

## Culture and Human Thought

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**Abstract :** *Wherever people move they carry their cultures, customs and practices along with them. Even if they try to be conscious to be away from their existing culture, it erupts time and again in their behaviors. So culture is like an ice-berg (Hall, 1976); a minute part is visible in outside activities but a great part is there within personality. That great part is not seen from the outside world but it is the same part which makes a person completely different from others. In Quappe and Cantatore's opinion, it is like water for fish to swim (2007). And, in Sadler's words, culture is like jam. The less you have the more you spread it around (2003).*

*Here, this study is based on cases so in a sense it looks like a case study but it has brought forward the multiple cases in detail about death culture in Nepal. So, it is based on the real data available in different cultures in Nepal which one can see even today. A form; death is same but the functions; understanding and practices are different. Everyone is right in their own ground. No one has a right to defend against their understanding and practices. Their sole goal is to send the soul of a dead person to the haven with god. Thus, their destination is same for which they have caught different routes. And, these routes are not led by languages but by cultures.*

**Key words:** *Culture; Funeral; Practices; Cremate; Corpse; Procession etc.*

### Six Different Cases

#### Case 1

On the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2014, I attended a funeral ceremony of an important person Mr. Hari Thapa (name changed), the deputy chairperson of non-resident Nepali (NRN). He was a good businessman in Thailand. He had four dry food companies, three chemical fertilizer dealers and three restaurants in Thailand, plus two fertilizer dealers in Nepal and one restaurant in India.

He had left Nepal in 2006 in search of job in Thailand. He struggled there a lot and became a successful businessman in a short period of time. He married with a Thai girl and got two children from her. Every one of his family members and relatives knew that the husband and wife had sweet relationship and understanding but unexpectedly the husband got killed in his own office on the day the office was off. So, the dead body was brought to Nepal for funeral procession to cremate according to Hindu custom and culture.



The funeral procession was going on in Arayaghat of Pashupatinath Temple, the biggest and holiest temple of Hindu people. Every member of the family and relatives was crying, weeping and sobbing. The terrible condition of the mother, sisters and sisters-in-law was drawing everyone's attention on the one hand but on the other hand his wife was taking snaps of his dead body and that cremation process from different angles. There was no tear on her eyes, no sadness on her face and no worry on her thought that was reflected in her conversations too. She took several photos of the mother, sisters and others as well. Looking her activities in Arayaghat, it sounded as if she

was busy in Pooja, the worshipping ceremony of Hindu people.

After the cremation process, the family decided to go to Pokhara, at their own home for 13 days mourning procession. It is a Hindu culture to offer a tea and snacks for the participants of the funeral procession so before leaving Kathmandu, Hari's brother; Pratap Ji managed to offer tea or juice to the attendants. In Hindu culture, attendants do not take salt, meat, fish and other similar items for that day but the family members for thirteen days. So, we gathered in front of a bakery and started having juice or tea with a light snacks. But, Maria (name changed) the wife of Hari, started having potato chips.

Everyone saw and understood that she was from Thailand, and she was also not from Hindu community but at the same time she was the wife of Hari. Attendants expected at least, she would cry in the untimely demise of her husband. Similarly they had hoped she would ask her family members what she was supposed to do and what she was not, during the funeral procession. Neither did she ask anything to anyone nor did anybody spoke anything against her such activities. She did that all knowingly or unknowingly that was within her heart but my mind took it in different way.

After leaving Arayaghat of Pashupatinath, that event stroke my brain a lot time and again forcing me to think about human culture, thought, understanding and reality. Therefore, my heart knocked me continuously until I decided to learn more and write about it.

### Case 2

Three days after Hari's funeral, I again went to Arayaghat just to satisfy my passion where I found two different ways of funeral processions; one of Kathmandu Valley's Newar's procession and another was of Lama, a Buddha Guru's.

Twenty to thirty women with completely white uniform without any slippers on their feet in a single procession file crying and wailing in a very loud voice throwing grains, flowers and coins together (*tilo* in Nepali) were followed by a chorus group chanting a holy hymn ahead of corpus, the dead body. Following those wailing women, chorus and dead body, the attendants were walking quietly in their double procession lines.

Once they came to Arayaghat, all of them offered the last attendance with a piece of flower and vermilion powder along with a minute of silence. The women were continuously wailing and crying on their own pace even while offering the flowers.



The dead body got cremated by the sons putting the cremating torch (*Dagbati* in Nepali) on the mouth of that dead body then everything was settled. The women who were wailing and lamenting during funeral and cremation process started immediately talking, smiling and laughing each other (except some exceptional family members). The chorus was already over and some attendants had already dispersed. Some attendants followed sons and family members and went towards the house.

The next was the Lama's procession where there was no tear and lamentation in the eyes of the attendants. Other Lamas were singing hymns, playing

musical instruments like; gong, qing (large bell), gu (large drum) etc. and reading stanzas from Tripataka, the holist book of Buddha religion. Lama's dead body was kept openly on the temple like chair. Attendants were coming and offering flowers and *khadas* (scarf like cloth). None of the audience would know who the wife, sons and daughters were there in the mass. Everyone was in the same appearance. Rather surprisingly some of them were distributing and eating some special dishes like fruits, meats and beaten rice.



### Case 3

More than surprise and shock, these events created curiosities and enthusiasm within me to discover more about this funeral culture and human thought about death. So, I shared this information to one of my friends interestingly. He, then, invited me to his village to observe their funeral procession in Magdi district. They were Thakalis, one of the Buddhists. I could not attend the complete funeral procession but I participated in the mourning procession; the sons were in white uniform at the corner and a Thakali priest was playing a drum and chanting his mantras. At the same time eight or nine women in white uniform were wailing in the same pace. They were welling lyrically but there was no tear on their eyes. Such thing was happening generally in the morning and evening. At the day time the women were busy in household activities somewhere around their



houses but when the priest started chanting beating his drum, they would gather together and start wailing in a lyrical manner. More than just observation it was really worth mentioning to be known to others as well.

Speaking truly, it was really interesting for me so I asked the reason for crying without tears in their eyes to my friend. According to him, the women who were crying there were mostly their kiths and kens; sisters, daughters, nieces and others but sometimes if the people do not have any one to wail, they need to hire the women to wail in such a lyrical manner to convince the god to take his/her spirit to the heaven. And, the women should/must be from the Thakali

community- not from others in any cost.

**Case 4**

After spending seven days in Beni of Magdi district, my friend took me to Upper Mustang, the former kingdom of Mustang, of Mustang district one day in Jeep and the another day in horse. Our purpose to Upper Mustang was not to observe any cultural practices but to see the remote area of Nepal called the Area beyond Himalayas. But, luckily we got a chance to observe a very religious, cultural and rare practice of funeral procession; the Sky-burial.

Sky-burial is often practiced in upper Mustang and upper Dolpa by the Buddhists who are highly influenced from Tibetan culture of Tibetan mountains who believe in rebirth; once a person dies, his/her body is considered nothing more than an empty vessels that needs to be disposed of. Since the ground is often as hard as rock and wood and fire are precious resources, feeding nature's creatures is a practical choice. So, the corpus is placed on a mountain top and sliced open in various places and offered to the vultures. Offering the useless body for the nourishment for another living creature is a highly sacred practice according to them. If the vultures eat all the flesh, then that person is considered a highly religious and soft hearted person. And, he/she goes to the heaven easily and takes rebirth soon and comes to the earth with us immediately from different mother.

**Case 5**

After a long period of time, probably four months, I intended to see some more practices of funeral procession so intentionally I went to see the funeral procession of Muslim culture. It could be just a part of Muslim culture which I had witnessed. It was the Swyambhunath site of Kathmandu district where a large part of land was separated for funeral procession of Muslim people in Kathmandu. That day I was informed from a friend that a dead body was being brought soon from Ghantaghar Mosque of Kathmandu.

A dead body was in a wooden box ahead of attendants who were not crying but they were praying for Allah, the holy father of Muslim people. There was no more side talk but a continuous praying for god; '*inna lillahe wa inna wollaihe rajauna*'. I asked the meaning of that statement. One of them said, "Oh God! You sent him/her here and you are taking him/her back now. In the other way, it was yours, it is yours and it will be yours. So, please take care of him/her forgiving all the mistakes as a human if he/she had committed in the earth.

While reaching to the spot, the dead of burial i.e. a hole, was already prepared. The dead body that was in the coffin (box) got opened for attendants to see for the last time. The dead body was completely neat and clean and covered with a white clean cloth (*Kafan*). I heard, before bringing that body to the cemetery/grave, it was washed, oiled, massaged and clothed clean, and kept into the box to send to *Jannah* (Heaven). They said, while sending someone to heaven, we need to make them neat and clean.

Before putting the body into the burial they did *shahaadah* (a declaration of faith to Allah) together looking towards the sky. Then they put the coffin in to the burial and put soil together and returned. They came little farther and gathered together then have some snacks together. There was no bar of salt, sugar, chili and turmeric powder in Muslim culture, I heard. Even the meat, fish and drinks were allowed from first day onwards.



Knowingly and unknowingly I had observed Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim's funeral procession so, now I decided to attend one more funeral procession i.e. of Christian people. For this I had contact to a church in Lagankhel of Lalitpur district.

**Case 6**

One day the church invited me to attend the funeral procession and led to Lele of Lalitpur district where there was the grave of Christian people. The members of that church were all gathered together. A priest delivered a sermon from the Bible in the name of that person to the Christ then the attendants all prayed together in the name of heavenly father. The dead body got put into the burial and everyone buried together and put flowers upon that grave. Finally a sign of Christ (+) is made and placed upon it and all returned to their church at the same time. There was also no bar of any foods and fruits. But, a surprising thing I found is that the attendants were just the members of the church not the members of his/her family. I heard that the other family members were Hindus so they did not attend the funeral procession. And, they were somehow not allowed to attend there since they demanded that dead body to cremate.



Christians believe that any time the spirit may come back to the person so that the body should not be destroyed. Once a person is died his/her spirit is never spoilt. Human life is immortal. It is indestructible. And, it is always passing from one to another but sometimes it comes into the same body as well. They give the example of Jesus Christ.

Whether the dead body becomes alive again or not, whether the spirit comes back to the person or not, or, whether there is heaven or not after death, that is not my concern. I am, here, not looking at the dead people but the lives and lived experiences of the live people. How do the people, those who are alive, perceive death? What has played significant role to perceive such things in that particular way? I pondered a lot and remembered an interesting issue and theorize my thought in 'Culture and Thought'.

### Different Theories on Thought

#### Language Determines Thought

A popular linguist Edward Sapir (1958) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) have claimed that language is more than a means of communication. It influences our culture and thought process. In their Theory of Linguistic Reality (as cited in Alford, n. d.), they write that one's language shapes one's view of reality. Similarly, taking reference of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Key and Kempton (1984) put in writing, the way people think is strongly affected by their native language. And, the structure of language strongly influence or determine someone's world view. So language acts like a polarizing lens on a camera in filtering reality (Key & Kempton, 1984)

According to Sapir and Whorf people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently. Citing Whorf, it is mentioned in the Introduction to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (2007) also that, the language differences reflect differences in conceptual structure. So in their opinion (Whorf, 1940) the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which have to be organized largely by the linguistic system in our mind.

Whatever we think is reflected through language and what is expressed in language that is our thought. So advocating perception and expression as synonymous, Badhesha (2002) writes thought is dependent on language. And, language is a means to carry out thought in the open space in human life.

#### Culture Determines Thought

Human thoughts and activities are different according to their culture, custom, rituals and social interactions. While speaking a same language, they have been carrying different practices. According to McCloud (1993) it is their culture which makes such differences in human practices. Similarly there are Oyserman and Lee (2008) who argue in favor of cultures to influence the human thought but not exactly the language. Language is just a means to give and take ideas. According to them the individuals are seen as fundamentally connected and related through relationship and group members (p. 311). So the individuals raised in diverse cultures actually sense the world differently (yml, 2010). Therefore, the culture has a great effect on perception (ibid).

Different people of different culture wear different shoes and glasses so they feel and see a thing in different ways. Vygotsky (1958) focuses on community and culture and writes, culture provides structure, guidelines, expectations and rules to help people understand and interpret other's behavior. Community plays a crucial role in the process of meaning making. So, individual development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded. In his property, 'Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process' giving more emphasis on family environment Vygotsky (1978) opines, there is no question that human children are affected by the culture in which they grew up, and even more strongly affected by their family environment.

Comparing (not contrasting) Piaget's view of cognitive development; cognitive development is mostly universal across culture, with Vygotsky; cognitive development varies across cultures, McLeod (2007) inscribes strongly that memory in young children is limited by biological factors however, culture determines the type of memory strategy we develop. Again citing Piaget's opinion McLeod (2009) adds it by acting on their environment through assimilation and accommodation, human develop their first rational construct. Same type of opinion is found in Rosenbluth (2013). In Blogs Zion's Corner Rosenbluth writes, our thoughts are originated from outside of our bodies! The brain does not create our thought. So changing a thought is not an easy task in our life living in human community.

#### Foundations of Practices from Third Eyes

In Nepal, it is difference in funeral procession practices not because of language but because of culture and community. Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus in Nepal speak the same Nepali language. Many of them, regardless of their religions, castes and cultures, they speak Nepali language only but they practice things differently. They have their sets of cultures in their communities; accordingly they carry out into their practice. In the first case, Maria, the wife of Hari, took photos of her husband at Arayaghat. It does not mean that she did not have love towards her husband. She ate salty potato chips at the same day. It was not happened because of

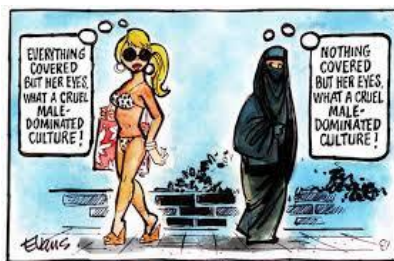
the lack of her knowledge in Nepali language. If she was willing to know she could have asked to her relatives as well but she did not do so. I accept, she would not understand Nepali language well. But, it is a fact that she has also become incomplete in absence of her husband. Now certainly it will be difficult for her to carry out these all the companies alone but there was no tear in her eyes. It was not her fault but it was the culture in which she was grown up where people may not disallow any foods at the time of death. Or, people may consider death as a general cycle. Or, she might have understood that no tear would work in that stage.

Similarly, in Newar's, Lama Buddha's, Thakali's and in the case of Upper Mustang I found completely different practices. They all fall under Buddhism by religion but they perform a same action in different ways. Their ultimate goal is to pass the spirit of the dead person to the heaven but the ways (practices) are different. These different ways of practices are called cultures here. 'Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.' (Tyler, 1870 as cited in Oatey, 2012).

I had read one story where a Muslim woman, almost all covered with burqa met an American woman, almost all open, on the way. Both looked at each other and interpreted them critically; "What a bad culture?"

Seeing the Muslim woman the American feels, the Muslim women are still under domination of men. They don't know what freedom is. So, their culture is brutal. On the other hand, the Muslim feels that what a brutal American society is. The women are kept almost all open. Why to expose the body which is to expose only to the special person? One anticipated that another's culture was completely male dominated. But what the actual reality were there, they were there only which both of them could not understand; just interpreted on their own.

In case of Muslim and Christian also in the above given cases, it was not the language and any other thing except culture in performing quite different ways from others. Muslims believe that the person needs to be neat and clean to enter into the kingdom of Allah. People should not cry at the time of demise because it was Allah who had sent him/her to the earth. Now, he likes to take him/her back to his kingdom so it should be taken just as Allah's wish. Allah loves and takes. Life is on his hand (Bukhari, Vol. 9, 'Umer, 633). No tear can stop him/her to die. So, no need to cry as well. This culture I found somehow matching to the funeral procession of Christian culture. In Christian culture also, there is no bar for any food after funeral procession. Just they pray time and again in the name of heavenly father for the rest in peace in of dead soul in the heaven. Life is taken just a journey. Once the journey is completed the person goes to the same place from where he/she had come (Monson, 2008).



### My Stance

As Nepal is a multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic country, I was also born and grown up in a rural area where more than 10 to 20 ethnic groups are living together. Some of them speak their own languages when they meet the people of the same ethnic group. But, some of them do not know how their languages are spoken. They speak common Nepali language as all Brahmin and Kshetri people speak. For example, Magars, Gurungs, Newars, Kumals, Thakalis and some other ethnic groups of Baglung District can rarely speak their own languages. They are monolinguals of Nepali Language like Brahmins and Kshetries but they practice their cultures and customs differently.

Especially the baptism, marriage and death cultures are different in each. When we talk about such variations they say 'it is because of their cultures'. Very often they involve in each others' cultural practices. They appreciate others' traditions as well but they do not go against their own cultures. Kshatries and Brahmins of that locality do not take meat, fish and salt for thirteen days if anyone from their relation is demised. But, Magars and Gurungs do not object for any types of foods if they like. In the same way, the Newars and Thakalis are stricter than Kshetris and Brahmins.

In a short, if we talk about the marriage culture, except Kshetris and Brahmins others (Magars, Gurungs, Newars, Kumals and some others) marry their (sisters') sons with their brother's daughters and daughters with sisters' sons. They argue that they their own reasons for doing that all but Kshetris and Brahmins do not accept that culture. If anyone keeps such types of relationship in blood relation or with his/her kiths and kin, he/she will be out not only from his/her family but also from society as well. But, they speak the same language; Nepali.

Therefore, in my opinion it is not because of their language they perform same thing in different ways in the same community but it is because of their cultures, customs and traditions. Speaking a same language they understand a particular thing differently. Their love, respect, religion, pain and pleasure are expressed in different ways. So I strongly support Piaget and Vygotsky along with their supporters who claim that the culture of particular group, society and ethnic group directly and indirectly effects in individuals' thought and practice.

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