

***Reconstructing through Memory: Ritual Performances  
around Thisham Festival of the Tangkhul Nagas of  
Manipur***

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## *Declaration*

I declare that this dissertation titled, *Reconstructing through Memory: Ritual Performances Around Thisham Festival of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur*, submitted by me at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University or Institution.

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CERTIFICATE

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Manipur*

## *INTRODUCTION*

This dissertation is an attempt to look closely at the ritual performances of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas with special reference to one festival named *Kathi Kasham* or *Thisham* which can literally be translated as “Soul Departure Feast”<sup>1</sup> or “Soul Send-Off Festival”<sup>2</sup>. This particular festival is no longer celebrated due to mass conversions of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> It does exist in the memories of the now-Christian elders, who were children when they were converted to Christianity and also in a range of writings on the Tangkhul community. The remnants of the formerly popular and indispensable festival are also found in the performances, stray songs, dances, ceremonial gift exchanges, rituals and events and also in the myths that exist in the marginal memory of the community. According to old Tangkhul Nagas religious belief, the soul of the dead does not leave the family, but stays on in the locality, until this particular festival is observed to send off the soul to *Kazeiram* (land of Dead). It was also meant to be a closure to a period of mourning and of coming to terms with the absence of the dear ones. In absence of actual empirical evidence, the memory of the festival and its remnants like dance, music, songs, ritual practices and landscape associated with the festival were found in the few continuing cultural practices. One can see these fragments of pre-Christian practices serving as the reference points for any re-collection and reconstruction.

According to all the available documentations, *Thisham* festival used to be celebrated by the whole community at the end of the year after rice harvesting season as per the early traditional calendar. This was celebrated in the form of an annual feast for all the people who passed away

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<sup>1</sup> William Pettigrew translated ‘Thisham Phanit’ as ‘Soul-Departure feast’ in the article “*Kathi Kasham: the “Soul departure” Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*” Journal and Proceeding of the Asiatic Society Bengal, 1910, 6:37-46.

<sup>2</sup> “Colonial Encounter and the Cultural Processes of Nagas”, By Tuisem Ngakang [http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts\\_and\\_Culture.Colonial\\_Encounter\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Processes\\_of\\_Nagas](http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts_and_Culture.Colonial_Encounter_and_Cultural_Processes_of_Nagas), Accessed on 17/04/2015.

<sup>3</sup> During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Rev. William Pettigrew, an American Baptist missionary was deputed to work in Tangkhul inhabited region in the highlands of Manipur. He introduced Christianity along with western education and philosophy to the indigenous people. In the present, census more than ninety nine percent of the Tangkhul have converted into Christianity, which remains the dominant religion in the region.



during that year. This was supposed to be a final farewell to the soul of persons who had left their bodies and were hovering in the surroundings until this festival was celebrated. Rituals like the Burial ceremony used to be concluded before the *Thisham* festival and *Onrah* ceremony (memorial stone ceremony) used to be observed after the festival. The day for *Thisham* was fixed by *Sharva* (the village priest) and the village king. The number of days for the festival lasted for 7 – 12 days differing from village to village. During the festival as mentioned by Rev. William Pettigrew, the families of the deceased invited a person of the same gender as the deceased, to impersonate and play the role of the deceased. He or she, known as *Thila Kapho* was fed lavishly and dressed in the most valuable clothes the family could provide, and was considered as the deceased by the family members throughout the festive period. This was followed by *Zeiphar* (sending off) ceremony, in which the family led the deceased away with the following prayer—"dear one, let us depart from here, may you go your way happily, please do not come back, let this be the end of our existing together."<sup>4</sup> However, with the embrace of Christianity, the Tangkhuls discontinued the practice of many ritual and social practices such as the *Morung* or *Longshim*<sup>5</sup>, *Thisham Phanit*, *Onrah* Ceremony (memorial stone ceremony). Currently, ninety nine percent of Tangkhul Nagas are Christians.

Most of the early accounts of the Nagas during the colonial periods were written by administrative officers who had served as political agents and military officers, while some works were by anthropologists or historians<sup>6</sup>. In most of these written accounts one can see that the 'viewpoint' of the administrators and the state remains prominent. However, one cannot help but also take their accounts into consideration, as these accounts are a part of the few available sources in the written form. Sir. James Johnstone's *My Experiences in Manipur and Naga Hills* (1896),

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<sup>4</sup> Shimray, 2000:162

<sup>5</sup> *Morung* or *Longshim* refers to the dormitory associations that also functioned as the informal educational and socializational space especially for the unmarried.

<sup>6</sup> In her article "The Nature of Colonial Intervention in the Naga Hills", 1840-80, Sanghamitra Misra writes, "The intimacy of academic and administrative investigation is a recurrent feature of this period, best embodied perhaps in Risley's (1891) emphatic statement on the importance of ethnographic surveys for efficient administration in the 'eastern society' where "it was impossible to define where administration ended and science began"

T.C Hodson's *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed)<sup>7</sup> and William Pettigrew's accounts<sup>8</sup> are relatively important in the studies of the Tangkhul Nagas. Some Colonial administrators as well as Christian Missionaries like William Pettigrew have also written specific accounts on the knowledge systems of rituals and lores of the Tangkhul Nagas in academic journals. However, most of these accounts are in the form of short articles and the information presented is limited. By the time Tangkhul Nagas had started writing about themselves, their society had already been Christianized and so have their thoughts changed. The earliest authors among the Tangkhul Nagas to write in their own language were students of William Pettigrew. English was a compulsory subject in the school and most of the schools had begun to adopt English as the medium of instruction. However, the early Tangkhul Naga writers preferred to use Tangkhul language for most of their writing. Early educated Tangkhul Nagas were more concerned in writing the traditional customary Laws, traditional Laws, as suggested by the title of the books written by the Tangkhuls. Among a host of other Tangkhul authors writing about their religion, Laws and various other areas, two crucial works which figure out dominantly are T. Luikham's *Wung (Tangkhul) Okthot Mayonza (traditional law)* (1961) and Stephen Angkang's *Hau Shiyan Chikan (Tangkhul Customary Law)* (1999). Many Tangkhul writings by Khashim Ruivah, Ng Mataisang, A. S. Shimray W, and M. Horam, include knowledge about the tribe which has been set aside by the Colonial researchers<sup>9</sup>. In the preface of the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective* (2014), one of the two important recent publications in Delhi by the Tangkhul

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* by T C Hudson who was assigned as the Assistant Political agent of Manipur, focuses exclusively on the Nagas living within the state of Manipur. In this book he gave an ethnographic account of the Nagas, their traditional beliefs and practices, ethnicity, livelihood, occupation and so on. Though there are some descriptive accounts of ritual practices and performances, these accounts are not comprehensive enough.

<sup>8</sup> William Pettigrew account includes: "*Kathi-Kasham: the "Soul departure" Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*" (1910), *Tangkhul Naga Grammar and Dictionary* (1918) (Reprinted by Tangkhul Naga Baptist Convention, 1979), '*Report from the Tangkhul Naga Field*', The Assam Mission of ABMU, 1899. *Jesuwui Lâ: Hymns in Tângkhul Nâga in Tangkhul*, (Assam: Published by American Baptist Mission House, Ukhrul, Manipur) (1907)

<sup>9</sup> Khashim Ruivah's *Social Change Among the Naga (Tangkhul)* (1993), Ng Mataisang *The Tangkhul Society and Religion: A Historical Study* (1999), A. S. Shimray W. *History of the Tangkhul Nagas* (2001) documents the historical, sociological and anthropological account of the Tangkhul Nagas from the insider's point of view and as a member of the community. Khashim also brought out the changes that had conceded after the introduction of Christianity from the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga. M. Horam writes meticulously the politics of the Tangkhul Nagas in the politics of other Tribal Nagas in his book *Naga Polity* (1975), and discussed some important aspects of the Social and cultural life of Nagas in his another book *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas*(1977).

Scholars' Association (TSA)<sup>10</sup>, R. Vashum, the Chief-Editor has mentioned in the preface “that in the process of colonialism (in some case Colonization) and post-colonization, most of the unique cultures and identities have been uprooted...”<sup>11</sup>. The other sources have been writings on colonial encounters and the loss or fading away of cultural traditions, trying to understand the idea of “remnants” that become the important threads in my study. Within the cycle of festivals, the interesting presence of the relationship of the Tangkhul Nagas to the concepts of soul, mourning, loss/departure, and memory/celebrations and community are deeply connected through the ideas of enactment and ritual inclusions. It becomes important to understand the reasons behind the replacements of some of those celebrations by other practices like burying of the dead, as well as the reason for the reassertion of identity through resurrecting those rituals once again. Presently, there is a gradual realization within the community the necessity to restructure such rituals once again. Some of the important questions that come up in this context are: How and why does a community reconstruct the past from its remnants after having let go of it, and can that be taken as a process without understanding the politics of the agenda? To understand any kind of performance, does it require the performance to be seen or be present in the performing space during the event? Can the aesthetics of the performance be transmitted through without the act of seeing? Also, can there be a collective memory of a performance or an event or of the past? How would we go about examining corporeal practice from the past, once the very bodies that constitute it have disappeared?

Through this dissertation, I have attempted to analyze the archival sources and texts that are available. I have also made an effort to examine the use of performance space, techniques of the body including specific movements, dance-steps, and gestures. I have tried to explore the use of language, the logic of participation, intended audience, assumptions about presentation and representation, the social hierarchies that configure or delimit the performance of self (in terms of status, gender, social function, and so on), the role of social myths and legends, the competing and simultaneous activities surrounding the performance, the ways in which the (agricultural, religious,

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<sup>10</sup> Tangkhul Scholars Association (TSA) is a forum established by research scholars and professors from the Tangkhul community to initiate and undertake research project relating to Tangkhul Nagas community. TSA has published two books *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective* (2014) and *Rethinking Education in the Hills of Northeast India* (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Vashum, R. *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective* (2014). pp 9-10.

budgetary) calendar frames the event, and the importance of the landscape in the construction of the physical and symbolic staging.

The idea that we forget or remember the past, that memory is not necessarily a reliable way of accessing the truth of the past is dealt in great details in the studies of cultural memory. The term ‘cultural memory’ signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon, as an act of individual remembering as well as collective. Cultural memorization is an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described which, in turn, continues to shape the future. Thus, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present as well as the future. Cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer, but something that you actually perform consciously or otherwise. Memory is active and it is situated in the present.

The study of memory as a social phenomenon finds its roots in the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). In the 1920s, Halbwachs coined the phrases like “collective memory” and “social frameworks of memory” to describe the way people’s perceptions of the past are crucially shaped and conditioned by their life experiences within social groups.<sup>12</sup> Three fundamental insights from Halbwachs’s research would have a lasting impact on subsequent scholarship. The first is the observation that human beings’ memories of the past are determinatively shaped by present day concern.<sup>13</sup> In his book *On Collective Memory* (1950), Halbwachs addressed the “reshaping operation” performed in and through the memory, noting that “even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu.”<sup>14</sup> Later, in his posthumously published *On collective Memory*, he reasserted:

remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared,

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<sup>12</sup> Halbwachs, 1950: page??

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered.<sup>15</sup>

Halbwachs suggested that remembering in itself is a reconstruction and memories in that way get build up across times. This concept helped us understand that in the present when a member of the Tangkhul Nagas community remembers, s/he remembers within the present socio-religio-political structure that has undergone many changes in the past decades. The second fundamental insight gained was that memories of the past are framed, constituted and constructed in and through the interaction of specific community. Halbwachs wrote, “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”<sup>16</sup> According to Halbwachs, members of a community share a common data or concepts and continually pass back and forth and which is the only process to understand how remembrance is at once recognized and remembered. Presently, for the Tangkhul Nagas, remembering and recognizing the past has become a necessity for the sake of the whole community. It is not just restricted to assert their identity per se, but to understand the present in a better way through the act of embracing and knowing the past. Thirdly, he claimed that memories of the past are framed by the physical spaces in which acts of remembrance take place. In the context of my study, the Tangkhuls had been inhabiting in their ancestral land for generations. The landscapes and monuments erected were accessible in everyday basis and therefore Halbwachs’ concept became relevant for understanding the traces and the remnants that are physically accessible even in today’s time.

Paul Connerton’s work *How Societies Remember* discussed how human’s perception of the past become habituated and “sedimented in the body” in and through various kinds of “incorporating” and “inscribing”.<sup>17</sup> By ‘inscribing’ practices he meant actions that store or encode information for later retrieval: the most prominent example is the use of the alphabet in writing, which transfers the properties of speech to replicable written forms.<sup>18</sup> Connerton marked that the “incorporating practices,” as a range of unobserved (and yet thoroughly ingrained) mnemonic

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>17</sup> Connerton, 1989:72-73

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

actions were performed in the body, from the repertoire of gestures connected with standards of etiquette to ritual postures and performances within liturgical settings.<sup>19</sup> The two kinds of habituations Connerton suggested helped the Tangkhuls to know what the inscribed and incorporated practices are within community structure and help how such habitual practices contributed in archiving performative repertoire of the past.

As historian Greg Dening discussed in *Performances*, “‘Presenting the Past’ will always imply bringing the past and present together. It will also imply that the past will not be replicated or repeated, but represented, shaped, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed.”<sup>20</sup> To think in Greg Dening’s line of thoughts, we can deliberate Joseph Roach’s understanding of the three-sided relationship of memory, performance and substitution where Roach proposed how culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process called “surrogation”. Roach defines surrogation as the process of substituting the vacancies created by the loss through death or other forms of departure by an alternative new or surviving elements in the life of the community.<sup>21</sup> For Roach, the past is replaced, replicated, repeated and represented in a new form which he considered it as a ‘surrogation’ of the past culture or performance.<sup>22</sup> This notion of ‘surrogation’ as taken up by Roach helped me understand whether the Christian belief systems and rituals practiced in the post Christian era substituted the pre Christian way of life and belief systems. The term performance suggests both a praxis and an episteme. It proves that to view an event, performance can be deliberated as an object of analysis, as a repertoire, as a spectacle, as a world view and as an analytical lens. What I intend to explore through this dissertation is if the systems of embodied practices stemming from pre Christian period to the period after conversion still continue to make their presence felt among the present Tangkhul Nagas. I include the community practices particularly everyday activities, festivals, death ceremonies, rituals, dance, songs, everyday speeches and so on to analyze the framework of embodiment in terms of individual and the collective.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 74

<sup>20</sup> Dening, 1996

<sup>21</sup> Roach, 1996:2

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

In her work titled *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan outlines the “ontology of performance”, stressing the liveness of the performative event, the now in which that performance takes place: “performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation.”<sup>23</sup> According to Phelan, the defining feature of performance that which separates it from all other phenomenon is that it is “live” and “disappears” without a trace.<sup>24</sup> If the liveness of the performance is only for the present, then how would a performing community continue to perform and transmit the knowledge and the act of performing? Diana Taylor’s book *Archive and the Repertoire* demonstrates the continuity of performance as she argued that the “DNA of performance” helps focus on certain kinds of transmission. Taylor's central thesis develops the concept of a repertoire as a corporeal, multi-generational heritage of actions that exists independently of the archive, which contains exclusively recorded material.<sup>25</sup> Taylor cited many examples in the colonial history of the Americas where colonizers and evangelists celebrated successful substitutions by the colonizers’ culture. This was, in fact, a performative shift and doubling had occurred that both preserved and protected the antecedents. Taylor defines “performance functions as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behaviour’.”<sup>26</sup> “Performance” on the other hand, constitutes the object/process of analysis in performance studies, that is, the many practices and events- dance, theatre, ritual, funerals, festivals- that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event appropriate behaviors. The process of selection, memorization or internalization and transmission takes place within specific system of representation.<sup>27</sup> It transmits communal memories, histories and values form one generation to another. This idea of the embodiment and transmission of knowledge as formulated contributed an important role to discern and decipher the performances and the knowledge transmission of the Tangkhul Nagas with the historical changes brought by Christianity. The continuous debate and contesting notions of the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ is read subjectively and taking into account the liability and the relationship

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<sup>23</sup> Phelan, 1993:14

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 146

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, 2005:160-189

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, 2005:3

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1-52

of the ‘past’ with the ‘present’ and vice versa to understand both to be relatively dependent and logically seen as a fluid state.

This research relies strongly on ethnographic methodology and historiography. Methods like close interview with elders from the community who were the witness and testimonies of transformation and conversion from the indigenous pre-Christian community to the Christianized community were used, visiting libraries, analyzing the available secondary data like texts and documents. I attempted to practice ‘Thick Description’ of the festivals and the rituals around the festival collected from the oral and written sources. My position as a researcher is paradoxical because, though I am a member of the community, some community festivals and ritual performances that were once performed around the festivals are alien to me due to the discontinuity of such practices in the course of time. But at the same time, I have the advantage of participating in some festivals, witnessing the landscape, hearing the music and observe the dance performances that still continue to remain even in the present day for which I can apply ‘participant observation method’ in my research.

The current cycle of festivals registers some few important ritual celebrations amongst the Tangkhuls even after large scale conversion of its members. In this context, *Thisham Phanit* (soul sending off festival) becomes conspicuous in the way it has ceased to be celebrated. The first chapter discusses the common thread of the belief system that run through all the rituals and their celebrations and explore the concept and understanding of ‘God’ and ‘Spirit’ in continuation from the practices of the times before the introduction of Christianity. The complex co-existence of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs in these rituals are analyzed in the context of Tangkhul life and practice. The functions of maintaining and reaffirming cultural identity and social solidarity as well as a parallel existence with the Christian practices become reasons for the continuation of these ritual celebrations. The role of the Christian church vis-a-vis the much remembered *Awunga* (the village Chief), *Sharva* (the village priest) and *Khanong* (the shaman) of the pre-Christian times foreground the extremely important role among the Tangkhul community as they were held at high esteem and given respect as the intermediary between *Ameowa* (the creator), *Kameo* (the spirits)



and man. In this chapter, I also discuss how these three characters perform their respective roles within the community especially their ritualistic characteristics in relation to *Thisam Phanit*.

The second chapter focuses on the much talked about religious and philosophical idea of death amongst the Tangkhul of the pre-Christian times. Remembered with nostalgia and a sense of loss, many writings refer to the festival of *Thisam* as an abandoned but not forgotten festival of the past. In the reconstruction of the “vanished” ritual, what becomes extremely important to me are these three words- ‘Soul’, ‘Departure’ and ‘Festival’, and the way in which all three continue to exist meaningfully within the ritual practices in the everyday life of the Tangkhul people even today. Relating to the religious notion of the concept of ‘life after death’, the existence of the ‘Land of Dead’, the fear and belief of the dreadfulness of *Kokto* who guarded the gate of the land of dead will help in understanding the structure of the ritual in this case. The principle focus is on a particular ritual during this festival, when the family of the deceased chose a representative *Thila Kapho* who belonged to the same sex as the deceased and who impersonated the deceased till the end of the festival. Some of the rituals incorporating sacrificing of animals or other objects, dances, songs, theatrical role playing and performances associated with the festival, continue to be present in some of the continuing festivities in the community. This chapter also attempts to reconstruct and document *Thisam Phanit* through the memory of the elderly members of the community who witnessed the festival before their conversion into Christianity, and also by collecting and rearranging documented records available in books, magazines, journals and so on.

The third chapter discusses some of the important remnants of the Tangkhul life in the post conversion times. Such remnants of the practices of the past exist as a continuity of the old traditions and culture in customs such as feasts and gift exchange, in objects, landscape and monuments, music and dance and so on. These practices are considered as a site for memory, the intangible culture and the spaces of significance such as the *Kazeiram* (Land of dead), that still carry some association with the past through the memories and orally transmitted history. The connections of such elements within the community are used in this research for understanding how they continue to perform and to mark the identity of the community. Even though many festivals, rituals, animal sacrifices, every day practices, belief system have changed and been

discontinued, many still continue to linger on within the old traditional practices and are apparent and noticeable even after mass conversion into Christianity in modern times. One of the central questions of my research here is around the act, the idea and the ways of remembering, that help the community to carry on some of the past practices, in a way that it actually manages to escape stringent measures of restrictions imposed by the church, through these apparently regular (hence unchallenging) practice of everyday life.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the existing debates, and to help create a cultural consciousness that the past and the present are intimately linked. The past exists in the form of remnants and in the memory of the people who have shared the communal space. It exists to be reinvented or reconstructed; the challenge is to reinvent and reconstruct it in a way that allows for creativity, imagination and remembering. With the help of memory (individual and collective) and through the process of remembering and recollection, this dissertation aims to document and archive what is available in the present about the past. It is important to note that the process of reconstruction will remain important as this dissertation attempts to deliver no prescriptive answers but rather suggestive and possible examples towards understanding and analyzing 'how to reconstruct'. Other Questions which follows are 'what to reconstruct' and 'why to reconstruct'. But these questions demand the construction and reconstruction of cultural traditions and performances including rituals, songs, dances, every day practices involved in festivities and ceremonies.

## *Chapter One*

### *Tangkhul Nagas: Religion and Ritual Performances*

Tangkhul Nagas have abandoned most of their traditional practices. The traditional practices have largely been replaced by practices related directly to their new faith i.e. Christianity. Their relationship with the 'past' is in the form of 'nostalgia'- just a remembrance of what their forefathers were. While the new generations of Tangkhuls have marched ahead with their own interests and aims, their 'past' can be seen in the residues of past traditions including songs, oral narrations, way of performing everyday activities which are still practiced by elderly people in the villages. To a larger extent, the impressions of the past therefore are constructed from pieces of information from different sources. Since writing was not in practice and print culture was absent among the Tangkhuls, and the Nagas in general, oral traditions constitute one major source of knowledge and information about the past life. The culture of writing came to the Tangkhuls only after William Pettigrew, an American Baptist Missionary introduced it during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the coming of the Christian Missionaries, the Tangkhuls underwent tremendous change in different aspects. With the coming of new generations, change in beliefs systems, political structure and the cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas have undergone massive transformation. Therefore, to understand the transformations and changes in cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas, stories narrated by the elderly people on what they remember about their past during the present becomes one integral means to recapture and re-visit the old terrain and if possible even to reconstruct different practices and performances. At this present juncture when most of the cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas have either been Christianized or modernized, the reliable sources to their past are etched in the memories of the older members of community, who were born before the large scale conversion to Christianity took place in 1910 onwards.

A significant way of understanding the cultural practices of a community is to analyze the religion and the performances<sup>28</sup> by the members of the community and transitions that have taken

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<sup>28</sup> Performances here is the 'being', 'doing' 'showing doing' as Richard Schechner defined. He also defined it as to "mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary

place through the ages with the introduction of new ideas and knowledge. The concept of culture as practice is intrinsically embedded with the ‘lived experience’ of the people. The analysis of cultural practices of any community has to take this ‘lived experience’ of culture into account. According to Raymond Williams, the word culture is used in two senses: “to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort...Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.”<sup>29</sup> According to Williams, culture was the meaning and practices of ordinary human being that constituted lived experience. It was the tapestry of texts, practices and meanings generated by everybody as they conduct their lives. On the other hand, from the anthropological point of view, Clifford Geertz defined culture as a “context... within which (social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes) can be intelligible ... described.”<sup>30</sup> Which means to say that culture allows social events or behaviors to be turned into significant acts of communication.

Culture and Religion were in many regards separate and distinct, but they also overlap and have an impact on each other. The culture in which a person lives is strongly influenced by the predominant religion of their society. The cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas were closely interconnected with their beliefs and religion due to which understanding the cultural practices alone without understanding the complexities of religious system is simply not possible. Religion was, and still is, the center of Tangkhul Nagas’ life since all activities are linked with it. There is no venture of life- social, economic, political and other domestic household activities in the life of the Tangkhul Nagas without first performing religious rites, ceremonies and sacrifices to the Supreme Being<sup>31</sup> and the many *Kameos*<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, the study of religion and culture is about understanding how religion may be an important element to know the intricacies involved in the

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life – are made of “twice-behaved behaviors,” “restored behaviors,” performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. Here, performances are the rituals, play, or even the everyday ordinary activities.

Schechner, 2004:22

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 1989:4

<sup>30</sup> Geertz, 1973:4

<sup>31</sup> The Tangkhul Nagas believed in the existence of a supreme god known to the people in many different names like: *Ameowa* or *Reisang Chonme*. *Kazing wung*, *Ngalei wung*, *Kasa Akhava*.

<sup>32</sup> *Kameo* was referred to the spirit that possessed supernatural power who can be both malignant and benevolent and intervene the life of human beings.

everyday life especially that of the rituals and festivals associated with the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas.

This chapter examines and analyzes the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas' religious and cultural practices, the changes that have caused in the way of life among the Tangkhul Nagas with the introduction of Christianity. Influences of the missionaries resulted to rapid changes in the realm of religion, socio-cultural activities of the people. Some of the monographs written by the British administrators and missionaries available include: Sir James Johnstone's *Manipur and the Naga Hills* (1896), J.H Hutton's *The Sema Nagas* (1921) and *The Angamis Nagas* (1921), J.P Mill's *The Lotha Nagas* (1922) and *The Rengma Nagas* (1937) and T.C Hodson's *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911). The account on other different Naga Communities like Angamis, Lotha, Sema and Rengma provided some details about the pre-Christian life and practices, if not adequately. In absence of such documentation it is necessary to understand the ways in which the everyday life and practices of the Tangkhul have incorporated new ideas from Christian belief and practices. Simultaneously, it is important to note that some practices of previous times have continued either parallel or as elements, absorbed and restructured to fit into the structures of Christian practices. Further in this chapter, I discuss the common threads of the belief system that run through all the rituals and festivals and have explored their shared knowledge on 'God' and 'Spirit'. I shall strategically revisit cultural practices and ritual performances before Christianity in order to better understand the changes and continuity in the practices from the previous time period to the present.

### ***Encountering Christianity***

With the expansion of the British rule over Naga Territory, the Christian missionaries approached the British authorities to grant permission to work among the Nagas. At first, the approach was turned down but when independent Nagas resisted the advent of British Colonial rule, they utilized the service of different Christian organizations to tame the Nagas including the Tangkhul Nagas. The earlier motive of the those officers who helped and supported missionary work other than personal religious conviction was that it would help 'civilize' the hilly Nagas and hence contribute

to their pacification. Realizing the ethnic, cultural, traditional and customary peculiarity of the Nagas from the plain people of India, Sir. Johnstone, a British political agent in Manipur wrote about the need of Christianizing the Nagas to save them from the invasion of other culture. Sir. Johnstone said: “I feel strongly that we are not justified in allowing them to be corrupted and gradually ‘converted’ by the miserable, bigoted, caste-observing Mussalman of Bengal” and continued if “properly taught and judicially handled, the Angamis would have made a fine manly set of Christian, of a type superior to most Indian native converts and probably devout to our rule.”<sup>33</sup> The mentioning of the Angami Naga tribe is also applicable to the Tangkhul Nagas as the British colonizers like Johnstone bluntly believed in ‘enlightening’ the indigenous group of people. According to M. Horam, a Tangkhul Naga scholar, the religious policy of the British administrators in Nagaland who employed Christian missionaries was guided by political interest. He wrote, “When the British established their authority over the Nagas, they favoured the missionaries in many ways not because of any sympathy with their missionary work, but because they thought that their influence would be of service to the British administrators in their campaign against the Naga dissidents.”<sup>34</sup> It was in the year 1894 when the American Baptist Mission was allowed to go to Naga Hills for the first time and that was when Rev. William Pettigrew came to Imphal in Manipur as a missionary. His objective was to Christianize the Hindu Meiteis of the Imphal valley, but such objectives were unfulfilled. Later he shifted his ambition to work among the people in the hills. In 1896, he came to Ukhrul the homeland for the Tangkhul Nagas and got a permission from the *Hunphun* village Chief<sup>35</sup> to build a house of living and began to settle there to achieve his objective of Christianizing the people.

The missionaries began to take up massive works in the spheres of religion and education soon after they came into contact with the Nagas. According to Shimreiwung, a Tangkhul Naga researcher, these two agencies, the ‘state’ (Colonial and Independent) and ‘non-state’ (Missionaries and others), have served as a catalyst of transition among the Tangkhul Nagas and most of the tribal communities in the Northeastern part of India. The colonial period turned out to be an era when new changes began to take root in tribal society. The Colonial rulers adopted

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<sup>33</sup> Johnstone, 1896:43-44

<sup>34</sup> Horam, 1988:85

<sup>35</sup> Raihao Awungshi was the chief of Hunphun village when William Pettigrew came to Ukhrul in 1896.

military measures and succeeded in establishing its domain and authority over the people, bringing significant changes in the political structure and economic life and developed the means of transport and communications. On the other hand, along with the establishment of schools, humanitarian measures, and disbursement of medical aids, the Christian missionaries succeeded in converting most of the tribes.

The early Christian missionaries did bring about drastic transformations among the Tangkhul communities and other Naga tribes of north-east India. After the experience of Colonial rule and acceptance of Christianity, the prevailing situation in tribal societies became less restrictive to new changes and more receptive to other cultures. Due to traditional practices like 'head-hunting' and the prevalent closed social structure of their society, most of their beliefs and practices were 'locality specific'.<sup>36</sup> To a large extent, their beliefs and practices do not expand beyond their community. Till the arrival of 'foreign rulers', not many changes had taken place in Tangkhul society. In the pre-Christianity periods, not only the Tangkhuls, but in every community in Northeast India, the cultural expression reflected 'simple cultural patterns' with the tradition of community lores, music and dances, festivities, local myths and sacred lore which were 'symptomatic of their philosophy'.<sup>37</sup>

The significance of the existence of Tangkhul Nagas traditional belief or religion cannot be dismissed in the present as Rammathot Khongreiwo strongly asserted that "Christianity in today's society largely stands on the debris of the Pre-Christian Tangkhul socio-religious edifices"<sup>38</sup>. He pointed out that the present situation both in social and religious sphere is constructed on the debris of the past. The argument asserted that the existence of a certain belief systems among the Tangkhul Nagas before Christianity was undeniable even though the western colonizers, especially missionaries, did not consider such belief as religion. According to Khongreiwo, this "misrepresentation of the belief system and practices of the Tangkhul Nagas (including the Nagas in general) by the early missionaries has been largely observed as a conscious

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<sup>36</sup> Eaton, 1984

<sup>37</sup> Aggarwal, 1995:14-15

<sup>38</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:67

attempt to justify their proselytizing mission in the region who even denied the existence of any form of religion or religious institution among the native people.”<sup>39</sup> He suggested that the early Christian Missionaries, in their proselytizing missions in the Tangkhul country, represents the Tangkhuls as ‘wild’, ‘savage’, ‘barbarous’, ‘unruly’, ‘pristine primitive’ and ‘heathen’ people possessing no established religions and religious institution.

Pettigrew had imposed ‘strict discipline’ in the church in order to maintain ‘the holiness of the church as people of God’.<sup>40</sup> He was convinced that Christians should lead a ‘distinct life’ based on the Biblical teachings and different from ‘Non-Christians’. Pettigrew's discipline includes abstinence from the participation in traditional festivals which involved taking part in old rituals, drinking rice beer, dancing and singing songs, and all other cultural practices associated with their past. When this strict discipline was implemented in the church many backed out, and Pettigrew had just few followers, yet he was adamant in following the disciplines. In the process of conversion, the church had been used as an institution and instrument to control the behavior of the converts. Those who did not follow the disciplines were excluded from the church and they were also isolated from community activities.<sup>41</sup> These disciplines were not just a project of implanting Christian life and ‘cleansing of evil practices’, but it became a part of ‘civilizing mission’ which the missionaries and colonial power had always intended to implement. The missionaries were not only opposed to traditional religious practices, but also all other cultural and social practices which in principle had conflict with Christian beliefs and practices. As the rhythm of everyday life of Nagas was interrupted by the Christian beliefs and practices, their concept of time and space were also subsequently transformed. Sunday became a day solely reserved for sacred activities; which actually disrupted the pattern of time they had been observing from the past. Christianity not only changed the religious beliefs and practices, but also convinced the Tangkhuls to adopt different lifestyles and cultural practices. The disdain for old cultural practices was implanted on the minds of the converted Tangkhuls by the Christian missionaries, as they considered that all forms of traditional practices were inextricably connected with traditional religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, there were massive drives by the missionaries

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<sup>39</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:64

<sup>40</sup> Lolly, 1985:43

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 45



encouraging the converted Tangkhuls to adopt western cultural practices and discard old practices. The desire to learn, acquire, and adopt ‘other’ cultural practices and lifestyle began to grow along with the increase of ‘inferiority’ complex; these features were non-existent before the advent of Christianity. During the Christianization process, religious conversion and cultural transformation were intrinsically correlated, for instance, adoption of new cultural practices, like western dress or abstinence from alcohol consumption, were considered as outward signs of inner transitions. Thus, expectations of the Christian community from the converts to prove their conviction through actions, and the struggle of the newly converted to prove their transformation set the benchmark for various changes in Tangkhul society. There always had been rigorous effort to create distances and differentiation between believers of Christianity and old belief systems of the Tangkhuls. Subsequently, as Christianization process moved further, not only the old beliefs systems and rituals, but traditional cultural practices were also relegated to the past.

Since the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas ways of life, the political, social, economic, cultural and religion were closely interrelated and interwoven with one another, the effect and change in one sphere ultimately impact the other spheres. With the introduction of modern school, education, written script, Christianity, western musical forms, Tangkhul Nagas community began to slowly embrace new knowledge and belief systems. Along with these changes, ‘cultural elimination’<sup>42</sup> took place in different forms and shape. According to Tuisem Ngakang, the “first and foremost step taken by the missionaries were to eliminate and demonized the different spirit worshiped and revered by the Tangkhul Nagas as condradictory to Christian beliefs.”<sup>43</sup> In the sphere of rites and festivals related to death, like *Thisam phanit* which was celebrated for a long period of time was completely stopped as a “fine of Rs. 600 was imposed to anyone who attempted to celebrate.”<sup>44</sup> The missionaries considered every indigenou thing as heathen practices, which they considered as their duty to get rid of as a service to the Nagas. Tribal songs, dances, sacrifices, celebration of various kinds were slowly removed from the converted Naga Christian. *Morung*, the Nagas’ centre of learning music was disapproved by the missionaries on the ground that as it

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<sup>42</sup> “Colonial Encounter and the Cultural Processes of Nagas”, By Tuisem Ngakang , [http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts\\_and\\_Culture.Colonial\\_Encounter\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Processes\\_of\\_Nagas](http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts_and_Culture.Colonial_Encounter_and_Cultural_Processes_of_Nagas) , Accessed on 17/04/2015

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

was a place of vice. The missionary detested the tribal culture of breaking out into community singing and dance practiced with big feast. The missionaries feared that the newly convert Christians might reverse back to ‘heathenism’ if they are permitted community singing and dancing. Tuisem Ngakang analyzed and came to a conclusion that the elimination and the disappearance of various practices of the Tangkhul Nagas were motivated by two factors:

Firstly, some of the practices were partly abolished by the missionaries as against the Christian faith and partly by the administrator as their moral duty to eradicate the ill practices in their administered areas. Secondly, in order to show their sense of distinctness by the newly converts Nagas and to show their cultural segregation from their non-converts, they themselves gave up their indigenous practices. The early converts being falsely impressed by the white missionaries, the acceptance of ruler's religion i.e. Christianity gave them a sense of religious superiority over the Naga indigenous belief system.<sup>45</sup>

According to Ngakang, another cultural process which causes the loss of culture among the Nagas and in specific the Tangkhuls was the process of “cultural imposition and adaptation”. Cultural imposition was an imposition of new culture or practices to the native, whereas cultural adaptation was a process in which the native started finding means to merge into the new culture that they encounter. Ngakang claimed that the Nagas for many years, even after converting to Christianity were still a nominal Christian and hardly understood the implications of the Christian faith. With the elimination of various practices of the Nagas, the missionaries advocated the Tangkhuls to adopt certain tangible symbols of ‘Christian Civilization’-wearing of clothes, cropping of hair, introducing some new food items in the life of the Tangkhuls. Introduction of tea in order to replace ‘rice beer’ for everyday drinking was a clear evident of cultural imposition by the Christian missionaries as the missionaries considered drinking rice beer as part and parcel of the ‘paganism’ and the root of violence and debauchery. Another such example was the imposition of western hymn instead of traditional songs for religious and social purposes. Also there were some aspects

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<sup>45</sup> “Colonial Encounter and the Cultural Processes of Nagas”, By Tuisem Ngakang , [http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts\\_and\\_Culture.Colonial\\_Encounter\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Processes\\_of\\_Nagas](http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Arts_and_Culture.Colonial_Encounter_and_Cultural_Processes_of_Nagas) , Accessed on 17/04/2015

of culture which were not consciously imposed by the missionaries, but the native considered them as integral part of the missionaries. For instance the architecture of the house build by the missionaries were considered to be a Christian housing by the early converts.

Before the advent of Christianity, the Tangkhul Nagas were illiterate and moreover the culture of writing was absent. Rev. William Pettigrew, supported by American Baptist Mission, took up the task of transliteration work, reducing Tangkhul language which was in a purely oral form into scribal form using the Roman characters.<sup>46</sup> Along with Christianity, he introduced modern education system and more importantly established the written culture to the Tangkhul Nagas. During the early period of evangelism he also set up a Mission School where Christian's values were taught simultaneously along with the western education. At the same time, Pettigrew came out with the first English textbook titled *Step By Step* in 1897 followed by two Tangkhul Text Book popularly known as *Tangkhul Primer* consisting of *First Primer* (1897) and *Second Primer* (1898). AC Kharingpam sees the publication of these Primers as “not only important as a document of western education for the Tangkhul Nagas, it became a colossal demise of oral tradition and the beginning of written translations.”<sup>47</sup> The publication of the Primers were soon followed by the *Luke wui Lairik* a translation of the Book of Luke from the *Bible* in 1902. A collection of few western hymns translated into Tangkhul dialect titled *Jesu wui La: Hymns in Tangkhul Naga* was later published in 1907. This period marks the beginning of western musical culture in the history of the Tangkhul Nagas.

### ***Religion as Remembered***

Religion is what people do on a day-to-day level. To put this in another way, religion is nearly always both a set of ideas and beliefs that people can engage with and also the framework for their lived experiences and daily practices. No doubt, different definitions of religion have been suggested by theologians, historians, sociologist, anthropologist and others, but one thing that was

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<sup>46</sup> Shimreiwung, 2014:156

<sup>47</sup> Kharingpam, 2015:37

accepted and understood to be present in all the definitions is the relationship between human and supernatural being. Andrew Lang defines religion as “the belief in the primal being, a maker, undying, usually moral without denying that the belief is spiritual beings, even if immoral.”<sup>48</sup> According to *Britannica Encyclopedia of world religions*, the definition of religion that has received reasonable acceptance among scholars is that “religion is a system of communal beliefs and practices relative to superhuman beings.”<sup>49</sup> This definition emphasizes that religion is a communal system or structure related to superhuman beings, whereas Andrew Lang’s definition rests its argument in the spiritual being who can be moral or immoral. Superhuman beings and Spiritual being both considered to have a force or energy that man does not possess and they can do things human cannot do. Their miraculous powers set them apart from ordinary mortals. They can be either male or female, neither, or both, and they can take the form of ancestors, gods, goddesses, or spirits. They can be malignant or benevolent or both. What was important was the relation of these beings to specific communal beliefs and practices, the myths and rituals of particular human beings. Religion was about the relationship between human being and the supernatural world. V.K Srivastava<sup>50</sup> sees religion as one of the basic institution in which a system of beliefs usually involved the worship of supernatural forces or beings. Similarly for Sinha,<sup>51</sup> religion was a subject of great concern even in an advanced society of today where futility of science has often compelled man to search for God, or a supernatural power so that his faith in the order of things was not absolutely lost. Religion was based on simple faith imbued with a sense of supernaturalism. Religion in preliterate societies exercise a more profound influence over man’s thoughts and behavior who ultimately surrender all their actions to him.

According to Jubilee Shangrei, for the Pre-Christian and Christian Tangkhul Nagas, “no distinct separation of politics and religion” existed.<sup>52</sup> Shangrei remarked that “no political actions of any importance, no assembly of the people, no meeting of court could take place without an introductory sacrifice and rituals by the chief or village priest... Religion was not independent of

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<sup>48</sup> Lang, 1913:4

<sup>49</sup> *Britannica Encyclopedia of world religions* 2006, 915

<sup>50</sup> Srivastava, 1997:97

<sup>51</sup> Sinha, 1977:11

<sup>52</sup> Shangrei, 2014:99

the state, but neither was the state independent of religion”<sup>53</sup>. A.S. W. Shimray stated that religion comes in the forefront and occupied the predominant place in the life of the Tangkhul Nagas. Regarding the religious life and belief of the Nagas, he quoted Tuisem A Shishak who wrote:

Among the Nagas, Then, to be religious means to be true to the traditions of the tribe, everything in the routine of life is bound up with some belief, tradition or superstition, which is an integral part of their religion. A Naga’s life, in all aspects, is guided by his religious belief and practices... the religion of the Nagas is intensely practical. They performed their rites lest mysterious powers about them bring calamities to their door... indeed, it is the physical necessity to protecting man from bodily harm and of getting food in abundance that dictates in large measure the substance of religious observances. The observances of this and are not dependent upon some individual, but the entire social unit, the village joins in it.<sup>54</sup>

The purpose or the functions of religion among the Nagas that include the Tangkhul Nagas was to protect them from any bodily harm and it is to be noted with great interest that rituals, rites, sacrifices, ceremonies and so on were taken up mostly by the community and not by the individual. For Shimray, this kind of religion was a “corporate religion where the entire village community participates in religious rites and ceremonies equally.”<sup>55</sup> By ‘corporate religion’ he meant to say that the traditional Tangkhul Nagas religion believed in the interconnectivity of individuals actions to the welfare of the greater collective village community. It was believed that the wrongdoing of one individual adversely affected the entire village population, and since the structure of the village was maintained in such a way that the whole village was seen not only as a religious unit, but social, political, economic and cultural as well. In the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas religion, the breach of time- honored custom of the Nagas was regarded as sin. Hodson rightly mentioned:

Sin, sickness and death are not for them isolated, unconnected phenomena. Sin in their view consists primarily of breaches both by accident and by intent of the unwritten laws of society. What gives validity to these

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<sup>53</sup> Shangrei, 2014:99

<sup>54</sup> Shimray, 2001:90-91

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,192

unwritten laws is the vague fear that something may happen if they are broken... they come to belief that the occurrence of any of these ‘extra natural’ cases of death is good evidence of sin either in the sense of breach of some precept of the communal law, the punishment for which follows, automatically, quasi-mechanically, without postulating the intermediary agency of spirits, or, in some cases, of an offence against some power.<sup>56</sup>

Setting aside personal liberty and interest, every individual had to be religious and obedient to the command of social and religious practices of the village community.

The pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed in the notion of ‘life after death’. They believed in the existence of *kazingram* which simply meant the sky or heaven symbolizing the dwelling place of the Supreme Being who was known to the Tangkhul Nagas by different names like *Ameowa*, *Varivara*, *Reisang Chonme*, *Kasa Akhava* and *Kazingwung*. Another realm that was believed to have existed was *Kazeiram*: a dwelling place for the dead ones. Unlike the Christian belief in the ‘resurrection’ and ‘salvation’ of one’s soul, the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed life after death in *Kazeiram*. The notion that soul of those who were righteous while they are living on earth were believed to go to *Kazingram* (sky) whereas the soul of those who were not righteous while they are living go to *Kazeiram* (land of dead) was the belief of the newly embraced Christianity. In contrast to that, the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed that every individual has a soul and when they die the individual’s soul, regardless of gender, status and age, all went to *Kazeiram* (land of Dead) and live a life similar to the life conducted on earth.

Christian missionaries and British administrators had branded the Nagas and Tangkhul Religion as animism, paganism or heathenism. Whatever the case may be, the Nagas were not idolatrous-worshippers of graven images or idols, or worshipper of animals. Here Hutton forwarded his argument, “polytheist, Pantheist he may be, but he is no idolator”<sup>57</sup>. The key features of animism are the beliefs that animals others than humans, plants, and material objects and places

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<sup>56</sup>Hodson, 2011:163

<sup>57</sup> Hutton, 1968:57

are imbued with a sacred or supernatural quality and that inanimate objects are animate. The supernatural quality of an object was often labeled as the spirit or the soul of the animal, plant, or object. For people in cultures with animism, the world around them was filled not just with other living things and inanimate objects but also with the spirits and souls of those things and objects, all of which influence human life. Pagan and heathen were those who hold religious beliefs that are not part of any of the main world's religion and were considered second class or the uneducated, uncivilized, barbaric by the Christians during the earlier period. Pantheism on the other hand is the view that the universe is identical with God, and that God is identical with universe and polytheist is the religious belief in the multiple gods. The Tangkhul Nagas religion, before Christianity, has no name for their religious belief system they followed. All the terms branded to the Tangkhul Nagas religion, in general understanding does not accommodate the complex religious systems. Rather such religion, that is, the religion of the past is simply known in general among the literate as the "Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas"<sup>58</sup> religion.

The belief that doing proper rites for the death enhances the prosperity of the family simply indicates the essence of ancestor worship. But ancestor worship refers to beliefs and customs centered on the worship of the deceased kin. It was always the deceased kin who are venerated and worshiped and it is the living kin of the ancestors who are required to perform the rituals associated. Another important aspects of ancestors worship was that the deceased ancestors take an interest in and can influence the life of their living descendants. Although the Tangkhul Nagas took the death of kin as an important matter and attended with rituals, the Pre-Christian religious system differs from ancestors worship. Tangkhul Nagas acknowledge the death of kin in different occasions like: *Thisham* Festival, *Wonyaithing* ceremony<sup>59</sup>, *Onrah* ceremony and *Chikhur Mathai*<sup>60</sup>. During these festivals and ceremonies, memorial stones were erected and different kinds of rituals were performed. But, the Tangkhul Nagas do not believe that the ancestors could influence the life of their living descendants and make no effort to influence the deceased kin ritually. They

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<sup>58</sup> Rammathot Khongreiwo uses the term 'pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga' to distinguish the religion followed by the Tangkhuls before Christianity from Christianity. It simply means the religious beliefs systems that was followed by the Tangkhuls in the past.

<sup>59</sup> *Wonyaithing* ceremony refers to a ceremony observed relating to death.

<sup>60</sup> *Chikhur Mathai* ceremony refers to a ceremony observed after the burial ceremony and *Thisham* festival on which the graveyard of the entire village was cleaned.

believed in the existence of soul but they do not worship to the souls of their ancestors. Rituals were performed as a token of their love to the dead and also for the fear to Spirits. One major understanding and belief of the people about their ancestors was that the ancestors are benevolent and helpful to the living kin and they communicated mostly through dreams. Among the Tangkhul Nagas, dreams were significant as they either represented activities of the soul, or they were messages sent directly by the gods or spirit or kin ancestors. Among this community, dream was considered one major mode to communicate with the supernatural being. Tangkhul Nagas believed that the *Kameo* (spirit) inhabited all features of the environment- lakes, streams, trees, rocks, mountains and so on. Humans may use these resources if they respect the spirits that inhabited there, offered appropriate prayers and performed appropriate rituals. Failure to perform rituals or offer appropriate sacrifices to the spirit could lead to punishment by the spirit at the moment or in the future.

Although a pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga village was a religious unit, there was no specific space for religious purposes unlike many other religion in the world. In this regard, W Robinson wrote in the middle of the last century, “The Nagas have no established form of worship; they have no temples erected in honor of their deities, and no ministers peculiarly consecrated to their services.”<sup>61</sup> Further, a written code of established theological principles and beliefs are absent in the religion of the Tangkhul Nagas. In fact, script was absent among the Nagas until the Christian Missionaries introduced the Roman characters.<sup>62</sup> It is also worth mentioning that there was no priestly class among the Tangkhul Nagas nor the Priest chosen by the village council was responsible for the spiritual growth of the individuals in the village unlike the Christian priest in the present. Priest or the Pastor in Christian religion were trained and learned in the field of Theology and Divinity to look after the spiritual growth of the fellow believers. But such trainings were not found among the Tangkhul Nagas during the past.

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<sup>61</sup> V.Elwin(ed) citing W.Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam, in the Nagas of Nineteenth Century*, pp 503

<sup>62</sup> According to Nagas’ myth, the Nagas used to have a written script. The script was written on an animal skin. During the period of migration, the dog accompanying the Nagas ate the animal skin out of hunger and from then on the Nagas lost their script.



### *Concept of God and Spirits*

Religion had strong presence in Tangkhul Naga's life. They believed in the existence of a Supreme Being known by different names like *Kazing Ngalei Kasa Akhava* (Creator of Heaven and Earth), *Zinghunga* (The King of Heaven) and *Ameowa*. A.S.W. Shimray also pointed out that the Tangkhul Nagas believed in the "existence of a Supreme God whom they called by different names such as *Kasa Akhava* (Master of Creation or Creator), *Varivara* (Source of Peace), *Kazingpa* (the one who dwells in Heaven/Sky), and *Reisang Chonmi* (the sovereign)."<sup>63</sup> From my interview with many Tangkhul elders, names like *Ameowa* or *Varivara* were seldom used by the Tangkhul Nagas, for they believed that those names were too great for human utterances and therefore it was beyond human's mind to comprehend. Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, instead addressed Him as *kazingwung* (king of the Heaven/Sky) and *Ngaleiwung* (King of the Earth) considering such names to be less sovereign and powerful. Different names were used to address the Supreme Being but one thing that is accepted by all is the existence of one God and the belief in the existence of God. They believed that the Supreme Being judges men's actions- good or bad, right or wrong, and rewarded accordingly. Rammathot Khongreiwo stated:

attributes of the God of the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas are almost wholly identical with the attributes of the Christian God. However, while the Christian God is worshiped, the Pre-Christian God was only believed; and the Pre-Christian God was secured at a remote and inaccessible celestial realm, for He was kind and harmless, and therefore least bothered by Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas.<sup>64</sup>

The Tangkhuls also believed in the existence of spirits around them who are capable of providing all the necessary care and fortune, creating harm to men such as disease and sickness, calamities, and even causing death by their supernatural powers. Both malignant and benevolent spirit were believed to have existed during the past. Among the Tangkhuls, spirits were generally referred by different names such as *Chipee*, *Kameo* and so on. The spirits were believed to hover within the

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<sup>63</sup> Shimray, 2001:192

<sup>64</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:67

realm of the human existence dominating and intervening every activities of human being. With regard to the religious belief of Nagas, Elwin described:

...Although they have a name for God, they do not seem to worship a supreme being... certain it is that their belief in the existence after death of the freed spirit is not uncommon, if not general... whatever may be their belief in a god or a future state, it is certain that they believe in the affinity of evil spirits or demons. Each disease is supposed to be in the immediate keeping of some particular demon, who travels about dealing out sickness and death at his caprice, and to propitiate this many demons in their care.<sup>65</sup>

The Tangkhul Nagas believed that spiritual being called *Kameo* with power and faculties much greater than that of man, existed everywhere in the world. And that the spiritual beings were almost always invariably inclined to use their power and faculties for malignant rather than for benevolent purposes lest propitiated. For Shimray, propitiating the spirit is seen as the hall mark of the Tangkhul Nagas' religion.<sup>66</sup> It was mentioned that the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas were preoccupied with propitiating malevolent spirits lest they would fall victims to their sinister schemes in the form of deaths, diseases and natural calamities.<sup>67</sup> Translating *Kameo* as 'demon' as interpreted by Elwin and other colonial writers actually departed from the essence and general understanding of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. 'Demon' in Christian and other religion represents and denotes the negative, wrong, bad, evil, opposite to the God who is loving, caring, all true, and always good without any exception. *Kameo*, on the other hand is a term used for both the malignant and the benevolent spirit that is believed to reside in the surroundings of the human habitation. Through performing religious rites, rituals, sacrifices and offerings, the Tangkhul Nagas propitiated the spirit to ward off their suffering and difficulties they underwent through in life. Though they believed in a Supreme Being, their sacrifices were directed towards the *Kameo*. Joy Rimai put forward the attitude of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas and the reasons for propitiating the spirits when he said that the "Spirits were not reverend rather it was the fear of spirits harming the people that makes them offer sacrifice. It was the fear of destroying the paddy field, holding hostages of the human soul which makes them propitiated instead of love and

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<sup>65</sup> Elwin, 1969:57

<sup>66</sup> Shimray, 2000:104

<sup>67</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:67

reverence.”<sup>68</sup> The same attitude was echoed when Shimray said that the propitiation of *Kameo* characteristically arose out of fear rather than love and respect.<sup>69</sup>

The general perception that all *Kameo* was malignant is misleading. There were many different *kameos* living around in the environment and they were mostly site-specific. For instance, a *Shurui Kashong Philava* literally means “Princess of the Shirui peak”, is a beautiful lady spirit residing in the Shirui peak. The famous ‘Shirui lily’ (*Lilium Macklineae* Sealy) that grows only in this peak is believed to be the manifestation of the princess.<sup>70</sup> The number of spirits were so many but some of the most important and common ones are: *Phunghui Philava* (Princess of wealth) who was believed to be the source of wealth and riches that lived in the paddy fields, *Shim Kameo* (Spirit of House) that lived in the house and look after the household, *Kaphung Kameo* (Mountain Spirit) was the spirit that lived in the mountain, *Kong Kameo* (River Spirit) was the spirit that lived in the river or stream, *Kharar ngahong Kameo* (Forest Spirit), *Kazat kameo* (Spirit of Sickness) and *Lui kameo* (field spirit) and so on. Another *kameo* known among the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas was the ruler of the *Kazeiram* (land of dead) who was called *Kokto*.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Festivals and Rituals***

For the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, Festivals and Rituals are inseparable. Festivals are community events created by and participated by members of the community, during which the core values of the community are acknowledged and reinforced. In traditional Tangkhul Naga society where the distinction between the natural and the supernatural worlds was often made, most festivals are mostly religious in nature. In addition to that, they may also had important social, political, economic, psychological functions for the participants and the community. Festival is a time set aside for celebration. There was not a single day that went by without performing ritual

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<sup>68</sup> Rimai, Joy. *Polytheism to Monotheism: Impact of Christianity among the Tangkhul Naga Tribe of North-East India*. *South Asia Anthropologist*, 14(1): 2014, pp 77

<sup>69</sup> Shimray, 2000:105

<sup>70</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014: 67

<sup>71</sup> Joy, 2014:77

even in the everyday lives of the people. Ritual simply meant the series of actions that were always performed in the same way, especially as part of their religious belief. Victor Turner considered the term “ritual” to be more fittingly applied to forms of religious behavior associated with social transitions, while the term “ceremony” has a closer bearing on religious behavior associated with social states, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance. Ritual is transformative, whereas ceremony confirmatory.<sup>72</sup> He defined rituals as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests.”<sup>73</sup> According to Turner it may be seasonal, hallowing a culturally defined moment of change in the climatic cycle or the inauguration of an activity such as planting, harvesting, or moving from winter to summer pasture; or they may be contingent, held in response to an individual or collective crisis.

In Roy Rappaport’s word the term ritual “denote the performance of more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.”<sup>74</sup> He explained that ritual encompasses not only human, but even the nature’s surrounding. He did not include every behavior under the umbrella of religious rituals, but instead differentiated the religious and the non-religious rituals. He further mentioned that “all manner of moral acts may be understood by those performing them and by the communities within which they occur to be innately religious.”<sup>75</sup> From the two definitions above, though they are not complete, ‘rituals’ was understood as the manner of repetition of small and thoroughly mundane acts perform by any every man in different levels individually or in a collective community basis. Emily Durkheim argued that religious beliefs are representations that express the nature of sacred things, while rituals are “rules of conduct” governing how people should act in the presence of sacred objects.<sup>76</sup> He also clearly saw ritual as the means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group. Ritual functions to “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member.”<sup>77</sup> It is true that by performing rituals it gave the members of the community the

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<sup>72</sup> Turner, 1967:95

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Rappaport, 1999:24

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>76</sup> Bell, 2009:24

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

opportunity to strengthen their bond. Monica Wilson suggested that another function of rituals “reveal values at their deepest level... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, It is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.”<sup>78</sup>

Festivals and communal feasts constitute an integral part of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. Although Tangkhuls were considered as hard working people, and their occupations were predominantly based on manual work, their festivals were un-usually long. Their time could well be divided between work time and festival time. Festivals time has been considered as a time when rules that are followed during the normal occasions are not applied. During festivals there was no restriction on interactions between the sexes. In some occasions; they danced the whole night, until they were exhausted.<sup>79</sup> The best wine and rice beer were prepared well in advance before the festivities began; elaborate arrangements were made to ensure that no shortages happen. Whatever maybe the nature of festival, excessive consumption of food and drink was a common feature in every festival. And there were some festivals where feasting was more prominent than other activities, such as *Maran Kasa* (feast of merit). Apart from the festivals pertaining to agricultural activities and feast of merit, there were a host of other festivals which had their own significance. *Thisham Phanit* was one of the major festivals of the Tangkhul Nagas. On this festival, the souls of the dead were given an emotional sending-off ceremony. Again, the dead were remembered by constructing *Onrah* (platform with a monolith) on the roadside as a symbol of affection for them.<sup>80</sup> There was intricate connection between these festivals and cultural activities such as songs and dances; as in each festival there were certain songs to be sung and specific dances to be performed.

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<sup>78</sup> Turner and Bruner, 1986:241

<sup>79</sup> Brown, 1874:42.

<sup>80</sup> Shimray, 2000:170-71

### *Ritual Actors*

At this juncture, it becomes essential to understand another vital elimination and alternation in belief system that would help us to comprehend the legitimization of replaced pre-Christian ritual practices. The performative nature of the three influential characters *Awunga* (Village Chief or king), *Sharva* (priest) and *Khanong* (shaman) that acted out a significant and remarkable role in the religious and socio-cultural sphere among the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas needs to be analyzed vis-a-vis the current hierarchy in ritual practices. Their importance and significance have slowly disappeared from the memory of the people as Christianization assumed control over the society. The older practices and traditions prevalent among the Tangkhul Naga and other groups of people in the North-East region of India is gradually vanishing. Yet, despite the changes that had taken place, the past continues to linger on though they are no longer revered and practiced religiously and wholeheartedly as they used to be. In this case, it is therefore necessary to understand the performative characteristics of these three characters which I choose to name as ‘Ritual Actors’ for their ritualistic significance. Rituals may do more than show, when someone perform rituals it is not only to do something in front of someone, but also to let the action turn into an experiment that moves or changes the present situation. It is not merely to entertain but rather to create an effect. Ritual is performed when participants act in front of spectating others or when they play roles in a subjunctive mode. In this act, the ritual actors were not always the “authors” of their own actions. Unlike stage actors, they are not supposed to be pretending. Although they may be performing, because they are aware of being observed, they are also supposed to enact something as agents who perform to accomplish something. Ritual agents are also social persons, not merely agents or performers, so usually they interact; they do not act alone. They do what they do among and with other people. Although ritualists typically act in groups, they also sometimes act as individuals. Since no one escapes socialization and enculturation, even solitary ritual actors interact, because others inhabit their brains and bodies, if not genetically then culturally.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Grimes, 2013:249

### *Awunga (The Village Chief)*

Pre-Christian Tangkhul village was a politically organized community of many clans which has a democratic system of governance that managed its own affairs. The political system was neither monarchical nor republic in the real sense of the term as the system had the features of both. The administration and governance of the village was vested in the institution of *Awunga* (Chief) and *Hanga* (council of clan elders). According to Horam “the village chief is called ‘Awunga’ a title equivalent to the English word ‘king’”<sup>82</sup>. During the colonial period, the colonial administrators had given the title ‘Headman’ for administrative purposes. Headman simply means administrative assistants to District Commissioner or administrative handmaidens of the District Commissioners, especially in the maintenance of law and order in their respective villages. Jubilee Shangrei had clearly described the nature and the significance of *Awunga* among the Tangkhul Village in the following lines:

The village chief is a hereditary chief on the basis of primogeniture that is, the institution of chieftainship flow from the line of the ruling chief to his eldest son, and so on. The chief is the political, social, economic, legal, and military head of the traditional village state. As political head, he was responsible for the maintenance of good order in his state. He is the guardian of the fundamental values of his people and mediates between them and the spiritual forces. The Tangkhul village chief is also the custodian of the village territory even though he does not own the land but is collectively owned by the community. He was also the final arbiter in the administration of justice; that is to say, chiefs have the status of an administrative magistrate presiding over customary, civil and even commercial disputes.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Horam, 1977:76

<sup>83</sup> Jubilee Shangrei, *Traditional Political System of the Tangkhul Nagas: Chieftainship and its Discontent* published in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspectives*. Chicken Neck: New Delhi 2014, pp 97

In every village there was one *Awunga*, and Shangrei has rightly pointed out that the post was attained by hereditary. *Awunga* in the village was not simply seen as the political leader, he was also seen and revered as the religious leader. He had enormous social and cultural positions. According to T. A. Shishak, the village chief automatically becomes the head of religion and the leading religious leaders of the Tangkhuls are indispensable officials of the chief.<sup>84</sup> During the pre-Christian era Tangkhul Nagas had no distinct separation of politics and religion. The obligations and responsibility of the *Awunga* did not limit only to the legislative, judiciary, political, social, economic sphere, but was equally acknowledged as a religious leader. As a religious leader he was revered to guard the spirituality of every member in the village. A.S. W. Shimray recorded a story narrated to him by his father that echoed the point mentioned above:

In the remote past, in a village called Ningthi, the *Awunga* failed to produce a male issue. Therefore, the *Awungaship* was passed to the nearest clan. The same fate occurred in the house of the new *Awunga*. Therefore, out of fear, he resigned the post. But no one dare to take the post seeing the successive bareness in the house of *Awunga*. The post remain vacant for days that during those days of vacancy, the village deity was left uncared. Because there was no *Awunga* to serve him and perform sacrifices. As a result the displeased spirit brought death and sickness on the people and so they complained to the clan and family of the *Awunga* to fill up the post immediately. The situation was saved only when a new *Awunga* was nominated from the nearest family and he offered sacrifice to the village deity and propitiated him.<sup>85</sup>

Regarding the execution of religious functionaries, all important village festivals and ceremonies such as *Thisham Phanit*, *Laira Phanit* (seed sowing festival), *Chumphut Phanit* (opening granary festival), *Thareo* (harvest festival) and other festivals of the village are declared by *Awunga* with or without consulting the village priest *Sharva* and fixed the date or day for the festival or feasting. During the *Laira* festival, *Awunga* together with his wife ritually planted the

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<sup>84</sup> Tuisem A Shishak , *Principles Underlying the Socio-Religious Practices of the Tangkhul Naga Animists*, A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of State University of New York, at Buffalo in Partial Fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts,1970, pp. 323

<sup>85</sup> Shimray, 2001:69-70



seed by going to his own field which lies outside the village gate to mark the beginning of sowing season and a new year for the Tangkhuls. This festival still continue to be celebrated and the ritual still performed, the act of performance had changed as the *Awunga* no longer went to the field to sow the seeds, but instead sowed in front of the villagers who had gathered in the open ground. Sowing seed of any kind before this was considered an offense and similarly during the *Thareo* festival before they first harvest some portion of rice from their paddy field no members of the village could proceed with grain harvesting.

Even in today's time, the structure of the village administration continues to follow the traditional structure in which *Awunga* remains as the chief of the village. With the coming of Christianity, every *Awunga* converted into Christianity, and in the present time they no longer remain the head of religious order. Religious leadership was willingly handed to the Pastor or Catholic priest, but in some cases due to mass conversion into Christianity, the leadership was compelled to surrender on different moral grounds. In the past, in every festival rituals sacrifices made by the king was necessary but in the present unlike the past, *Awunga* did not perform rituals during festivals like Christmas, New Year, and Easter. Christian festivals were conducted mostly inside the Church and in the Church compound, where the head of the Church lead the congregation. Even the village chief took part during the festival along with the other converted Christians. All the festivals begin with a prayer invoking to the Christian God and ended with a benediction.

### ***Sharva (Village Priest)***

Priest are found in almost all societies. Priest is a generic term that is used for any individual whose duty is to conduct rituals in order to communicate with the supernatural world. Among the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, the priest are simply known as the *Sharva* which literally means 'One who perform rituals'. He was the one who performed rituals on behalf of the family or the society. Woman cannot become a *Sharva* even though they can perform some individual and family rituals. For instance, during the occasion of *Chumpha* festival (opening of Granary), women shoulder the

responsibility of performing ritual. During this festival only the married women in the village cleared and cleaned the granary before the new harvest were brought in. Though there are many rituals performed particularly by the women, they were never considered as *Sharva* by the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. Rather the rituals they performed were seen as a responsibility and a duty. On the other hand, among the Tangkhul Nagas “every adult male is a priest as they do their own respective family rituals propitiating the deity.”<sup>86</sup> However, there exists an official priest for the village and Shimray pointed out that “the qualification to become a priest is old age and unblemished marriage record” and “*Sharvaship* is never a hereditary, any old man can be chosen to perform the official ritual of the society.”<sup>87</sup> The *Sharva*, in most of the cases was the head or the eldest of the clan or anyone who had the requisite qualification, who was well versed in customary laws, religious practices and lived a noble life.

The functions of the Village priest were to conduct rituals confined mostly to festivals, religious rites, ceremonies, sacrifices concerning many important matters, such as planting, harvesting, child birth, naming of child, marriage, and death. He performed all ritual sacrifices and led in conducting ceremonies pertaining to religious aspects. Each village had one or more village priest depending on the size of the village and these priests had rituals competence over all sacrifices to the *Kameo* of different kinds. The father or the eldest male member was considered to be the head of the family and therefore he performed rituals on behalf of the family whenever a ritual was required to be performed. The head of the family performed all necessary rituals for the family but in some cases like *Thisham* Festival or other ceremonies like child birth, naming of the child ceremony, he employed the service of the elderly Priest who was more efficient in this respect depending on the circumstances and nature of the case. *Awunga* had influence and control over the *Sharva*. The *Sharva*, at the direction of the *Awunga*, was called upon to conduct ceremonies and festivals that concerned the entire community. Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas *Sharva* often enjoyed high status in the community. The influence of *Sharva* concerned specifically the religious matters and they are served as adviser to *Awunga*. While priests provides services for individual members of the community, most of their ritual work was performed for the matters of importance

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<sup>86</sup> Shimray, 2000:109

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

to the entire community. But, due to the changes brought by Christianity, his role to perform rituals is no longer relevant for the people. Now religious rituals were performed mostly by the religious head who were the Christian Ministers.

### *Khanong (Shaman)*

Unlike the *Sharva* who did not possess supernatural power, *Khanong* possessed supernatural power that worked within the dominance of their religion and such practitioners were supposed to have abilities, knowledge, obligations, and authority that set them apart from other people in the culture. They even had a powerful access to the Supreme Being. *Khanong* was a religious specialist who occupied a social role with obligations that were tied to religious belief and activity. In every culture there were some individuals who through some means had access to supernatural power and who used this access to carry out religious practices. *Khanong* occupied much of their time with diagnosing and curing illnesses and with *Kameo*.

An individual person cannot become a *Khanong* (shaman) by personal choice. In order to become one s/he receive a supernatural calling to devote their life. And the calling was manifested mostly in the dreams of the individual. For most Tangkhul Nagas, the calling manifested itself during adolescence, often as an inner voice that bid the person to communicate with the spirits. If the person ignored the call, the calling spirit appeared in some way, such as serious illness. Luikham clearly remarked that *Khanong* possessed a supernatural spirit called *Sha* and they acted out according to the commands of this *Sha*.<sup>88</sup> *Khanong* worked by communicating with different *Kameos*. The Supreme Being punished the shaman if he behaved inappropriately against His will but always granted *Khanong*'s requests if s/he obeyed rules governing appearance, behavior, and the performance of rituals. *Khanong* was the individual who specialized in contacting and controlling the supernatural. The concept of *Khanong* rested on the belief that many events on earth are caused by supernatural forces and therefore human contact with and control of the supernatural is necessary to control life on earth. *Khanong* can be both male or female, old or young, and benevolent or harmful. The key characteristic is that *Khanongs* controlled supernatural

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<sup>88</sup> Luikham, 2013:18

spirits and used that power to cure illnesses caused by those spirits as well as to influence or communicate with the *Kameos* about other earthly concerns and in some cases the soul of the dead. They were brave, smart, creative, and willing to alter their behavior by honoring taboos required of their status.

According to Shimray there are different kinds of *Khanong*: “Some are experts in the trait of harming others but does not know the art of curing while some are experts in the art of curing... some can predict phenomena but cannot cure diseases or know the art of either necromancy or gastronomy.”<sup>89</sup> T. Luikham pointed out more kinds of *khanong*: some had the knowledge to remove malevolent spirit from a living body harming the individual, some had the power and knowledge to enter *Kazeiram*, some could cure sickness, some could bring back the soul that have been stolen away by the malevolent spirit, some knew the art of making herbal medicine for sickness, some could prophesy the future.<sup>90</sup> Individual *Khanong* had their own specificity, and therefore s/he did not possess all the power for manifesting such activities. There are no specific separate names for these different kinds of *Khanong*, but they were recognized by the villagers with their expertise. According their belief, any kinds of illness could be caused by the *Kameo* and therefore sacrifices and offerings were required to propitiate the spirit. The *Khanong* diagnosed the illness and prescribed appropriate sacrifices for the illness. The Tangkhul Nagas village *Khanong* were also like the medicine man of the tribes of African and American. Through the use of spells, rituals, and by communicating with the *Kameo* they healed the disease and another method was by making herbal medicine. *Khanong* in that way, were the healers who possessed certain supernatural energy to cure others. The use of these powers or energy required knowledge and skills in ritual activities and therefore training, often in an apprenticeship.

Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed that some sickness were caused due to the seizure of *mangla* (spirit) of a living by the Dead ones in *Kazeiram*. In such cases *Khanong*, specifically those who were expertise in entering *Kazeiram* (land of Dead) performed necessary rituals to bring back the *mangla* of the individual. Such kind of activity was called *Kazei Kazang* meaning entering

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<sup>89</sup> Shimray, 2000:110

<sup>90</sup> Luikham,2011:18

*Kazeiram*. In the house of the sick, *Khanong* sacrificed rice beer and chicken in order to appease *Kokto* and other spirits. After having done the rituals, according to T. Luikham as recorded in Tangkhul “*khanong china har akha vamlaga kasaikha pizanglaga thivahaowa, har chila khikha makhonglakla thivarumhaowa*”<sup>91</sup> which means, the *Khanong* held the chicken and lie on the mat spread on the kitchen floor as if dead, and the chicken also did the same. Technically *Khanong* did not die but his *Sha* was released from his body to go to *kazeiram* to communicate with *Kokto* and to the souls who captured the spirit of the living. Such acts sounded unreal and are impossible to believe in the present time, but many elders said to have witnessed such rituals. The *Khanong* remained silent and still for about twenty minutes and when his *Sha* was about to return to the body the chicken began to make a sound and soon after that *Khanong* came back to life. By that time his body became rigid, cold and transfixed like any dead body. People around helped *Khanong* by massaging and warming his body to return to normalcy. The reason for going to *Kazeiram* was to bring the spirit of the individual back to the world of the living which ultimately heals the individual from sickness. Fully recovered from the stiffness, *Khanong* narrated the story and the conversation he had with the souls and the found reasons. The reasons for the seizure could be different for different persons: for some the souls in *Kazeiram* loved the living ones too much that they do not want to separate; for some, they were unsatisfied and angry, therefore set to take revenge. Sometimes *Khanong* brought messages send by the souls in *Kazeiram* to convey to the livings and there were instances that he brought leafs of a tree or other article picked upon his way back. Such journeys to the land of dead are also recorded by A.S. W Shimray who considered it as a “visit to the land of dead.”<sup>92</sup>

In the present, such rituals like entering to *Kazeiram* are no longer seen or perform as the concept of *Kazeiram* has been replaced by the concept of Heaven where the Christian God resides in peace and harmony. The converted community now regarded such act as unchristian and unholy as the rituals were directed to the Pre-Christian god. But the relevance of *Khanong* in the present is still felt deeply by the people. Interpreting dreams, healing, treating sickness of different kinds, removing spell or exorcizing evil spirit are still their expertise. In the present, those who were

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<sup>91</sup> Luikham, 2013:97-98

<sup>92</sup> Shimray, 2001:196

*Khanong* during the Pre-Christian time are totally absent from the population. But a new kind of *Khanong* emerges as Christian *Khanong*. They are regarded as Christian *Khanong* because of the fact that they had converted into Christianity and follow the teachings of the 'Gospel'. A new generation of *Khanong* were born and brought up in a Christian home learning every Christian ethics and beliefs. Every *Khanong* who had converted into Christianity or born as a Christian invokes prayers to the Christian God instead of directing their prayer and offering to the Pre-Christian god and *Kameo* in the past. In the Christian society like the Tangkhul Nagas, the role of the Church had become the center stage. Churches also recognized the power that the *Khanong* had and considered such power as a 'gift' and a 'talent' blessed by the Christian God. Mostly *Khanong* in the present are devout Christians or 'good Christians' who obey the commands of Christian God to serve those who are in need, mostly spiritual needs. With the leadership of Pastor among the Baptist and Priest among the Catholic, *Khanong* walks hand in hand to 'glorify' and extend the 'Kingdom of Heaven' as commanded in the *Bible*.

## Chapter Two

### *Thisham Festival: Re-Arrangement, Reconstruction and Documentation*

Thisham festival is no longer a part of Tangkhul calendar, and yet it is not totally forgotten. Elders mention it, books mention it, and even the cultural calendar of the Tangkhul registers it. For this research, searching for the remnants of the festival began in secondary sources. These secondary sources includes the article by William Pettigrew's "*Kathi-Kasham: the "Soul departure" Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*" Journal and Proceeding of the Asiatic Society Bengal 1910, T.Luikham's *Wung (Tangkhul) Naga Okthot Mayonza: Wung (Tangkhul) Naga Traditional Laws Akai I eina II 2<sup>nd</sup>* (2013) and Sothing W A Shimray's *The Tangkhuls* (2000). All these three accounts gave a similar view and had registered *Thisham* though there are some differences that I found like the number of days of celebration. For gaining insights into the actual practices, I have talked to elders who have seen the festival in their childhood. Interviews with the elders were conducted in two different ways: one is interviewing one elder at a time and secondly gathering three, four elders together in one place and discussing mainly of *Thisham* and their experiences they remember. It was more difficult for me to arrange an informal group meeting for two reasons: one is since they are old, walking on the hilly terrain became a challenge physically, and the other reason is, there are very few number of elders in the village who were born before Christianity arrived. But, usually on Sunday afternoon after the Sunday Gospel Service at the church, elders from the locality (not necessarily every elder persons) gathers in one compound (shifts from time to time according to their convenience) for informal discussion. It is a small community gathering where every matter and topic is discussed and since it is open to everyone, I sat with them and placed my queries in three occasions. From these gatherings many stories have been collected but there is no way of understanding whether such accounts may be taken as accurate. But this research certainly considers them remnants of an important annual event – by which the community came to terms with the realities of life.

Tangkhul community embraced Christianity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century and since then have moved away from many of their practices especially rituals and ceremonies linked to belief

systems, and rites of passage. Catherine Bell in her book *Rituals: Perspectives and Dimensions*, wrote:

In most cultures, social life is a series of major and minor ritual events. While predominantly secular cultures may have just a few rites to mark birth, marriage, and death, more traditional or religious societies may envelop one in a nearly endless sequence of ritual obligations.<sup>93</sup>

Almost no documentation remains of their lived experiences, and cultural practices including music, dance, festival, arts, and rituals, that are slowly vanishing from the lives of the present Tangkhul Naga community. The nostalgia about the past practices are voiced by some elders, whose number has steadily reduced over the years.

The word “pre-Christian” for many members of the Tangkhul community means a past about which not much is known any more.<sup>94</sup> Though some have felt it necessary in recent years to reassert the socio-cultural identity, this project does not intend to become an identity reconstruction project. It has become a necessity to reconstruct the lived experience of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas not simply to assert or reassert their political, social, cultural identity but also to understand the acculturation process that helped create the Tangkhul practices of today from their past, and the value and the knowledge associated with them. An attempt has been made, first to reconstruct the past as it was and secondly, to document as it was in order to protect and preserve the culture from complete decay and disappearance. In this chapter, attempts have been made consciously to examine the pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga philosophical and religious concept of death, rituals performed in different ceremonies relating to the disposal of the dead bodies and the passage from the mother earth to *Kazeiram* known as the ‘land of dead’ and the cosmos of *Kazeiram*. For the purpose of understanding the past practices during ceremonies around the disposal of the bodies of the dead, effort have been made in this research to consciously reconstruct a particular popular festival known as *Kathi Kasham* or *Thisham* (literally translated as “Soul departure festival” or “Soul sending-off festival”), which is no longer observed since the large scale conversion to Christianity has altered lives and festivities of the community. This process involved documenting the community memory and the individual recollections of the elderly members of the Tangkhul

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<sup>93</sup> Bell, 1997:95

<sup>94</sup> Khongreiw, 2014:64-85



Naga community who witnessed the festival before their conversion into Christianity and collecting and rearranging available documents, journals, magazine, books etc. Concept of death and the pre-Christian belief in soul are effectively consolidated through ceremonies such as ‘Dead burial ceremony’ and the subsequent soul sending off ceremony, marking the separation of the living and the dead ones, ending responsibility of the living towards the dead.

Many of the festivities around the departure of the soul of the near and dear ones were purely performative, requiring a social presence of the community. A number of rituals were performed requiring community presence and collaborative participation. Some of the rituals were completely family specific, and required the family to choose a representative who would be treated as the personification of the deceased, to be treated as the departed relative, by the family. This representative is known as *Thila Kapho*. In a single festival there could be several *Thila Kaphos* depending on the number of deceased persons the ritual festival was supposed to set free in one year.

### ***General Understanding of the Tangkhul Nagas’ concept of Death***

Tangkhul Nagas believed that death is a transformation by which the life in which we are familiar is followed by some sort of afterlife in which our existence is continued. Like many other community, even for the Tangkhul, it is a phenomenon that deeply influences the emotions and the sentiments of every individual and of the whole community. In the past, Tangkhul Nagas bury their dead and believed in the existence of ‘life after dead’ in a place called *Kazeiram* known as the ‘land of dead’. Like many other communities, the Tangkhul Nagas before and after Christianity have continued to believe in the existence of Soul before and after the death of every individual. During the past before Christianity, when a person dies it was believed that a ‘soul’ leaves the body. William Pettigrew wrote “when any person... dies, the spirit of such is said to leave the body and turned into an insect called ‘*kaha*’, a kind of honey bee which flies to the roof of the

house.”<sup>95</sup> On a similar line T C Hodson wrote, “At death something leaves the body. That something is regarded as a winged insects of some kind, now a butterfly, now a bee.”<sup>96</sup> Death was indicated, therefore, by the absence of the soul from the body, and the separation of the soul from the body. But, even after the soul leaves the body of the deceased, it was believed that the soul still continues to live with the living beings for some time until a particular festival for parting and sending the soul off to *Kazeiram* was observed by the living beings. Another important thing to mention here is that, during the past, when any member of the Tangkhul Naga community dies, the souls were transported to the ‘land of dead’ where they continue to live a life like the living. Dr. Brown<sup>97</sup> had said about the belief of this people that “in the future state they live and die, men six times and women five times: after this they are turned into clouds”<sup>98</sup>, even in the ‘land of dead’ the dead dies and reincarnate again and again. Even though, believe in the existence of soul in every individual continue, life in *Kazeiram* after death discontinue, instead the Tangkhuls now believed in the existence of ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’ and live there eternally.

### **Kokto and Kazeiram (Land of Dead)**

The Tangkhul in the olden days believed that the dead would go to a place called *Kazeiram*. This land was marked as a faraway place in the mountain, where the dead of the community resided and lived similar to the life of the livings. The concept of *Kazeiram*, in popular belief was formed through the childhood stories and myths, whereby the belief of life after death was perpetuated. It was due to this belief that the tradition of providing the dead person with the essential items of food and comfort in his/her grave at the time of the burial became necessary. In the past, the community practiced an act of giving materials and articles to the deceased during the burial ceremony and *Thisham* festival with the belief that the deceased would go to *Kazeiram* and live like the life of the living. Hudson noted “in the grave are placed various articles for the use and

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<sup>95</sup> Pettigrew, William. “*Kathi-Kasham: the “Soul departure” Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*” Journal and Proceeding of the Asiatic Society Bengal 6:37. 1910.

<sup>96</sup> Hodson, 2011:158

<sup>97</sup> Dr. Brown was a surgeon and a British political Agent of Manipur. He wrote *A Statistical Account of Manipur* (1874).

<sup>98</sup> Hodson, 2011:164

comfort of the deceased in the world hereafter.”<sup>99</sup> At least some articles like—clothes, implements like spears, hoes, ornaments, shields, plates, cups, and tobacco pipe with some tobacco were placed in the grave for men while for women, cosmetic items, used by women cooking utensils and other materials were placed in the grave. It was believed that the person who died an unnatural death might meet their enemy even on their way to the land of the dead. So to enable them to fight effectively, all the necessary weapons which were used by him were placed inside the grave. In some cases dogs were also killed to keep company to the soul on the way to kazeiram. There was also a belief that the person who killed his enemies might serve him as his servant.

Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed and therefore paid homage to the ruler of the ‘land of dead’ as he was known to be dreadful and merciless if abundant gifts were not offered. Pettigrew said that:

the king of Kazeiram, what we might call the place of departed spirit is named Kokto. He is supposed to live in a great mansion, with sentries guarding all sides and nobody from the upper world dare enters. On the appearance of any spirit from above before the entrance to this mansion, they find him seated inside the door, and his first duty is to notice what kind of following the spirit has. There are of two kinds, one who has been a thief will be seen with the whole livestock which he has stolen trailing behind him, and the other will be seen with a following of all the animals procured by honest hunting.<sup>100</sup>

Hodson also noted that *Kazeiram* was a country of spirit and “by the gate there flits a woodpecker, the type of restless vigilance. The thin ghost themselves forced a way in so as to incumbent on the living to provide a buffalo for the burial feast in order that it’s mighty ghost may open the massy gate.”<sup>101</sup> From this two accounts we came to know that the King of *Kazeiram* was *Kokto* and he was also the one who opens the gate to enter *Kazeiram*. Another information we found in both the

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<sup>99</sup> Hodson, 2011:148

<sup>100</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:6-37

<sup>101</sup> Hodson, 2011:160

accounts was that the Kazeiram was a place for the dead where no living were allowed to enter as *Kokto* kept a close vigilant.

Rammathot Khongreiwo's<sup>102</sup> observations and findings on the pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga concepts of the world and cosmology provided a substantial knowledge on the imaginary realm of the 'land of the dead'. He pointed out that the postulation made by Richard M. Eaton, claiming that the pre-Christian Naga including the Tangkhul Naga cosmology was characterized by a 'two tiered scheme' of supernatural beings: an 'upper tier' (supreme benevolent deity) and 'lower tier' (minor malevolent spirits) is contradictory to the truth. He claimed that there is yet "a 'third world' in the pre-Christian Naga cosmology; and it was/is the 'world of the dead' an imaginary world". Mostly, it is believed to be situated beneath the world of the living, for the Tangkhuls before spread of the western knowledge, believed that the earth is flat. The 'land of dead' is identified with certain landscapes or experiential spaces in this mundane world. Interaction with many elders from different villages pointed out that *Kazeiram* is located in the east, towards the direction where the sun rises, though they could not point out the exact location. Khongreiwo recounts a community tale as written by Luikham<sup>103</sup> where the author writes that the 'land of dead' lies somewhere in the eastern world beyond the 'last village of the living'. In that story it is recounted that a man named Longyao Horam, took fifty-five days by foot to reach 'the last village of the living' and another day to enter Kazeiram to bring back his fiancée, Zamthingla Lungleng who died on the eve of their marriage. Khongreiwo finally said that the cosmos of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas consisted of the celestial realm of God and the 'Land of dead'; and their world consisted of the 'world of the living' and the 'world of dead' or the 'land of dead'. He made a strong argument that the 'world of dead' was "real/tangible and intangible at the same time"<sup>104</sup>. This explained that this 'land of dead' is located beneath the 'world of the living' or in the east beyond the 'last village of the living', whereas on the other hand it was/is identified with certain landscapes in some villages.

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<sup>102</sup> Rammathot Khongreiwo. *Landscape, Memories and Pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga Escatology* published in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective*. 2014 Pp. 75.

<sup>103</sup> Luikham, R. "Return from the valley of Death" (in Tangkhul). *The legacy: A Bi monthly journal of the centre for Tangkhul Socio-Historical Research and Documentation*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp 17-22

<sup>104</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:76

### *Burial Ceremony*

The burial ceremonies of the Tangkhuls have changed drastically after the coming of Christianity. In the past, when a person dies, the family of the deceased had to sacrifice an animal to Kameo. In case of a rich man or an old man's death, many animals were slaughtered including bull, cow, pig, dog, cat, fowl and smaller animals too. Killing bulls or buffalo was significant among the community members as it signified riches and high social status of the deceased and the family among the Tangkhul Nagas before Christianity. It was also believed that for the soul of the deceased to be able to force his or her way in to the 'land of Dead', it was necessary for the family to provide a buffalo for the burial feast in order to appease the gate keeper i.e. *Kokto*.

In the past each family had their own family grave located in the surrounding of their house where the dead were buried. The nature of disposal of the dead varied according to the nature of death. In all the cases of natural death, the bodies were buried in the usual burial ground within the village, but in case of unnatural deaths like, death by accident, or a fall from a tree, drowning, suicide, or even for the victims of attacks by wild animals, women dying during pregnancy or childbirth, or for those who died outside the village- due to epidemic like cholera or smallpox, the dead were buried outside the village gate, though the burial ceremony was conducted as usual. Even after mass conversion into Christianity, dead bodies were buried, but the concept of burying in the family grave and outside the village slowly vanished. In the present, the dead are buried in a community cemetery which is located within the village boundary.

According to Hodson, during the past, not all the dead were "buried inside the village", and gave three instances where burial did not happen inside the village and in the family grave.<sup>105</sup> According to him, firstly, for children who died before they are weaned off mothers' milk, are often not buried in the family grave but close to the house. Secondly, the people who died outside the village must as a general rule be buried outside the village. And thirdly "under the influence of

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<sup>105</sup> Hodson, 1991:160

eschatological belief, the dead who die by violence, who are killed in war, whose death might, as we should say argue a visitation of god, such as death by snake-bite, by drowning, by a fall from a tree, by a tiger in a jungle, or women who die in childbirth, are buried apart from the generality of the village.”<sup>106</sup> The body of the victims of unnatural death was not buried within the village in the usual family grave because it was believed that if they were to be buried within the village, the same misfortune might visit them again.

In the case of an ordinary or natural death, the grave was dug by the men of the deceased’s locality and the kin of the bereaved family usually male. In the case of an important person like the village chief or influential clan’s head or village leader, immediate kin dug the grave as a sign of respect to the departed soul. But in the case of unnatural death, only old men were allowed to dig the grave. This was done to avoid the evil designs of the malevolent spirits causing death. In case of women who died at child birth, the community forbade all women of child bearing age to participate in the burial ceremony. It was considered unlucky if they participated in the ceremony similar, and the popular belief was that ill luck might happen to them too. Young man from the locality took up the responsibility of digging the grave regardless of the gender, age and the nature of the cause of dead in the present.

It was a common practice among the Tangkhul Nagas to bathe the deceased body before Christianity and even after mass conversion into christianilty. This was done by the family and the relatives after a person died. Generally the wife for a man along with other female relations usually the married ones took up the responsibility of cleaning and dressing the dead body. In the past, after cleansing the body, the dead body was wrapped with clean white clothes to be laid on the bed where s/he usually slept on before his or her death. The body was then covered with a specific piece of cloth covering the body from neck to bottom leaving the face visible. This specific cloth was known as *Luirim kachon* for man and *Chongkhom kachon* for women. Many other clothes were intentionally cut at the edges to avoid *Kokto*’s admiration and then were placed next to the dead body. For the guard at the gate of *Kazeiram*, *Kokto*, a new piece of uncut cloth was placed

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 147

on the top of the clothes pile. Food, clothes, beer, salt, chili, yam, dried vegetables, meat and so on were gifted to the dead and all such gifts were buried along with the body. Male and female were distinguished by the dresses they wore, therefore placing clothes above the dead body for the departed acted out in accordance maintaining the distinct gender identity of the individual. The news of departure was sent to friends and relations in other villages. Mostly, news was carried by young men who may or may not be related to the deceased. These messengers trotted hills and rivers on foot to deliver the news and attempted to return along with the relations on the very next day to attend burial ceremony for such act was considered welcoming and appreciated.

In the meantime, some male members killed animals and distributed the meat in a traditional systemic manner in the form of a community feast.<sup>107</sup> Pettigrew said that the intestines were shared equally between “the grave digger” and the relations. The head of the animal butchered was given to the hosting family, while the right hind leg was given to the eldest daughter and the left hind leg went to the middle daughter. The “liver, heart, spleen, lungs, etc.” were then handed over to the *Sharva* or the village priest who would divide the portions into six part for male and five for a female and take the meat to the next door to cook.<sup>108</sup> From the ritually cooked meat, the priest sliced out six pieces and kept near the head of the corpse, in case the burial was of a male and five pieces of cooked meat were placed near the head of the body, in case the deceased was a female. The priest offered this to *Kameo*, who was believed to always sit nearby the corpse, by saying “*oh thisan yamsanli, shaiphung shakphungda thuiulu*”<sup>109</sup> which may be translated as “oh! We are tired of people dying so often, and fleeing leaving of their soul, please eat and drink this food and go away” After this the rest of the food was shared with the community members who had gathered to help with the burial process. In the present, rituals performed by the *Sharva*

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<sup>107</sup> The traditional systemic manner of distributing meat in every Tangkhul Nagas festival during the past observed a strict rule. Whenever a bull is killed for any occasion, eldest daughter who had married always gets the right hind leg, the left to the younger and so on. Head of the animal always belong to the hosting family. The remaining body were cooked for the feasting. The traditional distribution of meat is still practicing even in the present, but it has become less rigid unlike the past.

<sup>108</sup> Pettigrew, William. “*Kathi-Kasham: the “Soul departure” Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*”. The number, six pieces of meat for male and five for female could be what Dr. Brown had said about the soul of the dead and believing that the soul of a male die and live for six time and for female five time before turning into clouds reflects the social inequality among the tangkhul man and woman, subjugating woman as one live short than compared to man.

<sup>109</sup> Ruivah, 1993:135

is no longer practiced. In fact there is no *Sharva* in the present. Christian Ministers had taken the role of conducting rituals in every funeral. But whenever death occur, killing of animals and feasting is still a popular practice. They no longer offer prayer to *Kameo*, instead the prayer is directed towards the Christian God.

After the food was served, the priest prepared *Makhothing* which looked like a flat mat made out of wood to carry the dead body. Placing the dead body which was covered with white cloth on *Makhothing*, they were carried out from the house by some young men from the locality, led by the torch bearer usually a responsible relative of the deceased. As soon as the procession reached the 'grave'<sup>110</sup>, the torch bearer moved around the grave. Another relation took a pine torch and descended into the grave, calling the ancestors of the dead to come and meet the deceased soul on his/her way saying “*yeh.. o A rarali kho, Ayi Awo saikora unngaroklo!*” (oh! He/She is Coming, Grandfather and grandmother and everybody, come and lead him/her). Then the dead body with the support of the *Makhothing* was lifted while all the present relatives, friends and dear ones raised their volumes of lamentation around the body. Then tightly fastening the body to the plank, the body was lowered down into the grave and buried inside along with gifts and articles he often used during his lifetime and later covering the hole with earth and stones. After filling the grave, the priest placed a pole above the mount and placed a burning torch and everyone returned to their own houses.

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<sup>110</sup> In the past, dead body were buried in grave. The traditional grave were dug in such a way that there was sufficient room for dead body and the articles that were gifted by the relations. The grave had an opening which is around four feet in radius and a perpendicular hole about three to four foot deep. From the bottom, a room was dug to place the dead body. This room differs in size according to the number of people buried inside the grave. Every family had their own family grave. In the present, the concept of digging a family grave is no longer practiced. The idea of one body, one grave is the common way of burying a dead body among the Tangkhuls. It is often experienced that when a person die, the family members usually bury the dead body close to the grave of their relations. In some case, even before one die, he/she chose a site for his/her grave close to his/her relative.



### *Thisham Festival: Meaning and its Significance*

Every individual dies but not everything dies with the body. Not everything is forgotten after death. Memories of the things past remain and are often invoked. The beliefs of the Tangkhul Nagas formed the base of their belief in the presence of the soul, and the related beliefs and myths around the release of the soul of the dead continue to linger even after the large scale conversion of the community to Christianity. The community believes that the souls of the dead ones continue to hover around the loved ones and live together with the living until a particular festival called *Kathi kasham* or in short *Thisham* festival is celebrated. The word *Thisham* is formed by two words *kathi* and *kasham*. In Tangkhul<sup>111</sup>, the word *Kathi* means death and *kasham* had been translated by some native writers in English as ‘sending off’<sup>112</sup> or ‘expulsion’<sup>113</sup> or ‘ritual’<sup>114</sup>. Sothing W. A. Shimray<sup>115</sup> translated *Thisham* as ‘ritual for death’ and noted the two words *Thi* as ‘death’ and *Sham* as ‘rituals’. For him this festival was for the deaths in the community, in which the bereaved family and the whole village participates in performing rituals especially to send off the soul of the dead to *Kazeiram*<sup>116</sup>. Shimray analyzed this festival as “a repetition of the sorrow of the separation pang of the dear ones as the memories of the dear ones revived.”<sup>117</sup> Khashim Ruivah<sup>118</sup> considered ‘*Thisham*’ as the “last rite of the departed soul”<sup>119</sup> which is a “festival of the departed

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<sup>111</sup> The word ‘Tangkhul’ is also used as the language spoken by the Tangkhul People.

<sup>112</sup> Tuisem Ngakang translated ‘Thisham Phanit’ as “festival for sending off the death soul” in the article *Loss and Revitalization of Traditional Art: The State of Tangkhul Naga Music* which was included in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nags in Perspective* edited by R.Vashum. Pp.184

<sup>113</sup> AS W. Shimray translated ‘kasham’ as ‘expulsion’ in the book *History of The Tangkhul Nagas (2001)* pp.140. Also Rammathot Khongreiwo translated in the same manner in the article *Landscape, Memories and Pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga Eschatology* which was included in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nags in Perspective*. Pp. 78.

<sup>114</sup> Shimray, 2000,:158

<sup>115</sup> Sothing WA Shimray’s *The Tangkhul* which was published in 2000 recorded the Tangkhuls in their traditional setting, but not only of the past but of the present too and comparative analysis between the tradition and the modern are also made.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Kazeiram’ is a place where the soul of the dead reside. It is believed by the Tangkhul Nagas that this place exist and is located in the eastern side where the sun rises. A tale recounted by the elders from the community indicates that Kazeiram is located somewhere in the eastern world beyond the ‘village of the living’. Also some elders would mentioned that this place is located underneath the world of the living where there is no sun.

<sup>117</sup> Shimray, 2000: 158

<sup>118</sup> *Social Changes among the Nagas (Tangkhul)* by Khashim Ruivah is a comprehensive ethnographic account of the Tangkhul one of the tribes of Manipur. For him Kathi Kasham reflects the way in which the survivors enjoy the annual feast after harvest along with the death of the ancestral manes.

<sup>119</sup> Ruivah, 1993:234

soul”<sup>120</sup> and “is a feast given in honor of the departed souls of that year as the final ceremony for the deceased”<sup>121</sup>. Ng Mataisang<sup>122</sup> mentioned that according to the old Tangkhul Nagas religious belief, the soul of the deceased did not leave human habitation but remained with the livings until *Thisham* was observed. The purpose of this festival according to Mataisang was to “finally lay the souls of dead to rest”<sup>123</sup>. This observation made by Mataisang contradicts with the traditional belief systems as the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believe in life after death. According to Pettigrew, *Kathi Kasham* was a “Soul-Departure Feast”. Thus, it became significant and even more important to question the concept and understanding of the words like ‘soul’, ‘departure’ and ‘feast’ contextualizing them within the framework of the religious, social, cultural and economic phenomenon of the Tangkhuls before conversion into Christianity. As Pettigrew translated ‘*Kathi Kasham*’ as ‘Soul Departure Feast’, one requires to know for whom this feast is being observed – i.e. whether it was for the living to get adjusted to the finality of death of a near and dear one, or for the actual release of the soul of the dead to set it free from the social ties. The ‘departure’ of soul and its journey from human’s surroundings to the spiritual world seem to have been the basic beliefs for which this festival was observed. For Pettigrew, the word ‘Departure’ was synonymously understood as ‘leaving’ or ‘parting’ in English.

### ***Belief in Soul***

Tangkhul Naga community believes in the presence of soul. Popular beliefs among the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas regarding the causes of death are related to their ideas about the nature of the soul and its destination after the death of an individual. Tangkhul Nagas, like many other communities in North-Eastern India during the pre-Christian times, believed that when an individual dies, “something leaves the body”<sup>124</sup>. That ‘something’ was often regarded as a winged insects of some kind and Pettigrew considered this to be the spirit of the individual which

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>121</sup> Ruivah, 1993:137

<sup>122</sup> Mataisang, 1999:72

<sup>123</sup> Mataisang, 1999:72

<sup>124</sup>T.C. Hodson *Naga Tribes of Manipur. 1911* Pp. 158

metamorphosed into *kaha* a kind of honey bee which flew to the roof of the house.<sup>125</sup> After the burial ceremony, it was believed that the form of a spirit as a *Kaha* disappeared. *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* defined 'Soul' as the "spiritual part of a person, believed to exist after death" whereas 'Spirit' is defined as "the part of a person that includes their mind, feelings and character rather than their body". 'Something' that leaves the body when a person dies is more closely characterized to the soul of the deceased than to the spirit according to the definition. Apart from the title, the word 'soul', does not appear anywhere in Pettigrew's article. He used the word 'soul' synonymously with the word 'spirit'<sup>126</sup>.

According to Khashim Ruivah, "*Kameo*, the evil spirit was popularly held responsible for causing the death of individuals"<sup>127</sup> and it was believed that even after death, the *Kameo* continues to hover around the corpse till it was adequately propitiated with ritual offerings of food and meat. It was held that the life span of virtuous and righteous person extends over more than one hundred years. Attaining one hundred years was regarded to have attained the full age and such was termed *Mirar Kapei*. An individual imbued with such ideals live for a full span of a centenarian and expired naturally in the ripe old age only. Such person were considered beyond the reach of evil spirit, evil eye, evil tooth. On the contrary those who are sinful for commitment of socio-culturally approved deeds, are subject to the fatal attack of the evil spirit.

In all cultures, people believe that they and other humans have a spiritual or mystical essence that is distinct from their physical being. In Western cultures and religions, this essence is commonly referred to as the soul. While in some other cultures, the soul is defined as an individual's "personality", experts generally agree that the concept of "the soul" refers to a deeper

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<sup>125</sup>Pettigrew, William. "*Kathi-Kasham: the "Soul departure" Feast as practised by Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam*" Journal and Proceeding of the Asiatic Society Bengal 6:37-46. 1910.

<sup>126</sup> In Tangkhul language the word '*Mangla*' means both the 'soul' and 'spirit' and the distinction between these two English words does not exist. So the author must have used the two word synonymously. Even in everyday language the native speakers uses '*Mangla*' as the spirit or soul and even uses them as the ghost or the deities. During the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas religious belief system it is distinct and clear that every individual have a 'soul' or 'spirit' called the '*Manglas*' and they are supposed to live in 'kazeiram' where the dead ones reside. They were not supposed to live with the living after *Thisham* Festival but if the spirit continues to live for a longer time period the family and the whole community fear for inflicting disease, epidemic that may cause another death in the family and village. The two words 'soul' and 'spirit' will be used synonymously as I couldn't decipher and distinguish when translated into Tangkhul.

<sup>127</sup> Ruivah, 1993:133

and broader essence. Other features of belief and practice closely tied to beliefs about the soul are ancestor worship, death and afterlife, and supernatural beings. While a belief in the individual soul is universal, there is much variation across cultures in beliefs about the nature, number, forms, shapes, behavior, and meaning of the soul.

For the Tangkhul Nagas, beliefs about the soul are complex. In the past, soul was capable of leaving the body and might be stolen by a malicious spirit. *Mangla*<sup>128</sup> is a Tangkhul term for the vital essence of each living person. It was believed that when a person die, although the soul disappears, it remained in the community until the funeral ritual was conducted correctly and appropriately. If the funeral and rituals involved are conducted correctly, the souls went to the Land of the dead, taking with it all of the material and wealth offered and sacrificed during the burial ceremony and *Thisham* festival. If the funeral was not conducted correctly according to the traditions, then the soul lingered about as a possible source of trouble until it was appeased through prayer and offerings. The *Mangla* (Soul) who resides in *Kazeiram*—which was believed to be located in the Northeastern side of the village and closely resembles the world of the living—communicated with relatives still alive by appearing in dreams or through religious specialists who contacted them on behalf of their relatives especially *Khanong* (Shaman).

### ***The celebrations and the feasts – reaffirming life and structures of community living***

Thisham was an important festival in Tangkhul community life. The Festival was generally held in January and though the families and the relations of the deceased joined in the organization of the festival, along with the entire community, the festivities were announced by the ‘village

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<sup>128</sup> The word *Mangla* is generally understood among the Tangkhul Nagas as the intangible essence of an individual. There is no separate term in Tangkhul language for the two English words ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’. Both of them are understood as ‘*Mangla*’. Pettigrew and other colonial writers used the word soul and spirit simultaneously to the personal essence of an individual. But in fact, souls were more personal and spirits were generally referred to the supernatural beings surrounding the human habitation. Here, I have used the word soul as the personal essence of an individual and spirit to the non-human entities.

Chief<sup>129</sup> and were formally conducted under the direction and supervision of the *Sharva* known as the village priest<sup>130</sup>. It was simply not a festival for the dead rather it was for the living. Responsibility falls on the living members of the families and relatives to commemorate and remember the departed ones for they believed that if the souls continue to live with the livings, deathly diseases or epidemics would trouble the families and the community. So, to avoid any kind of misfortune the families and the community would perform the necessary rituals traditionally practiced and performed by the members of the society. Much of the past rituals of the Tangkhul may be seen as emphasizing the social bonding and regeneration of beliefs and understandings of the community. Much of such assertions have ideally been public in nature in oral cultures, where participation in such occasions from childhood has created an automatic awareness, or even just a habit of such observances. William Sax in his introduction to the book *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal*, wrote:

One of the most useful resources for thinking about the relationship of ritual to efficacious performance is Tambiah's (1979) essay on performative approaches to ritual, in which he advocates the integration of cultural accounts of rituals with attention to their performative and contextual features. Tambiah argues that, although it is evident that many rituals seek to convey cosmological information (by which he means not only religious cosmologies but also legal codes, political conventions, social class relations, etc.), it is also true that the performance of ritual is always linked to the status claims of participants, in other words, to relations of power and to the various contexts—social, political, religious, and so on—of the performance. Through various performative media, such as dance, music, and drama, a heightened experience is produced in the ritual, thereby indexing (and often altering) social relations while simultaneously

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<sup>129</sup> The Chief in a village is called 'Awunga' in Tangkhul who is considered to be the king or the head of the land. In *Traditional Political System of the Tangkhul Nagas: Chieftainship and its Discontent. Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective*. 2014 Pp 97-98.

<sup>130</sup> The Tangkhul words '*Sherra*' or '*Sharva*' can be translated as 'priest' into English. The literal meaning among the Tangkhul is 'one who perform rituals'. Every village has their village priest and they perform rituals and offers sacrifices on behalf of an individual or for the whole society. He has the power to communicate and converse with god and the deities. According to the tradition of the Tangkhuls, it is noted and strictly observed that the village priest maintained cordial relationship with deities surrounding the environment and to God for betterment and prosperity of the community. Among the Tangkhuls female priest doesn't seems to appear.

legitimizing them via cosmological paradigms. Cognitive content and sociological efficacy— meaning and function—are thus linked via the media of performance.<sup>131</sup>

William Pettigrew described the nature of Kathi kasham as ‘feast’ where as many Tangkhul writers in English would preferably use ‘festival’ instead of ‘feast’. In Tangkhul language ‘phanit’<sup>132</sup> means festival which is a time when a series of events connected with a particular activity or ideas is being organized and the whole community participated in the affair. In the past, absence from such community organized events was considered a serious offence. It was taken as an uncaring attitude towards family and community well-being. They feared that harm would be inflicted upon the individual and to the whole community by the evil spirit. Thus, in order to avoid any harm to self and the community, every individual participated in any form of community gathering and feasting.

Catherine Bell, in her Book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* discusses the relevance of feasts. She mentioned that:

Shared participation in a food feast is a common ritual means for defining and reaffirming the full extent of the human and cosmic community. Whether that community is conceived to be rigidly hierarchical or fundamentally egalitarian, the principle of sharing food marks it as a community. While almost all religion cultural traditions regard food and community in this way, some traditions affirm a universal community by exhorting people to feed anyone in need; others demarcate the boundaries of a particular community by specifying with whom one can share food.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Sax, 2002:4

<sup>132</sup> In pre-Christian Tangkhul tradition there are many *Phanit* or ‘festival’ in English. They can broadly be divided into two- *Nitrei* and *Nitra* which can be translated as ‘major festival’ and ‘minor festival’. Major festival usually involves huge amount of wealth whereas minor festival involve lesser amount of wealth, the number of days for the celebration is more in the major festival and less in minor festivals. *Thisham Phanit* is a *Nitrei* which is regarded as the longest and the grandest festival for the death among the Tangkhuls.

<sup>133</sup> Bell, 1947:124

The introduction of Christianity and formal education among the Tangkhuls in Manipur also was the beginning of enforcing of changes in the food habits among the community. But some of the traditional dietary habits and the ways of preparing, consuming and sharing food as a performative practice of the community remain unchanged in many villages. One important aspect of the food practice is the system of sharing and eating food together by the whole village community on occasions such as religious festivals.

Even though the term ‘feast’ and ‘festival’ are used synonymously in many occasions it has a different connotations, meaning and usage. A ‘Feast’ would somehow mean the communal meal undertaken in commemorative or joyous and celebratory occasions, festivals on the other hand would include many events including feasting, rituals, dances, singing, playing, etc. which are generally organized and conducted specifically and strictly during a particular period of time in a year. It is therefore more appropriate using the term ‘festival’ instead of ‘feast’ to capture the complex dimensions involving multiple events and activities during *Thisham*.

### ***Placing Thisham within the traditional Calendar of the Tangkhul Nagas***

Tangkhul Nagas’ knowledge of time and season during the pre-Christian era was calculated and based on the lunar calendric structure. The fixation of date for commencing festivals still depends very much on the agrarian calendric cycle. Since paddy cultivation was regarded to be the most important cultivation among other crops, the sowing and harvesting of this season also indicates the sense of time. Seasonal change in the weather was also marked within the calendar among the Nagas. All festivals, major or minor, are observed strictly according to the proclamation made by the Chief and the Priest of the village. The counting of days cannot be mistaken, as any such mistake for any festivals was believed to bring an ill fortune to the entire community. In the Tangkhul calendar, there are twelve months but the numbers of days may not be the same as the Gregorian calendar which was first introduced to the Tangkhul only after Pettigrew entered the Nagas’ homeland at the end of the nineteenth century.

According to the traditional Tangkhul knowledge of time, in one year which was calculated from their agricultural activities, had twelve *Kachang* which means moon or month just like the Gregorian calendar. No account of numbering of days in the past was ever recorded. Days were calculated by counting the cycle of the moon. Some elders including Ako Shaiza, T.Luikham, and Maiya Gachui calculated that the traditional month probably begins from the middle of the Gregorian month and ends in the next first half of the following month. For example: the first Tangkhul traditional month *Khayon* would probably fall during the second half of December and the first half of January according to Gregorian calendar.<sup>134</sup>

In one year, a series of festivals were observed and celebrated by the people in accordance to their traditional method of counting especially the agricultural cycle and festivals. To make sense and give the most probable season and time for *Thisham* festival in the present time would be to calculate from the agricultural cycle. After harvest, mostly done during the month of October and early November in the present time, a festival called *Chumpha* festival (Clearing and Cleaning granary festival) that marked the ending of harvesting season was celebrated. Once *Chumpha* festival got over, the day counting for *Thisham* festival began. It was considered a severe mistake if counting of days for the *Thisham* went wrong. Postponement or advancing the day for *Thisham* would mean calling for misfortune. Most of the elders agreed that *Thisham* festival, if still continue to be celebrated, would most probably fall during the month of January.

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<sup>134</sup> According to Maiya Gachui the Tangkhul calendar in tune with the Gregorian calendar goes like this. 1. Khayon (Dec-Jan) 2. Tharao (Jan-Feb) 3. Marun (Feb-March) 4. Mayo (March-April) 5. Khaying (April- May) 6. Kharam (May-june) 7. Makha (June –July) 8. Marang (July- August) 9. Phei (August-Sept) 10. Pi (Sept-Oct) 11. Tatharaha (Oct-Nov) 12. Ngaphei (Nov-Dec). According to this calendar the year begins in the month of Khayon

<sup>134</sup> ‘khayon’ is a season when after Chumpha and thisham festival gets over, every family begin to eat newly harvested rice from the granary with delight and satisfaction. Weariness and difficult times were closing but a new season with new construction or building of houses begins with ease as time passes by without much acknowledgement.



### *Remembering Thisham Festival*

T. Luikham and William Pettigrew both agreed and had noted that on the beginning day of *Thisham* festival the family and relatives collected pine resin wood called *Meira*<sup>135</sup> to use for lighting. For this matter, this day was also called *Meira phat Thang* which means ‘day of searching *Meira*’. It was a taboo to tie the animals which were to be butchered during the festival with an old rope. So whenever animals were to be sacrificed for the festival a new rope<sup>136</sup> had to be collected from the forest. Pettigrew mentioned that “rope for binding up the animal before killing is procured from the jungle, also the poles for hanging clothes up.”<sup>137</sup> Only men went to jungle for this purpose. The second day was marked to prepare the rope to be used the next day. Every village and every locality in a village had an open ground which was used for the purpose of every community gathering shared by everyone. In the community ground, male members of the locality along with the family erected a pole by digging the ground where the buffalos or other animals were to tie in order to avoid escape while killing. On the other hand, the female members would collect *khamuina* which is a leaf of a particular plant to wrap bread made of sticky rice. At the same time they would gather and stake up fire woods. Although Shimray considered these two days as ‘intensive preparatory days’<sup>138</sup> he acknowledges the activities and the labor dedicated for the festivals. He added that “well to do families flagged a shawl usually *Luirim*<sup>139</sup>, to a long bamboo at the family courtyard” which according to him signifies the “status of the family and at the same time that of the death”. This act of flagging was also done on the second day of the festival but no flagging is done for females.

The third day was known as *Thisham Sa Thithang*<sup>140</sup> which can be translated as ‘day of killing animal’. On this day, killing animals took place but before the killing actually happened, rituals were performed by the priest sacrificing and offerings were made to appease *Kokto*. Killing

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<sup>135</sup> Before oil lamps, candles and electricity the pine resin wood is used every day to light during dark.

<sup>136</sup> The roots and creepers from trees are used as a rope during those time

<sup>137</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:42

<sup>138</sup> Shimray, 2000:158

<sup>139</sup> *Luirim* is a shawl worn only by male who were dignified and respected by the people for his social status and his bravery exhibited during war.

<sup>140</sup> Shimray, 2000:158-159

of buffalo during the festival was considered an act of honor for the family and for the deceased. Not every family could afford to kill buffalo. Those who could not afford, killed smaller animals like chicken or dogs and even crab according to one of Tangkhul's tale.<sup>141</sup> But without sacrificing any living creature, *Thisham* rituals was not considered complete and appropriate. The biggest animal chosen for the festival was first butchered and then the smaller ones followed. All animals including the sacrificial buffalo were dragged from the grazing field a day or two before the festival actually began, except for those domesticated such as pigs, chicken or dogs. The first animal killed for the festival was regarded as the most important as they believed that this symbolized the deceased's popularity and greatness in the community. They even believed that the soul of the animal will go together with the soul of the human in *Kazeiram*. Before the killing, the buffalo was supposed to be tied to the pole erected on all the limbs with the rope collected on the first day. A head dress called *Pasi*<sup>142</sup> which has a circle shape structure with colorful decoration was placed on the head of the sacrificial buffalo. Then the priest took a sharp spear, encircled round the buffalo for more than two times and pierced the buffalo with the sharp spear but without much force. Once the priest pierced the buffalo, then the young males armed with spear and axe tried to break the limbs first to prevent the buffalo from escape and finally killed the buffalo in a pool of blood. Pettigrew described the act as "very cruel, and would not be tolerated for a moment in any civilized state... the poor animal are tied down and subject to much torture, the animal being cut to pieces piecemeal with knife and spear, and no attempt to end his life before almost the last shred of flesh has been torn away and the limbs torn away from their sockets."<sup>143</sup> He wrote, "it was considered quite a sight, and crowds gathered round, and even sits on the house tops, and gaze on this horrible butcher's work."<sup>144</sup> Soon after the killing and cutting of the animal was over, the meat was divided and distributed. The inner meat like the liver, kidneys, lungs, heart, intestines, spleen were given to the priest to prepare for offering to *Kameo* and *Kokto*. While the right hind leg was kept for *Thila Kapho*<sup>145</sup> and the remaining were distributed to the married daughters, sisters and sister-in-laws, the head and torso were kept for the host family.

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<sup>141</sup> In KK Hugh's collection of Tangkhul tales *Awo Ayi Lan* which was written in Tangkhul has a story titled 'Kachai Thisham Shamkhalui Mipha'

<sup>142</sup> Pasi is a head gear usually worn by man during festival and other occasion.

<sup>143</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:43

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> An individual who was hired by the family of the deceased to play the role of the deceased during *Thisham* festival

Fourth day was generally understood as *Kasho Thang* literally means the ‘day of opening’. From the beginning of the festival until this day, no outsiders would be allowed entry to the village, nor would any villager be allowed to leave the village boundaries. According to Shimray, rules were strictly maintained and observed so “as not to allow any undesirable elements enter the village nor the good luck left the village.”<sup>146</sup> This day was remembered mostly by the elders as *Thila Kapho ra thang* which means the day *Thila Kapho* comes.

### ***Mimetic Representation of Thila Kapho***

At this juncture it becomes important to discuss who *Thila Kapho* was, what role did he play, and understand the performative dimensions of *Thila Kapho* during *Thisham* festival. If a member of a family died, then the living members of the family had to prepare to send the soul of the deceased to *Kazeiram*. In the course of time after the death, the family searched for a person, male for male and female for female who possessed similar features to take up roles of the deceased during *Thisham* festival. The *Thila Kapho* may be from the same village or from some other distant villages. Hiring *Thila Kapho* for the festival was a rich man’s affair, and so not every family could afford to hire *Thila Kapho*, even though they would wanted to. Every year *Thisham* was observed whenever death occurred in the village. But the representative role acted by the *Thila Kapho* was not a yearly affair. It depended on the situation. Usually, if a small children or a poor person died, *Thila Kapho* was not hired at all.

There was no village or a clan identified as a clan or village of *Thila Kapho*, nor was any individual identified as *Thila Kapho*. There were few individuals who were hired every year for this role though this was not their professional career. Every individual can be a *Thila Kapho*, but most often, the role of *Thila Kapho* was taken up by the less fortunate ones. In some cases, a close friend or a family members of the deceased took up the role but such cases were very rare.

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<sup>146</sup> Shimray, 2000:159

Interviews with different elders from different villages gave a similar opinion that the role of *Thila Kapho* was accepted mostly by the less fortunate ones for food and materials.<sup>147</sup> Since there was no money system during that time, every gift or token or labor charges were bartered by material objects. According to my research in Ringui village<sup>148</sup>, most of the *Thila Kapho* happened to come from different villages.

The family of the deceased went and searched for *Thila Kapho* to represent their loved ones during *Thisham*. In many cases, family of the deceased went to other villages and settled the amount or quantity of materials or the food to be awarded for the role playing. Even after the commencement of the festival, the *Thila Kapho* had to wait till the fourth day to enter the village. When *Thila Kapho* arrived the family of the deceased treated *Thila Kapho* as their departed loved one. Such a representation automatically assumed a performative dimension as the *Thila Kapho* was free to act as the representative, with freedom to enact the role of the deceased. Even after he had entered the house of the family of the deceased, his role as a *Thila Kapho* did not start immediately. *Thila Kapho* was treated like they would treat their own relations. Since arrival, *Thila Kapho* was fed and offered a place to rest in the house of the deceased, no matter whether the *Thila Kapho* was from the same village or came from other village. Pettigrew mentioned that “the representative of the death finds his first occupation on this day by collecting ‘*khamuina*’.”<sup>149</sup> Even though *Thila Kapho* had lived with the family, still he was not considered as their family members or as the dead ones until the seventh day.

At this juncture, the mimetic representation of the *Thila Kapho* and the acting by the family members became important and significant. Though the family, the relations and the whole village did not necessarily played the role of another person, all the people around *Thila Kapho* became an actor, they acted as if the person playing the role of *Thila Kapho* was someone whom they knew and had shared memories with. They called the *Thila Kapho* by the name of the deceased, and the *Thila Kapho* answered them as if s/he was the real one. By considering *Thila Kapho* as their loved

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<sup>147</sup> An interview with Samatai Khutai.

<sup>148</sup> Ringui Village, in Ukhrul District Manipur.

<sup>149</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:43

ones and treating him/her without any difference, in their own self, they were also acting. Erving Goffman, in his book *Presentation of the Self in everyday life* said:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show 'for the benefit of other people.'<sup>150</sup>

Even in the enactment of *Thila Kapho*, s/he played out the role of somebody who had passed away and had disappeared from the view of the family. The philosophical reason behind the enactment or the role playing by the *Thila Kapho* was to ease the pangs of separation. It actually takes time for the bereaved family to forget their members and in such situation, the parting of the living and the dead among the Tangkhuls could be seen as a time consuming process. The fact that even after the deceased body was buried, but the souls of the deceased body continue to linger on with the livings without soon going to *Kazeiram*, was in a way, a slow separation rather than a sudden separation. In this manner, Goffman's idea of performing for the benefit of the other people becomes significant for this research. In this case, to perform is to release and relieve the grieving from the pain of separation. *Thila Kapho* who is seen and considered as the real one becomes the performer who released the family from the pain and suffering caused due to the demise of their beloved family members. On the other hand, Ronald L Grimes considered an action having an intention as not only speaking for the performer himself but also for the observer or the spectator participating as they see the action or the performance. The performer does not speak for themselves. *Thila Kapho* in that way does not speak for himself, rather he speaks for the family.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Goffman, 1956: 10

<sup>151</sup> Grimes,2013: 249

Ronald L. Grimes, had differentiated between Theatrical actor and Ritual actors in the book *The Craft Of Ritual Studies* (2013):

Ritual actors, unlike stage actors, are not supposed to be pretending (although they may in fact be). Although they may be performing, because they are aware of being observed, they are also supposed to enact something as agents who accomplish something. Ritual agents are also social persons, not merely agents or performers, so usually they interact; they do not act alone. They do what they do among and with other people. ...they also sometimes act as individuals. Since no one escapes socialization and enculturation, even solitary ritual actors interact, because others inhabit their brains and bodies, if not genetically then culturally.<sup>152</sup>

*Thila Kapho* is neither seen as a ritual actor nor as the theatrical actors but seen as someone who had the quality of both. The role of *Thila Kapho* enacted during the festival in front of the family and the relatives of the deceased can be separated from the real self as he/she like the theatrical actor were pretending. Unlike the ritual actors as defined by Grimes, *Thila Kapho* was supposed to pretend someone who had died and in that way had to accomplish something not for him/her, but for the family and the relatives of the deceased. *Thila Kapho* wouldn't fit into the social structure of the village if he/she belonged to some other villages, because, the interconnection and interrelation among the village during the past was considerably out of question. Thus, *Thila Kapho* who belonged to another village would not have any social affinities with the hosting villagers. Likewise, even if *Thila Kapho* happened to be from the same village, even in this case, the social entities did not hinder much to his/her activities. To become or to play the role of *Thila Kapho*, one required to be separated from his/her real self, even to the extent of discarding the social status. Grimes continued to state that in most ritual circumstances, like most theatrical ones, roles can stand apart from the people who enacted them. Rituals actors, are in that manner not always the 'author' of their own actions, rather they may be echoing in a way that resembles a stage actor's recitation of lines from a script.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Grimes, 2013:249

<sup>153</sup> Grimes, 2013:248

### *Thisham Festival towards the end*

On the fifth day, Pettigrew had recorded that “clothes of all kinds and qualities are attached to long poles and erected outside each house of the death. The more clothes displayed the greater one is thought of.”<sup>154</sup> Starting from the morning, women gathered together, made bread wrapped with *Khamuina*. Breads were distributed to every mourner’s family. In the meantime, the sense of belongingness within the community was reflected through songs sung by the elders in a group while the male population would engaged in killing animals and preparing for the feast to be followed. Sixth day was considered as the day for preparing rice beer for consumption during the following days and for completing works that were not completed during the previous days.

According to Pettigrew, the day rice beer preparation got over, the real excitement commenced. On that day, friends, relations, traders and well-wishers from different villages arrived. After the arrival of relations from different villages the family of the deceased called for their respective *Thila Kapho*. The actual commencement of the role of *Thila Kapho* began on the seventh day. A male *Thila Kapho* was dressed with bright head gear called *Vagui*, a colorful necklace called *Kongsang*, a brass armlet called *Har* and brass anklet along with the piece of cloth called *Marao* wrapped around the waist with spear in the hand. While female *Thila Kapho* wore a type of skirt called *kashan* that covers from waist till knee, bare breast, bangle called *Kazao* in both the hands, hanging earrings called *Unra*, a nose ring called *Nahui* worn only by the matured female, colorful bead necklace called *Kongsang* and an iron scepter called *Zeithing*. If the *Thila Kapho* is from the same village, than s/he get dressed from his/ her house but if the *Thila Kapho* is from other village, s/he has to get dressed up from the neighbor’s house. Many elders I interviewed, recalled that day as the most exciting day during the festival. *Thila Kapho* had to enter to the house of the family of the deceased on this very day and since then s/he was taken as the deceased one. Before entering into the house, *Thila Kapho* danced<sup>155</sup> in the front yard of the house

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<sup>154</sup> Pettigrew,1910:43

<sup>155</sup> My research failed to document this dance as this form of dance was no longer performed anywhere after converting into Christianity and since the festival was no longer celebrated for many decades from now, the bodily movement and the pattern of this dance was not even memorized by any of my interviewees.

of the deceased and entered into the house like he belonged to that family. After entering he was offered to sit in the seat used by the deceased.<sup>156</sup> From this moment onward till the end of the festival, he is looked upon as the “dead person in life, and just as we would treat a friend or relationship who was going on a long journey, with no prospect of seeing him again.”<sup>157</sup> Family members offered *Thila Kapho* the best food and rice beer- weak and strong and treated him/her as if he was the real one. From then on he remained in the family, and lived there with other members normally as if he had lived with them for many years. There was no question of shyness, like a theatrical actor, the *Thila Kapho* acted the role given to him/her to satisfy the wishes of the bereaved family.

The day after *Thila Kapho* entered the house of the deceased and began impersonating the deceased was remembered by the elders I interviewed as *Kayang kakhai thang*<sup>158</sup> which literally means ground separation day. On this day, i.e. the eight day, the activities were “mostly taken up by commercial pursuit”. Trade and exchange took place at a spot called *Leingapha kayang*<sup>159</sup>. Effigies of the deceased were made from bamboo and leaves of a tree were erected in the middle of the ground. This day was called Ground Separation day because, after a dance act was performed, *Thila Kaphos* remained on the ground with the family of the deceased separating from others. *Thila Kapho* performed dances and at the same time threw away clothes prepared for the occasion by the family of the deceased, while many villagers watched. But the clothes were picked up only by the less fortunate ones in the village.<sup>160</sup> Only those families who killed buffalo for the festival would perform such rituals. The number of the dancers differs from year to year according to the number of deaths occurred in that year. During the dance the dancers were accompanied by two young men who could be a relation of any of the deceased or if there were young men among

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<sup>156</sup> In the past, every member of a family had their specific seat to sit and a plate to eat with.

<sup>157</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:43

<sup>158</sup> Luikham, 2013:140

<sup>159</sup> *Leingapha kayang* literally means trade fair center or compound. Most of this compound is at the center of the village or in the compound of the village chief. This space is meant not only for trade fair purposes but it is a multi-purpose space where every community gathering or a festival were conducted. Sothing W.A Shimray called this village ground.

<sup>160</sup> It is considered a disgrace to pick up the dropped article, so only the less privilege people and those outsiders would pick them. It is also said that those poorer neighboring villages would want to attend this festival as they could collect money and clothes thrown away. The dropping of shawls, money and other articles is not a gift for the death but a show of status on the part of the host.



the *Thila Kaphos* they took on this role. This role was to lead the other *Thila Kaphos* in dancing. While dancing *Thila Kapho* would announce “*I ara aja eina thuida sangkhumsa eina aokthuiura, iram hili maungzangluimara*”<sup>161</sup> which meant ‘From today onwards I am going to live with dignity in the land of dead and will never enter this village’. While the *Thila Kapho* danced the family members hysterically beat clothes on the ground and would follow *Thila Kapho* with loud cries and mourning where ever he went. Later, *Thila Kapho* would move towards one side of the ground and “stand in such a formation that the weak and the old are made to stand in between and the brave and warrior at both the end”<sup>162</sup>. This was done so because the Tangkhuls believed that the same formation was followed as the souls journeyed towards the ‘land of dead’ which has full of unforeseen lurking dangers.

After the *Thila Kaphos* ended their dancing, the ground was made available for the *Thisham* dancer to perform *Thisham Mahon*<sup>163</sup> which may be translated as *Thisham* dance that was performed only during this festival. This dance was performed only by the male members of the married sister’s family i.e. the in-laws family. Such performance was performed only when a male member died. Long before the festival, the in-laws were informed in advance to make preparations. Even for preparations, a huge amount was spend by the hosting family and even after the performance, the dancers were awarded handsomely. In-laws could not shirk away or deny whenever such opportunity arrived, declining such responsibility could even lead to war as they considered such denial as betrayal. After the dancing and fair got over, “*Thila kapho* are taken and fed by the female relations, going from house to house receiving the clothes brought in the previous night”<sup>164</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> Wung, 2013:94-95

<sup>162</sup> Shimray, 2000:160

<sup>163</sup> *Thisham Mahon* is a kind of Dance in which chanting and dancing happens simultaneously. This dance is considered to be the most attractive and spectacular dance among Tangkhuls. But unfortunately since this festival discontinue to celebrate for many decades, this dance seems to have been forgotten as it has not been perform for so long. Another reason of this distinction is that this particular dance is specifically for this specific festival which means this dance cannot be performed in any other occasion other than *Thisham* Festival. Performing in other occasion would mean inviting misfortune in the community. Which is why this dance, after the breakdown of the institutionalized and traditional system, tends to slowly fades away from the body of the individual dancer. During the time of my research no individual mostly elderly people whose age are beyond seventy and more, who have lived the pre-Christian way of life and live through after Converting into Christianity remember the pattern of movement of this particular dance.

<sup>164</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:44

Pettigrew mentioned the day after *kayang kakhai thang* as a “day of great feasting”<sup>165</sup>. Two important rituals of this festival were performed on this day one before sunset and the other after sunset. *Zeirun Kharung* was a ritual performed by all the family of the deceased. On that day, every deceased family brought out large amount of food including sticky rice, meat of different kinds, vegetables and drinks mostly rice beer to the open ground where the dance performance happened the day before. This ritual was performed with the belief that souls of the dead ones returned from *Kazeiram* to earth and to partake a meal together with the living relations. Another reason was to gather all the souls together in one place to proceed towards *Kazeiram*.

Every members of the community assembled together for the great *Thisham* ceremonial feast. A wooden plate called *Thikhong*<sup>166</sup> was brought for the feasting. Even after a person died, the family continued to place food on his/her plate until this day of feasting. Considering that day as the ending day for sharing, a big piece of meat called *Zeirun Sa* was served on every *Thikhong*. Strong and mild beer were also served separately for every deceased individuals. To rightfully begin the actual feasting, all the *Thikhong* were raised at the same time chanting and saying “eh-he-he-he-...oh..zatulo-oh, hi eina tatang tarangsei”<sup>167</sup>(eh-he-he-he-he...O.. Now you go- oh, let this be the end). After this ritual led by the village priest is over, plates served for the deceased were raised from the ground exactly at the same time and were taken to their own respective houses.<sup>168</sup>

The most important ritual performed during *Thisham* was *Kazei kata* meaning going towards *Kazeiram*. It marked the separation between the living and the soul of the deceased. This ritual was performed on the very same day *Zeirun Kharung* ritual was performed, but this ritual

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>166</sup> *Thikhong* was a wooden plate used by the Tangkhuls in the past to serve food for the deceased. In the past, the Tangkhuls believed that the soul of the deceased did not leave the house until *Thisham* festival was observed. Hence, from the day a person died till the ninth day of *Thisham* festival, family used to serve food in the plate used by the deceased.

<sup>167</sup> Luikham, 2013:95

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

was performed only after the sun set. Family, friends, relatives and neighbors gathered at the house of the deceased family for procession. Every family began the procession from their respective home and marched towards a spot called *veikhur* which was considered as the gate of the village though there was no gate constructed as such. All the processions met there at the spot and from there all the families would proceed together towards a spot called *Zeiphar*. For the procession, women wore *Kongsang*, hold *Zeithing*<sup>169</sup> and carry *Tansop*<sup>170</sup> while man wore *Vagui* on their head, and dressed accordingly carrying spears. During the procession children did not participate. In Pettigrew's word:

At the head of same march the torch bearers, with the leaves gathered early morning wound round their and shoulders to keep off sparks from the burning torches. Behind this march a crowd of elders dressed in their war garb, and lastly the *Thila Kapho* the representative of the death follow with relations crowding around them, and with much lamentation and grief the procession proceeds slowly on its way towards '*Zeiphar*' a spot at the north end of the village overshadowed by a big tree."<sup>171</sup>

But not everyone proceed towards *Zeiphar*, the torch bearers, elders and the village priests went. Reaching a spot called *Veikhur* known as the village gate, according to Ako Shaiza, *Thila Kapho* looked just like the deceased s/he had been impersonating and even the voice transformed into the voice of the deceased. *Thila Kapho* removed all fineries and belongings that were associated with the deceased and his ritual significance would come to an end as s/he said, "*china kahor ramli pamngaiching lala mapampailui mana. I zathaora, nathum mashitrei eina leishi ngarok chingda thingphun luivatli ungrip varipda ringphalak eina chingri vari nimshimri okthui chinglo. Shimli pamlala lamrei karzangda ram shongjan janreili jangta zatlal ili phaninigungmi chinglo, ili masi masimilakalo nathumli leishishi haiya.*"<sup>172</sup> (Even though I want to live in this luminous world, I cannot live anymore. I am going, may you walk hand in hand in trampling, loving and keeping

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<sup>169</sup> *Zeithing* is a metal rod usually used by women while walking for support.

<sup>170</sup> *Tansop* refers to a bamboo sack that is cylindrical in shape. It is carried on the back carried with the help of a bamboo rope placed on the head. This is a common article for carrying goods.

<sup>171</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:45

<sup>172</sup> Ako Shaiza. *Tangkul Naga Wungram: Ngashan, Rivan kala Shivan Chikan Shongza* (written in Tangkul and the year of publication was not mentioned). pp.10

peace with one another. Remember me where ever you are, be at home or on a journey in a foreign land. Do not be ashamed for me for I have loved you very much). Breaking and tearing the fineries worn by *Thila Kapho* signifies the ending of his/her impersonation and from this point onward, s/he would again be transposed into his/her own identity. If the *Thila Kapho* is from the same village, s/he returned to his/her own house, but if the *Thila Kapho* came from another village he/she took shelter in a nearby hut outside the village for the night and returned to their respective village the following day.

After the *Thila Kapho* had completed his role, the torch bearers would carry four or five pine resin torches each and proceed towards *Zeiphar* which was/is located towards the rising sun from the village location across the village gate. Along with them would be the village priest who led the procession from the meeting point. Approaching the *Zeiphar*, all the pine resin torches also called *Kazeimei* were thrown away by the family members saying “*Zatulo, leishishi haikho hi eina tatang tarang haosa, hanung sharkho*”<sup>173</sup> (Now you go, we love you, let this be the end and never return again). Sothing W A Shimray also noted a similar quotation “dear one, let us depart from here, may you go your way happily, please do not come back, let this be the end (of our existing together), goodbye”.<sup>174</sup> Before leaving the spot, a huge bonfire was made out of the dropped torches and dresses worn by *Thila Kapho* were also burned. The reasons behind holding torches to pave their way towards *Zeiphar* was to lead the souls toward *Kazeiram*. According to Pettigrew, “the idea is that the spirit needs to be led in the gathering twilight to show them their way to their final place of abode *Kazeiram*, and the warriors are also needed as a guard to keep them from all harm on the way there. The spirit is supposed to enter into, or rather is turned into these lighted torches as soon as they are thrown down at ‘*Zeiphar*’.”<sup>175</sup> The Tangkhuls in the past believed that the souls of the deceased follows the procession towards the village gate and finally to their final abode *Kazeiram*.

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<sup>173</sup> Shaiza, (year of publication not mentioned):10

<sup>174</sup> Shimray, 2000:162

<sup>175</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:45

After the soul sending-off rituals at the *Zeiphar* were over, individuals participating in the procession returned to their respective houses. According to Shimray, that night was “considered not good for anyone to go hungry; roam around the village; remain unclean and to stumble or fall as the Tangkhuls believed that the soul of the hungry person went away and dined with the soul of the dead; the dead may mistook the dirty one with the trees and take those away with them; on falling down, the soul might run away out of fright”<sup>176</sup>. To avoid such misfortune, everyone returning to their respective houses took great care. If due to unfortunate reason a returnee falls, it was believed that the soul of the returnee fell too. So a ritual known as *Mangla Zai Kakhui* which may be understood as soul catching rituals would have to be performed in order to bring back the soul. As Shimray quoted, “If someone falls down that day, rituals known as ‘Mangla Zai kakhui’ is performed by the head of the family by taking a fowl to the very place and let the fowl make sound and flaps its wings by holding it upside down. Doing so, he goes back all the way home again”.<sup>177</sup>

According to Pettigrew, “before entering their houses, the *Wonyaithing* structure erected outside was pulled down and the pole over the grave are pulled out and thrown away. At the front door just inside the house, a pine torch was lighted and placed it on a stone. This was done on the purpose of not allowing the spirits of the living to go off with the spirits of the dead just got rid of”.<sup>178</sup> After entering their respective houses, every family who had participated in the procession killed a fowl and while removing feathers from the wings of the fowl, the head of the family, usually the father called out the names of every members saying “*Iwui mangla unglo, awui mangla unglo, kazeiram vasharkho, atoram ringfarakho, mangkikachi zakikachi tarayakha, sirayakha leifakho*”<sup>179</sup> (Come my soul, come your (names of every members) soul, you are not rightful to go to *kazeiram*, we will still live here, we still have to eat and drink as many as the water and the stars). Every members would then remain indoors thereafter. It was believed that the family members and the villagers who moved out could watch the souls journeying across the mountain

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<sup>176</sup> Shimray, 2000:163

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:45

<sup>179</sup> Luikham, 2013:97

as they could see the dead holding lighted torches flickering across the adjacent uphill mountains passing through wood and river<sup>180</sup>.

It is important to take into account what Khongreiwo had said according to his research conducted in *Marem* village and other nearby Tangkhul villages located in the northern part of Ukhrul district of Manipur, regarding the marching of the souls. He wrote,

it is testified by the few remnants of the Pre-Christian days that after the disposal of the pine torches of the death at the specified place...the living would watch the dead leaving the village and transiting the 'exit gate' tending their respective animals (killed in their honor by their families at the Thisam) as they headed towards Kazeiram. The living, it is recounted, could see the dead in full view holding the torches with flickering fires (symbolic, yet visible to the eye of the living) towards the 'land of the dead' transiting the 'exit gates', and as they yell out the name of some of the dead, the concern would stop for them and listen to their cries and words of farewell.<sup>181</sup>

Another significant account quoting Dr. Brown in TC Hodson's book *Naga Tribes of Manipur*, was that the

spirit of the departed appears at the distance from the village in the faint moonlight wending their way slowly over the hills, driving before them the victims they may have slain or the cattle stolen during their lives; the procession disappears over the distance hills amidst the wail of the villagers<sup>182</sup>.

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<sup>180</sup> My interview with many of the elders mostly septuagenarian and octogenarian claimed to have witnessed such sight.

<sup>181</sup> Rammathot Khongreiwo's *Landscape, Memories and Pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga Eschatology* was published in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nags in Perspective*. Pp. 79-80.

<sup>182</sup> Hodson, 1993:160

Khongreiwo added that “animals slaughtered for them at the feast” were also driven as the dead proceed towards *Kazeiram*. Both Khongreiwo a Tangkhul Naga Researcher and Dr. Brown who was a British administrator during the period of the ending of 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Manipur described the same event and both seems to agree that the spirit or soul of the dead appeared at the distance bearing torches wending their way slowly over the hills. Khongreiwo was convinced that this event “really took place” as he recounted the story being narrated by his paternal grandfather and grandmother about the ‘marvelous’ sight they experienced before their conversion into Christianity during the 1950s.

Even after the Soul sending off ceremony was completed, the living still observed the following two days as *Kazei Kuireo thang* which means a day of breaking of *Vagui* (head gear) worn by the dead and *Kharing Phanit thang* which means festival of the living.<sup>183</sup> Shimray recorded that *Kokto*, who was regarded as the ruler of *Kazeiram* and feared by everyone, “does not allow anyone with their head gear i.e. *Vagui* on to enter his kingdom. As to enter the kingdom of *Kokto*, everyone has to break off their *Vagui* on reaching the gate of the Kingdom of dead. As a mark of respect to the dead and the activities of breaking their *Vagui*, the living observed the day as *Kazei Kuireo Thang*. Pettigrew also noted that the Tangkhuls believed that on this day “the embodied spirit in Kazeiram cut all their hair off... and have a sort of “wash and brush up” to remove all connection with the mother earth” and adding that the living were not “supposed to bathe or touch water”.<sup>184</sup> The next day is a day of resting and feasting. *Vaichum Ngakhum* meaning, emptying rice beer barrel and utensils, signifying cleansing and separation from the pangs of death, was managed by every family. This day was spent sharing rice beer with the relations and inviting the *Thisham* dancers, as those families who could afford to organize *Thisham* dance generally took place soon after the festival. After some days of resting, the following days were meant to be days of hard labor before another major festival called *Luir* festival also known as seed sowing festival arrived.

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<sup>183</sup> Both T.Luikham and Sothing WA Shimray mentioned about this two particular days but gave a very brief detail. In fact, Luikham just indicated that the day soon after the Zeiphar ritual was performed, *Kazei kuireo* day and *kharing* festival follows.

<sup>184</sup> Pettigrew, 1910: 45-46

## *Chapter Three*

### *Remnants: The Work of Memory*

Human beings are constantly in transition from the present into a future which itself soon becomes the ever receding past. Understandably, we deal with this temporal dislocation by seeking to preserve, retrieve, reinterpret or appropriate past experience. In its original actuality, as it once was, the past is inaccessible. Nevertheless, we are daily surrounded by the manifold traces of earlier activities, to whose former existence they thus bear witness. As individuals, we carry the legacy of our past with us in the scars, wrinkles, tattoos and so on and as community or group we carry the legacy of the past in the stories, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, beliefs through which our experiential duration is inscribed on our ageing bodies and the collective bodies. Immaterial signifiers of the past include individual memory and a shared cultural memory, these permit the transgenerational transmission and inheritance of values, norms and social practices. Individual's memory and the shared cultural memory which was later understood as 'collective memory' is an integral body of work to further understand the mode and the process of transmission and transmitting culture from generation to generation and from old to new. In the case of the Tangkhul Nagas, from the Pre-Christianity to Christianity. At this juncture it is also important to mention what Diana Taylor said about the process of transmission and transmitting culture from the past to the present. Unlike the inscribed or incorporated memories in a cultural/collective or individual's memory, the knowledge of the past is transmitted from generation to generation through performance that were archived in the form of writings and found in the repertoire of the body of the performer i.e. embodied knowledge.<sup>185</sup>

There is a significant desire amongst the young people in Tangkhul society to learn about the past. But what does it mean when the young people in Tangkhul voice similar views, seemingly harkening back to the pre-Christian age as a better age? Many young Tangkhul scholars had moved forward to reconstruct the past, in my case, ritual performances, and the spaces where such performances took place. Another area that is discussed here is the significance of gifting and how

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<sup>185</sup> Taylor, 2005:20-23



it was seen as a ritual in the Tangkhul Nagas practices. While trying to see the processes of understanding of the past three principle processes could be highlighted – nostalgia, memory and reconstruction. In this chapter, the ongoing reconstruction of the past, especially that of the cultural practices like songs and dances, the tangible landscape and monuments and the behavior of the community that is reflected in the act of gifting through memories and nostalgia associated with them. The transition from the past to the present, the process of the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation, the mode of transference and the ethnic consciousness of identity are also highlighted contextualizing Tangkhul Nagas. In the words of Taylor<sup>186</sup>, ‘Archive’ and ‘repertoire’ were two different system of knowledge carried by an individual or by the collective community. This system of knowledge certainly occupies an important terrain, and not just to understand the mode of transference or transmission or transmitting knowledge, but also to look into the intricacies and the linings of performances weaved within the web of Tangkhul Nagas culture.

### ***Returning to the Past: Pre-Christian Nostalgia***

During my interview with the elders of the Tangkhul Naga community, the elders frequently lamented the present state. The pre-Christian period in particular, was portrayed in a highly idealized light, as a time when the sense of community was strong, the customary law was the law, continuously celebrating festivals for many days. Although some acknowledged that the pre-Christian Tangkhuls were uneducated and illiterate, wasting too much time and energy in festivities dinking rice beer, at least they had culture, they argued, and during the past people were more conscious of their identity, every member learned and knew the art off singing and dancing the traditional arts. Christianity came as a religion of peace, but many elders lamented that this religion was no better than the pre-Christian religion. Such sense of dislocation and thinking of the past in the present is generally understood as nostalgia. Since the past seems to have been unreachable and irretrievable, nostalgic reconstructions has become an important task to perform in the present to attempt to retrieve the past. Many elders among the Tangkhuls who had experienced both the pre-Christian and Christian way of life in the present lamented for being

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 19

unable to retain the knowledge and the values that were strictly attached to the people. There was a sense of longing for the past. But this has nothing to do with the return of the pre-Christian. It is not some perverse desire for returning to the past in every aspects mostly that of the culture. Nostalgia, after all, involves the longing for something that cannot be restored, something dead and gone. It precisely marks the distance between the "then" and "now". Here as elsewhere, nostalgia speaks of aspiration without possibility, deploying sensibilities and values drawn from the past in the context of current struggles.<sup>187</sup> It is also a kind of 'home coming', or 'nostalgia' as Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia "as a historical emotion, is a longing for that shrinking "space of experience" that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations"<sup>188</sup>.

### *Memory as Creative Agent*

Since, the bedrock of this research lies on the memories of the older members of the community, an attempt has been made to understand and discussed the complexities of memory. Considering memory of an individual and of the collective as a tool to recollect the past and using memory as an archive available in the form of an oral narrative like story-telling and in written form like books, journals and magazines. Tangkhul Nagas history especially that of the Pre-Christian time were scantily available in written documents but more abundantly existed or archived in the form of oral narrative, rituals, songs, tales, memories and festivals.

Both culture and memory can be understood as "web of significance spun by human beings"<sup>189</sup>. To answer these many questions, discussion on Dance and Music, the art of gifting and Landscape and monuments were included to better understand the lived life of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. Considering dance, music, act of gifting, landscape and monuments as an elements of culture that carries something of the past. Taking into account the elements of culture considerably the remnants, some immoveable like the monuments and landscape, behavioral

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<sup>187</sup> Bissel, 2005:215-248

<sup>188</sup> Boym, 2001:25

<sup>189</sup> Clifford Geertz

characteristics of human nature like the act of giving, and dance and music as an art form contributed to the construction of community identity. Discussion on memory and how memory is seen as a performance or the performative elements in memory maneuver within the culture were made.

If memory is social and cultural, it is also performative, making the past present in ways that can be experienced, generating knowledge of the relationship between past and present that is oftentimes troubling, other times comforting. The focus here is on the 'act' of memory, inquiring into the processes of making, constructing, enacting, transforming, expressing, transmitting cultural memory through stories, dance, festivals, ceremonies, songs, narratives. As Diana Taylor reminds us, 'to perform' is a verb<sup>190</sup>. It is 'to do something, e.g. a piece of work', as the dictionary states. So, to remember is also to do something.

Memory performed is at the heart of collective memory. When individuals and groups express or embody or interpret or repeat a script about the past, they galvanize the ties that bind groups together and deposit additional memory traces about the past in their own minds. These renewed and revamped memories frequently vary from and overlay earlier memories, creating a complex palimpsest about the past each of us carries with us. Thus the performance of memory is both a mnemonic device and a way in which individual memories are relived, revived, and refashioned. One important account that gives a stringent and clear elaboration on memory and memory studies and distinguishes individual and collective memory is Astrid Erll's definition:

Memories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, depending on the situation in which they are recalled. Re-remembering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Version of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memory are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of a person or group doing the remembering in the present. As a result, memory studies directs its interest not toward the

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<sup>190</sup> Diana, 2003:14

shape of the remembered past, but rather toward the particular presents of the remembering<sup>191</sup>.

The above lines clearly outline a very important issue and considering the act of remembering as a kind of creation. Since it is a mode of creation, and creation can happen only in the present state, things that we remember in the present had undergone a certain process of selection and elimination. Astrid Erll rightly pointed out that the version of the past changes every time whenever recollection took place. But the question is, if recollecting is a constant change and reassembling of different materials of the past than the authenticity and the truth about the past is always unclear and questionable. Another aspect that came out from what Erll had said is that the memory becomes collective when it goes beyond an individual account, subscribed to and shared by a group. It must have historical and emotional relevance, connecting seemingly discrete events in a cause-and-effect manner and remarked that any account of a simple event that has no historical and emotional relevance is not collective memory. It becomes so when it invokes shared emotions and consciousness. It is for this reason that collective memory becomes part of the process of healing, reconciliation, and reconstruction at both the individual and communal levels.

Another observation made by James Fentress and Chris Whickham in their book *Social Memory* (1992) gave us an understanding that memory is tool and distinguishes individual and collective memory and mentioned the process of becoming a collective memory from the individual memory. What Maurice Halbwach had said about memory i.e. a collective memory or an individual memory were always contextualizes and remembering can happen only within the frame structure, is again reflected in Fentress and Whickham book. When they said:

“...Past or Present, memory is everything, both tools and materials, both the means and the goal of their labour. But even individual memory is not simply: the memories which constitute our identity and provide the context for every thought and action are not only our own, but are learned borrowed, and inherited –in part, and part of, a common stock, constructed, sustained, and transmitted by the families, communities and cultures to which we belong. No human group is constituted, no code of conduct promulgated, no thought

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<sup>191</sup> Erll, 2011:8

given form, no action committed, no knowledge communicated, without its intervention; history itself is both a product and a source of social memory<sup>192</sup>.

Social memory is, in fact, often selective, distorted, and inaccurate. None the less, it is important to recognize that it is not necessarily any of these; it can be extremely exact, when people have found it socially relevant from that day to this to remember and recount an event in the way it was originally experienced<sup>193</sup>.

Looking through the prism of performance, one can analyze the process, transition and transformation of culture in the course of time as newer culture or religion is being introduced to a particular set of community. Thus, the cultural values in the present, even after embracing the so called newer value or knowledge, in this case Christianity, were not completely removed from the memory of the individuals and the collective memory. Cultural memory can be defined as the things and the ways in which a culture remembers. Here too, we focus on the cultural dimension of memory, taken as both what and how a culture remembers or a community remembers. As Maurice Halbwachs said ‘It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories’<sup>194</sup>

Paul John Eakin quotes Aciman: ‘he was not just remembering. He was remembering remembering’<sup>195</sup>. Aciman actually refers to the poet William Wordsworth, but he could equally have been referring to Marcel Proust; they are both writers whose work embodies the agency of a practice of individual memory. The point here is that memory practices are intimately connected with making, with narrating, telling and writing—in short, with the act of creation. As Gilles Deleuze put it in his book on Proust: ‘It is no longer a matter of saying: to create is to remember—but rather, to remember is to create,...’<sup>196</sup> So, it is the act of remembering that creates the events or

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<sup>192</sup> Fentress,

<sup>193</sup> Fentress,

<sup>194</sup> Halbwachs, 1992:38

<sup>195</sup> Eakin, 2008:163

<sup>196</sup> Deleuze 2000:111

the social or cultural events of a community which gets registered in the minds of the people from the community.

As we saw earlier, Maurice Halbwachs argued that memory functions within a social context and is therefore framed by it. It is also elaborated that cultural memory has normative and formative powers, since it serves to actively construct the identity of social groups from families to nations, which in turn ‘socially mediate’ individual memory. Memories are thus shaped by their social, generational and cultural context. Also Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik in the introduction of their book *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture* mentioned that “Memory is always recall and re-collection (the terms are frequently used as synonyms), and, consequently, it implies re-turn, re-vision, re-enactment, re-presentation: making experiences from the past present again in the form of narratives, images, sensations, performances”<sup>197</sup>.

“Ritual” often refers to the repetition of small and thoroughly mundane acts perform by any every man in different levels individually or in a collective community basis. In the essay ‘Ritual performance and the politics of identity: On the functions and uses of ritual’ Jan Koster in the essay ‘Ritual performance and the politics of identity: On the functions and uses of ritual’ viewed ritual as a “technology” with a very clear purpose that cannot sensibly be seen as just a side-effect: the reduction of the sense of individual self of the participants in order to achieve a sense of ‘communitas’ with respect to a territorial model.

### ***Individual and Collective Memory***

In Maurice Halbwach’s *On Collective Memory*(1992) edited, translated and introduction by Lewis A Coser was translated from the original text *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1952), originally published in *Les Travaux de L'Année Sociologique*(1925), Coser resounded Halbwach’s concept

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<sup>197</sup> Liedeke, 2013:6

of 'Collective memory', as is "not a given but rather a socially constructed notion. Nor is it some mystical group mind"<sup>198</sup>. Coser pointed out the importance of both the individual and the collective and their inter dependency quoting Halbwach "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember."<sup>199</sup> He further mentioned that there are as many collective memories as there are many different groups and institutions in a society. Social classes, families, associations, corporations, armies, and trade unions all have distinctive memories that their members have constructed, often over long periods of time. Likewise even the Tangkhul Nagas as an individual entity and as a group or community, in the past and the present shared a kind of distinctive memory different from the other group of people. Cosen further added that "It is, of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past"<sup>200</sup>. "Every collective memory," says Halbwachs, "requires the support of a group delimited in space and time."<sup>201</sup>

The recourse to social framework, is an indispensable prerequisite for every act of remembering. Social framework are, for Halbwachs, first of all simply the people around us. Humans are social creature: without other humans, an individual is denied access not only to such obviously collective phenomena as language and custom, but also according to Halbwachs, to his or her own memory. This is partly because we generally experience things in the company of other people, who can also later help us remember the events. Much more fundamental for Halbwachs, however is the fact that it is through interaction and communication with our fellow humans that we acquire knowledge about dates and facts, collective concepts of time and space, and ways of thinking and experiencing. Because we participate in a collective symbolic order, we can discern, interpret and remember the past events.

Social framework convey and interpret the contents of collective memory- the supply of shared knowledge and experiences relevant to the group. Halbwachs said that "it is this sense that there exist a collective memory and social framework for memory; it is to the degree that our

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<sup>198</sup> Halbwachs, 1992:22

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 84

individual thoughts places in this frameworks and participate in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection”<sup>202</sup>. Our perception is group-specific, our individual memories are socially formed, and both are unthinkable without the existence of collective memory. However the collective memory is not a supra-individual entity separate from individual’s organic memories. Collective and individual memory are mutually dependent: “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifest itself in the individuals memory”<sup>203</sup>. In short, cultural formations are based on a collective memory and “An individual always remembers within sociocultural contexts”<sup>204</sup>. It is only through an individual’s act of memory that the collective memory can be observed since memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory. What Halbwachs seems to suggest is that while memory is no purely individual phenomenon but must be seen in its fundamentally collective dimension, it is the combination of various group allegiances and the resultant framework for remembering that are actual individual element which distinguish one person from another.

### ***Incorporating and Inscribing Memory***

In Paul Connerton’s *How Societies Remember* (1989), he take up the notion of memory, memory not just as an individual memory but as a collective memory or social faculty and raised to enquire where one finds this phenomena, social or collective memory, and how it operates. He raised question like ‘how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained?’ He argued that through the hierarchical power system of a state or politics of the state and through the meta- narratives of the historical past was shaped the “unconscious collective memory”<sup>205</sup>. He accepts the idea that the present condition and the knowledge of the present is determined by the past’s object and events like his predecessors.

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<sup>202</sup> Halbwachs, 1992:38

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>205</sup> Connerton, 1989:1



For “Social Memory” in particular, images of the past commonly served to legitimate the social order of the present— it is assumed/presuppose that the member/participants of the community/social order must have a shared memory. His fundamental argument in this book is that both Individual and Collective Memory are sustained by a Ritual Performances. If there is such a thing as ‘social memory’ than we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies; but commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit, and habit cannot be thought without the notion of automatisms.

We preserve our past by representing it to ourselves in words and images. In Habitual-Memory, the past is, as it were, ‘sedimented’ in the body. In suggesting how memory is sedimented or amassed within the body, two fundamental social practices can be distinguish: ‘Incorporating Practice’ is a transmission occurring only during the time that their bodies are present to sustain that particular activity. E.g. handshake, words spoken. And ‘Inscribing Practice’ is something that holds information even after human organism has stopped informing. E.g. photograph, encyclopedia, print.<sup>206</sup> Connerton suggested that the “primary object are canonic text, and the life of human being, as ahistorical life, is understood as a life reported and narrated, not life as a physical existence. When the defining features of human species was seen as language; the body was readable as a text or code, but the body is regarded as the arbitrary bearer of meanings, bodily practices are acknowledged, but in an etherealized form”.

### *Performing Memory, performing Community*

The Tangkhul Nagas social, cultural, religious, political and economic life has been undergoing a rapid transformation as a result of the introduction of a new way of life by Christianity, contacts with the outside world, western education etc. The most important factor of social changes among the Tangkhul Nagas according to Khashim Ruivah was proselytization which began only after the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 72-73

coming of Christian Missionary in Tangkhul Naga in 1896. Before Christianity the Tangkhuls were devoid of writing as there is no script or a written language of their own.

Research on communities suggests that rituals lay a key role to building and maintaining community growth and it states that for building and fostering a community – ritual as indicators or marker is vitally important for understanding how to foster community and in shaping consciousness and a shared sense of moral belongingness to the community. Community studies have also constituted a traditional focus of ethnographic research though a unified theoretical definition of the concept of community has been lacking. The most widely used conception of community is one that considers it as one of society's main units of social and biological reproduction.<sup>207</sup> This view, firmly rooted in anthropological studies emphasizes the functional and structural aspects of a community, assuming that the community is a pre-existing natural unit, an empirical object that can be discovered through ethnographic research. Community is mostly defined as a collection of households and individuals residing in a shared place, who interact on a day-to-day basis, share life experiences and goals, and hold a common normative culture. Modern scholars mostly dealing with the modern community conceived of modern community as imagined communities in which members feel united by a created sense of belongingness and comradeship that exists even when the community members have never meet face to face. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined.<sup>208</sup> Ultimately, community is understood as a “boundary-expressing symbol”<sup>209</sup>. This brought us basically to regard the community as a process of group identity formation, constituting as such a fluid domain of identity, affinity and political dimensions, with very elastic borders. The active creation and recreation of a group identity, the creation of a “we- feeling” and a notion of “we- they” opposition, is thus one of the foci around which communities are commonly constructed. They provide the setting where the experience of community is constituted, and the locus from which the (local) community as a social construction ultimately emerges. Daily interactions occur in this setting, operating within, but also constantly creating, a context of relations and feelings of kinship, friendship, neighboring, familiarity, solidarity, as well as rivalry, jealousy, and enmity.

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<sup>207</sup> Yaeger and Canuto, 2000:2-5

<sup>208</sup> Anderson, 1991:6

<sup>209</sup> Cohen, 1985:14

These feelings not only define the phenomenological dimension of the community, but also are central in the formation and negotiation of a common identity.

### *Music and Dance*

After the encounter with the Christian Missionaries, the Tangkhul Nagas had experienced rapid change in different forms of art and culture especially music and dance. In the process of change, not only festivals and religion were abandoned but along with the abandonment of the belief and religion, musical culture and dances which were central to the life of the Tangkhul was large affected. Due to the introduction of new ideas and culture, Tangkhul's some traditional form of art especially dance and music altered. In fact, due to the cultural contact between the Christian missionaries and the Tangkhul, different kinds of dances and music disappeared. Among them were the Thisham Songs and Thisham Dance. Many other forms of dance and songs continue to survive and they were performed during festivals even in the present. During the early period of conversion, the missionaries strictly segregate the traditional songs from the western gospel music. Among the converts, those who sang the traditional songs were considered to be immoral. Anything related to the past culture and practices were considered uncivilized. So, even the converted Tangkhuls refrained themselves from singing and dancing the traditional songs in a traditional tune. Ngakang mentioned that "the cultural contact between the west and the Tangkhul Nagas set 'undesireable' because it led to the loss of some section of repertoire and partial extinction of traditional music of the Tangkhuls"<sup>210</sup>. He further mentioned that the causes for the disappearance of music were "the gradual disappearance of *Longshim* and the changes of occupation"<sup>211</sup>. This can be applied even to dance. The culture of dance though they were not performed on the everyday basis, every festival included dancing during the past. Like the songs, some dances were to be performed only on specific occasion. Therefore, with the discontinuity of observing some festivals, dances were also slowly forgotten from the memory of the dancers.

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<sup>210</sup> Ngakang, 2014:170

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

Even though, many musical repertoire and dance discontinued to perform in the present, many still continue to live on. It is therefore important to know how some music or dance, despite the cultural colonization led by the western missionaries and administrator, continue to be present in the present state. In the book *Cities of Dead*, Roach argued that in a situation where there is cavities created by loss through dead or through other form, it is necessary to fill the cavities. If such cavities is felt by the community, the community Reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described as ‘surrogation’. For Roach, Surrogation “does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occurred occur in the network of relation that constitute the social fabric”<sup>212</sup>. In the case of the Tangkhuls, surrogation happened in a large degree as some of the vacancies that were created by the introduction of new religion were filled by the western values. In the realm of music, the traditional musical forms were partly replaced by the Christian gospel songs sung mostly in congregation. In some form, the traditional music were fused with the traditional tunes and create a new form of folk-pop music. Among the Tangkhul, Rewben Mashangva<sup>213</sup> represents such kind of musical genre.

For the Tangkhul Nagas all Traditional-practices<sup>214</sup> including music and dance were closely related with agricultural cycle, and most of their religious rites also were concerning with good harvest and prosperity<sup>215</sup>. In a simple term, music involved singing and playing musical instrument accompanying one another. The Tangkhul Nagas were agriculturists during the pre-Christian and Christian period<sup>216</sup>, and most of the population still depends on agriculture for livelihood. At every festival, community feasting, singing traditional songs and performance of traditional dance constitutes an integral part of their celebrations. However, the Tangkhul Nagas had numerous traditional songs for different festivals and occasions but some of them were performed only on specific occasions and festivals. Similarly, different styles of traditional dances were performed for every occasions and festivals but not all dances could be performed anytime

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<sup>212</sup> Roach, 1996:2

<sup>213</sup> Rewben Mashanva also known as Guru Rewben Mashagva was a singer, song writer and performer from Ukhrul, Manipur.

<sup>214</sup> Traditional practices may be define as that practices which are associated with the traditional institution of the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas.

<sup>215</sup> Shimray 2000:134

<sup>216</sup> Hodson, 1911:39

in any occasion. Therefore, Tangkhuls' traditional song and dances were intimately connected with day-to-day activities as well as with important occasions. In most occasions, folksongs and folkdances were performed together. The significance and 'meanings' of folksong and folkdance could be comprehended through the relations it shared with other activities and practices.

According to Tuisem Ngakang, since the Tangkhul Nagas had no interaction with the outside world the "musical instruments were determined by the environment they live in"<sup>217</sup>. Musical instruments were prepared from the material available in the locale. He further added that the "tropical and sub-tropical evergreen forest of the area produced great trees ideal for making drums, so is the abundance of bamboo provides the need for various design of flute"<sup>218</sup>. Traditional musical instruments used by the Tangkhul Nagas were not many, however the instruments available and used by them could efficiently produce a melodious music accompanying with the singing. Those musical instruments were: *Tingteila* (one stringed instrument like the violin), *Sipa* (flute made of bamboo), *mazui* (type of mouth organ made out of reed used only by woman), *Talla* (a horned instrument generally made of bamboo and animal horn), *Phung* (drum) and *Sinphung* (Gong usually made of brass or bronze)<sup>219</sup>.

*Hao Laa* (Traditional songs), according to Rewben Mashangva, a Tangkhul Naga Folk singer, are "melodies of Tangkhul folksongs and music are predominantly of pentatonic scale", and the styles of singing are varied, while most of the songs are sung with subtle slurring.<sup>220</sup> According to Mashangva, "there were songs for community works; as for practicable, work songs were sung rhythmically and in synchronization with the physical action so that the labour may become more of a fun".<sup>221</sup> Ngakang also observed that the "philosophy of singing while working is that, it lightens the otherwise weighty work"<sup>222</sup>. Group singing was the popular way of performing traditional songs during and mostly learned at *Longshim*<sup>223</sup>. Tangkhul traditional songs

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<sup>217</sup> Ngakang, 2014:171

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>219</sup> Sothing W.A. Shimray. *The Tangkhuls* 2000. P 93-94

<sup>220</sup> Mashangva, 2001: 7

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ngakang, 2014:175

<sup>223</sup> Common Dormitory for the unmarried man. Also known as *Morung*.

are divided into various categories, specially pertaining to the occasions they were sung. Some of the categories of traditional songs are: *Tantak laa* (songs for journey to the paddy field), *Meisum laa* (courting songs), *Kanrei laa* (songs for dry season), *Luiraa laa* (seed sowing songs), *Shimsak laa* (songs for construction of house), *Maran laa* (songs for feast of merit), *Luisak laa* and *Luishom laa* (songs for ploughing and seed plantations), *Naokhot laa* (lullaby), *Pet laa* (bed songs), *Chapchat laa* (songs of tears and sorrows), *Zingcum laa* (seasons' song, heralding new season or year), *Khangser laa* (promiscuous song), *Zur laa* (songs of rainy season), *Yangyir laa* (songs of spring season), *Kanrei laa* (songs of winter season), *Thisham laa* (songs of Thisham festival) and etc<sup>224</sup>. Thus, in traditional practices of the Tangkhul Nagas, there were songs for every important events and festivals. One Thisham festival song sung by the Hunphun Village during the pre-Christian period was available in a written form but unfortunately no traditional singers who could sing was available. The song goes like this with free interpretation by the researcher:

*Iramli Thishamli* (My village is observing Thisham)

*Lakhokva Thuithihaowa* (noble woman had passed away)

*Ngafariya, Kazeiram* (gloomy kazeiram)

*Kazeiram shirimei yarilo!* (May kazeiram be more harmonious and joyous)

*Chungna vaya, chungna vaya* (many had gone, many had gone)

*Thingreikong meila shar* (lighting pine through woods and river)

*Chara ngayaya* (my tears keep flowing)<sup>225</sup>

Most of the traditional songs sung were composed by the creative song composers but the composers remained anonymous. The community orientation of the Tangkhul Nagas was very strong that most of the songs were sung in group, and the music was shared by the entire community. According to Tuisem Ngakang “music is owned by the community as a whole” and further stated that “none of the Tangkhul Nagas songs bears the name of the composer as the songs are owned by the whole village or by the clan”. Tangkhul Nagas traditional songs were performed in three voices or part with the same tune that is, Okrei (soprano), Okla (alto), Khakrei (bass). To

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<sup>224</sup> Luikham, 2013:77

<sup>225</sup> Luikham. 2013:192

quote Gertrude M Godden<sup>226</sup> (as quoted in Brown), “their (Tangkhul Nagas’) singing is pleasing, being executed in well-tuned parts, blending together and forming a pleasing melody, men and women, in equal numbers, sing thus together and sometimes men alone. The melody was always in slow time, whatever the nature of the song, joyous or otherwise”<sup>227</sup>.

Since there is no written tradition, songs were memorized by the singers. For the younger ones festival time it is another occasion to learn songs as some songs were prohibited to sing in other occasion like *Thisham* song. During festive season, the young boys and girls of different age group joined the older members in the singing. Through imitation, the young ones learned the verbal expression and gesture of the elders and repeat after them. “As everyone participated, there were no groupings of audience and listeners, and there were no boundaries between musicians and listeners. Everyone is a participant”<sup>228</sup> quoted Ngakang. Traditional songs are narratives and tell stories. In the past, songs were also claimed to be employed as a means of communication - people talked with each other through songs, using singing as a form of conversation. It was dialogic in nature. Thus, usages of songs were not concentrated to a specific practice or occasion, but also in every other aspect of their social and cultural life.

Apart from singing, there was another form of musical expression in the style of non-lyrical harmonic chanting known as *khamahon* which could be described as a “pulsation of successive choral voices looped in a sequence”<sup>229</sup>. *Khamahon* has two different forms of performance- firstly, a *Pheichak* (traditional dance) accompanied by Voices or song and secondly a vocal expression namely singing and yelling without dance act. But most of the time these two terms *Pheichak* and *Khamahon* were used synonymously. Also on many occasions, *Khamahon* is also understood as *Mahon* and they are interchangeable and the meaning remain the same. Further, in the course of a *khamahon*, there is an occasional burst of loud sustained cry with a tremolo effect which is known

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<sup>226</sup> Godden, Gertrude M. “Naga and other Tribes of North East India”. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 27, 1898

<sup>227</sup> Brown, R was a surgeon and a British political Agent of Manipur. He wrote A Statistical Account of Manipur(1874)

<sup>228</sup> Ngakang, 2014:173

<sup>229</sup> Mashangva, 2007:7

as *kakahang*<sup>230</sup>. There are different types of *Pheichak* and *Khamahon* among the Tangkhul Nagas. Some of them are: *Langanui Pheichak* or *Langanui Mahon* (Dance performance during *Luiru* Festival performed by the Maidens), *Thisham Pheichak* or *Thisham Mahon* (performed during *Thisham* festival for the death by the relations of the deceased which was considered the most beautiful dance before), *Rai Pheichak* or *Rai Mahon* (War dance performed by the warrior before the war and after if victorious), *Rachan Mahon* (a vocal expression performed while working in fields in group) and so on<sup>231</sup>. Most of the Tangkhul Nagas dance accompanies song

Like singing traditional songs, dance called for participation of the entire community. Even the audiences or onlookers participated in the dance performance by taking part in body movements and shouting in rhythmic voice (*khamahon*). The demarcations between audience, and 'actors' was very slim; such concepts were absent in their traditional practices. In every traditional dance performance, there were equal numbers of male and female, there were no individual or solo performances, all dances were in groups. The movements of folkdances were strictly based on the uniform rhythm of footsteps which was accompanied by voice. The uniformity in body movements of all the dancers, irrespective of gender and age, indicates the unity of their society and social equality. It also implies that there was no space for individualism in their social set-up. Thus, the structure and body movements of dance in Tangkhul Naga society had dramatic semblance with the prevalent social structure and Customary practices.

### ***Remnants in the act of Gifting***

Like other cultural performances like dance, songs, rituals, ceremony and festivals, the art of giving or gifting among the Tangkhul Nagas during the pre-Christian society and even in the present Christianized society constitutes a very important role in reflecting and asserting distinguishing characteristics of the people. The act of giving something to someone among the

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<sup>230</sup> *Khamahon* and *kakahang* were frequently enacted during dance performances; it serves as the rhythmic balance for body movements. However, these forms of performances were quite common while working in the field and in other activities as well.

<sup>231</sup> Shimray, 2000:96



Tangkhul Nagas is an everyday affair and to study the nature and the meaning of giving and the concept of gift as understood before became one important area to closely analyze and decipher in order to better understand the nature of the past i.e. the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas. Not only of the past, but even of the present. Among pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas gifting happened on different occasions such as death burial ceremony, child birth, marriage and *Thisham* festival, to mention a few. For our discussion here, the nature or the art of giving and the gift as an object and the significance of such objects is discussed closely in association to one particular festival-*Thisham* festival.

What is a gift for the Tangkhuls? And why giving is important in the life of the Tangkhuls? How does a Tangkhul give and in what way gifts are accepted? First of all, the gift only ever appears on the horizon of the other. The gift is either given to the other or received from the other. Marcel Mauss *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1924) suggested that gift giving creates reciprocities and obligations to give and reciprocate in return. *The Gift* is the most famous rendering of the gift and in the book he shows how common wisdom is mistaken in assuming gifts to be free, disinterested and voluntary. He argued that no gift is given completely without self-interest. On the contrary, according to him, gifts always involve a wish or expectation of compensation: ‘A gift is received “with a burden attached”’<sup>232</sup> Therefore, Mauss writes that although ‘in theory, [gifts] are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily’<sup>233</sup> According to him, there is no gift without a bond, no gift that would not bind the giver and the receiver. This means, in a simple expression ‘I give you so that you will give’, and ‘a favor for a favor’.

Olli Pyyhtinen stated in the book *The gift and its Paradoxes: beyond Mauss* (2014) “that a gift is anything given gratuitously, without guarantee and expectation of repayment. And for that reason the gift is deemed as being imbued with goodwill and generosity, even grace. As regards the gift, there is no price set on what is given, but the thing given is given unconditionally, for free,

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<sup>232</sup>(Mauss 2008 [1924]: 53).

<sup>233</sup> Mauss 2008(1924) :3

without explicit consideration or demand of recompense”.<sup>234</sup> He continued by saying that “in the gift, the giving is assumed to be free also in another sense, in being voluntary and spontaneous. Whenever the giving is obligatory, a duty, in other words, whenever one cannot not give, what we have on our hands is no longer a gift in the strict, absolute sense of the term”<sup>235</sup>.

Giving is a response of charity, esteem, or regard for others. To denounce giving is to embrace a pitiable selfishness. Gifts and those who know how to give them are attractive and pleasing to the senses. During *Thisham* festival, gifts were offered to the deceased individual, to *Kokto*, to souls of their family relations or friends or lovers who had passed away earlier, to *Thila Kapho* and to the family of the deceased. During the festival, relations and friends offered gifts mostly clothes for the deceased. Clothes were made gender specific and gifting male’s cloth to a woman was regarded inappropriate and vice versa. Friends and neighbors brought articles what the deceased individual would have been fond of during his lifetime. The concept of gifting among the Tangkhul Nagas during the time of yore was more close to what Mauss suggested. They gave with the intention that they will receive the same when their turn comes. For the Tangkhul Nagas ‘Giving’ was like an exchange of labor and in some cases giving was a responsibility. If a poor individual dies, and the family could not afford buffalo or the cost for other necessary requirement for burial ceremony and for *Thisham* festival, then the head in the clan took the responsibility. If the clan’s head or the head of the kin could not shoulder alone the responsibility, than other members of the same clan offered to share the responsibility, but such offerings were made with the understanding that same offerings will be received later when the need is felt. In other case, when a person die (man or woman), the immediate brothers or married sisters were bound to offer cloth, but such act of offering were exempted to the unmarried sisters as they were still dependent on their parents. On the other hand, gifting is synonymous to ‘exchange of labor’. The common and popular expression ‘*ngalang khangatha*’ (literally means exchange of labor) usually used in the exchange of agriculture labor. Even in the act of giving, the Tangkhul Nagas used this expression comparing it to the exchange of agricultural labor. So, when a gift was brought for the deceased during *Thisham* festival or during the Burial ceremony, the family of the deceased

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<sup>234</sup> Pyyhtinen, 2014:15.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid

counted and made sure that they also present gifts equal in value to the giver when unfortunate fate visited to their family. The act of giving gifts to the *Thila kapho* was again a different case. In this case, it was a token of gratitude and like a wages paid to an actor for performing the role of the dead individual. Gifting *Kokto* had a whole different reason. Gift for *Kokto* was prepared by the members of the deceased family. The reason here was not to receive any mercy from him towards the giver but instead it is an act performed on behalf of the deceased for the deceased could no longer perform such act of propitiating to *Kokto*. During this festival, another kind of gifting was significant. It was a gift neither for the living, nor for the deceased person for whom death ceremony were being performed, nor to *Kokto* but to those souls of the dead who were living in *Kazeiram*. In this case, during the burial ceremony and *Thisham* Festival, the giver may or may not be a relation to the deceased person, but since every individual within the village knows one another, the giver packed and send gift through the deceased person to deliver to his/her relations who had passed away earlier. The soul of the deceased person for whom the ceremony was conducting became a messenger and carrier. Even in this case the giver and the receiver obey the exchange and reciprocal theory suggested by Mauss. The giver gifted to the souls of their ancestors in order to seek protection and wealth from them. The significance of gift offering in cementing and cultivating bonds and obligations within families and social communities.

### ***Changing and Unchanging Landscape and Monuments***

We human being as individual or in group has a capacity to remember: remember words, how to do things, what we do before, and when we were children etc. but what we are not aware of is that families and societies also have something like a memory called the cultural memories: by that we refer to stories, songs, rituals, images that are passed between individuals and from generation to generation. How a society or a community as a collection of many individual and a symbolic representation which reflect the shared virtues and values remember not just the individual remembers, and what do the collective actually remember seeing or passing certain landscape or monuments.

For all the society or community, landscape and monuments has extremely played an important role as public expression of a particular view of the past, some continue to remain unchanged while some symbolizes different meaning after change occurred. The landscape and monuments also served the community to remind every individual in the here and now of what is important to remember about our past time. Monument never work in isolation even if they form discreet object in the village scape. They do tell much about the past and they send invitations to passers-by or the community members to think of story they already know and to remind them that the monument were a significant venue worth remembering to tell and retell the generations to come. This production of shared stories of the pass is a complex and an ongoing process.

Monuments, to further proceed our discussion, mean the memorial stones erected also known as *Onrah* among the Tangkhul Nagas. The construction of *Onrah* happened during the *Onrah* ceremony, a ceremony usually happened after sending off the Soul of the deceased during Thisham festival. Such ceremony were conducted only after a man of honor and respect within the community passed away. Before and during construction, like any other ceremony and festivals of the Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, rituals and sacrifices were made to *Kokto* as he was considered to be the Ruler of the ‘Land of Dead’ and also to *Kameo* residing at the site where the construction took place as they believed in the existence of spirit everywhere. Khongreiwo assured that *Onrah* were constructed to serve as a ‘meeting points’ for the death and the living<sup>236</sup>. Pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas believed that a strong animal, usually buffalo was required for the soul of the dead to break through the gate of *Kazeiram*, so it was incumbent on the living to provide buffalo for the burial feast in order that *Kokto* may open the gate of *Kazeiram*<sup>237</sup>. It was also believed that in some cases *Kokto* doesn’t open the gate and so the “unsettled soul of the dead, always haunting the living. This might also have been one genuine reason deep seated in the construction of memorial stone-and-earth monuments at certain strategic vantage point or over the graves”<sup>238</sup>. Khongreiwo asserted again that *Onrah* “philosophically served/serve as the abodes of the souls/spirit of dead, and practically, they acted/act as cenotaphs meant for the living to rest as they

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<sup>236</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:83

<sup>237</sup> Hudson, 2013:160

<sup>238</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:83

were/are commuting to and fro from the wet paddy fields or as they carry home firewood from the jungle”<sup>239</sup>.

The selection for the sites of construction and the stones to be used underwent many processes as head of the family with the help of the elders and the village priest offered sacrifices including chicken and rice beer and performed rituals in order to propitiate the *Kameo* who was believed to reside at the site for construction. The night after rituals were performed for selection of sites, dreams as a communicating medium showed whether *Kameo* approved or disapproved for the construction. If negative sign were shown in dreams then the search for new site would continue until found, but if a sign of approval was revealed in dreams than one discontinue the search. Same procedure like the previous sacrifice and ritual performances were again performed in order to select the suitable stones. Huge stone, preferably flat in nature were the ideal stone for the erection. After having found, the stones were marked so that no other person could destroy or remove them. A day was fixed for construction by the hosting family depending on the availability of time apart from their agricultural labor and one day before construction, animals were killed for feast and for sacrifices. On the construction day, sacrifices were made to *Kameo* and *Kokto*, and the earth work would start with some men carrying the stones that were marked before. Stones were piled up in an elevated platform like structure which was rectangular in shape. The height of the structure was about two feet tall, four to five feet width and five to six feet long. There were no limits to number of monolith erected, but it was constructed in such a way that people could sit and rest comfortably on the stones placed on the boundaries. According to Pettigrew, “the last article that was placed on this memorial was a large stone slap” that may differ in size and was considered the most important stone of all known as *Ngalung Akhoka* “for, on it, the spirit (of dead) is said to come and sit during his occasional peregrination around, to view his rice field”<sup>240</sup>. In some cases, this stone, instead of placing flat on the top of the elevated platform like construction, was erected to stand.

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 83

<sup>240</sup> Pettigrew, 1910:41

The other significant area that plays an extremely significant role in remembering the culture and history of the past for the Tangkhul Nagas is the Landscape. Landscape was viewed as denoting the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, simply the earth's surface. Khongreiwo pointed out that "Landscape of the preliterate societies, are imbued with ancestral associations, keeping them alive by perpetuating the memories by means of which tales and legends of the ancestors were woven into landscapes where certain significant events took place in their unrecorded time"<sup>241</sup>. Also, landscape is always inclusive of man and nature; it is an environment or nature transformed through cultural process and can be seen as culturally constructed phenomena. To the pre-Christian Tangkhul Nagas, nature was not a lifeless or passive repository of wealth –minerals, rather they perceived nature as a powerful force capable of determining the fate of humans and responding to human action. All landscapes, by virtue of being the abodes of some supernatural spirits, were looked upon as both tangible and abstract spiritual world. But after Christianity came the beliefs in the existence of the guardian spirit associated specifically with particular sites and landscape slowly began to fade away.

Since times immemorial, Tangkhul Nagas found their settlement on the top of hilly mountain situated in the sub-Himalayan region in the North Eastern part of India. The settlement on the top of the mountain had many reasons, one major reason was for protection from the warring neighboring villages. During the early stage of Christianity, a shift of location, a movement from the old settlement to new settlement occurred and was prevalent among many villages including *Ringui* village. During the early conversion period, after missionaries brought the so called 'Good News' to the villagers, some were convinced and wanted to embrace the new religion but due to the resistance of the majority including the Chief of the village, separation from those who did not convert became an unavoidable situation. Firstly, to follow the new religion and secondly, to distinguish themselves from the others and thirdly, to avoid any unwelcoming feud between the converts and the non-converts. In the case of *Ringui*, a small village located in Ukhrul district of Manipur, the present location of settlement differs from the pre-Christian settlement. During the late 1940s, Christian missionaries came to this village and successfully converted some members into Christianity. But since majority of the villagers were resistant to changes, it became almost

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<sup>241</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:84

impossible to continue to live together within the existing village. Therefore, in the beginning, thirty six members who were willing to embrace Christianity left from the location of the existing village and found a new settlement in another plot of an individual and called the new settlement ‘*Vareshi Shimpung*’ meaning Christian’s land. As the wave of Christianity became stronger, slowly, villagers from the old settlement started embracing the new religion and moved to the new settlement joining with the other converted Christians; mostly due to religious purposes. In the course of time, every villager converted and had moved to *Vareshi Shimpung* including the Chief of the village. The name of the village ‘*Ringui*’ remained unchanged even though the location of settlement had changed. The phenomena of mobilization from one place to another is important to be recorded as history but more importantly the memories and the cultural memories linked with the old sites of settlement draws attention for more enquiry.

From the present location of *Ringui* Village, the old site where the village was once settled is located about three kilometers away. Both the settlements took place on the top of a mountain, and they were located on the same mountainous range facing each other. Presently, there are no more houses in the older settlement, but the flattened area on which the houses were once built and retaining walls built to avoid soil erosions during rainy season are still visible and remain undestroyed though they are now covered with bushes, plants and trees. Out of many other physical remains some which survived are the flattened land, the retaining walls, grave dug nearby the compound and *Onrah*. They are the remains of the past that one can actually see and touch. Other things like the dances, songs, ritual performances, sacrificial actions, death procession etc. as a performance could not be seen or touched, but through the help of imagination and recollection, those who had once lived there pointed out where performances of different kinds happened.

Every Tangkhul Nagas’ village had a landscape where *Zeiphar* ritual was performed during the last day of *Thisham* Festival. The location and landscape may differ from village to village but one thing that was common in the direction and the landscape is that all the *zeiphar* ritual was conducted outside the inhabited areas beyond the village gate toward the north eastern side from the village location. For *Ringui* village, the *zeiphar* spot was situated at the slope of the hill toward the north eastern side on which the settlement of the village (Older settlement before moving to

the present location) perches about one kilometer to its west. This *Zeiphar* spot on the northeast of the landscape is now remembered as the path of the dead, from where the souls of the dead begins their journey toward *Kazeiram* that was believed to be situated in the north eastern direction. In the present, if we face towards the north eastern direction which was once believed and considered as the direction from which the soul of the dead appears, then what we could see is another village. In the past, this same direction was known to the villagers as the way to *Kazeiram*. According to Khongreiwo:

Landscape in the Tangkhul Naga country are no mere geographical spaces, but are also cultural spaces wherein the religious ideas and perceptions of their pre-Christian forefathers are embedded. While the Landscape gave the pre-Christian beliefs/ perceptions durability and cultural spaces, the pre-Christian beliefs and/or perceptions in their turn, gave durability, cultural meanings and historical significance to the landscapes. Thus many such landscape still continue to be part of the Pre-Christian past and as much as they are part of the Christianized and scientific present world.<sup>242</sup>

Like the landscape as Khongreiwo had described, music, dance and the act of gifting among the Tangkhul Nagas are still very much a part of life. One can see and walk on the landscape where actions in the past took place. Songs and musical culture may have changed in many manners, and may have learned varieties of forms in the present but the existence of the old traditional form of music continue to be present even though they are less popular among the younger generation. In some cases like *Thisham* song and *Thisham* dance, reconstruction became almost impossible, but one can always be optimistic that in some corner of Tangkhul Nagas villages, *Thisham* songs and dance were ‘sedimented’ on the body of the performer that survived in the form of memory among some elders and could be retrieve for documentation. Gifting was and is an everyday affairs among the Tangkhuls and that can be seen mostly during festivals, marriages, funerals to mention few. The Tangkhuls had been living in the present location for centuries, many landscape may have changed in the course of time many but still remain

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<sup>242</sup> Khongreiwo, 2014:85



unchanged. Landscape and monuments in that manner were inscribed by the actions and the events of the past, and the values attached to them may have changed for many reasons, but the still remaining landscape and monuments erected cannot be simply forgotten or not remembered. Remembering could be individual or collective, or could be both at the same time. What matter is whenever we remember we create and perform? Past is not always the past, it is the present that creates the past and vice versa.

## *CONCLUSION*

The past is not dead; it may be hidden from present's view but cannot have disappeared. In fact it is not even hidden from view. If the tail is seen on the surface than the tail must be attached to a body and must have a face. In the present, almost all Tangkhul have converted to Christianity and have abandoned the old traditional faith and beliefs. Along with that some major festival like *Thisham* have also been discontinued. But with Christianity, new festivals like Christmas, New Year and Easter were introduced with a new mode of celebration. Many rituals, songs and dance performed during the *Thisham* festivals had also been slowly fading from the memory of the elders. It can be mentioned that since *Thisham* Festival had been abandoned by the Tangkhuls for decades, most of the ritual performances, songs and dances that were integral parts of this festival were mostly difficult and often impossible to retrieve. As elders who were the living archives, have died over the years, the community has lost its ways of remembering, and most of the archive itself. Written documents as well as documentation are scanty and often unreliable. The elders who are still alive, are torn between a nostalgic memory of the past and a sense of sin about reminiscing about the faith that they have abandoned long back. Some even question my motives of re-searching for remnants of practice abandoned long ago, while becoming nostalgic about the nearly forgotten festivities of their childhood.

Many of the memories are precarious as their archival sources, i.e. the older population among the community, are aging and dying. One of the examples is that of the songs specifically sung on the occasion of *Thisham*. Since the village elders decline to sing *Thisham* songs on occasions other than *Thisham*, these songs are already 'endangered' and it becomes most probable that those songs might vanish altogether with the elders. On this regard Tuisem Ngakang said that "death song or lament son, if sung except on the occasion of death would invite death to one's own family"<sup>243</sup>. Small number of *Thisham* songs are available in written form but during my research, no singers could sing any of those songs. In the past since there was no equipment to record live

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1 Ngakang, Tuisem. *Loss and Revitalization of Traditional Art: The State of Tangkhul Naga Music*. Published in the book *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nags in Perspective* edited by R. Vashum. Pp.184

performances, memory seems to have been the sole faculty to archive. Dances of the Tangkhul Naga, especially dances of *Thisham* festivals are unavailable already. In absence of people who could and did participate in these dances, the particular memories associated with the corporeal experience are already lost, along with the body memories that carried the archives of those specific dance movements. Which also means that the pre-Christian Tangkhul Naga's 'body' seems to have vanished from the performance accessible terrain, since the rituals and the offerings made for different purposes during the past had been removed from the new religious structure and practices.

But even though the festival is no longer observed in the present, the remnants of the festival is seen everywhere. The burial site, the Onrah, graves, songs in the form of writing, landscape, to mention few, are accessible and were explored during my field work. The remnants of the Pre-Christian past are accessed by the Tangkhuls in their everyday life. For instance *Onrah*, in the present time like the past served as a resting place for the tired traveler and for the farmers. Embedded in the stone is the story of someone who had died and the family, out of love, erected the memorial monument to remember the past and also to serve the present.

In my attempt to reconstruct *Thisham* festival, theories on memory had helped me understand better the concept on how remembering is a present phenomenon and through remembrance it can label out the past. In another word, remembering is a construction on its own. Cultural memorization is an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future. Cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future. Cultural recall is not merely something of which one happens to be a bearer but is something that one actually performs even if, in many instances, such acts are not conscious. Memory is active and it is situated in the present. So, in the process of construction, interviews with elders from the community answered some of my questions. I had started out with the questions, why to reconstruct now and what to reconstruct. Since constructing past is an ongoing process and ever changing one as the memory of an individual also changes. Even when narrating the same event, different narrative and story were found as the faculty of every individual who narrated had distinct individual memory which were selective and specific.

Such diverse dimensions and perspectives about the past enriches my information, at the same time the difficulty to arrange and rearrange strategically becomes the most challenging work. The degree of achievement and failure in recovering, reconstructing and documenting *Thisham* festival was that, through interviews and arranging and rearranging written documents, a re-construction / documentation of *Thisham* festival and rituals around it has been attempted and presented in this dissertation, knowing and acknowledging the fact that there can be no complete recovery in this case. Since there was no culture of writing among the Tangkhuls before Christianity, many of the lived life experiences of the past including part of *Thisham* festival had vanished and mostly are now irretrievable. Therefore, to preserve the remaining that is available, writing and documenting about the festival became an important task. The concern that led to the urge for understanding and archiving now was also because of the fact that the elders who once witnessed the festival when they were children have grown old and with their passing, memories of *Thisham* festival would be buried along with them.

The constant interaction between the past and the present is reflected in my dissertation. The ‘now’ looking through the windows of memory to the ‘then’ are in a way constantly communicating. As I tried to reconstruct ‘*Thisham*’ it is impossible to eliminate the past from the process as this festival no longer exist but therefore had to look back to the past. At the same time current practices always exist in conversation with past events, sites of remembrance, and embodied traditions.

The collective past is not something that is given or fixed once and for all, instead it is an unlimited resource for reimagining the past, interpreting and shaping the present and therefore also the future. In some cases, since the elders in the community couldn’t remember and recollect and the dream for revival seems to be far from this point. Songs and dances performed during *Thisham festival* are no longer sung and danced due to the changes around the belief system of the community. It is generally accepted that exploring the ‘past’ in the present for present purposes is conducive. But I would like to propose that the reverse is true. Great care has to be taken to avoid unfounded assumptions about the past on the basis of present practices. However, by looking at past and present, textual and oral sources as complementing each other, one gains a richer and

more colorful picture of both present and past. In general many scholars have argued that we turn to the past precisely to secure what the present cannot supply. On this point I would argue exactly the reverse. If the ethnography of Tangkhul Nagas can tell us what remains of the past in the present, it is this that past provides precisely a resource which is rich in values for people struggling with the present and hoping to achieve what the present could not find, would be found in the future.

*List of Images*



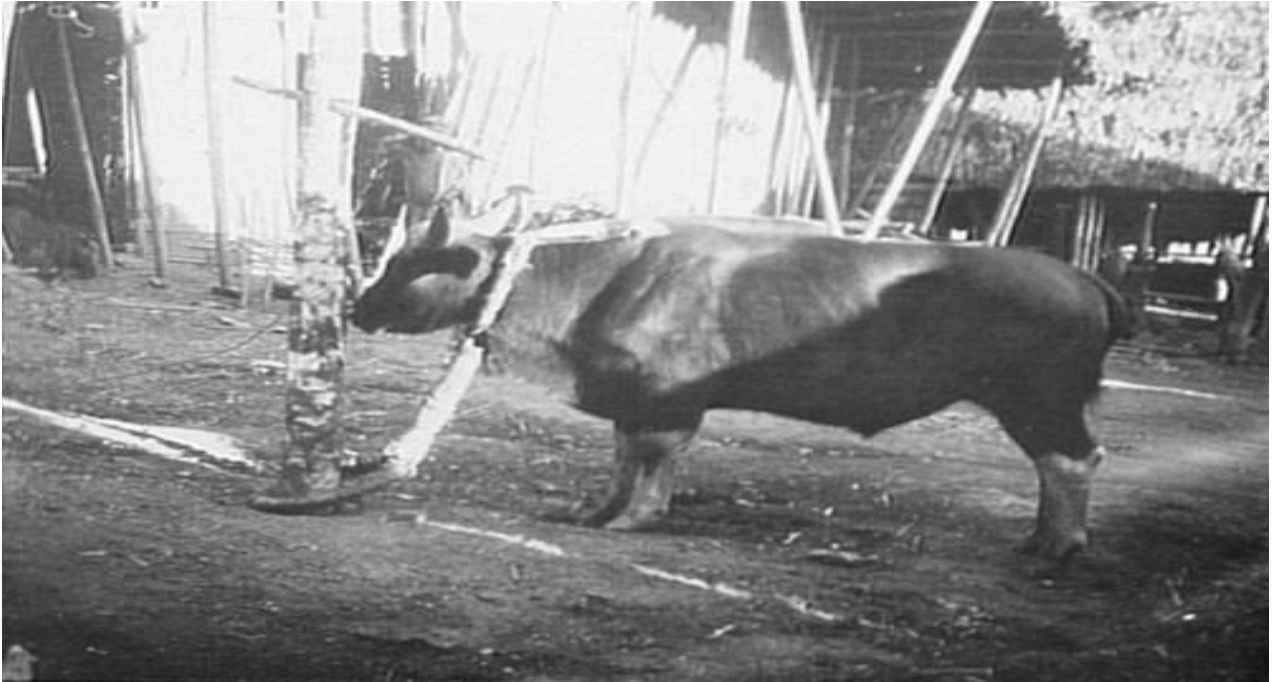
*Image 1: Tangkhul Male Dancers with spear and head gear. (Location unknown). Photograph taken by Ursula Graham (1937-1946) (Source: Longshim)*



*Image 2: Memorial cairns, stone monument Tangkhul [Ukhrul village]. Black & white photographs taken by Ursula Graham Bower between 1937 and 1946 (Source: Longshim)*



*Image 3: Stone monument (Location unknown). Photographs taken by W.G Archer 1946-1948. (Source: Longshim)*



*Images 4: Sacrificial bull tied on the pole. (Location unknown) Photograph taken by JP Mills 1922-1945. (Source: Longshim)*



*Image 5: "Tangkhol Naga funeral at ukhrul village. The beast is thrown and stabbed to death to dispatch it" Photograph taken by Ursula Graham 1937-46. (Source: Longshim)*





*Image 6: “Tangkhul Naga funeral at Ukhrol village. Shaft grows deeper”. Photograph taken by Ursula Graham 1937-1946 (Source: Longshim)*

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