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Death Ritual Practices Among the Dangaura Tharu of Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines the death ritual practices of the Dangaura Tharu community in Nepal, focusing on how these rituals embody cultural beliefs, social values, and community solidarity. It aims to explore the spiritual, social, and symbolic meanings of death rites such as body washing and wrapping, the use of khatiya (bamboo bed), lighting the diyo (lamp), offering rice, and performing purification rituals (kriya). Conducted in the Kailali and Bardiya districts through qualitative ethnographic methods, the research engaged 25 participants, including ritual specialists (guruwa, kesauka), elders, and bereaved families. Data were gathered through participant observation, interviews, and group discussions. The study draws on Durkheim's theory of social cohesion, Blumer's symbolic interactionism, and Goffman's theory of ritual interaction to interpret how collective mourning and symbolic acts reaffirm unity, moral order, and social continuity. Findings reveal that each ritual act from carrying the body to observing food restrictions and performing kriya carries profound social and spiritual significance, reinforcing kinship, gender, and generational roles within the Tharu community. In spite of modern challenges such as migration and state health interventions, these rituals demonstrate the Tharu's cultural determination and continuing respect for ancestors. The study is significant for understanding how traditional rituals mediate between individual emotion and collective identity, transforming grief into social renewal, and serves as a valuable foundation for future researchers interested in the connection of ritual, belief, and social

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cohesion in indigenous communities of Nepal.

Keywords : Dangaura Tharu, death rituals, social cohesion, symbolic interactionism, guruwa

Introduction

Death is one of the most momentous social and cultural events in every human society. It is not only a biological ending but also a social and spiritual alteration that deeply influences the life of the community. Among the Dangaura Tharu of Nepal, death is seen as a opening from the physical world to the spiritual realm. The Tharu people believe that the soul continues to exist after death, and that proper rituals help the soul find peace and protect the living family from misfortune. These rituals are not only about mourning but also about restoring balance, purifying within the family and the community. They bring people together, express shared beliefs, and reaffirm social ties that hold the group together during times of loss.

Across the Himalayan and South Asian regions, scholars have noted that death rituals vary widely across ethnic and ecological contexts, showing how societies create their own ways of coping with death and grief (Cohen, 1992; Parkes, 1996). In Nepal, cremation is common among high-caste Hindus, while burial or mixed practices are found among indigenous groups like the Tharu (Gell, 1998; Foley, 2005). Researchers such as Guneratne (1999, 2002) have shown that the Tharu combine elements of animism, Hinduism, and shamanism in their rituals, guided by ritual specialists known as *guruwa* and *kesauka*. These specialists connect the living with the spirit world, helping to maintain social and cosmic balance. The Tharu's funeral practices thus reflect their deep respect for nature, kinship, and ancestral spirits, linking the human world to the supernatural.

Sociological theories provide important tools to understand the meaning of these rituals. From Durkheim's (1912/2008) perspective, death rituals are collective acts that help communities rebuild social unity after a loss. Through shared mourning, offerings, and purification, people reaffirm moral values and strengthen group solidarity. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) helps explain how everyday objects used in funerals such as the *khatiya* (bamboo bed), *kafan* (cloth), *diyoo* (lamp), and rice gain sacred meaning through repeated use and shared understanding. Each gesture or object carries social meaning, helping people express grief and honor the dead in ways that sustain cultural identity. In this way, Tharu death rituals serve both spiritual and social purposes: they guide the soul, comfort the mourners, and restore harmony in the community.

Literature Review

Existing literature (articles, books, criticisms, and analyses) depicts death rituals of *Dangaura Tharu* as culturally specific, socially integrative, and symbolically rich systems linking cosmology, kinship, and ecology. Studies highlight continuity amid modernization, emphasizing ritual specialists, agricultural symbolism, and collective mourning, yet mark a gap in longitudinal ethnographies exploring evolving practices within ecological and migratory transformations. Quantitative assessments of ritual cost, access, and mental health outcomes linked to disrupted mourning are scarce.

Scholars of Himalayan and South Asian anthropology have long emphasized the cultural specificity and social functions of death rites (Cohen, 1992; Parkes, 1996). The scholars agree that death rituals are not universal in form but socially constructed processes that reveal each community's moral and cosmological order, illustrating how societies transform grief into culturally patterned behavior that sustains social cohesion. As such, within Nepal, ethnographic studies have documented substantial diversity across ecological zones and ethnic groups ranging from cremation among high-caste Hindus to burial and syncretic practices among indigenous communities (Gell, 1998; Foley, 2005). Their work supports the argument that funerary practices in Nepal are plural and locally grounded, reflecting the adaptive interplay between geography, religion, and ethnic identity.

The Tharu, as a widely studied Tarai people, provide illuminating cases due to their syncretic cosmologies (mixing animistic, Hindu, and shamanic elements) and distinct ritual specialists (*guruwa*, *jimidar*) who mediate relations with the supernatural (Guneratne, 1999; Guneratne, 2002). These ethnographies claim that Tharu rituals, including those surrounding death, function as mediating systems that reconcile human, ancestral, and spiritual worlds, thereby maintaining equilibrium between nature and community.

In the same vein, Arjun Guneratne, in his ethnographic work, has been central to contemporary understandings of Tharu ritual life. Guneratne (1999; 2002) documented how Tharu religious specialists' shamans (*guruwa*) and priests tackle illness, death, and spirit-related disturbances. His studies claim that these ritual experts are not only healers but moral agents who embody social authority and reproduce Tharu cosmology through their performance. He emphasizes that Tharu cosmology recognizes multiple spiritual agents (local deities, ancestral spirits, and malevolent ghosts) and that ritual responses are calibrated to these categories (Guneratne, 1999). This affirms with a stance that Tharu rituals are highly differentiated symbolic systems in which each spirit type invokes distinct ritual behavior, affirming the moral logic embedded in local belief. Guneratne's analysis further situates ritual specialists as social actors who both reflect and shape community norms, a point echoed by studies of ritual specialists across Himalayan

societies (Hodgson, 2003; Lewis, 2009). Together, these studies claim that ritual specialists act as agents of cultural continuity, linking cosmology and everyday social regulation.

Comparative work on life-cycle rituals among Terai and hill communities shows recurrent patterns use of ritual specialists, the symbolic importance of rice, directional burial practices, and pollution and purification sequences (Shneiderman, 2000; Onta, 2006). These scholars claim that the repetition of these patterns across ethnic contexts demonstrates a shared South Asian ritual grammar that encodes ideas of purity, transition, and rebirth. For instance, rice appears repeatedly as a liminal substance in funerary contexts both as an offering for the dead and a symbolic medium of continuity between living and dead (Cox, 2011). In this sense, Cox argues that rice functions as a powerful medium of communication between realms of existence, symbolizing sustenance and moral continuity across generations. Rice holds a dual role as both a staple food and a sacred substance, making it a fitting medium for funerary rites among agrarian communities such as the Tharu. This claim highlights how agricultural symbolism infuses spiritual practices, linking ecology and ritual expression.

Building on this, Durkheim states that ritual and social cohesion remain a primary sociological frame for interpreting funeral rites. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1912/2008) argued that religious rites express collective representations and serve to renew social solidarity. This foundational stance theorizes that death rituals are mechanisms through which collective grief is transformed into reaffirmed social unity, re-establishing the moral order disrupted by loss. Funerals, in particular, dramatize community values, restore moral equilibrium after the destabilizing event of death, and symbolically reaffirm the social order through shared ritual (Durkheim, 1912/2008). This claim supports the present study's claim that Tharu death rituals function structurally to maintain communal balance and reinforce kinship solidarity through collective participation. Empirical applications of Durkheim in South Asia show how ritual acts, collective mourning, purification rites, and hierarchical responsibilities operate to re-bond kin and village groups (Fuller, 1992; Parry, 1994). These theoretical perspectives claim that the social drama of death transcends individual emotion, transforming mourning into a reaffirmation of hierarchy and mutual obligation.

At the micro-interactional level, symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) provides tools for analyzing how objects and gestures acquire meaning through social interaction. The above foundational theorists claim that meaning arises from human communication and that ritual symbols gain significance through shared interpretation within specific cultural contexts. Ritual artifacts (*kafan*, *diyoo*) are not simply material; they are invested with symbolic work through repeated use, speech acts, and ritual sequencing (Turner, 1967; Bell, 1992). The authors claim that ritual behavior functions

as a performative medium that produces and reproduces social meaning, situating death as a communicative act rather than only a biological event. Ethnographies of death show how small acts placing a lamp on the chest, strewing rice, the living's dietary abstentions serve as communicative acts that shape emotional experience and create shared moral narratives (Hertz, 1960/1960; Kirmayer, 1996). Their positioning is on the bodily gestures and sensory experiences, which are integral to social meaning-making, enabling communities to collectively process grief through patterned symbolic action.

Recent work has also addressed changing funerary practices under modern pressures public health regulations, migration, and commercialization of death services (Howarth & Kitzinger, 2011; Walter, 2017). The studies claim that global modernity transforms traditional death rituals by introducing bureaucratic, hygienic, and economic logics that often conflict with indigenous cosmologies. Studies have documented shifts from traditional burial to cremation or funeral home services, and modifications in mourning sequences due to labor migration and urbanization (Pandey & Murphy, 2018). They claim that ritual flexibility enables communities such as the Tharu to maintain cultural continuity amid change, preserving essential symbols while adapting practices to socioeconomic realities. Tharu communities are not immune to these pressures; reports note both persistence and adaptation in ritual practices across the Tarai (Maycock, 2018; Rana & Pokharel, 2020). These studies claim that Tharu death rituals demonstrate cultural resilience, sustaining symbolic coherence despite external forces such as modernization and mobility.

Overall, the review shows that *Dangaura* Tharu death rituals intricately weave cosmology, kinship, gender, and ecology, functioning to sustain social cohesion and moral order while enabling symbolic continuity. However, gaps remain: longitudinal ethnographies are scarce, and quantitative data on ritual costs, access, and mental health impacts of disrupted mourning are limited. Future research should integrate micro- and macro-level analyses to capture how these rituals adapt among ecological, migratory, and modernizing pressures.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the meaning, structure, and social functions of death rituals among the *Dangaura* Tharu community of Nepal. Fieldwork was conducted in the Kailali and Bardiya districts, where *Dangaura* Tharu people are densely settled. The qualitative approach was employed to capture beliefs, emotions, and ritual meanings in their natural cultural contexts. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and group discussions. A total of 25 participants took part in the study, including ritual specialists (*guruwa* and *jimindar*), elders, family members who had recently conducted funeral

rites, and other community members. These techniques enabled the researcher to observe rituals firsthand, interpret symbolic actions, and record participants' perspectives on death, mourning, and purification. All research activities adhered to ethical protocols ensuring informed consent, privacy, and cultural sensitivity throughout the process.

The collected data were analyzed thematically and interpretively to identify recurrent patterns, symbolic meanings, and social roles embedded in ritual performance. The study was anchored in classical sociological and interactionist theories. Emile Durkheim's framework elucidated how ritual practices reinforce collective solidarity and moral cohesion within the community. The perspectives of Herbert Blumer and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism guided the interpretation of how material objects such as *khatiya*, *diyoy*, and rice become culturally charged through repeated social interactions. Erving Goffman's concept of ritual interaction further illuminated the performative dimensions of respect, grief, and social order during death ceremonies. Together, these theoretical lenses provided a comprehensive understanding of how the Tharu community negotiates meaning, identity, and cohesion through death ritual practices.

Results and Discussion

Death, in every human society, holds profound social and spiritual meaning. For the Dangaura Tharu community, one of the major Tharu sub-groups residing in the Sudurpaschim (Far Western) and parts of the Mid-Western Terai of Nepal, death is not simply an end to biological life but a transition to a new form of existence. The Tharu worldview holds a profound belief that the soul endures beyond physical death, transitioning into another realm or form of existence. Consequently, death rituals are not merely acts of bodily disposal but sacred processes aimed at guiding the departed soul toward peace while restoring the bereaved family's harmony within the social order.

The Tharu community, known for their close connection with nature, forests, and agricultural life, deeply embeds death rituals into their social, cultural, and religious systems. The rituals surrounding death among the Dangaura Tharu reflect their beliefs in purity, impurity, social responsibility, kinship hierarchy, and the interconnection between the living and the dead. These rituals are not only spiritual and social acts, but also ensure harmony between the physical and metaphysical worlds.

Ritual Sequence: Preparation, Procession, Burial

Dangaura Tharu ritual sequence begins immediately upon death. The body is washed, wrapped, and placed on the *khatiya* (sleeping cot) or a simple bamboo frame (*charpai*). The use of the *khatiya* is deeply symbolic it serves not merely as a resting platform but as an indexical object that bridges the deceased's everyday life with their restfulness after death. In symbolic interactionist terms, placing the deceased on the same

cot used in life constitutes a *continuity symbol* a material gesture that communicates identity maintenance across life and death (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). This act reflects how material objects mediate the social self, allowing the deceased's identity to persist symbolically within the collective memory of the living.

The *kafan* white or sometimes yellow covers the body, symbolizing purity, mourning, or sanctity (Oommen, 1990). The *diyo*, a small flame placed on the chest, guides the soul and prevents wandering. Together with the *khatiya* and *kafan*, it serves as a communicative object translating religious meaning into ritual gesture; as Blumer (1969) notes, such objects gain significance through shared use and interpretive interaction.

Processions to the burial site are typically male-led. Women remain at home, observing seclusion or supporting domestic ritual tasks. The body is carried to the riverbank, family field, or designated burial ground. The preference for riverbank interment aligns with the wider South Asian understanding of water as a conduit of purification and spiritual continuity (Fuller, 1992). This spatial choice reflects a cosmological logic in which the deceased's proximity to flowing water ensures both cleansing and transition between realms. At the burial site, the act of strewing rice before, around, and even over the grave reinforces this symbolic layering. Rice, as Cox (2011) observes, operates on two levels nourishing the spirit materially and serving as an offering to maintain social and cosmic reciprocity. Together, these practices illustrate how material acts and spatial symbolism intertwine to sustain moral and ritual coherence in the face of death. To be more specific, the act of scattering rice performs an intergenerational link, feeding the dead and assuring agricultural fecundity for the living.

Durkheimian analysis frames the procession and the collective acts (lifting the body, strewing rice) as public rites that renew social bonds. In the Durkheimian model, funerals dramatize the community's shared values and reaffirm membership in the collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1912/2008). For the Dangaura Tharu, public participation in carrying the body and contributing soil is not merely assistance; it is a ritualized assertion of communal solidarity and obligation. The distributed participation the neighbor who fills the grave, the relative who sprinkles rice manifests an enacted morality of mutual support.

Mourning Regimes: Dietary Restrictions and Temporal Structure

Mourning among the *Dangaura Tharu* is characterized by dietary restrictions and abstinence from oil, salt, meat, and fish, lasting for three, five, seven, or up to ten days of intensified ritual observance. The most elaborate sequence concludes with the *kriya* purification ritual performed on the tenth day for males and the ninth for females while rites for children and unmarried individuals are often abbreviated. From an interactionist

perspective, these dietary prohibitions shape the daily rhythm of grief and reinforce the social visibility of mourning. To abstain from particular foods is not merely a matter of personal discipline but a symbolic act that marks the mourner's altered social position. Through embodied practices of restraint, mourners communicate both sorrow and the pursuit of purification (Douglas, 1966). Similar food taboos are widespread in South Asia, where sensory aspects of certain foods especially oil, fish, and meat are deemed inauspicious during periods of death impurity (Fuller, 1992). What Fuller studied is very much relevant from a ritualistic point of view.

While Durkheim's functionalist perspective clarifies the temporal structure of mourning as a mechanism of social regulation. The fixed duration of mourning, culminating in communal purification, provides a controlled framework for grief, guiding individuals from emotional disruption toward social reintegration. The differentiation in purification days for males and females (tenth versus ninth) reveals gendered dimensions of ritual pollution and moral restoration. While numerically specific to Tharu tradition, these distinctions share Durkheim's broader insight that ritual temporality restores moral equilibrium and re-establishes collective order after the disorienting rupture of death.

Gendered Ritual Responsibilities: Eldest and Youngest Sons

One of the most striking features of *Dangaura* Tharu funerary practice is the assignment of ritual duty within the patrilineal family: the eldest son traditionally performs the *kriya* for a father's death, while the youngest son performs the mother's *kriya*. During the ritual period, the son fulfills his duties while living separately, eating restricted foods such as sugar rice, and carrying out the prescribed acts under close social observation.

This junction of obligations signals multiple social logics. First, it locates descent and ritual authority in sons consistent with patrilineal kinship patterns. Second, the differential assignment for mother's rites to the youngest son codifies a normative affective arrangement the mother's preferential connection to the youngest transforming familial emotion into ritual structure. From a symbolic interactionist view, these ritual assignments are not mere prescriptions; they are social acts that enact role expectations and produce identity both of the son whose duty marks him as ritually authoritative and of the household whose continuity is enacted through ceremonial performance.

Durkheim would interpret these role assignments as manifestations of collective representations about family order and the morality of lineage. The function of the rituals needs to ensure that the social system kinship lines, property succession, and moral obligations continue smoothly. The ritual performance by a named son publicizes and legitimates his new social position (for example, the eldest son as head after the father's death), thereby reducing uncertainty.

Ritual Specialists and Mediation of the Supernatural

Ritual specialists *guruwa* (shamans), *kesauka* (local ritual mediators), and Brahman priests play differentiated but overlapping roles in *Dangaura* Tharu funerary life. *Gurau* and *jimidar* are central to shamanic and local cultic dealings with ghosts and spirits; Brahman priests are involved where pan-Hindu rites are invoked. According to community accounts, if rites are incorrectly performed or delayed, spirits can return as *churaini* or other malevolent beings, requiring specialist intervention.

From the Durkheimian perspective, ritual specialists serve as institutional embodiments of authoritative collective conscience. Their ritual assertions and performances legitimize the moral order by aligning local practice to collective representations of what constitutes a properly performed funeral. Symbolic interactionism adds that specialists facilitate interpretive frames; they provide labels and narratives (For instance, “this grief is because of a propitiated ancestor”) that help community members make sense of misfortune and re-establish normality.

Purification Rites and Social Reintegration

The *kriya* purification on the ninth or tenth day marks the ritual climax, involving sacred bathing, *pinda* offerings, and recitations led by priests or elders. With this act, the household’s state of “pollution” ends, allowing the resumption of cooking and social contact. The ritual demonstrates the social function of re-establishing order through boundary restoration. As Mary Douglas (1966) argues, death disrupts symbolic boundaries and threatens social cohesion; purification rituals mend these ruptures and return the family to normative categories. From Durkheim’s perspective, the collective acknowledgment of purification renews the collective conscience and moral unity. The concluding rites transform personal grief into public affirmation, ensuring that both the deceased are properly honored and the household reintegrated into the moral and social fabric of the community.

Emotion, Memory, and Performance

While structural theories explain the macro functions of ritual, examining micro processes reveals how emotion and memory are shaped through performance. Laments, recollections, and ritual scripts socialize grief, while material objects such as the *kafan*, *khatiya*, *diyo*, and rice serve as mnemonic anchors that materialize remembrance. From a symbolic interactionist view, these objects act as signs whose meanings evolve through use the small *diyo*, for instance, gains power as a repeated symbol guiding the soul. Participants expressed that ritual performance helped “organize” grief by giving socially acceptable forms to public mourning and private reflection. Durkheimian theory clarifies that such routinization of grief sustains social solidarity, as the shared rhythm of rites offers a collective framework for expressing emotion and reaffirming moral unity within

the community.

Conclusion

To wrap up, the study shows that death among the *Dangaura Tharu* of Nepal is not only a biological end but a deeply social, moral, and spiritual transition. Through ethnographic observation and interpretive analysis grounded in structural theory and symbolic interactionism, the research demonstrates that Tharu death rituals integrate beliefs in ancestral continuity, purity, and collective harmony. The chronological acts body preparation, burial; mourning restrictions and purification function as mechanisms of social reintegration, reaffirming kinship order and moral values. Objects like the *khatiya*, *kafan*, *diyo*, and rice carry layered symbolic meanings that communicate grief, purity, and the passage of the soul. Gendered responsibilities and the centrality of ritual specialists highlight how ritual performance enacts hierarchy, emotion, and cosmological balance. As a whole, death rituals serve as a bridge between the living and the dead, binding the community through shared emotion, belief, and social duty.

The findings suggest that Tharu funerary practices represent cultural continuity, maintaining symbolic integrity in spite of modernization and migration. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative ethnographies to document ongoing transformations in Tharu death rituals under urbanization, ecological change, and economic mobility. Interdisciplinary studies connecting anthropology, sociology, and psychology could seek to understand how ritual adaptation influences collective healing and identity. Academically, further documentation and analysis of Tharu ritual language, songs, and sensory symbolism would enrich the field of South Asian ritual studies. Strengthening local ethnographic archives and community-based research collaborations is recommended to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and deepen understanding of death, emotion, and social continuity among Nepal's indigenous groups.

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