



Journey into the past: Reliving the Village life of Pre Colonial Tangkhul Naga Society

Orient Thansing RS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Orient Thansing RS hails from Phalee village, Ukhrul District, Manipur. He did his BA (Hon) in Political Science from Kirori Mal College, Delhi University and MA in Political Science from JNU. He did his M. Phil from Manipur University and he has recently completed his PhD from Manipur University.

ABSTRACT

The following discourse is an attempt to look at the pre colonial village life of the Tangkhul Naga society. Before the advent of the British into the Tangkhul Naga country in the 19th century, nothing much was known about the social and cultural life of the Tangkhuls. They were absolutely living in their own world with their own cultural practices that was totally different from the outside world completely void of modernity. The village was a self sufficient independent unit with its customary laws reigning supreme in any matters relating to the social and cultural life of the Tangkhuls. And yet life in the village was really simple and poignantly ignorant. From cradle to grave a Tangkhul identifies himself with his village and he would do anything to safeguard the village. The traditional thatched house and the Morungs was where the first hand education was imparted to the young ones and the youths from where the thread of civilization lingers on. The village was simply the vantage point from where customs, conventions and practices emanated and thereby a culture of a people was born.

Key Words: Culture, Custom, Longshim, Morung, Tarung, chieftainship

I. INTRODUCTION

Travelling back in time and flipping through the pages of our history one could not help but be mesmerised by the lifestyles of our ancestors when threshold of modernisation was still distant away. One wonders as to how society thrives on a hilly terrain when the surrounding was just so harsh. From a food gathering and hunting wild animals as their main occupation to a stage of a settled life with domesticated animals and agricultural activities at their disposal, centuries must have gone by in its evolvement. The cold freezing winter wind, the menacing mosquitoes of the summer, the impending savage attack of wild animals and the incessant rainy season before autumn sets in would have made their life horrible but only for their resilience did they survive. Nature was their best friend. Nature was everything to them as it provided all that they wanted. We do not know for sure as to how many generations they have survived. But our forefathers have withstood against all odds and what we get today out of their struggle for survival is a primordial entity in the form of culture.

Culture is a complex whole that encompasses almost every aspects of human activity in a society. Every member of the society in due course of time acquire that attributes which tend to cohere themselves into a refined cultural unit. They share some commonness, they have the same values, they communicate and cooperate with each other and that's how they are able to stick together as a group. It's all about the daily habits of the members of the society. As the society grows in age the habit that they acquire overtime becomes inherently their daily practices. They learn from each other and

it becomes a part of their life. When such daily practices that emerged out of human habit received wide acceptance by the society at large it sets in a pattern of behaviour whereby people don't hesitate to accept it as a part of their life. The occurrence of such pattern of behaviour could be seen in their daily food habits, dress codes, social relation, festivals, agricultural activity, religious activity etc. This gives birth to what we call custom. Custom is that pattern of behaviour occurring regularly for a long period of time and that its sanctity is invariably given by the society per se. This inclusive ideas and habits which basically move the wheels of society is what we call culture. Culture is a broad concept that necessitates the understanding of the different facets of society and its interface with each other. Culture simply becomes the accepted ways of living or ways of behaviour for the members of the society. It is a learnt behaviour that is transmitted from a father to his son and to his grandson and further down to his generation. 'Culture therefore has two essential qualities: firstly it is learnt, secondly it is shared. Without it there would be no human society'ⁱ. Change occurs in the society and change itself is a part and parcel of culture. There is a general principle since the dawn of human civilization that the evolution or the development of our society depends upon the uniformity of human thought and action. Further investigation into the daily life of our forefathers would depict certain amount of uniform pattern that thrive the primitive society. The main characteristic of a primitive society as we all know is a simple living – a simple hoe to till the field, a wooden tube made of bamboo to draw water, a simple loin cloth enough to cover their private parts, bow and arrow for hunting or a simple sharp tools used as spears and knives etc. But as the society evolves, this simplicity became entangled with a vicious mythical realm that arose due to uncontrolled human imagination only to be dispelled by invoking a mystical supernatural being. It is the daily practice of certain rites that induced him to believe in the existence of external forces that transcends human experience thus emerges the concept of religion.

It is an unusual thing in a Naga society to live in isolation. From the beginning of the year till the end of the year, the Naga society is characterised by what we call 'community life'. The morning and the evening scene in a Tangkhul village resonates a sporadic sounds of laughter from the gossip platform or from the village square where men in groups huddled around spending their leisure time. R.R. Shimray puts it in the following words: "Naga individuals know no other life except that of community life. They work in groups, eat in groups and sleeps in groups. There is no individual cultivation or harvest, no individual house-building no feast of merit by individuals alone and no wooing of girls individually. All things are done in groups and in the full presence of the entire community."ⁱⁱ The social structure of the Tangkhuls depicts a very vibrant character of an open society. Equality pervades in all walks of life. The Tangkhul society being an agrarian society begins the cycle of the year with the celebration of the seed-sowing festival with much fanfare and enjoyment. The whole village erupts into joyful mood as they spent their time eating and drinking. Agriculture being the main occupation of the people, land was considered sacred to them. And so when they celebrate the festivals they celebrate in such a way as to propitiate the gods so as to have a plentiful harvest and that every one in the village young and old alike participated in the festival. As such their social life was inextricably interwoven into the cycle of agricultural season. The festival goes on and the cycle of the year completes with the harvest finally done and food grains are brought home and stored in their respective granaries. But the fact that the social life of the Tangkhuls was as exhilaratingly profound as one could possibly imagine of, is simply shown by the manner in which the festivals of different kind are celebrated throughout the year. The Tangkhuls are a fun loving people. Whether it is at the gossip platform or at the village square or at the bachelor's dormitory they are just ever ready to compliment and supplement to whatever they say to each other and burst themselves into peal of laughter. Words of mirth never stopped coming out from their mouths as the amusement increases its intensity.

II. THE VILLAGE AS IT WAS

The culture of the Tangkhuls simply revolves around the life in the village. Village was everything to them. It was a well knit compact society where the customary laws reigned supreme. Village was the vantage point where a myriad of customs first appeared. The Naga society as a whole was a predominantly agrarian society and led a community life. In fact, the pre-colonial Tangkhul society was very firmly intertwined with agricultural activities – agriculture being the only means of their livelihood. The folksongs and the folklore handed down from generation to generation very lucidly speak about the daily agricultural activities of our forefathers. A bad day in the jhum field or an unlucky hunting expedition could be easily lightened up over a cup of rice beer with friends sitting around the hearth or sitting around the fire at the village square. Until the advent of the British to the Naga territory in the early part and later part of the 19th century, little was known about their way of life, their culture, religion or belief systems, etc. The areas which are now inhabited by the Nagas were simply dubbed as a region inhabited by 'wild tribes', who are known for its 'head-hunting' practices. A Naga village, in the past, was a small fortified settlement invariably built on a hill summit rather than on a bank of river as is the case with most of the settlement patterns in various civilizations of the world which are mostly seafaring peoples. The

reason for living on hilly areas rather than an open spacious valleys or plateaus was undoubtedly because of the practice of head hunting within the Naga community. And so, Tangkhuls were basically living in a different kind of 'civilization', completely insulated in their own world of ignorance about the outside world. But life in the village was as good as it gets for ignorance was bliss. Every Tangkhul village was an independent, self sufficient unit comprising two to five clans or more following their vibrant customs and practices. A conglomeration of ten to thirty households or perhaps more would have been the ideal size of the village back in the day but as time goes by it increased steadily. The first man to settle down in the village was naturally the chief of the village of which very gradually the institution of chieftainship became hereditary. It is believed and accepted that it was he who discovered their place of dwelling and the first person who lit up the fire, fire being one of the most important assets of the primitive society. Therefore, it was expected from the villagers to show their allegiance and honour to him. The settlement gradually expanded with the coming of their kinsmen from different direction and joining them thereby increasing the households of the village as well. When the original villages started to multiply, the chief of the village sent out an expedition for searching a suitable settlement to accommodate the increasing population and to cater the needs of their domesticated animals, especially cattle that required large areas of grazing ground. It takes a whole lot of courage for a man to leave behind his near and dear ones, friends, family members and his own village where his youthful days were spent and venture out to some unknown territory in search of a greener pasture. Harsh vegetations, rugged topography and menacing wild animals roaming about the thick jungles were some adversaries they had to negotiate as they start their new settlement.

One of the main aspects of leading a settled life is the easy availability of a perennial source of water in the vicinity of the village. The main criterion for making a permanent settlement, therefore, is the availability of water even during the dry season. The chief of the village would make sure that a village well is dug up from a natural spring not very far away from the village. As a result it became a mandatory job for every member of the village to keep the well clean. Therefore cleaning of the village well every year at an appointed time becomes a convention for the villagers. One person each from each household was the norm for taking the attendance. The punishment for the absentee during the cleaning of the well is quite huge and embarrassing as well as the family of the absentee would be debarred from drawing water from the well. If a pig is slaughtered for this purpose the head of the pig will be given to the chief and its limbs will be accordingly shared by the respective heads of the other clans and the rest of body parts will be equally distributed to every households in the village. And so keeping a village well secure for sustaining the whole populace of the village was considered something really sacred to our forefathers. In fact the responsibilities of taking care of the well and ceremonial rite of cleaning the well was assigned to a particular head of the clan. This age old practice of cleaning the well can be still seen in some villages even though we have upgraded our living standard by drawing water through pipeline from the nearby stream.

A typical traditional Tangkhul village consists of irregular collections of houses or different khels occupied by respective clans along the stretch of the village street. And so within the village we find a fixed clan dwelling huddled together resembling a separate unit of which this setting has considerably changed in modern Tangkhul villages. At the entrance of the village not very far away from the village gate preferably towards the paddy field, there stood a place called *wonra*. The chief of the village also has his own *wonra* at a specified area along the path that's often trodden by the villagers. *Wonra* was a symbol of dignity and honour. Villagers often take rest on this platform as they come home after a hard day's work and freshen themselves up along with the cool evening breeze coming from the nearby stream and a soothing conversation among themselves about their day's work before they go back to their respective homes. More or less majority of the villages were perched on the hilltops or on the ridge extending from the main hillock downward or on the sloppy side of the hill. One of the main reasons for selecting a hill summit for their dwellings as mentioned earlier was basically to shield themselves from the enemy's attack as the party on the top will have the upper hand while in combat and in defending their territory. There was a constant fear that another village will come for their heads as their war trophy. And so people had to be always alert and hence a huge village gate was also put in place at the main entrance of the village with bamboo spikes all over to ward off any possible invasion. It also necessitated the timings of going and coming back from the paddy field or jhum garden to be monitored very meticulously lest that would put the village to the risk of being attacked by the enemy.

The colloquial head hunting is associated with the Nagas and the Tangkhul Nagas are one such brave and ferocious group of people who takes pride in taking heads of the neighbouring villages as something worthwhile. As a matter of fact bringing home heads of the enemy was considered a hero and the whole village accords him with a special social recognition. As a man steps into adulthood he starts looking for an avenue to excel so as to get recognition from the society and one such way worth emulating was chopping heads of the enemies and bring home in triumphant jubilee which would prove him his manhood. Eligible young damsels clamoured for the man who had brought home human

heads in numerous occasions because he had earned honour and dignity and the whole society would highly regard him as a warrior and who would not want to become the wife of a highly decorated man in the village. Head hunting was so prominent that even hearing the name of a great warrior alone would make the surrounding villagers send its shivers down the spine. The culture of head hunting is associated with the economic well being of the village as well. There were times when the deity of the jhumming field would not allow any cultivation of crops until a human head was offered to it. This necessitated the practice of taking heads in order to appease the deity. It was also believed that the victim would help carry the load of the man who took his head when they journey into the Hades. Professor Horam very lucidly surmised the purpose of head hunting in the following manner: "Heads were also needed in connection with several religious ceremonies. Whenever a chief's house or Morung or such similar abodes were being built, a head was needed to appease ancestral ghost. The taking of heads also, it was believed, ensured good crops, fertility in women, good luck during hunting and general well being and prosperity for all. Not only in this life but even in the life to come the taking of heads paid dividends. Thus the practice of head hunting was bound up with the social, the religious and even the economic life of the Tangkhuls."ⁱⁱⁱ

III THE TRADITIONAL HOUSE

The pre-colonial Tangkhul house was a simple structure with a thatch roof or a wooden plank above and without any intricate architectural design therein. Generally it consisted of two main rooms which were technically huge and spacious as one could possibly imagine of the normal domestic activities that were to be executed in it and of course considering the number of the members of the family to dwell in just two rooms. Depending on the social or economic status of the family the number of rooms increases. As for instances an affluent family who has given a feast of merit to the whole village will have additional rooms as bachelors' dormitory or ladies dormitory is usually accorded to them. But normally the house was so big that they could easily accommodate the youth's dormitory. Usually no porch could be seen at the main entrance of the house. The front room was specially built for sheltering the domesticated animals such as cattle, pigs and fowls and for doing other domestic works such as pounding the paddy in a huge wooden mortar with a long sturdy pestle to beat out the husk. Every morning the front room used to be a busy conclave with the buffalo munching a pack of hay, the pig grunting for food along the messy ground covered with husk, the fowl scrambling on the floor for food and the mother of the family busy pounding the wooden mortar with the pestle. At one corner of this room was where women did their weaving. A mother would be seen busy at the loin loom after the entire kitchen works were done inventing many intricate designs that the generations to come would marvel at their expertise.

Every village have their own style of construction but normally almost all Tangkhul villages have great similarities and affinities in building their respective houses. In constructing the house of a commoner usually there consisted of three main posts or pillars namely *Wongri* as the main post in front, *Wongrai* in the middle and *Panri* at the end. Whereas if they were to construct the house of an affluent person who has just given the feast of merit, then the pillars would be usually more than five in numbers as it would house the bachelor's dormitory or ladies dormitory where a huge royal bed enough to accommodate twenty to thirty youth would be kept. The main post at the entrance of the house is usually great in size, carved out of a single tree ostensibly of a good quality. One would see elaborate carvings of animals especially of mithun in front of the house of the rich and shingled wooden plank roofing on the top indicating his higher social status in the village. For every commoner in the village the style of constructing the house is almost the same: no carvings of animals in front of the house and only thatched roofing which simply indicate their ordinary status in the village. A good quality of thatching grass is easily available not very far away from the village. The thatching grass is then very meticulously tied in bundles after carefully removing other unwanted weeds from it with strips of fine bamboo in such a way that not a single blade of thatch could be pulled out. The wall of the house is made by either wooden planks which the rich usually do or bamboo sheets. Usually when they build a house, their closest clansmen, relatives and neighbours would come and help in every possible way. The roofing is so excellent that it could withstand ferocious winds of the dry season and that it would run for quite a number of years before another major repair is conducted.

The second room is a continuation of the front room and is basically the kitchen and bedroom combined. The main door that connects the first room to the next room is called *Viyean*. At the centre of the room lies the hearth with three very well polished cylindrical shape stone grounded where cooking is done. On the top of the hearth there hang three layers of shelf-like structure for different purposes. The immediate shelf above the hearth is called *Anreai*, a small mat roughly woven with bamboo strips and is meant for drying meat and fish before it is put in a basket called *sangkhong* specially made for preserving dried meat and dried fish. The second shelf is called *changshar* where paddy is usually dried so as to be pounded the next morning. The uppermost layer or shelf is called *Anheam* where almost all other visible

materials used in the daily life of a villager are kept. Usually one of the stone in the hearth is more prominent in size than the other two and the topmost part of it is very fully flattened so as to burn the fatwood at night. At the corner of this room opposite to the main entrance, there is a special room called *Reamui* usually smaller in size meant only for the elders to go in. It is an unusual thing, a taboo for kids and youth to go into this room. It is here that all the valuable things of the family are kept. Rice beer is also usually kept here and it is the duty of the mother to serve the drinks whenever required. There is also a small room called *Phahui* attached at the back of the main room that served as a storeroom for the family. Granaries are usually built in groups a little distance away from their respective houses. This was purposefully done so because back in the day there used to be an abrupt fire breaking out in the middle of the day and as all the houses were thatched the chances of burning down the whole village was very high. And so in order to save the grains from such unforeseen calamities they built their granaries at the periphery of their dwellings. All the granaries are thatched like their own houses and are cylindrical in shape built on a little raised platform and made of bamboo sheets. The size of the granary depends on the amount of harvest that each household brought in. Normally the well to do families brings in more harvest and so their granaries are much bigger in size for obvious reasons. The doors of the granaries were simply secured with a wooden bolt that could be easily opened but people were least bothered about someone stealing their belongings because they hardly see any thieves roaming the village street.

Not much of fancy utensils could be seen inside the traditional kitchen except those earthen pots, wooden jars, bamboo tubes, royal plate carved out of a wooden block, a cup called *Phu* beautifully chiselled from a dried bottle gourd and apple gourd. Almost all the containers, bowls and baskets irrespective of its size ranging from a small basket as a safe for preserving dried meat or eatables to a bigger boxes-type basket for keeping their cloths to a larger material called *Khongkhai*, a large bamboo mat for spreading paddy and basking in the sun and a large container for preparing *Khor* or rice beer were made from fine whittled strips of bamboo as our forefathers were fine craftsmen as well. It was intricately woven in such a way that it could hold water or any liquid for that matter for a considerable period of time. There was a special type of royal plate called *Sakhong* carefully carved out of a wood, very broad in size, which were used as plates during food time. But this special plate has a special place in the society as this particular plate is to be used only by '*Sahui Raimi*' or those families whose main occupation was hunting wild animals and head hunting. The bed for the family is arranged and kept as per the convenience of members of the family taking into consideration of the alignment of the main door of the house. This is where the first hand education of the Tangkhuls is imparted to the young ones. The whole process of socialization begins from this unsophisticated and shabby structure and yet adorned with guileless ignorance of humanity that their kindred and the generations to come would always look up to it as a symbol of the cradle of their civilization. The rudimentary form of education begins within these four walls of a thatched house. No matter how ignorant and naive they were about the outside world, the father passed on the little knowledge he had to his son and the mother passed on the art of weaving to her daughter enabling the thread of civilization to linger on.

IV MEGALITHS AND THE TANGKHULS

Nagas are believed to be great lovers of nature. Wherever they migrated they erected stone monolith or planted sacred trees in memory of their respective clans or to show their intense love for the place where they were born and brought up and where their ancestors had lived and died. They would also erect during festivals as to commemorate the spirit of festivities and celebrations. This is one area where we find a conspicuous departure from the Kukis, whose coming to Manipur from Myanmar is believed to be of recent origin and in whose history one would hardly find any such handiwork of erecting stone monoliths or a tree post, as Nagas had practised it so dearly from time immemorial. As the history goes, Kukis were least bothered of settling down permanently in one proper place but had loved to wander in wilderness like nomads. The status of the Kukis leading a nomadic life is substantiated by T.C Hodson in one of his enduring ethnographic account in the following manner, "We are like the birds of the air, we make our nests here this year and who knows where we shall build next year"^{iv}. Thus one significant feature of the Nagas is the distinct practice of erecting stone monoliths or a huge tree post called *Tarung* wherever they settle down which in fact still plays an important role in the social and cultural life of the Nagas. It is a ceremonial tree post usually erected during the feast of merit where a wealthy person who wanted to climb the ladder of the social hierarchy in the village and thereby change his social position gives a handsome meal to the whole village. There was a time when the feast of merit was also celebrated as a matter of competition between two affluent individuals in the village. When an efficient well to do person gave a feast of merit to the village, the other individual whose social status and economic position was of the same stature with the one who had given the feast, felt greatly humiliated. It was the pride that pushed him further to give a feast of merit with more killings of mithuns or buffaloes. And so the more Tarungs they could erect, the higher their social status would be.

Megaliths are symbols of our identity. It's a symbol of our rich culture. It's an identity that traverses through time to remind the magnanimity of a people's culture. The Northern Tangkhul villages generally known as Raphei, possesses this rich culture of erecting stone monoliths as one can see megaliths still standing in great numbers in most of the these villages. One would be awe-struck while contemplating the handiwork of our ancestors and marvel at their ability to drag home such enormous piece of rock or a giant tree post with no any technological improvisation but with their sheer will power and their physical strength. A mere superficial look at the tradition of erecting megaliths would simply likened anyone to make an inconclusive attempt in generalising this custom as nothing but a mere wastage of time, energy and wealth. But it was not the material thing such as the stone or the tree post that is important. What matters to them were the functional aspects of the monolith. The dignity and the prestige attached in erecting the stone monolith or *Tarung* was so preponderantly huge that everyone yearned for that position in his lifetime. There was nothing so big worth striving for in a Naga society than to earn social recognition in the society through the feast of merit. To have a monolith standing in one's courtyard was something even their deity would be pleased (as it was believed so) and to look back his life contemplating on the number of Tarungs he had erected adorned with the skulls of animals indicating the number of feast of merit he had given, he took pride in his achievement even as he prepares his sojourn for the next world. History remembers him as a legend and his kindred would claim him to have lived a purposeful life and would try to emulate him. The most succinct description about the megaliths of the Tangkhuls is put forward by Khongreiwo in the following words: "Till today, their megalithic structures carry the voices, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and images of the past."^v Though the stone monoliths or the tree post never had an inscription on it to say the least about the life of the people, it had some engravings on it though, it does epitomises people's culture and its identity as this whole idea of erecting the monolith shows the perception of the people about their way of life.

There existed no social stratification in the traditional Naga society in the strict sense of the term as that of the Indian society where a very rigid varna system existed. But if there is any indication of some inequalities that were in vogue in our society back in the day, then the practice of giving feast to the whole village or the feast of merit as it is called where essentially there involved an element of a possible distinction between the haves and the have nots, very dimly indicate its existence. Here's a question of a man trying to climb up a step higher than the rest as the attributes of economic power that he had acquired over a period of time had earned him respect in the village. Taking into account of his economic well being, the village council headed by the chief of the village would then give him the assent to build his house the way the affluent people usually do. In doing so he had to kill a buffalo or a mithun and give a handsome meal to the whole village. This would entitle him to build a house with a shingled wooden plank for roofing, animals head designed and carved out all over in front of the house, a royal bed installed in his house and Tarung erected in front of his house, which hitherto he was living in a thatched house like any other ordinary person in the village. This is the flipside of the feast of merit. And this, I would say, is the social inequalities and the manner in which a person tries to defy all odds and do the needful so as to leave his original social position and don the cloths of the affluent is a conspicuous process of social mobility. So this whole concept of feast of merit and erecting of monoliths do consist some elements of division among the populace on economic premise and thereby the process of social mobility as well. I presume that this theorization of social division and social mobility of the Tangkhuls could well be contested by many scholars but nevertheless I would vouch for a more intense research and a vibrant constructive debate in this area. Nevertheless the symbol of *Tarung* was one of prestige and a hard earned dignity. It was an accomplishment of one's hard work, grit and valour. It was an integral part of the Naga society and it is through this practice of erecting monoliths that we are able to pick up the thread of our long gone history and our culture and thereby reconstruct our identity.

V LIFE IN THE LONGSHIM

The institution of Morung or Longshim in Tangkhul, generally known as bachelor's dormitory is one unique culture that the Nagas could give to the world. No write up on the social and cultural life of the Nagas or for that matter the Tangkhuls is complete without a mention on the sumptuous life of the youth in the Morung. A person born into a Tangkhul society had to go through this stage of 'going to Longshim' in his lifetime where the process of integrating into the society begins. This was in fact the school for the Nagas. The bachelor's dormitory was where the essence of a community life was manifested. It was here that the knowledge of life was imparted to the young boys and girls as they learn to grow whilst interacting among themselves as they prepare to go into adulthood. The whole edifice of the social life of the Tangkhuls rested upon the institution of Longshim as this was the only place of learning and imparting knowledge to the youth and as such the only channel for the process of socialization to get acclimatized. Picturising the village settings of the pre colonial era where the sun had just been swallowed by the western horizon and the youths getting ready to go to the Longshim with a simple shawl and loincloth just enough to cover their nakedness before

darkness would consume the twilight, one is left with an impalpable prejudice as to how twenty to thirty boys would spend huddling together by the hearth simply gossiping. And yet a deeper analysis on the functional aspect of Longshim reveals a much more elaborate character of our culture spreading across generations and presents the historicity of our history more prominently. M. Horam, an authority on the social and cultural life of the Tangkhuls, wrote on the essence of Morung thus: “It is in the Morung that the boys get all the useful lessons of community living. The Morung gymnasium turns out skilful sportsmen, wrestlers and warriors. Here the youth receive invaluable lessons in leadership. They also get acquainted with the history, culture, folklore, songs and dances of their village. Play, singing and dancing are a regular, if not daily, feature of this institution. The Morung is therefore, both a training school in the arts of life and war and a club for entertainment and fun.”^{vi} It was rightly called as the Naga School because things that were never taught at home by their parents were all taught in the Morung. In fact it was like a night school as most of the activities and deliberations were done at night. As in the days of yore where head hunting was in vogue, security of the village was perhaps the most significant priority and therefore the youths of the Morung were tasked to keep vigil throughout the night and make sure that an alarm was set off if there were any attack on the village by the enemies. Horam further writes about Morung thus: “So we see that in the absence of schools, especially in the olden days, the Morung was a training ground for all lessons that youth must learn before starting to live independently. Here they were taught also the important and invaluable lessons of discipline, hard work and the spirit of service.”^{vii}

When a boy or a girl attains puberty or when he or she feels shy to sleep together with their parents they would start going to longshim accompanying the older peers. That did not necessarily give them permanent membership to the longshim but instead they became the associate members and they were assigned with duties that every new entrant ought to perform. During this probationary period, discipline and obedience go hand in hand as they make a new journey in their life in Longshim. They would sit at one corner of the house huddled together watching each steps of the elders and slowly and steadily learn the behaviour of the elders in the Longshim. They shall be tasked with petty duties like collecting fire woods for the night, fetching water and were expected to run errands for the seniors whenever the situation demanded. They would be slowly introduced to the life of a youth. As for the newly admitted girls, they would watch how the senior girls do all the intricate process of producing yarn from the raw cotton for weaving and knitting. While doing so every girl would join together in singing folk songs. Girls from wealthy family used to wear all kinds of dresses they could possibly adorn upon themselves as they wait for the boys to come to their Longshim. And when the boys starts to descend in groups to the girls’ dormitory, their eyes are all fixed towards the most beautiful girl among them so as to ascertain as to who would be that guy the girl has an interest. Usually girls don’t go to the boys’ dormitory but it was only the boys who visited the girls’ dormitory. Since most of the days of their youth life were spent in the Longshim, wooing a girl was also never done in private though their intuition was personal. It was all done in full view of the public in Longshim.

VI VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION

The administration of the village revolved round the institution of chieftainship among the Tangkhuls. A Tangkhul village like any Naga village was like a Greek city-state that resembles a politically organised association with a well organised village council called *Hangva*, consisting of all the heads of the different clans who would help the chief in the administration of the village. The village chief is called “Awunga” in Tangkhul. Back in the day, when tradition held its sway, the chief or the head of the village was all in all the most powerful person. He was the sole arbiter and the dispenser of justice in the village. He was the custodian of the customary laws and the authority to declare such date as the festivals of the village and proclamation of genna lies with him. He would be assisted by the village council comprising at least one to three members from each clan in the village depending on the size of the households and the population of the clans concerned. The functions of the councillors were executive, legislative and judiciary combined and as such there was no clear cut separation of powers as we see today in modern form of government. The house of the chief was naturally the place where council sittings were held and where deliberations were done. The councillors were the legislators, they were the executives and they were the ones who sat as the judges and dispense justice whenever a case was heard. Observation of genna and other religious ceremonies and date for clearing of the forest for jhumming cultivation were also proclaimed by the village council.

Even though Awunga is a secular title secured through hereditary means, there seemed to be no proper demarcation of the chief of the village with that of the chief priest of the village in terms of their duties because sometimes the role of the chief priest can be seen demonstrated by the village chief. And so the chief of the village had a dual function, as the religious head and as the secular head. In this regard R.R Shimray thus wrote: “As the religious head, the chief is the first man to sow seeds, the first to plant and the first to harvest. Although the actual religious worships and

sacrifices etc were performed by the village priest, yet his presence in any religious ceremony was prominent. He presided over all religious festivals. As the secular head, his functions were numerous. At the time of head hunting his primary concern was for the defence of the village. As the head of the administration, his duty was to summon and preside over the meetings of the village councillors who were by custom the representatives of the various clans.”^{viii} In today’s modern judiciary system things have become very complicated. It has become too expensive as well that to get justice delivered for the poor it’s just next to impossible. Sometimes corruption has simply prolonged the case in the court and that it has become time consuming activity. But in the olden days delivering justice was quick. The village chief’s house was the court and the councillors themselves were the judges and the chief of the village was the chief justice. And since their legal system was based on the customary laws they were never hesitant nor delay themselves in giving out the verdict instantly. The corollary “Truth Shall triumph” simply runs in the veins of our ignorant forefathers that they always steadfastly held to the truth. But any dispute, be it between two individuals or dispute involving more than two groups, first and foremost thing that our forefathers did was that as far as possible such disputes are settled within the clan itself or between the two warring clans before it actually explodes and goes to the village court. And so any issue is actually a clan issue before it becomes a village issue. Then it becomes the responsibility of the village council to settle the disputes as per the laws prescribed by the unwritten customary laws. They are also to see that the decisions of the village council are obeyed and carried out duly. Accordingly punishments are accorded to the wrong doers or the law breakers. The Tangkhul society being an egalitarian society and having strictly followed the customs and the prescribed unwritten norms one could hardly see any law breakers roaming about the village street. But nevertheless there were very few instances of black sheep committing crimes in the society like theft of which the village council dealt with those individual in a befitting manner. The punishment for such act was that the perpetrators were made to compensate the affected person the court fee, which was usually a pig, that the affected person had offered to the village council for solving the case and at the same time the culprit was forced to give the appropriate fine in terms of animals depending on the degree of the theft. Promiscuity was a taboo in the Tangkhul society and if such act was caught they were ostracised from the village.

VII SEASONS AND FESTIVALS

The Tangkhul society was an agricultural society and therefore they strictly followed the seasons of time. The beginning of the year was signified by the celebration of *Thisham*. *Thisham* generally known as the feast of the dead is usually celebrated at the beginning of the year in remembrance of their near and dear ones who have died the previous year. They placed some objects or any articles corresponding to the number of deaths that took place the previous year, in the middle of an open ground wherein the chief priest comes and performed some rituals. The dance is then performed basically to show respect and honour to the dead souls and even as they journey to the Hades, *Kazeiram* in Tangkhul (where the dead souls live), it is believed that they shall be given an ostentatious welcome by the dead souls. And finally when the sun has set, they collect the objects and carry it to the village gate while the dance party leads the way and threw it. Only men folk were allowed in the disposing ceremony. When finally darkness consumes the light and as people watched over the eastern horizon, they’ll see the same number of dead souls lighting the fatwood and slowly vanishes as they crossed into the eastern hills towards *Kazeiram*. This was followed by the seed sowing festival popularly known as *Luita Phanit*. This is the longest festival with the celebration stretching to almost two weeks with each day having its own symbolic significance. The festival, no doubt, is all about merry making and a showcase of traditional sports, yet nevertheless it is a time of invoking the super natural being to bless upon them with a prosperous year so that they have good harvest at the end of the year. The competition items during this festival includes folk song, folk dance, high jump, long jump, wrestling, bamboo climbing, carrying rice pounding stick on the back, tug of war, trumpet, flute, violin, and many more. Tug of war is one showpiece of an event that really captivates the hearts of the audience with equal numbers of men and women at each end of the rope trying to pull with their utmost strength. There goes a proverbial saying, and folks still believe in this act, that if the rope they pull breaks then the year has many good things in store for the village.

The month of April is one of the finest seasons especially for the youth as they celebrate the youth festival known as *Yarra Kashak*. They would eat and drink heavily and do all sorts of merry making games even as they sing and enjoy the season before they begin the heavy cultivation work. Usually this is celebrated according to age wise as peer groups. Nevertheless the main idea behind this festival is to enjoy the unbounded freedom and the care-free life of the youth leaving all the worries and family problems behind. By the month of May and June transplantation of paddy is all over and as people take rest after a prolong toil and work they celebrate another festival known as *Mangkhap*. This is the time to celebrate by drinking rice beer and basking in the morning sun and also invoking the deity of their respective paddy

fields to protect the paddy from various natural calamities and attack from wild animals. Generally the month of July to September is the weeding season. And so the season before the harvest is a lean season and therefore there was less celebration as it always involved eating and drinking and by this time around the granaries were all getting dried up. But by the month of November after the harvest is done another festival called Chumphut is celebrated again and as their granaries are now filled up, eating and drinking take the centre stage. Chumphut is basically celebrated to appease the deity of the granary called *Phunghui* to bless them abundantly as they would start a bountiful year ahead with the new harvest. The mother of the family always takes the responsibility of opening the granary of the new harvest even as she invokes the deity so that the new harvest could sustain the whole family until the next year's harvest. Besides these major festivals there were many other festivals as well of which its significance and celebration is all gone into oblivion.

VIII CONCLUSION

Legends and folklores are an integral part in the making of our history. When our forefathers knew nothing about writing down their history, folklores became a channel for transmitting our culture from one generation to another generation. The village square and the gossip platform where men used to gather in the morning and in the evening became a platform for deliberating new ideas and new thoughts. The fire place in the middle of the thatched kitchen was where the mother taught the basic fundamental lessons of life to her young ones. The Morungs became an institution for educating the youth. The art of facing all odds in life was imparted in Morungs. The folk song that they crooned beside the hearth becomes a lifeline for our people as the story and the culture of the people are basically told through the songs they sang. What remained after they are all gone are those primordial things in the form of relics that form the deposits of the culture of our people.

Though the village life of the pre colonial Tangkhul society is now a thing of the past and remains as a long gone memory, the rich tradition and the rudimentary convention of our forefathers still pervade the present Tangkhul society. Social organisation such as the bachelors' dormitory no more exists in the present day society and yet the element of community life is still very strong. Even though the life styles have changed and things have changed a lot with the coming of modern education and modern civilisation the village life as it were hasn't changed much in terms of its traditional and cultural orientation. There is still a strong bond of oneness among the village folks in their day to day life. For instance the manifestation of the rich cultural heritage of the good old days of a Tangkhul village can still be seen in the celebration of Luita Phanit, the seed sowing festival. It is like flipping the pages of a written history where one get to see the daily social activities of the past as if it is for real. And of course things have changed now and with the coming of Christianity the old practice of animal sacrifices and brewing rice beer have stopped. The strict adherence to the norms of celebration in tune with the old ways has slowly waned away. And yet there is so much of enthusiasm in holding steadfastly onto the customs and traditions of the past. With the coming of Christianity in all the Tangkhul villages, the festival of the dead also known as Thisham is no more in practice now. What drove our ancestors to the thinking of a realm that supposedly exists beyond this present world is precariously unfathomable. Perhaps a natural force such as a storm or earthquake or lightning induced them to give in to an abstract metaphysical opinion of an existence of an unseen power that was behind the occurrence of all these phenomena and probably interfering with the activities of human beings. Then superstition crept in when mysterious phenomenon occurred that required explanation but where natural justification for the repeated occurrence of the phenomenon was hard to come by. But the concept of God in the primitive religion as practiced by our forefathers underwent a drastic change with the coming of Christianity. The head hunting practice which was once glorified as an act of valour now only remains as a bedtime story. The once Tangkhul village perched on the hilltop with very minimal access to the neighbouring villages let alone the outside world, for fear of their heads being chopped off is now linked with the district headquarter and other villages with motorable roads and modern amenity is slowly making inroads thereby enhancing the living standard of the people. The old way of understanding natural phenomena is slowly getting replaced by modern rational thinking and modern education has indeed played a tremendous role in changing the outlook of the people.

Glossary

1. Khel: It is basically a division of the village into different clusters or groups that forms a locality within the village. The bigger the village the number of such khels increases.
2. Gossip Platform: This platform is generally situated in middle of a Khel which is usually made of wooden plank or with flat stones on an elevated place for sitting in the open. This is where people come and meet and talk and discuss and deliberate upon any issues.
3. Village Square: Village Square is an open ground or an open area within the settlement of the village where men come together either in the morning or in the evening just to spend their leisure time by gossiping around over petty things or perhaps discuss some important issues or to just freshen up their minds after a hard day's work by sharing jokes with each other.
4. Wonra : A raised stone and earth platform erected on the path to the paddy field by a wealthy affluent person in memory of his ability to give the feast of merit to the whole village while he was still alive or it was erected by the clansmen of a rich person who had his sway of influence in the village not only in terms of economy or social but political as well.
5. Chumphut: Opening of new granaries after the plentiful harvest.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bower, U., 1950, *Naga Path*, Butler and Tanner Ltd., London.
- [2]. Haralambos, M., 1980, *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- [3]. Hodson, T.C. 2007, *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, Low Price Publication, Delhi.
- [4]. Hodson, T.C. 2007, *The Meitheis*, Low Price Publication, Delhi.
- [5]. Horam, M. 2016, *Naga Polity*, Sunmarg publishers & Distributors, Delhi,.
- [6]. Horam, M. 1977, *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas (The Tangkhuls)*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi.
- [7]. Jonestone James, 2002, *Manipur and the Naga Hills*, Gyan Publishing House, Delhi.
- [8]. Mahaphang, SP. 2015, *Tangkhul Wungram kala Ameoyan (in Tangkhul)*, Wormaya Publication, New Checkon, Imphal.
- [9]. Raikhan Home, 2016, *Naga History: Through a Clan and Tribe*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati.
- [10]. Ruivah Khashim, 1993, *Social Change among the Nagas (the Tangkhuls)*, Cosmo Publication, Delhi.
- [11]. Shimray, A.S.W. 2001, *History of Tangkhul Nagas*, Akansha Publishing House, Delhi.
- [12]. Shimray, R. R. 1985, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, Published by Mrs Pamleiphi Shimray, Delhi.
- [13]. Shongzan Mayaso, 2013, *A Portrait of the Tangkhul Nagas*, Published by Wungramthan Shongzan, Delhi.
- [14]. Thansing Orient RS, 2019, *Traditional-Cultural Orientation and the Process of Political Socialisation among the Tangkhul Nagas*, International Journal of Indigenous & Marginalised Affairs, Vol. 5.1, p 36-49.
- [15]. Zingnim, T.S. 2013, *Hao (Tangkhul) Awo Ayi Manglarin Phanit Phanao kala Shiyen Chikan (in Tangkhul)*, Published by Christian Institute for the study of Religion and Society, Ukhrul, Manipur.

Notes

- ⁱ. Micheal Haralambos, *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980. P. 3
- ⁱⁱ. R.R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, published by Pamleiphi Shimray, New Delhi, 1985, p. 121.
- ⁱⁱⁱ. M. Horam, *Social and Cultural Life of the Nagas, (The Tangkhul Naga)*, Low Price Publication, Delhi, 1992, pp. 88-89.
- ^{iv}. T.C Hodson, "*The Naga Tribes of Manipur*", Low Price Publication, Delhi 1911, p. 2.
- ^v. Rammathot Khongreiwo, *Tangkhul Naga Megalithic Tradition: A case study of the North Ukhrul, Manipur*, Man and Environment, vol. XXXIII, No. 1, 2008, p.124.
- ^{vi}. M. Horam, *Naga Polity*, Sunmarg Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 85-86.
- ^{vii}. *Ibid.*, p. 87
- ^{viii}. R.R Shimray, op cit., p. 53.