits of the ancestors. It was the largest amount during the spiritual medium's service.



Interviewing with the spiritual medium

Discussion

Poe Kayin people who reside in Kamapar village celebrate the ceremonies of paying homage to the late ancestors. They hold it so far the good of their business, health and education. Although it is costly, they do it because they believe that their objectives are good. Even if they cannot hold it at present, they promise to propitiate their ancestors, without fail, sometimes in the future. As soon as they achieve their objectives, they hold it without fail. Preparation is necessary for the ceremony. Every member of the family has to take part in the ceremony. As for the elderly people, they are placed at the head of the house. Young people come back home at the time of propitiation of the spirits of their ancestors. Therefore, they are not familiar with the service of the spiritual medium. They must learn the rituals.

Conclusion

Actually the ancestor worship ceremony is a small family gathering of home coming children. In addition, all the family members can worship their late ancestors together. Besides they get together for breakfast, lunch and dinner and they treat the villagers to rice and curry. Whatever or not the ancestor worship accomplishes what Poe Kayins believe it does, it serves a number of social functions. It plays an important role in maintaining social solidarity.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. KyawKyawKhaing, Rector of East Yangon University, and pro-rector, Dr. Min Min Yee for giving me permission to do research. I am also deeply greatly thanks to the local people who took part to answer my research questions in my fieldwork.

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