FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Like other tribes of India, the Koches also observe some traditional festivals and ceremonies based on their folk customs. The important festivals and ceremonies are discussed below.

5.1. Seasonal Festivals and Agricultural Ceremonies:

The Koch communities are basically an agricultural community and usually they do not have any other occupation besides agriculture. Their crops are paddy (winter and summer) jute, mustard and pulses. They derive their cash income by selling surplus paddy, mustard and jute; the last two crops are mainly produced as cash crops. They cultivate their land with a plough which is common all over Eastern India and a pair of bullocks and buffaloes. Planting, harvesting and thrashing procedures are the same as in all over Assam. However, for housing paddy, mortar and pestle can be seen very frequently.
through husking lever is not rare. Ploughing a field is the duty to the males while in all other agricultural activities, females work side by side with the males. The agriculture calendar of the Koches is given below:

The Agricultural Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>March</strong></td>
<td>Ploughing for jute and ‘Aus’, Paddy, sowing of ‘Aus’ paddy towards the end of the period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May</strong></td>
<td>Preparation of seed beds for Sali paddy.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td>Towards the end of the period ploughing for Sali paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>July</strong></td>
<td>Transplantation of Sali paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Harvesting of Sus’ paddy and jute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Activity Details</td>
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<td>------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Ploughing for and sowing of mustard pulses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
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<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Harvesting of Sali paddy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Harvesting of mustard and pulses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Harvesting of mustard and pulses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the households possess land for cultivation. Those who possess own land cultivate it with the labour of the members of the household or by contract agricultural labourers, who are called 'Chakor' and work for a stipulated amount of paddy for the agricultural season. For such agricultural labourers, the agricultural season begins in the Hindu month *Baishakh* just before the ploughing begins for the major crop i.e. Sali paddy and ends in the month of *Magh* after the harvesting of Sali paddy is completed. Landless families cultivate others' land on share crop basis.
So, we see as the life of Koches is related with natural greenish environment, their celebration of festivals are also lively like the nature. During the months of June- July they work in the field. Women are actual workers to plant the sapling of the rice cultivation. They play ‘Hadel’ with their mud clad cloths. During rainy season, Koches celebrates ‘Hadel Gailaieny’ festival. Their Pidenmai (fasting) festival is celebrated gorgeously. It is the custom to offer fruits to the God, and after offering, they break their fasting.

They observe Amtichua, and during Amtichua, they do not work in the agricultural field. This festival is like that of Ambubachi observed by Hindus. On the ending day of Amti, they enjoy wine, meat and other kinds of fruits.

Another important festival called Kati Gasa is celebrated in the month of Kati (Oct/Nov). This festival is celebrated on the full moon night.

‘Pushna’ (Magh Bihu) is also observed by the Koch people. It is celebrated middle of the month of January and starts to take new rice after harvesting.
An important Koch national festival is Charmaga. This festival is started just after the full moon night. A group of village folk moves from village to village singing song. They also perform play based on ancient legends. The ancient legends folk song is as follows:

(Male and Female)—

O sana rania

Ningbara kasa sasa

Tinibara nini zata kasawa

Zingka kura chuaje lawaka kaiatoa

Wani heneken lingbara

Elao tarie dongna manchato

O dhon aia

O dhon guru murbbirong

Tinibara kasarong

Sarai akui sarai
Rasanabo nini kane gokzokbo

Sarai akni sarai

Taopha ra ra sekbazok

Elao muzaini saraichoto rarong

Ning sarai aia sarai awa

O sona rania.

**Male—**

Bakni khorong bakna dhon bakna

O aia bani chai on bakna

O aia tini bara

Aidi sikni chaiobo

Rawaimung lina bo aia lina

Bekekura kasa nokbo nere nakbo

Zanom doa bo doa aia doa

Nani sasa nibo lawa
Mati zoni rupar burang lama

Female—

Karabara doa bo doa O awa doa

O awa dungni chaion doa

Awawani aidi sikni karaabo

Rawai mung lit obo lito

Ningbara kasarong rasan muk park zagai

Surjowani soromaba doa de doa

Wen kundi muldizuba rasana mung

Mikimung khela mela

Hirai Jirai zorom doa bo doa

Tesebara Haria Bhuya zik saru doabo doa

Wenkundi Bhuya aba murphi aba

Bosot bati sat dine sat rati hal bowai toa botoa.
O' Golden Queen: We are all children of Koch. Today the Koches have not been able to remain on firm land like a frog falling inside a well. O' Darling! O' Mother! O' Elders! Wake up all Koches today. Wake-up slowly! Sun rays are falling on our bodies. Wake up slowly, wake up. The Taopha bird is calling; early down is showing itself. You have not yet wakened up from sleep. We have wakened up. O' Mother! O' Father.

**Male:** O' Darling! We will tell the story! O' mother! We will sing song of old days. We will depart from here after telling how the houses of the Koches, the house of men come into being. We are your unworthy children. We are begging word of silver from our mother.

**Female:** O' Father! There are words, here is a song telling about the old days of our children. We will depart from here after completing that song. We Koches were born of the Sun in the place called Rasan Mukprak. In that place a women named Mukdi had frolics with the Sun and Hirai and Jirai were born. They were married by Hairya Bhuya, the chief, who started to inhabit the land after ploughing. The land was ploughed for seven days and seven nights. The woman named Hirai went after taking cold cooked rice to her husband. There Shiva, the God was waiting under a Bel (wood apple) tree, taking the form of Bhuya. In that place Shiva, the God, had frolics with Hirai and Jirai. Such were the words about the old days of our children and thus we are going after answering your questions.
Pabuni Festival:

Pabuni is another seasonal festival of the Koches. "Pabun Shali' (Banyan tree) may be seen in every Koch village of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Pabun-Shali is nothing but a place of worship of traditional deities of the Koches. As other tribes of the North-Eastern India, the Koches have also rich in cultural heritage, as other tribes they love teasing and dancing and thereby try to enjoy life. In the past, even in dead ceremony there was a tradition to dance and sing.

In Baishakh month of the year, the tribes of the North-Eastern India celebrated their national festivals. The Assamese celebrate Bihu, the Mikirs Ali-Ai-Lingang, the Rabhas Baikhu, and so on. The Koches of Meghalaya celebrate their Pabuni festival which is their national festival in this first month (i.e., Baishakh) of the year. The Koches select their Pabun-Shali where lots of big trees are in existence and it must be at nearby of the village. There they place their deities as per importance. At present Pabun-Shali, we may find the following deities which are not common with the Hindus.
1. Pabuni:

The God of nature and love who is placed under a big banyan tree with decorated bamboo post. The Koches believed that he is the source of sunshine, moon light, rain, wind and everything that is natural as well as the instincts of love in human mind.

2. Other Deities of Pabun-Shali:

a)  *Bura Baush:* The great old God who travels only on the back of an elephant.

b)  *Shitull:* The Goddess who protects the villages from fatal deceases such as cholera, small pox, etc.

c)  *Katuli:* The Goddess of wisdom.

d)  *Lokhi Ame:* The Goddess of crops.

e)  *Chora Buri:* The Goddess of land.

f)  *Bangal Way:* The Goddess who protects the life.
All these Gods and Goddesses are worshiped in Pabuni festival and propitiated to give them all necessities that are needed in human life, for living. After taking Prasad (offering) of these Gods and Goddesses by the villagers, the young boys and girls and other aged men and women indulge themselves in singing and dancing in the evening. In this Pabuni dance the Koches use Mata-Dhaki (great drum) and Bangsi (Bamboo flute) and Mosikarong (buffalo horn) for their music. The contents of the Pabuni songs may be either prayer songs or love only.

As Pabuni is tribal festival of the Koches, no Brahmin is selected for the worshiping as worshiper is selected from among the villagers. He is called Deosi, one the Chathung Launi and one from Chelakder are selected to assist the Deosi, the main worshiper.

The Pabun-Shali is also called Baush-Shali. It may be observed that these deities are worshiped twice in a year. In conclusion, we may say that Pabuni festival is observed by the Koches for happy and prosperous New Year and Baush festival
for good harvesting for the year. The special phenomena of this festival are to offer Puja and oblation by a Deosi (Chatung Launi) and the Chelekder assistance). As soon as the ritual to the deities is over, group of Koch youth and damsel with traditional dresses and ornaments dances in around the deities beating mata Dhaki (big drum), Bangshi (bamboo fluit), Musi Korong (buffalo horn) for music.

3. Aaum Pabuni: It is observed by the Satparia section of the Koches. It is celebrated in the months of Jyaitha-Ashar (May-June) of the Bengali calendar year, when mangoes and jackfruits start ripening. According to their custom, the Satparia Koches can not take the taste of those fruits without performing the Aaum Pabuni Puja. This worship is performed inside the house. The place where the Goddess i.e. Aaum Pabuni is placed, 2-3 numbers of mangoes and Panpak thai (A kind of round and sour fruit) are to be hanged on the top of a piece of bamboo erected from the ground. In front of (outside the room) the house, dao, knife, axe, plough, sickle, etc. are kept together and, here also, 2-3 nos. of mangoes and Panpak thai are
hanged on top of a piece of bamboo erected from the ground. Rice, banana, sweets and wine are used as offerings to the Goddess. No animals are sacrificed in this worship. After taking *Prasad* of this Goddess by the participants, they indulge themselves in singing and dancing. They also take fish, meat and wine, but the fish or meat is to be cooked without oil i.e. boiled.
5.2. Ceremonies of the Koches:

1. Birth Ceremony:

Life is full of transitions in cycle order. Birth is the first crucial transition of the human being. All sorts of rites, ceremonies, observances, taboos etc., associated with childbirth are rites de passage. Although the Koches are matrilineal and matriarchal there is no hard and fast rule like the Garos and the Khasis that in all cases a boy must go to his in-laws house. The women are treated with respect in Koch society. In most groups Koch daughters inherited the property. They are consulted in family matters. They play an important role in social and religious activities. It is natural that every woman desires to have child after her marriage. In the Koch society it is generally seen that a Koch woman prefers to get a female child rather than a male child because of the facts mentioned above. Hence, daughters are more desirable to the Koch parents than sons.

(a) Pregnancy: Life begins with conception and conception produces pregnancy. Pregnancy is foreshadowing of
birth. Every mother-in-law of married woman of the Koch society naturally becomes happy while she comes to learn about the first pregnancy of her daughter-in-law. There are special rites or ceremonies connected with the pregnancy in the Koch society like the non-Koch people of Assamese Hindu society. The Koches are well known for their rigid customary laws. The expectant mother works in the field, carries water from well or hereby spring and performs all household works. But a pregnant woman and her husband have to observe certain taboos. Due to pre-delivery restrictions the expectant mother is not allowed to leave the house from dusk to dawn and is forbidden to visit any house where death has occurred. Her husband is not allowed to join any funeral procession. They have to abstain from killing any birds and animals. If they disobey these taboos, it is common belief that delivery of child will be complicated and delayed and dead child may also be delivered.

(b) Birth rite: A pregnant woman of the Koch society
expects that a separate room for the birth of the child is kept ready and, it is in this room in presence of the local midwife the delivery takes place. A bed specially prepared for the purpose of delivery with thatch is used by woman. Under the bed a piece of iron or a knife is kept so that neither the mother nor the new born child could be harmed by any evil spirit. After birth a drop of honey is poured into the tongue of the child. Prior to this, the tongue of child is cleaned with a tip of hair of the mother.

(c) Purification ceremony: Virtually all societies do isolate mother and child from periods of time varying from a few days to several months. The purification ceremony is observed by the Koches after a few days of new born child which depends on sex. Various rites are performed relating to the purification ceremony. In case of male child, the purification ceremony is performed by the Koches on the seventh day and, for a female child, it is on the fifth day from the day of the birth. At the time of purification ceremony the hair of a child is
ceremonially cut. It is called as *janam suwa peluwa* (first cutting hair). Then the baby is sprinkled with holy water, mixed with *duwari* (a kind of grass), a few holy basil leaves and a ring of gold. After the ceremony, the blessings of the village elders are sought. The ceremony ends with refreshments.

*(d) Name giving ceremony:* Naming incidentally, is a universal human practice. It symbolizes the individual's personality and often indicates some aspects of his social status. If the name is ceremonially bestowed, this is usually done by a nearest relative; otherwise, the most common practice is for the mother to decide what her child is to be called. Names that are associated with good luck or great deeds tend generally to be preferred.

Name giving ceremony is observed by the Koches after few months of new born child. It is observed by the Koches that the formal names of the children are chosen and often given by the parents at the time of name giving ceremony, called *namakaran,* consulting
with the village priest. For this ceremony, the relatives and the village elders are invited. On this occasion a grand feast is arranged.

(e) Adoption in the Koch society: Naturally every couple desires to have children. The custom of adopting a child by a childless couple is very widespread all over the world. (Adoption may sometimes be resorted to even when a couple or an individual is not childless). The system of adoption is prevalent among the Koches. If the couple is childless and has no hope of having the child in the predictable future, then the question of adoption comes. Children who are orphans or whose parents are not able to maintain them are generally adopted either by some related persons or even by absolute strangers. The adopted children are treated as full members of the family. They wealthy persons who have no issue at all adopt the child of others with the purpose of preserving their properties after their death. In a Koch family where there are both boys and girls, only the male children can inherit the property of the
father. The female child is not entitled to inherit the property. But if a female child is adopted by a couple having no child of their own at all, then she can inherit the property of her foster father after his death. On the other hand, in the absence of male heirs in a family a daughter is entitled to inherit the property of her father.

2. Marriage Ceremony:

Among the Koch, endogamy system of marriage is prevalent. The age of marriage for the girls and boys is between fourteen and seventeen and twenty and twenty five respectively. Marriage by negotiation is preferred. Marriage by elopement and by courtship is also not infrequent. They are monogamous people. Polygamy is rarely seen. There is a system of paying both bride price (Bonpon), and groom price (Jamaipon). The bride price ranges from Rs. 39.00 to Rs. 69.00 and, groom price from Rs. 80.00 to Rs. 200.00. The Wanang Koch prefers agricultural land rather than money for both bride price and groom price. In many cases wrist watches and transistors are demanded as dowry.
There are two types of marriage among the traditional Koch society. One is known as Bia and other Hadidabaiya. The term Bia (Marriage) is of Sanskrit origin. It is not known whether the Koches had any term to mean marriage in their own language. The other word Hadidabaiya literary means breaking of matrimonial offence. It is a compound term of the words, ‘Hadi’ means matrimonial offence and ‘dabaiya’ means to break. Under the Koch custom there cannot be any relationship between a male and a female unless married. So, if any body does it, he commits an offence and is liable to be excommunicated. These offences are incest, premarital sex act, touching of any girl or touching the forbidden parts of her body, whether with her consent or connivance or not.

If any body commits such offences, the society excommunicates the offenders and, in some cases, even their parents are not spared. To save themselves form such odds, the parents of the girls summon the villagers and take social approval by declaring the guilty couple as wife and husband if the pair is marriageable degree. The Hadidabaiya form of marriage seems to have come from such origin. In the present
day system the boys and the girls need not commit any such
offence and it could be a regular marriage after negotiation.
The Koches of Garo Hills resort to this type of marriage
(Hadidabaiya) because it is simple and less expensive.

In the Hadidabaiya form of marriage, after the
negotiations were complete, the parties fix a date. On the
appointed day the groom either alone or with friends goes to
the house of bride. In the meantime, the parent of the bride
extends formal invitation to the people of their village. The
attending villagers take their seat in the courtyard under the
open sky who are served with betel nut and Ct or C, a home
brewed liquor, now a days tea. As soon as the arrival of the
villagers completed, one of the village elders ask for the reason
for summoning them (though every body knows it). The
guardians or parents then tell them the occasion. When they
come to know occasion ceremony, the next question is asked
to the bride-groom as to whether they have their consents.
Answers are generally affirmative and, as soon as the villagers
get the answer, marriage is over. If prior arrangement is for
uxrilocal residence, the groom remains in the girl's house. If the
arrangement is very local, the bride goes to her husband’s house. There is a custom of examining the entrails of the fowls among Anang (Wanang) Koch, in a Bia form of marriage, but not in the Hadidabaiya form of marriage.

Marriage initiations among the Koches are done according to necessity. Although the Koches are matrilineal, there is no hard and fast rule like Garos and the Khasis that in all cases a boy must go to his in-laws house. The Koches are agriculturist people. So, one of the guiding principles of the Koch marriage apart from procreation, is the requirement of helping hand. A marriage proposal accordingly goes from the needy party. If the proposal is accepted in the Bia form of marriage, date is fixed on which the party seeking to bring the in-law, goes to the house of such proposal in-law parents with betel nut for final settlement of the marriage. This is called Guigasha’a. Guigasha’a is a very important pre-marriage ceremony. ‘Gui’ means betel nut and ‘Gasha’ means to feed i.e. feeding betel nut. In between, there are no other ceremonies until marriage comes. In the Koch society, there
are both bride as well as groom price which is called *Gadhan*. This price is generally paid to the parents of the incoming in-laws. So, in the Koch custom there is paid no fixed person or sex who is entitled to the price. The price is paid because the parents who send out their son or daughter deprived of their earnings. The price also varies from almost nothing to Rs. 300.00 to Rs. 400.00.

The Koch marriage is performed inside the main house. The performance of the marriage lasts for two days and all the 18 Jukus i.e. entire clan people of the society are to be invited. While Hadidabaiya marriage is performed without priest the Bia form of marriage is presided over by the Ajeng.

In this form of marriage grooms party is to face a trial of strength in a mock fight arranged about a furlong away or so from the house or village of the bride. On the marriage day a long bamboo is put across the road. The relatives and guests of the bride remain there to receive the bridegroom. As soon as they arrive they are welcomed by challenge to show their mettle where upon the people from both sides take bamboo
pole on their shoulder and push against each other. Perhaps the bride’s party ultimately yields or suffers defeat otherwise according to the custom the bridegroom can not come to the bride’s house. This is called ‘Killa Lucka’, i.e. fight of the Killa or fort. After this killa fight the groom’s party comes to the house of the bride. The groom is then taken inside the house after ceremonial reception. He is accompanied by his friends and Airaks. The main houses of the traditional Koches consist of two rooms. The inner compartment is called dabon nok. The bride and the bridegroom sit in a selected place inside the main house where Batika fish heads two garchi, a kind of earthen pot, one contains full of water the other full of wine are placed. The Ajeng with the help of Matak, his assistant performs the marriage, by chanting mantras in Koch language which is as follows:

“O’ Rasan nak, O’ Rongret nak

Chaifai narang tining

Penem dong hecha dong
Ghughu jor Ganda Faiarka jor Ganda

(Name of the pair) Jora Laota tining^2

That is, O' sun, O' moon, you come and see whether (properly) matched or not like the pair of doves and bride's (we are making so and so) a pair. Then fowls (seven in number) are killed by pressing the throat by the Matak and the Ajeng examines their entail. Koch marriage admits divorce and one of social contract and not sacrament.

Like the Hadidabaiya marriage if the prior arrangement is for resident-son-in-law, the groom remains in his wife's house and if resident daughter-in-law then the day after the marriage both the bride and the bridegroom go away along with the party to the groom's house. After eight days there is a Gharphira ceremony. Both the couple goes to the house of the one who has come to the other's house leaving his or her house. In some cases if the arrangement is for daughter-in-law resident,

marriage takes place in the house of bridegroom.  

A widow or widower can remarry as many times as one likes but there is a taboo period. This is a kind of marriage bond seems to be the influence of their two neighbours the Garo Akim and the Khasi Jing. But Koch bar to remarry is more Akim to Khasi Jing then to the Garo Akim, because no duty lies with the clan people of the deceased spouse to provide a substitute. It is more a taboo in honour of the deceased spouse than a bond. A living spouse is released by a simple ceremony called Kur-seta where by the clan people of the deceased spouse released the living spouse from their marriage tie. And from the day of Kurseta a living spouse becomes free to enter into one's second married life. Violation of this rule makes the guilty couple to pay Dai (fine) to the deceased spouse clan. The word Kurseta literary means smearing of rope, kur; rope; seta smearing.

Under the Koch custom only younger sister-in-law can be married. Husband's brother, elder or younger can not be

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married. Elder sister-in-law also can not be married. Marriage with all other relatives of the wife and husband either senior or junior are also strictly prohibited. Any body violating these rules is liable to be excommunicated. Generally marriages in such prohibited degree are also not expiable on payment of Dai or Dondy (fine). So excommunication is only or not.

3. Death Ceremony:

Death is an important occasion for the Koches. Whenever there is death in any family, news of it is immediately circulated by messengers to all the relatives specially the clan people. As soon as news reaches, the relatives come and have a last respect. The female members of the deceased person’s clan weep loudly, jointly or singally. Sometimes village women folk of different clans also take part in the wail by remembering deceased person’s qualities. The clan women also make Chika Sora in the ear of the deceased. Dr. Buchanan wrote about the assembly of the kindred’s who drink, dance and sing. Perhaps he confused funeral rites with ‘shradha’ or ‘marikam’

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4 Dr. Kar, ibid., n. 35: 2
during which the Koches drink, dance and sing. This is called.

The Koches of the Garo Hills believe that each clan has its own Chika meaning water or stream. If the deceased feels thirsty he can drink water only from the Chika of his own clan. Likewise, if he has to cross a river he can cross the river belonging to his clan. So as a mark of caution Chika Sora is made by the Garo Hills Koches. Mourning clan women also name a long list of predeceased clan men and women, who the Koches believe would be there to help the deceased in the next world. So, their names and relationship are told in course of their waling. As for instance⁵:

**Kama Nikini –**

*Chimuk nag, Chisik nag.*

*Duracha chika, Duranag chika.*

*Dalmar chika, Dalchini chika*

**Ranja Ninkni-**

⁵ As briefed by S. N. Koch during interview.
According to Dalton (1872) initially, the Koch used to bury
the death body. But they stopped this practice long time ago and started cremating the death body. Now the Koches cremate the dead. Before taking to crematorium, the Koches wait for the arrival of their relatives who may be residing at far-off places. The dead body is kept inside house washed and anointed with the mustard oil. It is carried by four pole bearers in an impromptu structure the dead is taken in a procession to the cremation ground. While taking the dead body corns, pieces of thread, cotton and paddy are thrown from the edge of the village to crematorium. According to the custom seven firewood sticks for men and nine fire sticks for women are required for cremation. The eldest usually lights the funeral pyre by uttering the name of Lord Bhisan (Haribol). In the absence of a son, the funeral pyre lighted by the son of the relative. After the cremation, the frontal bone and patella (right patella in case of men and left patella in case women) are carried the daughters. The bones are wrapped in a piece of cloth and are kept on wooden piece inside the house. They observed mourning for thirteen days. Obsequal rites for the dead are performed after the harvest. From the day of the
death up to the day of the last rite, food and water are served daily to the spirit of the deceased so that the soul of the deceased has a safe journey to heaven. If the dead is buried a symbolic _mukhagni_ is done by burning the lips and forehead with the help of burning wick.

Last rite for the dead called _Marikam_ in Koch language is generally done after harvesting and there is no fixed day for that. From the day of death up to the marikam meals are served twice at the time of launch and dinner to the spirit of the deceased on a plantain leaf near a wall in some conspicuous parts of the main house. The Koches believe that for salvation of the deceased person's soul marikam is necessary otherwise his or her soul will not be able to go to heaven. For unnatural deaths and deaths of minors 'shradha' is optional. The length of time after which deceased person's last rite is performed varies according to the time of his or her death. Generally such rites are performed between two to six months after the death.