

Original article

## Rites-de-Passage and Healthcare Practices- A Study among the

### Totos

Rimi Dutta<sup>1\*</sup> and Subir Biswas<sup>2</sup>

---

#### ABSTRACT

India is a rich country in many ways. It has been retaining its traditional wisdom in one side and going ahead with the innovations, discovery, search and research on the other side. Being a sea of humanity, it carries forward legacy of civilized existence of numerous tribal communities with various shades of culture, political systems, subsistence pattern, dietary habits, dresses and indigenous medical beliefs and practices. These multicultural attributes/features help India to occupy a unique position in the tribal map of the world. The tribal population of India is also unseen to be the autochthonous people of the land, constituting 67.76 million (Census 2001) population form 8.08 percent of the total population of the country.

Each tribe of India has been bearing unique history and culture which have been source for instigating numerous scientific researches to explore traditional knowledge for assimilation those wisdom in global network of culture and civilization. Ethnographic description of lives, cultural belief and practices as well as behaviours of the tribal population approaches to understand the population holistically. Numerous studies indicate that the tribal are generally found as the staunch followers of traditionally laid down customs and practices which also dominantly determine their health care system, health seeking behaviour, concept of health and mode of treatment. As a part of traditional culture, the practiced rites and rituals are also interwoven in such a way with the social fabric of life that invariably establishes close link to the health issues and well being of the community people. Present paper will basically attempt to explore the practiced traditional life cycle related rites and rituals of the Toto community which are closely linked with the health issues of the studied population.

**Key words:** Tribal, health, life cycle, rituals.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Post Doctoral Fellow, ICSSR, Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University*  
(\*Corresponding author: rimi\_nbu@rediffmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> *Professor, Dept of Anthropology, West Bengal State University*

## INTRODUCTION

Rituals, originating as a belief in mystical powers have evolved into a vital component of the family life that transcends caste, class, culture and socio-economic levels. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) defined ritual 'as a prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or power. While defining the various categories of rituals, it has been described that the rituals performed on the occasion of biological crisis viz. birth, sexual maturity, reproduction and death are called crisis rituals. Hypothesizing the significance of rituals associated with the biological crisis to an individual's life, Arnord Van Gennep (1960) for the first time coined the expression 'rites-of-passage' or 'rites-de-passage' through which individuals are eased through difficulties of transition from one social role to another. Adding to one more step, Moore and Myerhoff (1979) stressed on the importance of recognizing the sacredness of the rituals specially maintaining the context of simple societies.

Every individual has to pass his own cycle of life through three distinct stages which seems to be universal irrespective of caste, class, clan, and sect/sept. Like the other, relatively isolated and autonomous tribe Toto have their own cultural system owing to the specific outlook towards social, cultural and religious life. They also recognize three crucial stages in life cycle viz. birth, marriage and death in their own way. Numbers of rituals and occasions are celebrated as part of their social and cultural life cantering the said crucial phases of life. Ceremonies related to birth and marriages are always connected to joy and happiness which give the community members some festive mood. On the other hand, incidence of death often challenges social solidarity and integrity of the community. To observe three distinct phases of lifecycle field survey was conducted among the studied tribe which also revealed how far the lifecycle related rituals are related with health issues and health hygiene concept of the concerned population.

Birth is acknowledged as the joy of pregnancy among the studied Toto population, although there is no pre birth ceremony observed. After birth there is no pollution period observed among the Totos. Mother and baby are kept little bit isolated but on the same house. *Madipapo* is the name giving ceremony and it is observed at the uneven number of day like

3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th or 13th day of birth. It has to be mentioned here that any type of animal sacrifice is strictly prohibited on the day of *Madipapo*. As per custom, the children are named after their grandparents though new name is adopted at the time of marriage. But now a day's relaxation is entertained regarding this rule. On the auspicious day of *Madipapo*, *paw* (i.e. priest) is invited by the family members in early morning breakfast. There is a strict reason behind giving the early morning invitation. The *paw* has to take fast on the day of *Madipapo*. So, the inviting family has to send invitation at early morning. At about 7a.m. *paw* comes and rituals are started. With the help of coating (wooden piece) and wooden stick a *tullike* structure is prepared which is called *changpi*. One full pot of *eu*(country liquor), 7 piece of *durbagrass*, *tanke* (one kind of herb), one piece of fresh turmeric, 7 piece of thread (made from *kapash*) are kept over *changpi*. The *paw* spins out all the seven threads together up to 7 times. The length of the thread must reach one and half feet. The threads are spines out like hair plating to make a wreath or garland like structure which is tied on the neck. The wreath is called *madi*. The *paw* performs some propitiation and prayer. The meaning of the prayer is that, from the day onwards the baby will be recognized by the name of "X" (X= name of the baby). Sun, moon, plants, earth are the spectators of this truth. With this prayer, rituals get conclusion. The priest sits the house and drinks a bowlful of liquor and then all the community members drink together. The child gets all the blessings from his community members. One point should be mentioned here that there was no distinction found between the male and female child regarding the rituals of *Madipapo*.

Another important occasion among the Totos is *Badilongwai*, the rice giving ceremony which must be celebrated before marriage irrespective of male and female. Without celebrating *Badilongwa* none can proceed for marriage. There is no fixed date for this celebration but generally celebrated between the age of 1 to 14. One red cock or one pig (weighted 5-6kg) is sacrificed according to the clan. On that auspicious day *paw* comes and sacrifice is done. Sacrifice is not made by him but his associates only. In case of pig the left portion is devoted to god at *changpitawa*. In case of hen/ cock feather and wings are removed before killing and butter is smeared over head and chest. Then the hen is sacrificed. One *eupot* is placed over *choitingat jiri* (i.e. *pujagharor* propitiation room). *Paw* spells the sacred text and prays to god that the boy or the girl should not face any difficulty in rest of his life. Then community feast is given by the family with that sacrificed animal. Special gift is given to *paw* and *Dhaima* (concerned mid wife) and both of them must take part on that feast.

The Totos are endogamous tribe and strictly follow clan exogamy. Marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. There are 13 numbers of clans and each clan is permitted to marry different clans. This equation is fixed. For example, *Dantrobei* can marry with *Bangobei*, *Dankobei*, *Nurinchankobei*, *Buddhubei* and *Boudhubei*. Some pairs of clans are considered fraternal; hence arrange between *Nubeibei* and *Manchingbei* or marriage between *Bangobei* and *lenkaijibei* cannot be executed. In this context one point should be mentioned here that marriage between two fraternal clans is possible only after seven generation. Cross cousin marriage of both type are preferred though parallel cousin marriage is strictly prohibited. Engagement or betrothal ceremony is the only premarital occasion. In the old days Toto boys and girls used to get married at very early age. At the preliminary stage, the parents talked to each other and the agreement was finalized with small feast in the bride's house. The girl was given new dress and meat by her in-law family every year in *Ongchu* festival (celebrated in rainy season) until she attained puberty. If she marries any other boy she has to give compensation to the previous boy. But now-a-days marriage rituals have gone through some changes. There are two type of marriages one is called *Tabobehao* and other one is *Tai paowa*. *Tabobehao* is also recognized as *DebaBehao* and *Tai paowa* is also known as *JipecoBehao*. *Tabobehao* or *DebaBehao* is the form of marriage among the Totos which is celebrated in one step; on the other hand *Tai paowa* or *Jipeco Behao* is the form of marriage which is celebrated in two steps. Now a day *Tabobehao* or *DebaBehao* is almost disappeared from Toto society and *Tai paowa* or *Jipeco Behao* is widely accepted form of marriage ritual. In first type of marriage, two of the close male relatives of groom (other than father) go to the bride's house with 2 two pitcher of *eu* but the groom does not come. After reaching bride's house *Bankoteowa* is celebrated over there. In *Bankoteowa*, two pitcher of *eu* is placed over *choiting* at *jiri* and the paw performs some incantation. The essential ingredients were turmeric, ginger, betel nut, *dhungchu* leaf, mustard oil and red colored thread. After completion of *Bankoteowa* the girl moves toward her in-law house. Two female relative of the bride must accompany her. All the rituals should be completed in the morning and the girl starts her journey. During this period relatives of the bride gather in bride's house and wait for invitation. Some male and female relatives of the groom's side come to the bride's house to give invitation. Then all the relatives of both side come to the groom's house. Rituals are performed by the paw and the newly married couple worships the deity by sacrificing a cock. Community feast is given. After that *Barapiwa* is celebrated in which father in law and son in

law get introduced with each other. Son in law gives one pot of crop and father in law gives him a pot of *eu*. After 3 days the new couple again visits to wife's house where small feast is given to close relatives. All the invitees bless the new couple in form of gifts or any other things. On the same day the couple comes back to their own house. Then the marriage is declared socially sanctioned. In case of *Tai paowaor JipecoBehao* marriage is celebrated in two steps. In first step, two close relatives of groom go to the bride's house with two pot of *eu* and a red fowl. If the bride's father accepts the proposal then *bankoteowa* is celebrated in the evening. Then the bride moves over to her husband's house. Then the newly married couple worships the family deity and the new name is given to the couple. Actual marriage ceremony is held at the second step after the wife is conceived. On the day as fixed by the bride's father, all members assemble in the house. Husband and wife come in the wife's house. They sit together amongst the gathering of village people. After propitiation priest offers a portion of beef to their highest deity *Senja*. Community feast is given which continues up to three days. Finally the marriage is socially, spiritually sanctioned and declared properly celebrated.

**Table-1: Consideration of Clans for Marriages**

<b>Name of the clans</b>	<b>Name of the clan with which marriage can be executed</b>	<b>Name of the clan with which marriage cannot be executed</b>
<i>Bangobei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Manchingbei, Pisichancobei</i>	<i>Nurinchancobei, Diringchancobei, and Bangobei</i>
<i>Budhubei</i>	<i>Dankobei, Bangobei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mankobei, Mantrobei, Manchingbei, Pisichancobei, Nurinchancobei, Diringchancobei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei</i>
<i>Dantrobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Dantrobei, Nurinchancobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei</i>	<i>Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Manchingbei, Pisichancobei, Diringchancobei, Dantrobei</i>
<i>Dankobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Dantrobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Manchingbei, Pisichancobei</i>	<i>Nuringchancobei, Diringchancobei, and Dankobei</i>
<i>Nuringchancobei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Manchingbei, Pisichancobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Nuringchancobei and Diringchancobei.</i>

<i>Baudhubei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Mangchingbei, Pisichancobei, Dirinchangkobei, Bangobei, Nuringchancobei.</i>	<i>Budhubei and Baudhubei</i>
<i>Lenkaijibei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Pisichancobei, Dirinchangkobei, Bangobei, Nurinchangkobei</i>	<i>Mangchingbei and Lenkaijibei</i>
<i>Nubeibei</i>	<i>Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Pisichancobei, Dirinchangkobei, Bangobei, Nurinchangkobei, Mangchingbei, Lenkaijibei.</i>	<i>Sub clans of Dantrobei only and Nubeibei</i>
<i>Mantrobei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Mankobei, Pisichancobei, Diringchankobei, Bangobei, Nuringchancobei, Manchingbei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei</i>	<i>Mantrobei</i>
<i>Mankobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Dankobei, Dantrobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Lenkaijibei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mangchingbei, Pisichancobei, Nuringchancobei, Diringchancobei</i>	<i>Mankobei</i>
<i>Mangchingbei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Dankobei, Dantrobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Pisichancobei, Nuringchancobei, Diringchancobei, Mankobei</i>	<i>Lenkaijibei, Mangchingbei</i>
<i>Pisichancobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Dantrobei, Baudhubei, Budhubei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Nuringchancobei, Diringchancobei, Lenkaijibei, Mangchingbei, Mankobei.</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Pisichancobei</i>
<i>Diringchankobei</i>	<i>Dantrobei, Dankobei, Budhubei, Baudhubei, Nubeibei, Mantrobei, Mankobei, Linkaijibei, Mangchingbei, Pisichancobei</i>	<i>Bangobei, Nuringchancobei and Diringchancobei</i>

Observing mortuary rites and rituals in association with the ancestral worship is observed in last phase of life cycle i.e. Death. The studied Toto villagers observe different types of rituals for the peaceful journey of a departed soul and for the purification of themselves. After death they do not change the cloth but wash with water and oil the body. In case of death of a couple, opposite sex put the oil on the body. A few clan members go to the nearby forest to procure wood and bamboo in order to construct a dug out on which the body is laid wrapped

in plantain of *Odla* leaves. Body is made purified by *Dhungchu* leaf. One clan member takes a straw from the roof of the deceased's hut and lit it. He waves it seven times for both male and female and throws away. Another party of the community members digs the grave in the clan ossuary according to the size of the wooden bed. Clan member will carry the dead body and no woman is allowed to accompany this funeral procession. At the burial ground the dead body should be placed with its head facing east direction. They put all the necessary items like gold, utensils, cloths etc used by the deceased person at the feet of the corp. the first soil is given by the eldest son. Two banana leaves, betel nuts are also offered in the grave. One point should be mentioned here that one who digs the grave must carry *eu* and fire on his hand. At the time of burring the body one elderly person comes in front of the body carrying a banana leaf on his hand and prays for the happy journey of the departed soul. A piece of bamboo of the size of dead is given to the wife of the deceased's husband or to the husband of the deceased's wife. The bamboo stick must be kept for a year. Those who accompany the funeral process they must purify themselves by hot water, *Dhungcu* leaves, ginger and fire. If the deceased person is male then the pollution period continues up to 6 days, on the other hand in case of female the pollution period continues up to 5 days. In case of a couple, the opposite sex has to perform the obsequies rites into two steps; first step is performed after 5 or 6 days. After one year, the bamboo stick which has been carried by the deceased's husband or wife is thrown away. The husband or wife has to take bath for purification. During this one year period they have to maintain certain rules and regulations. If the husband dies then the wife cannot wear any kind of ornament, cannot cut or oil her hair. On the other hand also the husband has to follow the same rule regarding the hair cutting. They cannot attain any propitious ceremony during this one year. Now a day, this taboo has been relaxed from one year to 12 days. In earlier days one calf was given in charity. But now this rule is generally not followed by most of the Toto villagers.

So, it is found that there are various rituals as well as occasions centering round the major phases of life cycles among the studied population. According to them and through the in depth study and analysis of the researcher it is found that the use of different types of ingredients in various occasions reflects the necessity of those things in daily life for better health and better preventive precaution of the studied people. Apart from that, they follow various special rite and rituals centering round the three major phases of life cycle which intern strengthen the social solidarity of the community.

The various articles used in all occasion and rituals can be categorized into two categories-

(1)Herbal Ingredients

(2)Auspicious Articles

The reason behind the uses of the above said articles or special things can be analyzed in the following way.

**Table-2: Herbal Ingredients used during Life Cycle Rituals**

Sl. No.	Name	Occasion	Main Reason
1	Turmeric	Birth, Marriage, Death	1. Antiseptic, can check microbial infection 2. For brightness and to glorify skin 3. Can absorb pain (with lime i.e. calcium carbonate)
2	Mustard oil	Birth and Death	1. By balancing moisture level, it can prevent skin roughness 2. Gives better result when mixed with turmeric
3	Betel Nut	Marriage	1. To increase taste of mouth 2. Helpful to give successful child birth
4	Betel leaf	Death	1. Good mouth freshener 2. Extract of young leaf is useful in stomach pain
5	Banana leaf	Marriage and Death	1. Gives protection from skin disease 2. Remedy from insect bite 3. Remedy from skin injury (particularly for burn cases)
6	<i>Dhungchuleaf</i>	Birth, Marriage, Death	1. Good antiseptic, can give protection from skin disease 2. Can prevent contamination 3. Good mosquito repellent
7	<i>Tanke/ Tenke</i>	Birth and Death	1. Good antiseptic 2. Very useful in curing pierce
8	Neem	Death	1. Antiseptic, can cure skin infection 2. Prevents contamination
9	<i>Durba/ Duba</i>	Birth	1. Twig part can check bleeding 2. Good appetite increaser
10	Ginger	Marriage and Death	1. Useful in curing cough and cold 2. Can be used as mouth freshener



**Table-3: Auspicious Articles used during Life Cycle Rituals**

Sl. No.	Name	Occasion	Main Reason
1	Bamboo pot and bamboo stick	Birth and Death	1. Anti-infectious and hygienic for consuming any kind of food and liquor 2. Protection from evil spirit 3. Easily available
2	Sacred thread (made from <i>kapash</i> )	Birth	1. Hygienic, cannot cause harm to new born
3	Use of fire	Death	1. To destroy surrounding germ 2. Use of fire with <i>Dhungchu</i> leaf is good antiseptic 3. Give protection from evil spirit
4	Hen, pig, cock, fowl	Birth, Marriage, Death	1. Source of high animal protein 2. Easily available
5	<i>Eu</i> (country liquor, made from <i>marua</i> )	Birth, Marriage, Death	1. Keep the body cool in summer 2. Used as an energy supplement

Above exclusive study on life cycle related rituals and traditional health care practices actually helps to unfold the concept of health and well being with all situation to religious and supernatural connotation based on their age old traditional practices. Long time cohabitations with the dominant Nepali Communities led to accultured numerous traits within their indigenous culture, which sometimes reshape the traditional one into a new form. In spite of that, the studied tribe has still retained in uniqueness and indigenolony which is reflected in their observed rituals and customs from birth to mortuary rites.

The study revealed that the concerned tribe has knowledge about the practical application of herbs and auspicious articles along with the supernatural connotations associated with the use of auspicious items like turmeric, *neem*, mustard oil etc are widespread among the studied tribe. It is not always true that all the studied villagers use these auspicious items after knowing the beneficiaries of those items. In one hand, many villagers use these auspicious ingredients as part of the practice of their traditional culture, on the other hand number of villagers are there who actually more or less aware about the basic beneficiaries of using turmeric, *neem*, *dhungchu*, mustard oil etc.

For example, turmeric is used in all the three major phases of life cycle viz. birth, marriage and death among the studied tribe. It is very useful for new born baby and new mother as it is a very good antiseptic. The same turmeric is used in marriage ceremony as it has very powerful skin glorying property. The protective and antimicrobial property of turmeric makes it as an essential ingredient at the time of funeral procession. The studied people have strong belief that the use of turmeric can avoid the attack of evil spirit. Daily cooking requirement mustard oil also has some herbal remedial feature; so there is a custom to use mustard oil in various occasions.

The widespread application of *dhungchu* and *neem* are also reported by the studied tribe. According to the villagers *dhungchu* is considered auspicious item but *neem* is not, although both of them carry similar type of beneficiary properties. The age old concept of close relation between *neem* and evil spirit may be the probable reason for not using it during auspicious occasions like birth, marriage. But in case of birth and marriage the basic beneficiary quality of *neem* is attained by using auspicious as well as antiseptic *dhungchu* leaf.

Apart from the thinking pattern of general people, some herbal medicine men added more conspicuous features to the above said auspicious items or special items. According to them, turmeric is very much reliable for curing liver disease, earthworm problem. The bitter taste of *neem* as well as *dhungchu* is protective and germ killer.

Apart from the use of special herbal and auspicious articles the studied tribe strictly follows some observances or rites which intern helps them to achieve good health. For example, bathing before special rituals is an age old tradition among the studied population for the purification of body, mind and soul. Keeping isolation of mother and new born baby is another important taboo associated with them. This particular taboo is useful for protection from various possible neonatal infections, at the same time new mother can get rest for at least some period of time which helps in early recovery.

It is noticed that related rituals of different phases of life cycle is linked with health issues and health status of studied population. It is recorded that the use of different types of herbal ingredients in different rituals reflected the necessity of those items in daily life for better health and hygiene. The above study about the occasion centering the life cycle of the people

unfolded the idea about the basic health concept of them and how they include the herbal remedies in their occasions also which can establishes the better way of living.

## REFERENCES

Moore SF and Myerhoff BG (1979) Secular Ritual, *Consortium for Educational Communication* 19(2): 82-83

Tamang Y and Tarafdar P (2014) Life Cycle Related Rituals and Traditional Health Care Practices Among the “Tamang” of Sikkim, India, *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal, 24 (1 & 2): 117-130

Tarafdar P (2007) Life Cycle Related Rituals and Health Care Practices Among the Santals and Kora of Jhargram, *Bullatin of the Cultural Research Institute*, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal, 23 (1): 49-53

Turner V (1967) *The Forest of symbols: Aspect of Ndembu rites*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Van Gennep A (1960) *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago