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**Original Article**

# Dances in the Name of the Dead: *Syarga* and *Ghyapri/Klepri* Rituals Among Gurungs



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## Abstract

Within the diversified and multicultural country like Nepal, there are many death rituals depending on the basis of their caste, religion, geographical area and their economic status. The Gurungs have their own kind of death rituals termed as Arghu (pae), in principle, appears to have similar purpose with the annual Shraddha as practices by the Brahmin-Chhetri and other people. The entitled research topic explores about the death rituals syarga and klepri dances to be performed differently during the pae. The ritual of Arghum among the Gurungs is a three-day event which includes the dancing rituals of Syarga and Klepri together with prayers and rituals that aim to send the deceased person's soul to heaven. Main purpose of this study is to find out how the Gurungs believe their death ritual by dancing and its soul connection to the deceased. The paper follows the interpretative approach to present the story of the special dances and rituals performed in the name of the dead by her/his relatives, friends and fellow villagers. This study was conducted among the Gurungs of Gorkha district. Seven death rituals were carried out for the field study where five klepri gurus and 5 syarga dancer was taken as respondent. My own participation in and observations of the ritual performances, and activities supplemented by my interview with elderly and knowledgeable people including ritual specialists has yielded the essential data needed to learn about how Gurung people understand human life and the relations between themselves and their deceased ancestors. Main finding of this study is dance in the name of deceased which believes that dance is one of the important part for human life and its fluctuations. As same like Gurung people believe that we can dance in the name of the dead which reminiscences the previous life where she/he belong to.

**Keywords:** *Gurung, death, deathrituals, pae, klepri, syarga*

## Prelude

'Death' means sad moment for all creatures as we remark it as a demise of

someone which never come back into the new form/previous form. Pignede (1966) stated that the Gurungs have their language, cultures, rites and

dresses with *rodi* as a major social institution. Among the different cultural rites, death ritual is one of the important ritual among the Gurungs. There is no dispute that Gurung people have different rituals regarding their life cycle. Their priests are *klepri*, *pachyu*, *lama* etc. Gurung people believe on the next birth and the worship on their deity for the goodness of their life. After deceased of any family member Gurung people organize *arghum/Pae* in the name of deceased by their offspring which brings an imagination of sending their parents into the realm of ancestor's called heaven. Death rituals heavily rely on the priests to make it happen as they do the recitations, the ceremonies and the rituals that are said to help take the soul where it needs to go.

Every community has its own kind of after death ritual beliefs as Gurung have. In the demise of their love one, everyone cries, becomes sad and mourns in the name of dead soul. The other kin group and communal group give sympathy to the bereaved family. As Van Gennep (1960) treats that death as one of a number of life cycle crisis which command ritual observance, next, a functional approach to explain mortuary ritual offered. The principle objective of this paper is to introduce

how Gurung people believe in dances of *klepri* and *syarga* in after death ritual ceremony. In this remarks, I try to interpret about the symbolic meaning of different dances of *syarga* and *klepri* in the name of deceased person.

Dances, in the sense, the fundamental objective of this article is to present what are the meaning of dances and the actions of dances performed by *klepri* and *syarga* group (dance group) in response to dead throughout these rituals. This article is centrally concerned with the dynamic aspects of death rituals and beliefs through the application of dances.

*Pae* is the death ritual conducted in the name of deceased. It depends on the economic status of the host family as they can organize three days and two nights (*dui-raate*) or one night and one day (*ek-raate*). After death ritual same as *shraddha* Hindu religious person and other follows as after death ritual *Pae/arghum* also a death ritual of Gurung people which is conducted in the name of deceased by their family members and other kin. *Pae* can do only in the time of odd months of the deceased. *Pae* can do together in one function from their own clan (13generation) of different family.

Gurung people believe that *Pae* has to be better done within a time of 49 days of passed date. Main assumption is if done in 49 days, the deceased soul will not transfer into the other creatures like ant, insect, grass etc. so that they do *Pae* after 13 days or within 49 days from the day of deceased. Some people do not make it within a year too just because of the economic crisis and abroad residence of their offspring. It is known that Gurung death ritual is made for three days ritual ceremony is very costly in economic aspect. Similarly, for the low economic status can do only for one night and one day ceremony called (*ek-raate*) arghum where only their kin are present and dance and other villagers are absent.

According to Turner (1975), culture is not power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions or processes causally attributed. *Pae* is also a kind of social event where kin, relatives, friends and other village fellows are taken as participants of the event. Death ritual of the Gurungs have divided into three days ceremony: *thalne* (starting day), *herne* (second day), *fukaune* (last day). Those days are organized a feast for all participants and villagers. In starting day, from the morning time, son-in-law (son-in-law

and brother-in-law) collects all the materials to make an oblation in the name of the dead and adorns it with the flower garlands, green pine leaves, different pictures of Lord Buddha making with the stand of asparagus and banana tree and *klepri* starts to recite their mantra to call the essence of deceased into the ritual performed area.

In second day, the dance groups called *selopati* organize a dance making a circle for whole day where firstly asked a name deceased and worship for his/her soul where *guruba* (a spiritual teacher) is main body of the group. This kind of dance can be made more groups in accordance with the wish of host family by inviting different *syarga* dance groups. Before the beginning of their dance, they call to *kiryaputri* (last rite) to worship the musical instruments like drum, a cymbal in the name of deceased person. In this ceremony, dance *guruba* asks for the permission of dances by calling the deceased name offering with some drops of alcohol which makes sacred to the playing instruments. In this task, offspring of deceased person provide some clothes for the instruments to cover and alcohol to the dancers as Gurung people take alcohol as a *sagun* (holy drink) in their rituals.

As Levi-Strauss (1958, 1969) remarks that scientific explanation does not consist, as we have been led to imagine in the reduction of complex to simple. Gurung death ritual is totally depended on the imaginary activities as they make an effigy as a body of dead soul and adorns with different clothes, flowers, different garlands of notes and flowers. Similarly, they give some food in the name of dead. The ritual ceremony of one night as mentioned above takes place to make simple in the sense of completing rituals but it mainly does not make satisfaction that much in local people's perception without different activities like dances of *klepri* and *syarga* the deceased soul may not be happily gone to the ancestor's house.

In the dances of *klepri* and *syarga* child of deceased person specially women lament differently according to their relationship with the deceased. Each lament demonstrates a specific kind of social relationship between the bereaved women and the dead person. There can be seen two kinds of dances; one is by *klepri* and another is by *selopati* (*syarga* dance group). *Klepri* dance is only danced by *klepris* and *syarga* is danced by the ordinary people under the instruction of a *guruba*. The host family invites them after consulting with their

*jyotish* (Gurung priest) called *jaisi* and give invitation to the *klepri*, *selopati* and all the relatives in the confirmed date. In the final day, offspring, relatives and village fellows gather in the ritual area to make them sacred by using cow-urine, pure water, yellow tika (made by sandal-wood), flowers etc. From the very first day of *arghum*, host family organizes feast and all participants eats in event area. If someone does not eat, the assumption is that the dead soul is in debt of those who do not eat there.

As a student of anthropology I always wanted to know and explore about different culture through the lens of anthropology. My area of interest is also to study about different rituals from different caste and ethnicity. Death ritual dance among the Gurung is performed since long but no studies have done yet on this topic through other scholars. It may help to other people to know about the Gurung death ritual dance and also will be helpful for the theoretical support for the other cultural studies.

## Methodology

Methodologically, this study has been implemented through the ethnographic

examination through my own participation, observation and interviews with the seniors. This study was conducted about the Gurung *syarga* dance and *klperi* ritual dance of Thalajung, Gorkha where can be found a typical Gurung people who speak more Gurung language and less common Nepali language. During the data collection period, language became a barrier due to the mixture of Gurung and Nepali languages in the *syarga* song and *klperi* mantras.

Ethnographic study helps to collect data in an empirical and descriptive way, which also helps in the in-depth study of a specific area. Death ritual study cannot be done during our desired times. Each part of the events must be observed and analyzed. For that, ethnographic study is the most important part. *Paes* are specially organized during the autumn and winter seasons. For this study, three *Paes* were observed during the data collection including as a respondents of two *guruba*, six dancers and three senior person of the dance group from the group of *syarga* team in Gorkha and Kathmandu district.

One *pae* in Gorkha and two *paes* in Kathmandu were taken as a *pae* sites

from the same *klepri* gurus and *syarga* team. Team *syarga* and *klepri* are permanent residents of Nepal. They participate in any *pae* of Gurung where they are invited. *Klepri* means a profession, so they live in any area of Nepal but gather in the same place where they are invited to perform death rituals.

Age group from 18 to the elder age any one can perform the *klepri* and *syarga* dance during the ceremony. They do not give any formal classes to teach their followers, but they learn through the practices during the ceremony. Once they become senior as well as perfect in their knowledge, *guruba* can chose according to their expertise by the previous *guruba* when he becomes unable to perform in desired locations.

Both dances have their own time to be performed. *Syarga* starts from the morning before sun rise and ends only after the sunset. *Klepri* dance performance depends on their activities done during the *pae*. Observation method and interview method helped to collect data even after the *pae* ritual. Some of the dancers stay for whole night after *pae*. They sing *dohori* song for whole night so I could ask few questions during that night too. Even in

tea time and break time also different questions were asked to the concerned person. I did some audio and video recordings and some field notes during the data collection which helped to transcribe and analyze data more easily.

## **Dances in the Name of the Dead**

Dances in the name of the dead are not mandatory in every death rituals. It depends on their territorial and cultural background. Some people do not invite for the *syarga* team but *klepri* dance is compulsory because *klepris* are gurus who perform death ritual as a priest. During their death ritual performance they do dance. According to *klepri* guru 'Chitra Bahadur Gurung 'being a *klepri* guru, we perform death ritual everywhere where we are invited and we should perform dance which is our ritual during the rituals. Dances during the rituals remind us our life when we used to entertain through the different situations and fluctuations. Dance helps us to remember only the good things of our life and it helps to dead soul to forget their family easily who are lamenting on the demise of their beloved one. In most of the part of dance, we remember the name of deceased and call their soul in the

performance area. Our dance helps to bring the deceased soul in the death ritual area so that we can connect the deceased soul and do some worship and other rituals for the deceased soul.

According to *Syarga guruba* Purna Bdr Gurung, dance is one of the important parts of human life which helps to forget the pain and helps to heal the wound to the bereaved family. *Syarga* dance starts before sunrise and ends only after sunset. In the morning before start dancing dance *guruba* do puja with fire camp, add some incents and take some pieces of clothes and alcohol from the deceased family in the name of dead soul. We believe that in that pieces of clothes, we put some ashes of incents and sprinkle some alcohol so that we call the deceased soul in that clothes and we put that clothes in our drums and cymbal. For whole day dance we sing song and dance in the name of deceased soul. This dance reminds our life from beginning to the ends.

### ***Klepri* Dance**

The picture in Figure 1 below explains the dances of *klepri* gurus during the *pae*. This is third dance performance. First dance is done at the first day of *pae* and second dance is done in the

morning time inside the room where the *klikhor* are kept. During this period, son in laws make effigy and keeps them a little bit far from the *pae* performing area. son in laws and *klepri* gurus calls the dead soul's near to his/her family

*Figure 1: Klepri Dance*



*Ghyabri/klepri* are priests of Gurung. They are very important in good and mostly in bad function of Gurung community. They are involved in funerary rituals and play *dhyangro* (drum) and large brass cymbals. The *klelpri* have no sacred literature, learning all prayers and rituals by spiritual teacher over several years. Their practice is largely in the realm of interpreting the supernatural. While their ritual language is also archaic, it is

more readily understood by practitioners and laity. They are also believed to communicate with spirits and local deities and are often employed by persons suffering illnesses or misfortunes to draw up horoscopes.

*Ghyabri/klehpri* also called upon to exorcise possessed people, perform mortuary rites, and appreciate ancestor worship. They wear their own kind of attire at the time of dancing which is made with blue color in background and



embroidered with different textures and patterns. Their headdress is made with the hard clothes patterned with Buddha's photos. The *Klepri* believe that the Buddha/bon religion is their ancestor's religion.

In *pae*, some village people, friend fellows come themselves and other kin groups and relatives, especially married daughters, have to be invited. The starting time of *klperi* dance normally starts in the morning time but it depends on the arrival of deceased soul's essence (*sime*). When the *klperi* get notice of the arrival of *sime*, they ask to every member who is praying in the room of *klperi* to go to take a guest (deceased soul) by dancing and carrying some *saguns*. Near to the deceased effigy where son-in-law covers that with *bakkhu* (a kind of shawl knitted by sheep wool) and make a bed cover called *radi*. Before going to take a guest son-in-law and *klperi* dances where son-in-law protects *klperi* to go to touch effigy and *klperi* calls the soul into the land. After dancing *klperi* and son-in-law, deceased offspring, kin and other relatives offer clothes, foods and garland on the effigy and spread messages to go finely into the heaven/ancestral home as ancestors have made a beautiful home in the

heaven for the deceased. Kin and offspring adorn the effigy based on sex/gender, and women lament differently according to their relationship with the deceased. Each lament demonstrates a specific kind of social kinship relationship between the bereaved woman and the deceased person.

### **Plah Kharaba**

It is a first dance between *klepri* and son-in-law inviting dead soul in to the world. In this moment, *klepri* dances with their mantra. In Gurung death ritual, use of sheep was very important and now people are slowly minimizing it just because of different circumstances. i.e. lack of resources. In previous period sheep was taken as a body of dead soul. With the song of *klepri* they call essence into the sheep and dance together with son-in-laws and brother-in-laws and host family specially offspring give food to the sheep. When the sheep eat some food *klepri* declares that essence is already into the sheep. At this time, offspring cries because of seeing dead soul as a sheep.

At midnight of the second day after completing *syarga* dance, *klepri* dance

starts with surrounding an oblation where participants are son-in-laws and *klepri*. This dance do not wrap in day time because *klepri* assumes that in Satya Yug there were a nine sun and nine moon which was created by a devil named *rawala* which ate all the offspring of people. Those sun and moon are inside that devil so son-in-law and *klepri* are just protecting an effigy from the devil and to send to the heaven. Son-in-law takes effigy on his hand and *klepri* takes a cymbal. It's about time of throwing *barakhi* which means last dance in the name of the dead. Son-in-law and *Klepri make an effigy happy by showing their dance, and after the dance, son-in-law, offspring, and klepri go to throw barakhi where homemade alcohol (3 paane) burns by fire under the roof of white cloth, making a stand of nigalo.* The *Klepri* prays mantra shows how Gurung people understand human life and the relations between themselves and their deceased ancestors.

The after death ritual is main ritual in Gurung culture. They do not believe much in pasni, chhewar and wedding. They do these things just in between family members but after death ritual is a compulsion program. As Gurung people think that human life is all the

mixture of happiness and sadness. In the ritual period, many people cries and laughs as well as dances which encounters about how human life have gone through. For deceased soul, to mesmerize previous life, *klperi* and *syarga* group plays a vital role to demonstrate how human life gone throughout different stages like eating, crying, wearing new clothes, dancing and throughout different activities.

Gennep (1960) interprets that to die is to depart the world of living and to enter the home of the ancestors. It is true that the deceased wife/husband cries and prays and like you go to the heaven and stay with your ancestors they have built a beautiful house there for you. In *klepri's* belief, the decease soul after funeral ceremony will be staying surrounding by ghosts until finishing death ritual '*Pae/arghum*'. When *arghum* starts in the very first day, *klepri* reads only their mantra by centralizing the name of deceased thanking to the deceased family. First day is only starting day so *klepri* do not dance just recite their mantra. In the second day, *klepri* starts dancing from the morning after some formal pray and mantra.

### Retrieving the *Dugra*

The effigy (*dugra*: the cone shaped clothed-decorates according to sex) is a representation of the individual who has passed away. In second day of the rituals, around the time of 10am they wear their attire and starts a dance called '*nautaal*' (nine style). In this dance, there is no mantra and songs, only dance and instrumental music of cymbals and drums which symbolizes to bring the deceased soul from the demons area which is called "calling essence". In this time, the effigy will be outside and *klepri* are inside. The *klepri* dancing inside asks power to their guru to separate the deceased soul from the demons and evils. In this *taal*, they fight with the demons by reciting their instrumental music and protects the deceased soul that continues with the combine dance of son-in-law and *klepri* in a one group where son-in-law in another group have to protect to go *klepri* near to the effigy. *Klepri* believes and assumes that at this dance phase, they called soul of deceased and effigy is the body of deceased and they try to protect from the evils through dancing and bringing deceased soul to his body. When *klepri* become able to cross the son-in-law group then *klepri* declares that deceased soul came with protection and without attacking by any evils.

Somewhat, *klepri* dances with laughter because he knows the winning to the demons and protected deceased soul and able to bring into the previous world where son-in-law covers the puppet by *bakkhu* and makes a stand on the *Radi*. *Radi* and *bakkhu* is holy clothes in Gurung culture. The effigy (made by bamboo splits) adorns in accordance with the gender of deceased soul by wearing different clothes and jewelries and covers it until *klepri* become able to bring his/her soul in to the real world. After entering into the area of effigy *klepri* sings a song:

*'Please come in to the real world,  
I am protecting you to come here from  
the devils,  
see you are looking so beautiful by  
wearing different jewelries and new  
clothes,  
your kin are here to meet you and  
lament you why you left this world,  
don't afraid with anything I am here to  
protect you please come with me'.*

After bringing his deceased soul then *klepri* tells by song to bring east so that you can see your face because effigy is faced into the east direction where sun rises. After bringing soul, the *klepri* goes to touch effigy and dances *nautaal* again touching his elbow on effigy

frequently where he declares that no demons are here to touch you because I have compounded you with the protection. In *nautaal*, *klepri* dances surrounding effigy, when they become able to cross the son-in-law's boundary he starts to protect effigy by dancing

and touching the effigy area by elbow respectively means protection from the demons.

## Syarga Dance

Figure 2: Syarga Dance



This photo was taken during the fieldwork in 2019. This big circle of men is a *syarga* dance. This dance starts from the sun rise and ends after sunset. Except short lunch and snacks breaks they perform dance for whole day by singing *syarga* song and playing musical instruments cymbal and drum.

It is believed that those musical instruments are played in odd number i.e. one cymbal and three drums.

*Syarga* is a cultural death ritual dance of Gurung people which to be performed under the instruction of *guruba*. Through this dance Gurung people

imagine that it gives peace to the dead soul for his/her transfer to the heaven (ancestral home) and ensures entrance into the new home called heaven with other ancestral souls through the singing song, beating drums, a large brass cymbal. Singers and musicians are from the own community. They don't have any special classes to teach the younger. They have their own traditional musical instruments, lyrics of the songs with beautiful rhythm and typical dance movement trained by participating in each death ritual event and following the elder's guidelines by watching and listening them while singing and playing instruments. This dance group is named as 'selopati' (group of dancers). Superficially, Gurung death ritual is taken as a different in type comparing with other caste and religion. In one hand, they mourn, cry and receive sympathy in the name of deceased and on the other hand they sing different song and dance for whole day approximately 14-15hrs making a large circle in the name of dead which called *syarga* dance. In this dance only *kiryaputri* (last rite) and deceased own offspring from same clans are not allowed to participate in dance but son-in-laws of deceased can dance a *syarga* and compulsory to dance with *klepri*

and other kin can dance together with *selopati*.

*Syarga* dance was taken as only a dance of men before 2057BS in study area. Later on, through the effect of globalization and equal participation concept it has become homogenous where men and women are equally participated. All actors/dancers wear their cultural attire. As Victor Turner () said, in the various ceremonies at death in commemoration and communion with the departed, and worship of ancestral ghosts, religious gives body and form to the saving beliefs. It comes true in Gurung people while the *syarga* team sing a song in the name of dead. Gurung people believe in the previous and next birth. Different styles of dances indicate about the life cycle which goes in different fluctuations. One of the most important and center of attraction of this dance is called 'jorimaya' (couple dance). In this dance, mainly a male and a female make a couple and dances between the circle of the dance group. In this dance, a particular song would be sang by alluring a couple and male says:

"*haa..haa..haa..haa..*  
*are you my couple or not?*"

*Love, If then I will adorn your head by  
flower'*

*and female replies in*

*"haa...haa..haa.haa..are you my couple  
or not,*

*love I don't need your flower".*

*Syarga* dance goes with different fluctuations like fast and slow motion, raising their leg ahead and behind, running ahead and turning back which defines about the fluctuations of entire human life as we experienced. These movements are for the purpose of rewinding deceased previous life's circle as they had fun, danced with his/her friends as same others did in their entire life. As a last dance performance of "*khukuri dance*", only four men in opposition plays drums and another person dances with knife, sings very vulgar words and dances by showing sword and knife. Main perception of this dance is to protect deceased soul from the ghost and evil spirits which may keep in their control instead of going to the heaven because sending soul to the heaven only after *klepri* performs fireworks at the end.

## Conclusion

*Klperi* and *syarga* dance defines the same meaning to send a deceased soul in to the realm of ancestor's home called heaven. Gurung people after the demise of their beloved one, the host family go to the *klepri* or *jaisi* home to check-out the proper performance day of *Pae/arghum* which is obligatory. On the performance time, the *lho*(twelve year cycle) of last rites shouldn't be running in the same year (*lhochalne*). *Klperi's* role in the *Pae* is three days work and *syarga* is only for the second day. On this day, *klperi* and *syarga* both pray and sing for the deceased soul to send to the ancestral home called heaven. Somewhere, both of them do together slow lamenting dances where they both attempt to make a deceased soul happy. In the context of Nepal, only Gurung people dance in death ritual and in global context those practices of dance is found in Romania also.

Songs and dances of both team belongs to the dead soul which tries to rewind dead soul's previous life and after completing different mantras and dances, they believe that the deceased soul will reach to the heaven and stay with ancestors. Culturally rich Gurung

people believe in spiritual power and mythical aspects. They believe that *Pae* is taken as the main function after life which may do the conception of epic world and emic world where our body and soul remains.

*Pae* is done in only one time after deceased. But somewhere, it is found that if that dead soul didn't go to the heaven (barakhi nagayeko) it has to be done again and again and if it does not go in three time, that should be kept by worshiping as *Bayu*. *Bayu* puja is done in Baisakh purnima. If there happened some unexpected accidents and bad things in the family, the host family and their kin organize *deuta basne* (bring a god into the ordinary people soul and that person is chosen by the previous dangre) program where the dead soul's deliverance to the heaven could be known.

*Syarga* in economic aspect is very costing and expensive in the sense of giving them transportation, lodging and fooding facility as well as their whole day remuneration for the far distance people as they do not have fixed remuneration. But in the same village and neighboring villages, they have

their own different normal rates. But actually both of them do not ask their fixed remuneration. Klperi takes their remuneration for their personal expenses and household title but *syarga* contributes for their community to make road, water tank, communal houses, social infrastructures etc. In study sites, there are many buildings and other constructions which are contributed by the *syarga* team.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there exists no potential conflict of interest.

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