

Article

Dimasa Rituals of Death and Mourning in Contemporary Assam

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Abstract: Deaths provide an important setting for Dimasas in Assam to engage in collective ritual performance. These rituals not only allow the people to affirm their identities, but also provide a space to create strategies to adapt to the changing urban landscape. This paper is an attempt to understand the shift in Dimasa death ritual processes in contemporary Assam. The essay has traced how people mobilize resources as a community to ensure the smooth journey of the deceased from this world to the afterlife, within the constraints of an urban environment. A small but critical part of this process is engaging in bodily techniques that recreate the unique cultural practices of *meser-moso* and collective grieving, called *grasimang*. By using ethnographic methods, the paper highlights the perseverance of the people as a functioning collective, and the meanings and symbols that are shared to ensure a successful ritual.

Keywords: Dimasa; death rituals; urban; ritual performance



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1. Introduction

For the Dimasas, death at an old, ripe age, after bearing children and seeing those children grow up, is the ideal scenario; With access to minimum health care, most can attain this goal today. Unless one dies of old age or serious illness, sudden deaths, however, are looked upon suspiciously. There are good deaths and there are bad ones. The implication of this is that the level of threat from bad deaths is much higher than good ones. Special care, therefore, must be taken to treat them differently. In the Dimasa society, however, death rituals are performed equally for everyone, i.e., it does not matter if the individual was morally bad or good, lazy, selfish, greedy, notorious, kind, etc., during their lifetime. As a society that maintains the stratification of age and gender, death becomes a reflection of how the deceased are treated in terms of this principle.

The present paper is primarily a study on death rituals and practitioners -the Dimasa community of Assam. The community as a context is important, because in a critical life event such as death, the response to an individual's death is, for the most part, determined by the nature of their social grouping. In the case of the Dimasas, this is their kinship network. The relationship between the local neighborhood/community and clanship, and the obligation towards one's ancestors, lies at the center of Dimasa death rituals and, like several other communities in the region, we also see the Dimasas slowly trying to fashion their cultural practices with forces of modernity and urbanization. It is in this context that the paper asks a broad question—what can rituals of death and mourning tell us about the lives of communities, particularly those that identify with clans and kinship network, in an urban setting? Urban spaces are heterogeneous spaces, that are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. With diminishing physical space for the dead, there have been accompanying changes in ritual processes. In such situations, events that require some degree of adherence to a specific set of cultural norms have to be strategically reformulated to ensure a successful completion. As it is not in the nature of humans to be a passive recipient of culture, we do not simply receive it and reproduce it—we also transform it and create new forms. An urban setting creates structural constraints which demand these

rituals to be performed under unique conditions; yet, at the same time, it also creates opportunities for the performers to mold part of their rituals according to such conditions, thereby breaking away from norms without the imposition of impending sanctions (Borer 2006; Kong 2012; Pascaru 2019; Bergmann and Schaflechner 2020).

Dimasa death rituals, from the time of cremation till the purification, can last for months. This “ritual journey”, i.e., the transition of the soul of the deceased to the afterlife, requires the constant engagement of the kins of the deceased, and a space to perform rituals of offering to the deceased every day. The Dimasa rituals of death take place, in equal part, both in the house of the deceased (a relatively private space) and in the communal cremation ground. For societies in transition, where geographical and social space is a space for contestations of multiple identities, rituals of death can be both disruptive to collective identity, and at the same time suggestive of new ways for identity affirmation. Relying mainly on ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, this study has been an attempt at understanding a core component of Dimasa culture in contemporary urban Assam, and the adjustments that have been made to ensure its continuity (Parry 1994; Maaker 2016; Lipset and Silverman 2016).

2. A Brief Note on the Dimasa Community in Assam

The Dimasa people, also known as the Dimasa Kachari, constitute an important tribal-ethnic community of Assam. They mainly inhabit the district of Dima Hasao, and are found in small numbers in parts of the Nagaon, KarbiAnglong and Cachar districts, and certain areas in the state of Nagaland (Bordoloi 1984; Barman 2014). The exact place from where they migrated to the valley of Assam is a matter of speculation. Barman (1992) speculates that the arrival of the much larger Kachari group was around 5000 years ago, leading to their settlement along the confluence of ‘Di-Louhi’ (Lohit) and ‘Tsang-Di’ (Tsang-Po). This knowledge, he claims, along with Kachari traditions through traditional narratives, has been passed down through generations by a clan, Zaun-thai¹ (Barman 1992, p. 15). Gaits (2013) mentioned that the meaning of Dimasa may be translated as children (-sa/basa) of the great river (Dima). It is thus widely believed that before the coming of the Ahoms, the Kacharis must have inhabited the banks of Brahmaputra and its various tributaries. Using etymological arguments, but basing the opinion on a more materialistic interpretation, Bathari (2017) added to this discussion on the history of the Dimasa dynasty, emphasizing the emergence of rice-cultivation, its links to the plains of Brahmaputra, archaeological evidence in Dimapur ruins and the technology used, thereby hinting at much older origins of the Dimasa kingdom. The architectural structures in Kasomari (Golaghat), Khaspur (Cachar), Dimapur (Nagaland), and Maibong (Dima Hasao), and the inscriptions and coins discovered there have, to a certain degree, helped in the reconstruction of this history. Lastly, it has also been argued that Dimasa is derived from the word Arikhidimasa, which translates to children of Arikhidima, who is believed to be one of the mythical creators of the Dimasa people.

Despite being a prominent dynasty in the Dhansiri valley, extending from the southern bank of Brahmaputra in Nagaon to upper Assam, the Dimasas have no written scripts, and the information on the history of migration (and the speculation around it) has been derived either from oral knowledge (folk songs, tales, etc.) for the most part, and from the Ahom chronicles of Buranjis. Folklores discuss the formation of the capital at Dimapur around 1086 C.E, until the defeat the hands of the Ahom in 1536 C.E. After the fall of Dimapur in 1536, the Dimasa king shifted his capital into the uninhabited hills on Dima Hasao, in Assam where, with time, a second Dimasa kingdom with its capital at Maibang, on the banks of the river Mahur, developed. Eventually, another attack on Maibang in 1706, by the Ahom king Rudra Singha and his allies, forced the Dimasa king Tamradhdvaj to shift his kingdom to the plains of the Barak Valley, now in the Cachar district of Assam, where the new capital was established in Khaspur near Silchar in 1750. After Govindachandra’s death, the kingdom was annexed by the British in 1832, thus marking the end of the dynasty in Cachar. Post independence in 1947, the Dimasas were classified as a separate tribe in

the 1961 census, and the 1971 the North Cachar Hills (now the Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council) was made into a district. The Dimasas are now constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Tribes (Hills) in Assam.

Central to the Dimasa social organization is their double-descent system of lineage, where both the matrilineal and patrilineal clans are exogamous. The matrilineal (julu/jadi) and patrilineal (sengphong) are said to number forty-two and forty, respectively. The society is patriarchal in nature, and clan identity is fixed and non-interchangeable for all socio-religious-political purposes and, to this day, clan membership determines a person's social roles in critical life events, to a large extent. All patrilineal clans are also grouped and tied to each other through their notion of sacred geography—an institution called the *daikho*. The entire Dimasa land was divided into several territories falling under the jurisdiction of a particular god (Ramirez 2006). Each of these territories is known as a *daikho*, twelve in number, which translates to an 'abode or sanctuary of god', and each are affiliated to a particular god who control/protect it, including the people who live there. The *daikho* is also a gendered space where women are not allowed, along with non-Dimasa.

In the course of the expansion of the Dimasa kingdom (and the subsequent migration of the people), the Dimasa kings began to gradually provide patronage to Brahmin priests and incorporated Hindu ideals into their way of life. This was solidified by the reign of Krishanchandra in 1773, who constructed several temples in Khaspur in the Cachar district of Assam. Thus, the impact of Brahmanical Hinduism cannot be underplayed. The initial phase of the coming of Hinduism strengthened the state formation. However, during its final hundred years, it is said that the royalty and aristocracy, having inducted themselves heavily into the Brahmanical order, grew distant and alienated from the masses, as well their traditional customs. Although the conversion to Hinduism brought about changes within the community, the Dimasas, by and large, have belief systems which are distinct and still very much prevalent. Today, a majority of the population follow a "mixture" of the traditional system and the Hindu religion. There is also a presence of Vaishnavism (for e.g., ISKCON), as well as Christianity among a small but growing segment, especially in Haflong. It is often argued that the Dimasas residing in Cachar have been Hinduised far more intensely than their counterparts elsewhere. This is reflected in their identity as 'Barman Kacharis'. However, what needs to be focused on are the traditional ideologies, beliefs and notions of cosmology that still retain an important position. The deities of the Dimasa pantheon are several in number, and with the incorporation of Hindu deities into the religious system, the functions of rituals (both indigenous and non-indigenous) and its observance have only increased.

3. The Experience of Death

The Dimasa cosmology is a two-part reality: the living world *habsao*, and the after world or land of the dead, *damra*. There is therefore no clear notion of heaven or hell, unlike the dominant religious systems, nor a 'centered' space or a single focal point, such as the Nordic 'Cosmic Tree'. There does exist a sense of 'sacred' geography, as seen from the discussion of *daikhos*, which connects the after world, earth, the gods, the spirits and society. This idea of *damra* is very important, as it plays a prominent role in death rituals. Of course, significant appropriation of Hindu practices has taken place, and the contemporary Dimasa practices have clearly incorporated some of these ideas and rituals.

The belief in the presence of the *beseh* (soul), which resides within all living individuals, could be the starting point of this account. When a person dies, the role of those alive is the transportation of the *beseh* to the *damra* (afterworld) as swiftly and smoothly as possible; all succeeding rituals have this one singular purpose, and despite there being several people performing several roles, they are all united by this end goal. Unlike childbirth, death has a strong influence to suspend mundane and daily activities. Therefore, it is only common that death rituals are more elaborate, performed with greater care, and with more utilized resources. As in most cultures, Dimasas also believe that failure to perform death rituals in an appropriate manner can bring shame on the people.

There is a widely accepted ritual model, but Dimasa death rituals are known to have small variations, similar to most cultures. There are, however, patterns to be found. For instance, upon death, the announcement is made by the family members to the rest of community, through whichever means possible. The first step, after the event of death, is to let people of the *raji*, and the neighboring *rajis* know about the death, so that people may come and participate in the activities. *Raji*, is a term used for village/neighborhood, and remains an essential representation of the community in the Dimasa society. Every *raji* has a village head called *khunang*, and the *raji* functions similarly to a neighborhood association, making decision on behalf of its members; in any 'life-crisis' events, the *raji* will either support (or at times oppose) the family, etc. *Rajis* are thus called upon for almost any activity, and can be used for mobilizing resources, if and when required. Haflong town has 14 (fourteen) *rajis* in total; Guwahati has 1 (one).

4. Confronting Death in the Community

The core arguments of this paper come from research performed in Guwahati and Haflong between 2013 and 2016, with two death rituals observed in Guwahati and two in Haflong. Both the towns are located in the state of Assam, in the northeast region of India. Guwahati is the center of administrative and business activities in North-East India, and Haflong is the headquarters of the hill district of Dima Hasao, located in the southern part of Assam. The first Dimasa family to set up residence in Guwahati happened in the 1950s, followed by the settling of few others over the next few decades. Today, as a migrant community, they number to approximately 700–1000 in the city, which include a mobile group such as students and young working individuals, and around 80–100 families. The Dimasa community in Guwahati comprises people who have come from various areas: Nagaon, Karbi Anglong, Cachar, Dima Hasao, and Nagaland. The Greater Guwahati Dimasa Association, headed by a *khunang* (politico-cultural head), constituted by the members of the community, functions as a formal body representing the interest of its members. What this has led to is the creation of a more diverse Dimasa identity, based on cultural components from the above region. The Haflong town became a part of the old Dimasa kingdom when the capital moved to Maibang in 1536. The Dimasa people constitute a dominant majority (demographically and in terms of visibility of culture) in Dima Hasao. Historically, one can trace and locate the assertion of their tribal identity (in post-independent India) here as well. This is significant to the study as it highlights the distinction between the two areas of study. Haflong and Dima Hasao, due their status as politico-administrative centers of a majority of the Dimasa population, hold an important place in the imagination of the community; Guwahati's importance lies in its ability to provide economic opportunities and independence.

In the case of Guwahati, both the deceased were kins (mother and daughter); thus, the setting for the rituals was the same household. The mother was a non-Dimasa who married into the community and, following the customs, converted to 'Dimasa' by accepting a new matriline and her husband's patriline. Her children (her daughter included) were thus considered to be Dimasas with membership into both matriline and patriline kin groups. It would be naïve to not point out that being born with a certain (respectable) status, and being married into a family with a similar reputation, can make the process of assimilation and acceptance on one end much easier. The Dimasa community, as mentioned, is highly endogamous in nature. Inter-community unions are not prescribed, and they come with sanctions that can range from mild gossip to long-term disassociation from the life of the community itself, depending on the 'other' community concerned. The daughter herself never married; her patriline when she died was thus the one she was born into. In Haflong, both the deceased were elderly men who died after dealing with long-term health conditions. Although one of them had been ailing for a long time from terminal illness, the other's death was gradual and was partly because of old age.

Typically, Dimasa deaths occur at home, with relatives already present, and thus the encounters and confrontation with death is direct. The experience of death itself therefore remains central to members of the community. Especially in Dimasa villages, children grow up seeing deaths, unless in case of accidents. However, this has altered in the case of urban households where a significant number of deaths occur outside the residences, such as in hospitals, etc. In the four cases followed and observed, all the deceased were going through different stages of illness, some more prolonged than the others; hospital deaths were therefore the common premise.

One of the informants in Guwahati informed me that the reason why death rituals are large affairs is because one does not need an invitation to be a part of it. It is a moment where people show solidarity without being asked. Death rituals and mortuary practices have always been viewed as prototypical rites of passage. The dilemma of dealing with the unpredictability of death requires a symbolization of some degree of continuity, i.e., engaging in imaginative forms of ways to transcend 'death'. In the Dimasa community, this is resolved through the concept previously mentioned—the existence of *damra*, the afterlife, and *beseh* (the soul) which reside with all living individuals and could be the starting point of this account. When a person dies, the role of those alive is the transportation of *beseh* to *damra* as swiftly and smoothly as possible; all succeeding rituals have that one singular purpose, and despite there being several people performing several roles, they are all united by this end goal.

In this section, I present a narrative of funeral practices, beginning with the preparation for death and the treatment of the deceased, followed by the cremation and the main feast at the end of pollution period. The description is not of a single case, rather a generalization of death rituals in urban Assam among the Dimasa community, with the aim of providing a coherent picture. Of course, in reality, there are variations depending on the geography and type of death, but the processes mentioned are mostly similar. The significance of the variations is also noted to show the similarity and difference between the rituals as performed in Guwahati, versus that in Haflong. The completion of Dimasa death rituals can take anytime between one to six months. There are rituals specific to events (such as the preparation of the body for cremation, final purification rituals, etc.), and there are daily routine rituals of offering food to the deceased until the end. The death and funerary rituals can be broadly classified into three parts: firstly, the preparation and performance of cremation rites; secondly, the preparation and performance of *jumangsho*; lastly, the *maimutharba*. There are several rites being performed simultaneously, and sometimes more than once, with each one being given a unique function and role. The reason, therefore, for the classification, is that over the entire duration: (a) these three events hold a special significance, demanding a collective effort that goes beyond just the involvement of the kins of the deceased; and (b) they are performed only once, and the dates for which are pre-fixed (aside from cremation). The classification therefore does not completely correspond to van Gennep's² classic three parts of the rites of separation, transition and incorporation, although all the stages are present in their own distinct forms within Dimasa death rites. In the succeeding rituals that follow the death of an individual, all members of the *raji*, including the kins of the dead, come together and perform various duties and roles. The most prominent role is that of the headman of the *raji*, *khunang* who distributes the work among other adults. As in most tribal societies, the *khunang* is not only a prominent ritual head, but also has an important role to play in matters of most social events, such as marriage and birth. However, there are other adults (unmarried, married and/or widowed) who assist in the performance of the entire ritual process.

The Dimasas cremate their dead. The male relatives of the deceased make arrangements for cremation, whereas the female relatives start the preparation for what the Dimasas term as *makhmgarba*, i.e. offering of the food. Since the *mangkhlongling*, the cremation ground, is a communal property, there is a process of 'buying' the ground called *mangkhlongrebma*, for the purpose of the cremating the dead, and occupying space for the construction of the repository, *thaire*, and the associated funerary rituals. The community members should

have a partial ownership, so the process may complete without any interruption. *Jom raja*, as a deity who brings death, is invoked, so that the petition (to buy) can be made. It is the *khunang* and the *hojai*, who offer *khaodi* (cowrie or small shells) as a mode of payment to *Jom raja* (god of the death) and *Sibarai* (a prominent male deity believed to be the ancestor) for safe passage to *damra* and from the earth, respectively. In Haflong, the Dimasas have a fixed location near the Kalibari Temple, located near Main Town for cremation purposes. All cremations are performed there, and the place is collectively maintained by the members of the community. Although there is no water source in the area, most of the arrangements are made beforehand, such as the gathering of firewood, etc., and symbolic purchase of the spot for cremation is still performed. Guwahati presents a different situation, since the community has no ground as such to call their own. Therefore, the cremations in the instance of the two cases were performed in a crematorium in the city located in the foothills of the Navagraha Hills in the Silpukhuri area. The entire ritual process of buying and chanting prior to cremation were forgone for practical purposes; as such, things were already taken care of in the towns, where the cremation grounds already had the pyre ready. The management of disposing of the bodies of the deceased, whether through cremation or burial, is no longer the responsibility of the families; authorities have mechanisms to deal with such situations which take into consideration the pressures of demographic changes. As a migrant community in Guwahati, this is certainly true for Dimasas, where services of GLP and Marwari Yuva Manch are used to carry the body of the deceased to the cremation ground. Instead of symbolic payment, the community now must make actual monetary payment for the use of space and its resources; the means (money) and the roles (the management of the cremation ground) which are secular in nature become crucial to attain (pre-dominantly) non-secular goals.

Back in the households of the deceased, preparations are undertaken to build the *dolai*, with bier made from bamboo to transport the body. This bier has to be constructed by men belonging to the patriclan of the deceased, who are brought in from their native villages or towns. While this is being done, the body of the deceased, the *mangathik*, is bathed, cleansed and clothed with fresh new clothes, according to the sex of the deceased, and laid upon the mat, covered, in the main hall/entrance room of the house with the feet facing the entrance, in the main room of the house, on the floor. This room is somewhat more public, and serves the purpose of letting the residents know what is happening outside as well. In all the cases observed, these rooms had direct access to the front yard. Drawing on Singh's (2016, pp. 29–30) arguments on death rites in Varanasi, the architectural significance of this main hall/entrance room as a public space can be highlighted as opposed to the "cooking, dining and retiring", which is a private part of the house. Elderly and adult women sit around it, while men usually sit or remain outside. It is important that one of the women should fan the dead constantly with the mulberry plant, while the others start engaging in *grasimang*, which will be further explained in detail. This is the first of the several emotional and embodied moments which is shared by those involved in the process. Depending on the time of the death, the Dimasas also engage in the activity of 'watching/guarding' the body of the deceased. This is known as *horkhamba* (hor = night, khamba = to sit), a way of keeping vigil in the olden days when wild animals were plenty in the vicinity, if the death were to occur at night and the body needed protection. The community does not believe in keeping the body overnight, but if it has to then a collective activity of protecting the body is performed.³ As death is considered polluting, visitors who make trip to the household before cremation generally undergo purification (spraying oneself with *tulsi* water) once they go home, to be free of all contamination of "dirt".

All the acts, such as the construction of the bier and the dressing and covering of the body of the deceased, follow a specific method wherein all the cutting, chopping, laying of the materials, dressing and covering is performed in what the Dimasas term as *meser*. *Meser* indicates an act of completing something in reverse, opposite, or turned upside down (Jahari 2010). The explanation for this lies in the traditional understanding of the *damra*. The *beseh*, in order to find peace and have no disruption in its existence, must be able to

travel from the physical, natural world of the living and move on to *damra*, where it will continue to live as it did in the natural, living world. The disjunction caused by death, wherein the *beseh* momentarily transforms into *simang*⁴, a state of being spirit or ghost-like, is dangerous and should be kept as short as possible. The belief is that, in the afterworld, *damra*, everything is *meser-moso*, i.e., it is in a state of topsy-turvy, and reversed. In order to ensure that the *beseh-simang* journeys to the unknown lands and finds a comfortable life, the preparations have to be made from the world of living, and have to be completed in a manner that reflects the topsy-turvy nature of *damra*. Anything in contrary to this will only result in the possibility of the spirit of the deceased in an eternal state of confusion and limbo. This must be avoided at all costs, for a confused and lost spirit can also be potentially malevolent. This *meser* technique emerges repeatedly until the last of rituals are performed (such as offering of the food with the left hand), and it can be safely be said that the notion of *damra* has a tremendous influence on the ways and techniques of the rituals, and can be considered as that one singular belief that binds and provides a sense of cohesion to the entire process. This physical technique that accompanies all rituals shows how bodily aspects are central to the integration of the members and their belief systems (Mellor and Shilling 2010). They organize people's dispositions such that it produces similar knowledge as well as goals.

Crucial to this process of transportation of the dead is the preparation, and the offering of the sacrificial food. Food is central to all cultures; therefore, it is only natural that food becomes a medium for rituals, and food rituals, a marker for taboos, and a sacred symbol (Fox 2014). There are three categories of *garba* that are performed here. First is *makhamgarba*, second is *simanggarba*, and third is *midogarba*. *Garba/gerba* denotes a form of ritual where the community worship together. *Makham* (cooked food) *garba* is the act of offering cooked food specifically to the deceased. *Simanggarba* is the food offered to the ancestors, whereas *mido* (cooked meat) *garba* is the offering of meat and rice beer to the gods and deities, usually at the altar of Sibarai. The women make preparations for both *makhamgarba* and *simanggarba*, i.e., they are exclusively prepared, and the feeding is performed by women, while the men make preparations for *midogarba*, i.e., feeding the gods. The food is also consumed by those who prepare them, i.e., women consume the food prepared for *simanggarba* and men consume that of *midogarba*. Eating is, thus, an important theme linking women's activities in death to those in ordinary life. Women, essentially, bear the responsibility of caring for the dead, just as they do for the living. The *makhamgarba* begins immediately before the cremation until the day of *maimutharba*, but *simanggarba* and *midogarba* is performed only on the day of *maimutharba*. Both in Guwahati as well as Haflong, the first *makhamgarba* before the cremation took place in the cremation ground itself, while the rest (which had to continue until the final event of *maimutharba*) were performed at the home of the deceased. The daily routine of offering food to the deceased in the vicinity of one's private space in Guwahati was done, as the access to cremation ground was no longer possible after the deed was complete. In Haflong, however, women from the *raji* would continue to go to the Kalibari for the daily offering.

As any death event, the moment of cremation is an emotional one for the family members, and before the burning of the body, the bereaved family mourn. However, it is also a ritual prescribed by customs, where members of the clan also engage in what is known as *grasimang* (*gra* = cry/weep; *simang* = spirit of the deceased/ancestors). *Grasimang* is not only an important ritual, but it is also the most explicit response to grief and death. One could equate it to a type of mourning where people weep, and lament in groups or individually. This 'performance' of mourning takes place before cremation, and then during *makhamgarba*. What should be added here is that *grasimang* is not just a simple weeping, but a kind of conversation that the weeper has directly with the deceased, unlike a eulogy. *Grasimang* typically takes the form of a mourning ballad, where the ancestors are invoked upon to help the deceased pass on to *damra* safely. Part of the ballad also has reference to the deeds of the deceased (Thaoson and Thaoson 2017, p. 48). The more formal aspects of it consist of laments, many of which are conversations with the dead. For instance:

Ningla Dambra thangka Lairidi himka,
 (You have departed for the other world, where the goddess has walked)
 Dambra thangkabo Lairidi himkabo
 (And even though have departed)
 Thikabo, ninikuribada dong kuribubi dong
 (Your family, brothers, sisters still live)
 Thikabo ning wainsoh maiya buji maiya
 (Yet you are not to remember them, worry about them)
 Ning githini githijing gathang nigathang.
 (You are no longer a part of this world,
 Let the dead be dead, and let the living live)

Here the speaker engages directly with the deceased, expressing their regrets, sadness and even gratitude. These are women, who are not professional mourners, but because of their experience have the ability both to control and to let go of their emotions and thus are engaged by the family members to mourn during *simang garba*. Most of these women are clan members or married to the clan members of the deceased, and are therefore kins by default. The fact that their emotions can be both “theatrical” and “natural”, is an indication that grief and sorrow can be stylized, and performed as the situation demands (Grimes 2007, p. 245). Most of the time, the *grasimang* is not as eloquent. In fact, the louder voices are usually simple, personal, and raw where all that is said is “. . . . Amai amai amai (oh mother . . . mother . . . mother . . .)” or “. . . . abai(father) . . .” or “. . . . adai(grandmother) . . .” or “. . . . aaju (grandfather)” repeatedly or some phrases that demand answers (e.g., why have you left us?). This lack of complex verses, replaced by free-flowing speech, creates an impassioned environment. The *grasimang*, thus, as a crucial component of the rituals, accompany all the major moments of the rituals. One can easily see how the participants become aware of their emotive practice; the dramatic practice is communicated and learned by the members in the form of bodily knowledge. Embodied ritualistic experience is the context for collective identity for the Dimasas, and to communicate to the dead and those alive.

After the fire is extinguished with water and ashes, the other remains are collected and thrown away in the river or stream by the family in a suitable time. In the case of Haflong, the Diyung river is where the remains are thrown. In Guwahati, the lack of communal space means that only the ashes are collected and disposed off as wished by the family members. Whatever is left of the charred bone from the *manggreng* and the charcoal remaining after cremation is collected. *Manggreng* is a combination of two words—*mangathik* (dead body) and *begreng* (bones). Thus, *manggreng* would signify the bones of the deceased post-cremation. This bone is the remains of the forehead, which is kept in a *phontho*, a container made out of bamboo and buried in the *jaara*, a small symbolic house which is tied to the tree near the *thaire* (Danda 1978). The construction and the use of the *jaara* is considered as an important aspect of the transition period of the spirit of the deceased. However, this aspect was missing in Guwahati, the reason being the difficulty in construction of the *jaara* and the skills required to do so, i.e., the lack of people to build it. Instead, the remains were put inside a container made on bamboo pole and buried in the *mangkhlong*. Usually, the area where the body was burned is transformed into an enclosure, and the men built a fencing around it. This enclosure is temporary and dismantled after the final *makhamgarba*, and it is here that the *jaara* and *mangkhlong* are placed. They are sacred spaces and represent the temporary resting place for the deceased before their final journey to the *damra*. In Guwahati, the *mangkhlong*, fashioned in the likeness of the actual site was constructed within the yard of the house, and it was there that the *manggreng*, which is the remains of the deceased, was buried. The *mangkhlong* is a conical-shaped structure, about two–three feet tall, which is constructed within the fencing. The skeleton of the structure is bamboo poles, covered by bamboo mat paneling and finished on top with cloth similar to *risa* (traditional Dimasa clothing). This is the temporary shelter for the spirit of the deceased until it is ready to move on to the other-side

(Jahari 2010, pp. 108, 149). It also acts as repository of sorts, where some of the ‘items’ such as clothes, combs, brushes, etc., used by the deceased when they were alive, are kept. These items, however, are made non-functional—they are twisted, broken and torn—before being offered, thus observing the meser-mosoh principle. The *garba* is performed here twice a day, morning and evening, for the next few days post-cremation, and once a day until the final rites. It becomes the responsibility of the family (and the community) to ensure that the deceased is sent off with sufficient belongings, thus ensuring a comfortable and content life in *damra*.

The second phase of funerary rituals is that of *jumangshao khainba*. This is held after a week, i.e., on the seventh day of the cremation. This event is for the *raji*; this is first time where the family formally invites the members of the community to discuss further plans of the funeral. The ceremony of *jumangshao* (ju = alcohol, mang = dead (body) and (shao = cremate), *khainba* (offering of some form of liquid for consumption) takes place; as the name suggests, there is offering of the rice beer to the men who assisted in cremating the body. However, the key component of the ceremony is the fixing of the date for the final rites. In Haflong, women (of the patri-clan and/or *raji*) accompanied by a few male members go to the *mangkhlong* on the day and perform *makhambarba*. After the completion of the *garba*, the members of the *raji*, the family and relatives, come and sit together to discuss the appropriate date for the final event. This is done keeping in mind, first, the time needed by the family to gather resources for *maimutharba*, and second, to make sure that the date coincides with a waning moon, and is again on the same day as the death of the deceased. Earlier, such a decision was determined by people’s ability to remember the seasons and the weather conditions, whereas today, the calendar is the main tool to determine the waning- waxing phases of the moon. While all elders give their input, it is the *khunang* who makes the final decision regarding the matter. *Jumangshao* is a fairly low-key affair. Haflong managed to gather a decent number of people, but in Guwahati, there were only about five to six men who had participated in these discussions. Not surprisingly, it was the men who decided on these matters, although it is not prescribed as mandatory according to the customs.

Maimutharba, (mai-paddy; *tharba*-purification) is the final event, and it is ideally held within two–three months from the day of the death. Although there are no rigid rules as to when the day should be observed, the constraint on the family of remaining polluted, i.e., *gushu*, until the purification is a crucial factor as to why people prefer to hold the ceremony at the earliest possibility. As death is so polluting, these rituals are mechanisms to refine the dead, thereby allowing the transformation of the soul into that of an ancestral spirit, who can be worshipped and invoked in the future. The morning of *maimutharba* begins with a condolence meet to pay respect to the deceased. The formality of this activity stands out in stark comparison to all other activities which are all marked by a distinct sense of mild chaos. Both in Guwahati and Haflong, the ritual was conducted in the front yard where the men mostly gathered in groups and sat. While this was completed, guests were fed, and this was called *mel* (meeting/function) *khamba* (to sit). Death by itself was bad, but Dimasa funerals were not completely devoid of good times as well. There were always people conversing with great energy, drinking, and joking, and casual conversations became an opportunity for people to catch up with each others’ lives. The abundance of food and alcohol meant, at some point, someone would be more than simply mourning. The people of the neighborhood, kins and the village have to be entertained with a grand feast of food and drinks, and it is usually believed that the entertainment of a larger number of the people at the death ceremony ensures the spirit of the deceased a more happy and prosperous life in the next birth.

Once the guests are fed and all preparations are complete, there is one final visit made to the *mangkhlong*, to pay the final respects to the deceased. Transportation, if needed, is arranged to take the family members and kins to the cremation ground. Those who have not been able to do so earlier, such as relatives who live far away, usually make a point to attend this. It is plain to see that this time *grasimang*, the mourning, is longer and louder.

During mourning (whether in the cremation ground or the front yard of the house), the living mourners and the deceased make up a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person.

After the completion of *garba*, the process of dismantling the *mangkhlong* begins; this is completed by the men who take the *mangkhlong* apart and burn it down. Few remain behind, while most of the visitors return to the resident of the deceased after someone from the *raji* sprinkles the visitors with *dither/dither* or holy water (di = water, thar = purified), 'purifying' the community and the family (Thaosen 1995, p. 258). Once people have returned home, preparations are made for *songikhoba* (songi = sickle and khoba = release), a social ritual where the family and the men who carry the bier and cremate the body negotiate the payment, due to the latter. Much of the conversation between the *hojai* (who speaks on behalf of the rest) and members of the household is symbolic. There are no expectations from these men for actual payment on the day. It is believed that carrying the body is a sacred job that demands gratitude and some token of appreciation. The *hojai* and few men involved in the process sit down with a family member and engage in a series of back-and-forth discussions, where the former express their gratitude for the services. The family member conveys their inability to repay the debt in the form of gold and silver and instead request the *hojai*, and the men to accept rice-beer as payment. The payment through *judima* is the standard mode of payment which is accepted by all. It is believed that carrying the body is a sacred job that demands gratitude and some token of appreciation. It is clear from the conversation that the *hojai* and the men represent the larger community: '*raji*'. It is the *raji* who provide labour, support and pitch in the management of the entire event. In Guwahati, for instance, young boys and girls who are in the city for their studies are also engaged by the students' association to assist with serving, and other work. *Songikhoba*, where any form of indebtedness is resolved, is a representation of the importance of community in a life-changing event.

The unavailability of clan members, especially experienced ones, can delay the start of the process. In Guwahati, situations like these are handled by relying on larger kinship networks across districts. Thus, the family members from Haflong arranged for patrilin members to be driven to Guwahati to construct the *thaire*, the bier and the *mangkhlong* at the shortest of notice. By the time the final event (*maimutharba*) arrives, more specialists, who also include clan members and *hojai*(s) are also brought in. Due to the presence of a large number of visitors and guests, and the number of multiple rituals and the feast that has to be completed in a single day, *maimutharba* truly becomes a space to observe communal cooperation. It needs to be mentioned that one can observe minor ritual variations especially in form of incorporation of events which are not indigenous to Dimasa oral traditions across the duration of mourning. Following the rules of (patri)clanship relations, meser-mosoh principles, and the purity–pollution demarcations are very important. However, the same mourning processes have also included an evening of singing *kirtans* (devotional songs typically about Lord Krishna) in the name of the deceased and even organizing a *sraadh* (a Hindu ceremony performed in honor of the deceased family member). The reason for this small variation is the inclusion of mainstream Hindu beliefs and practices into Dimasa practices. Dimasas, as a community, have been able to blend Hinduism with their own (borrowing deities and rituals into daily religious practices), thus allowing the community to construct a certain socio-cultural model that allows them to connect with the wider society, yet maintain continuity with the oral traditions. This has allowed for minor adjustments in rules of mortuary rituals, as long as they fall within the larger framework of accepted arrangements.

5. Management of Dead and the Living

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, at the center of all Dimasa death rituals is the relationship between the community/neighborhood (*raji*), and the larger kinship network tied together with ancestral worship. While conflicts may arise in the private

space of the family, the rituals are performed as a family, and there is a strong need to maintain a unified public image in order to protect the reputation of the deceased. The ritualized crying of *grasimang* is a clear depiction of social unity of the community, *raji* and kinship. Furthermore, the elaborate offering of food to ancestors on the final day of funerary rituals, and the daily routine of food to the deceased depict the important status of those long past. There is, therefore, a close interrelation between the dead and the living where the comfort of both are interdependent. Part of navigating this relationship requires an understanding of how the contemporary urban space is utilized by members of the community for the successful completion of the rituals. In the light of the demographic transition, the pressure on land-use for communal purpose, by a community that is a relative minority in terms of population, is clear. In Guwahati, there is acceptance of a public ground cremation ground which is not a 'Dimasa' communal ground as a space for such acts. The permanence of the cremation ground in Haflong is clearly missing in Guwahati, where the community members have to negotiate with an external party, i.e., non-Dimasa individuals in matters of disposal of the deceased. In Haflong, along with the family members, the *raji* (*khunang*, *hojai* and few other adult male members) play a dominant role in the matter of cremation. In contrast to Guwahati, all decision-making authority lies with them, procuring the necessary materials (wood, etc.) to construction all takes place within the community itself. There are distinct cultural shifts in the ritual journeys of the Dimasa people in Guwahati and their belief systems. However, at the same time, these same collective ritual performances also demarcate between those who can or cannot participate, displaying the persistence of their collective identity. It is in these moments that the members make a 'place' for themselves.

Death, in its most basic form, can be observed in the responses of the mourners or the bereaved to the death of their loved ones. In earlier years, people usually died at home and death was witnessed by the family; however, today, the hospitals have taken over⁵. From the observation of the mourning, it can be concluded that death leaves a rupture. Thus, there is a need to respond to it or confront it through questions, and through inquiries (Lipset and Silverman 2016, p. 235). It is very difficult to pinpoint when the mourning period ends, emotionally, to a person. Typically, integration back into the society and resuming normalcy is effective once *maimutharba* is completed. However, refraining from social events is, ultimately, a personal choice. Then, what about "working through" grief? Are the Dimasas expected to get over the grief within a certain period of time? The problem of managing the relationship between ritual form and that of feelings is persistent, but the relationship between death, emotion, and ritual is not straightforward. After all, grief cannot be ignored or denied; grieving is one way of acknowledging the notion that the dead are not forgotten and, more than that, the realization that those who mourn themselves are alive. However, when one engages in funerary rites, it does allow and facilitate a sense of grief in a manner which seems to be both personal as well as shared.

Contrary to Grimes' (2007) argument, protection of survivors is an important part of Dimasa death rituals. The realities of the Dimasas depict a commitment to urban ways of life, along with the need to accommodate how the members of the community deal with the distinction between sacred and profane. The urban setting is a reflection of the tension in a worldview that is in the process of transformation.

6. Conclusions

There is no single way to deal with death in private life, but as a community, such multiplicities are kept to a minimum, and the reason behind this, especially in Guwahati, is the presence of the same factors. Several factors are directly responsible for this: the fact that both the deaths occurred in the same household implies that the same family members and kin members influenced the process. This also meant that the decision making was largely a matter of the members of the community who had been present or close to the family for a significant period of time. They constitute the dominant voices in such rituals. These voices were gendered in both Haflong and Guwahati. This can be seen not just

through the management of the rituals, but in other social functions as well. Of course, to assume that women are passive would be highly inaccurate, as they play an important role in creating a safe passage to *damra* for the deceased. With no choice but to accommodate the demands of the urban environment, small changes are made in terms of the cremating process, etc. These changes, which are part of the community adapting to a city where they are a minority, are not of much hindrance to the larger sentiments of the people themselves. The preparation of death rituals is communal, interlinked with the values and meanings to the people. Death rituals in urban spaces have so far tried to hang on to the traditional method of performing. Funeral arrangements tend to be both a personal and communal affair, although the responsibility of ensuring that all the ritual specialists are available on time for the rituals falls mainly with the family and immediate kins, and there are several other roles that the larger community take care of at the request of the family. The concerns for transmitting cultural values to the coming generations, and displaying themselves as having an indigenous religious identity, appears as a motivation behind the collective ritual performance. Oral traditions have a flexibility that allows the members of the community to bend certain rules and act creatively. Whether people truly believe with certainty that these rituals influence the fate of the deceased is uncertain, but it is a chance nobody wants to take. Sharing these values, and displaying shared group behavior appropriate for a Dimasa mourning, definitely aids in grappling with the situation.

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Notes

- ¹ Zaun-thai/Zonthai/Jonthai is term used for Dimasa equivalent of a priest. Jonthais are responsible for the religious activities related to *daikhos*, or the shrines or abodes for different clan gods.
- ² Arnold van Gennep (1960, p. vii), highlights that when such events and activities are examined in terms of their order, it can be classified into three phases: separation, transition and incorporation.
- ³ Dalton (2016) in his work on Rawa mortuary rites of Papua & New Guinea describes a similar activity of watching the dead, in which the viewers watch to detect signs of life or effects of sorcery etc. However, the same cannot be implied for the Dimasas (p. 63).
- ⁴ While Singha (2010, p. 85); Thaosen (1995, p. 257) and Jahari (2010, p. 200), all define it as spirit of the dead, Thaosen and Thaosen (2017, p. 36) describe a “social function” of *simang jiba*, which is a feast offered in the name of forefathers by women folk during bushu before the public feast is held.
- ⁵ Singh (2016) makes a distinction between deaths at home versus deaths in the hospital. His emphasis on the nature of death as having corresponding effect on the response and reaction of the bereaved- death at home as always a surprise, leaving the bereaved unprepared-leaves questions of how people react to death in a controlled environment (such as hospitals) to be answered.

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