

The Village Community among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

The Tangkhuls occupy the north eastern hill of Ukhrul District, Manipur. Tangkhul people know no other life except that of “community life”. In fact, they work in groups, eat in groups, work in groups and sleep in groups wherever there are. All things are done in groups and in the full presence of the entire community. The individuals have no existence apart from the community. Interestingly, there was no place for idle men in the Tangkhul Naga community. The principle “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” is adopted by the Tangkhul Nagas. All must work and participate in the community work - may it be house building, feasts of merit or harvesting, everyone must join the community work.

In the nineteenth century, the farmers of the village community were very helpful in time of happiness and sorrow. There was no hierarchical system in the social set up. Collection of wooden materials and construction of house took only a few days. There was a strong sense of corporate responsibility present in the construction of any house including the chief’s house in the village which is an indivisible unit. The sense of collective accountability has been responsible for the integrity of the community.

In the village community ‘*Longshim*’ or dormitory played the most vital important role in shaping young men’s and women’s life. The ‘*Longshims*’ were created according to different age group of the given village. Indeed, *Longshim* was an admirable institution. The institution system taught them the meaning of co-operation and responsibility. It was the crucible which moulded girls and boys into responsible women and men. Thus, the village community as a whole belongs to a farming community. Their lifestyles were simple, honest and co-operative. The village

community was a compact well-knit society where the customs and traditions are regulated accordingly.

Key words: *Awunga* (Headman/Chief of the village), *Hanga/Hangva* (The village elders /Councilors), *Longshim* (dormitory), *Sharva* (Clansmen's' priest), *Shim Ameowo* (House Deity).

Introduction

The Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur are the largest community after the majority Meitei community in Manipur. Ukhrul district is the home of the Tangkhuls since time immemorial. The Tangkhuls' habitat spreads beyond the India border into Upper Burma in Somra tract and Naga hills of Burma. Many Tangkhuls have settled down in the foot hills and in Imphal valley. The Tangkhuls predominantly inhabited the whole district of Ukhrul measuring 4,544 sq. km. Jessami, Wahong, Poi, Tusom, Chalao and Kharasom are the northern most villages-boundary with the Nagaland state. In the east, Chamu, Khayang, Chatric Khullen, Kachouphung, Chahong Khunou, Kongkanthana and Kangpat Khullen villages bordering Sagaing Division of Myanmar. The Southern-most villages are Nambashi Khullen, Lairam Khullen bordering Chandel District and in the west Kachai, Champhung, Sana Keithei, Hongman, Mapao, etc., border Senapati and Imphal East.

The Tangkhul inhabited area situated in the Ukhrul District of Manipur is a mountainous country. They enjoy a very pleasant climate, which is neither very cold nor hot and thus make this land, a suitable place for healthy living. The land is blessed one. A cold climate prevails in the district of Ukhrul. The district headquarter, Ukhrul, is 6800 ft. above sea level. Monthly rainfall on an average is 99.7 mm. The maximum temperature is 29*c and minimum temperature is 2.6*c.

The entire Tangkhul community belongs to Indo-Mongoloid ethnic race and follows the same culture, customs and traditions with slight variations here and there. They are bound together by these inseparable ties and what future holds for them collectively. In every village, they have their own dialect which is a very unique in Naga Society. Nevertheless it is also true

that all the dialects spoken by Tangkhul community in all regions can be mutually understood without much effort. In the late nineteenth century Rev. William Pettigrew introduced a common Tangkhul language for the betterment of the Tangkhul community at large. In the past, the entire Naga people followed head hunting irrespective of the Naga tribes. The Tangkhul community followed such a practice too which was put to a stop by the Britishers when Naga inhabited areas were brought under their administration. Changes were ushered in with the advent of colonial rule and Christianity.

The community life of Tangkhul Nagas was typical and spectacular as it was quite different from the other tribes. In the Tangkhul village, there was no class and caste distinction among the farmers. A form of social democracy was in existence. The smallest unit of society in a village was the family. There were different organizations and societies in the form of co-operative society for social and community development in the village. Nevertheless, unwritten form of democracy was in vogue in the village community. The Tangkhul Naga community is basically agriculturist, so suitable dates are fixed by the chief/headman in consultation with the village councilors (*Hangva*) for the observation of particular days for seed sowing, transplanting, saplings and harvesting and other festivals. The first day of each such activity is observed with the worship of the relevant deities, *gennas* and festivities.

Meaning and Concept of Community

The term ‘community’ denotes almost uniformly and permanently shared lives of a people over a definite region. According to MacIver and Page, “whenever the members of any group, small or large live together in such a way that they neither share, nor this or that particular interest, but the basic condition of common life, which is called that group a community”(K. Singh, 1993:204). According to Lumbi, “A community may be defined as a permanent aggregation of people having diversified as well as common interests and served by a constellation of institutions”(K. Singh, 1993:204).

Every village besides being a distinct political and economic unit is also recognized as a religious community. Most religious ceremonies involve the entire village and the village as a whole is affected by food *gennas*. For example, even in the olden days, tribal loyalties could be seen extending beyond the village borders. Generally, people of one tribe or village help to the smaller village or weak neighbours for the development of that particular tribe or village in the

spirit of unity and integrity, but such spirit was never lasting for long time. As political units they have at the best shown themselves capable of only feeble attempts at concerted and united action against a common foe. The Mao group of villages perhaps offers the best example of unity in religious matters extending beyond the narrow limits of a single village.

One of the most colourful ingredients of the Tangkhul Naga village-states is its “Community Life.” In Tangkhul, society individuals know no other life except that of “community life.” They work in groups, eat in group and sleep in groups in the given society. There is neither individual cultivation nor harvest, no individual house-building, no ‘feast of merit’ by individuals alone and no wooing of girls individually. All things are done in groups and in the presence of the entire community. The individual has no existence apart from the community. The Tangkhul Nagas enjoyed the rights to properties and lands. There was no place for idle men in Tangkhul Naga Community. The principle, “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” is a Naga principle in practice. All must work and participate in the community work—may be in the construction of house building, ‘feasts of merit’ or harvesting, everyone must join the community work to show solidarity of oneness.

The philosophy of individualism did not have much importance in Tangkhul Naga community life. The individual had no existence apart from the community. No one was allowed to stay away from the public work, rather the young people were enthralled by the competitive spirit and they used to compete with each other to carry the heaviest wooden materials and also exhibit their skill and efficiency in construction work, etc. When one could not complete the cultivation or harvest on time, the general public had to volunteer free labour so that the village festival was not disturbed.

During the nineteenth century, the farmers of the village community were very helpful in time of happiness and sorrow. There was no hierarchical system in the social set up. There were no cases of oppression and suppression to the poor people by the rich people. “Instead of that the poor and weaker section of the people were helped and sponsored by the rich and well to do people. The rich and those who had more working force helped the weaker people by working together for equal share of produce. The rich people enjoyed the happiness and solace in helping the poor and weak people. The farmers of a village were accustomed to work together in groups, societies and villages as a whole for a construction of house, cultivation, fishing, hunting and

celebration of festivals. They really enjoyed working together and eating together exhibiting solidarity and unity in oneness.

1.2. Construction of House (*Shim Kasa*)

In the Tangkhul society, construction of wooden house was not an individual's responsibility alone. It has always been a collective responsibility of the clan or the village itself from ancient times. Even now this culture is still practiced in the villages. The closest clansmen and relatives would always prepare all the wooden components which constitute roughly about 60 percent of the total materials required. "The immediate male family members contributed maximum labour followed by other close clansmen and then from brother- in-laws and distant clansmen and neighbours as well and the entire villagers"(R. Luikham, *Tangkhul Traditional Land Use System and Related Custom*). Thus all the wooden materials are mostly prepared from within the woodlands owned by the clan itself or by individuals or from collectively owned woodland by the village as a whole on obtaining permission from *Hanga*. Generally speaking, a farmers' house is a wooden structure built over the ground with plank walled and thatch roofing. Collection of wooden materials and construction of house takes only few days. There is a strong sense of corporate responsibility present in the construction of any house including the chief's house in the village which is an indivisible unit. The sense of collective accountability has been responsible for the integrity of the community.

Practically, thatch collection was considered as women's sole responsible for every household. Nevertheless for construction of a new house in a village, it was collected by the immediate clan women members followed by other womenfolk of the clan preferably during the months of November, December and January. In short, construction of a clansman's house has always been a collective and corporate responsibility which has in fact kept up and preserved the closeness and integrity of the clan as well as of the community as a whole. In the nineteenth century, all the houses of the farmers in a village were thatched roofed, womenfolk would therefore collect thatch in winter and the dry season for roofing new houses. According to R. Luikham, "Thatch collection was not an easy job. Every exposed part of the body was cut and the soles punctured and pierced by sharp thatch new shoots. It had to be cut and made to dry and subsequently carried home on their back laboriously before the forest burnt down by fire." (R. Luikham, *Tangkhul Traditional Land Use System and Related Custom*).

The pillars of the house are often of great size and of excellent quality. The roof of the house is so thick that it lasts for long time, say, about twelve years. When the need arose for repairing they replaced the old thatch with the new thatch. Excellent thatching grass is found usually in the vicinity of the villages; having cut it, they divest it carefully of every weed and inferior blade, after which they tie it up in little bundles with strips of bamboo which is long between the joints, pliable and tough, so tightly that a blade cannot be extracted from the bundle. The method of tying is very simple. First the act of binding is done through the middle of the grass and at the head of the bundle of thatch and then one turn round it bringing the end up and passing it in between the surrounding turn by a slight twist a loop is formed at the end into which a short stick is thrust, with which, as a lever, the bundle itself is firmly tied. These little bundles of thatch are tied it each separately to the bamboos of the roof running parallel to the ridge pole, and thus a bundle of thatch is formed to protect and resists water and rainfall effectively for a couple of years.

In the case of *Lhota* community, they also wasted a lot of money and wealth for the construction of houses. The walls are of bamboo and the roof is of the thatch or palm-leaf. The front of all but the poorest houses is semicircular, with a door in the middle of the semicircle. The roof of the front semicircular room slopes up to the roof of the main building like the roof of the semicircular apse of a church. The Tangkhuls use pine planks and shingles in their houses which possess the appearance of great durability. The style of house built by the Tangkhuls was similar to the Kubo Valley; it greatly shows evidence of Burmese influence to the construction of house.

For the construction of ordinary farmer's thatch house, "*Sharva*" the clansmen's priest invites some elderly persons and the owner to be present during the ritual in the morning to satisfy the normal requirements of invocation and worship to house deity "*Shim Āmeowo*" or "*Shim Kameo*" in order to prevent any possible accident while constructing the house and to grant peace, health and prosperity to the house owner. Then the village elders of the clans would assign responsibilities of work to different individuals. In order to complete the construction of the house in time, some would carry out rough mapping of the site, on the ground, some would start digging the pit and yet others would be sent out to the forest for the collection of specific jungle vines that would endure for generations. Such housing generally and universally provided three rooms. As a result, such thatch houses lasted for generations.

The front room accommodates chicken and also serves for the pounding of paddy, the second serves as a living as well as cooking cum-children's sleeping room. This is the most indispensable and most commodious room where all guests are welcome. Tangkhul chiefs'/headmen's houses are generally shingled and always larger compared to ordinary farmer's houses. In case of the ordinary farmers, the third room is designated as sleeping room of the parents while at the same time it serves as a store room. Such houses are owned by all farmers without exception. There would be some variation in the size of the houses to keep chicken, pigs or cattle. The widows, widowers and the orphans would observe the same partitioning arrangement but their houses were always much smaller.

The second category of housing is wooden shingled house called "*Lencheng Shim*" which was generally constructed by the chiefs, sub-chiefs and farmers who are more prosperous than the average ones. However, some motifs can only be used in chief's house alone. Although they follow the same partitioning system, the houses are larger and with embossed designs and motifs on the front section of the house by mounting *Lengchenggui* in front to signify prosperity and happiness in life. "The back compartment may be partitioned into more than two rooms to accommodate family members as sleeping rooms and also storing room for keeping wine and beer or agricultural implements. Usually the wine or beer pots or wooden kegs are kept at the fire side or at sunny backyard to quicken brewing. The houses of Angamis, Maos, Chakesangs, Pumeis, and Marams resemble such houses of the Tangkhul Nagas community.

It is a fact that wooden shingle houses lasted much longer than thatch houses as the decayed shingles are easier replaced by new ones without involving much labour. Although the shingles are assembled on the roof they are locked at equal intervals and it is difficult for a storm to dislodge them easily, as opposed to roofing which can be partially or totally damaged by strong wind and storm. However, the initial cost of shingle house is far greater than that of an ordinary thatch house. Indeed, construction of such houses involves ceremonial rituals in buffaloes and pigs are slaughtered over the period of construction. The farmers would also brew sweet rice and beer for consumption of all the participants drawn from clans, relatives and those who are experts with designs on the front section of the house. No cash is paid to anyone but they always free to eat and drink throughout the duration of construction and the farmers overwhelmingly enjoyed such auspicious occasions. However, the closest relatives such as brothers or sisters always bore the entire expenses by contributing buffaloes or pigs or wine or

beer pots as the case may be. During the nineteenth century even in a large shingle house, the front room was used as shed for cattle and pigs in deplorable and unhygienic conditions. But today such practices are no longer in vogue.

1.2. Erection of Y-Posts (*Marān Kasa*)

Erection of *Tārung* (*Marān kasa*) involved construction of a shingle house and also erection of Y- post. ‘House of merit’ was generally constructed by the chief of a village or sub-chief of clans called *pibas*. Such houses are predominantly taller, larger and the frontal section well decorated with human images and other motifs called “*Khachon Kharuk*.” The designs of *Lengchenggui* with all the motifs complete, signify prosperity and continuity of life. The roofs are almost always supported by tall and large pine pillars, the end of which that goes into the soil is turpentine’s which last for generations. The Tangkhul community calls such a house “*Lengcheng Shimrei*.” Generally, the owner of such a house would provide community feasting in which undiluted wine and beer flow endlessly and buffalo’s meat and pork were served lavishly for a couples of days.

Erection of *Tārung* (Pillar) varied from village to village and person. Some erected five large prominent pillars and in the case of the *Āwunga* it goes up to seven pillars, where buffalo heads, sun and moon and woman breasts are imprinted, representing wealth, continuity of life and fertility respectively. Indeed, after the construction of the house of merit and erection of Y- posts is completed, one *Tarong* (*Machāng*) a slightly slanting wooden platform is also erected. Interestingly, during leisure and sunny days villagers would assemble there to watch farmers walking up and down, singing folk songs, telling stories and exchanging views on trivial matters in a relaxed mood.

In the words of R. Luikham, in his book entitled “*Tangkhul Traditional Land Use System and Related Custom*”, traditionally five Y-posts were erected. In some northern villages (*Lunghar*) however only three Y-posts were erected. Normally the Y-posts erected by the Tangkhul farmers have several parting as against the practice of Semas, Yimchungers and Sangtams having only one Y parting. The Tangkhuls place the best variety of orchids at each parting hanging gracefully with colourful flowers enhancing attractive and beautified of the house.

A case study of the *Nungshong* village regarding the erection of *Tārunḡ* (*Marān Kasa*) shows that not all individuals or even rich persons would be permitted to do so unless he belongs to *Āwunga* or *piba* of the sub-clans. A farmer might be *piba* but then if he is poor, he has no means to erect *Tarunḡ* at his house. The reason is obvious. It involved lot of money and social prestige. The house owner has to bear the entire expenditure incurred in the erection of *Tārunḡ*. In addition to that the owner had to take care of everything. The process took a lot of time. All the men folk of the village ate and slept at the owner's house. A number of buffaloes, cows, *mithun* and pigs were slaughtered over the entire period of construction. The host provides delicious dishes at morning, noon, and evening respectively. In the course of the erection of *Tārunḡ*, men are not allowed to sleep with their wives because it is taboo. That's why, men folk usually stayed away from their respective wives and homes while the erection of *Tārunḡ* is going on.

1.3. Dormitory (*Longshim*)

The youth's dormitory (*Longshim*) is typically a huge building which physically dominates a Naga village, resplendent with carvings representing hornbills, tigers, *mithun* (bison) and human heads and sometime with projecting barge-boards resembling wings or horns. Sociologically it is a key institution of Naga society, though its importance varies between different groups. A Naga village is typically divided into two or more geographical areas called '*Khels*' and in each *khel* there are one or more dormitory. Usually, however, the two (or more) *khels* would cooperate on the rituals, economic or political occasions where village unity was vital. Prominent in many villages is the dormitory for the young unmarried men- some tribes also have small houses for the unmarried girls. The dormitories are guard-houses, recreation clubs, Centre's of education, art and discipline and have an important ceremonial purpose. Many house the great wooden drums which are beaten to summon for war or to announce a festival. Formerly skulls and other trophies of war were hung in the dormitory and the pillars are still carved with striking representations of tigers, hornbills, human figures, monkeys, lizards and elephants.

Longshim is a Tangkhul word which means dormitory. It is derived from two Tangkhul words, i.e., 'Long' means group 'Shim' means house. Therefore, '*Longshim*' is a group-house where every boy and girl has to live and sleep from the time they get themselves admitted to that organization. Generally the Tangkhuls used their chief's house as '*Longshim*' for boys. In case **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:2 February 2015
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the village was too big to accommodate all boys of the community, they might, with permission from the village headman as well as from the council, install as many *Longshims* as they required in other houses of the village. However, the houses of the clan head, who possessed the required qualifications, such as being a rich and generous clan's head, who was a socially acceptable and influential man and above all who had a commanding authority and who could be in a position to accommodate the youths and the maids in a proper way were used as dormitory.

In the village community '*Longshim*' or dormitory played the most vital important role in shaping young men's and women's life. The *Longshims* were created according to different age group of the village. In the eighteenth century both boys and girls dormitories were combined. The boys slept on the upper side of "*Pitkhuk*" which means a long huge bed. However, this system of combined dormitory was abolished after the advent of Christianity. In fact, *Longshim* or *morung* was an admirable institution. The system taught early the meaning of co-operation and responsibility, it was the crucible which moulded girls and boys into responsible women and men.

The *Longshim* in which all the members of the Tangkhul community must pass through without any exception was not only the house of the youths and maids, but was indeed the crucible wherein the Tangkhul men and women shaped into the responsible adult members of their society. Young boys were admitted to the *Longshim* at about the age of 12 or 13 and they could leave it when they married and set up of their own houses. Before entering into the '*Longshim*' young boys were expected to do their works satisfactorily.

Both boys and girls after attaining puberty left their home and slept at the '*Longshim*'. Once a boy joined the *Longshim*, he would leave it only when he married and set up a home of his own. It was like any other institution which had its own set of rules and regulations and no outsiders could interfere in its administration. The one who breaks the rules of *Longshim* is liable to Punishment, as are other ordinary villagers, for breaking any traditional or customary laws. The *Longshim* is thus not a rival or parallel administrative unit of a village but an institution within the village unit. The *Longshim* may aptly be called a microcosm of the village and like the village it has its own council.

The dormitory is the institution around which the social, political, religious, legal and military life of the many tribes revolves." It controls the growth of a boy to manhood and

regulates the daily life of the village community. At the *Longshim*, favouritism, bias, nepotism, and discrimination were permitted. Whether rich or high or low all were treated equally. Differentiation on the basis of wealth and family position was frowned upon and formation of factions and groups was not allowed. *Longshim* may be described as a classless society. “The primary aim of all such organizations was to form a classless society having unity, equality and brotherhood”(Ninghorla Zimik,1988:41).

During the day time both boys and girls helped their parents in their respective field works and various other family chores. After having returned from the field, both boys and girls took their dinner at home and then went to their respective *Longshim*. For them this was the Centre training, merry-making, singing, feasting and especially romancing. In those days when *Longshim* was combined for both boys and girls from other locality or from another batch of *Longshim* would pay a visit at the time of courting.

The boys were dressed neatly in full Tangkhul costume and some even put on “*pasi*.”(Bamboo rope). In the *Longshim* they would all sing, exchange stories, cut jokes and revelled in merry making. However, we should keep in mind that in the *Longshim* they did not sit idly by singing or merry making alone. The girls would spin cotton thread and the men would be busy making mostly bamboo mats, baskets of various designs, wooden spoons, etc. However, they also exchanged various views and ideas through songs and jokes.

While singing, both boys and girls used to put in a question and answer form, alternately side by side waving their hands. Some men played ‘*Tingteila*’ (a typical Tangkhul one-stringed musical instrument) and harmonized the song and the girls’ spinning of yarn blended with the rhythm of the songs. These songs buoyed spirits and brought about happiness and made one forget the travails of everyday life. To quote Dr. M. Horam’s view on the importance of singing among the Tangkhul Nagas, “of all the activities, singing is most popular as it were, for with the Tangkhuls, as indeed with most Nagas singing comes as naturally as breathing” (Ninghorla Zimik, 1988:43).

Thus, the village community as a whole belongs to a farming community. They were very helpful in times of happiness and sorrow. Their lifestyles were simple, honest and co-operative. They liked singing and cracking jokes. The villages are sovereign state in nature and always a

social, political and religious unit. The village community was a compact well-knit society where the customs and traditions are regulated accordingly.

1.4. Participation in Festivals

It is interesting to note that the Tangkhuls usually observed the traditional farmers festivals in the middle of February and first part of March. The farmer festivals are still celebrated enthusiastically. In fact, non-observance of such festivals still results in ex-communication of the non-participant. Although the Tangkhuls have embraced a new religion, their main occupation, i.e., agriculture, remains unchanged. Festivals among the Tangkhuls require the participation of each and every village.

The early tribal life centered round the soil, the ancestral fields, sowing and harvesting. Village feasts were dictated by the agricultural calendar and the seasons. Most religious ceremonies and festivals are directly connected with the agricultural practices. Worship of *Resangchonmi* or *Ameowa* (Deities) and spirits was important for the farmers in order to bring good harvest. The entire social structure is dependent on the economic self-sufficiency of the family and village and thus everything is depended on the productions and harvest of paddy crops.

All festivals, though rooted in solemnity, are joyous occasions of prolong feasting, copious drinking, and merry-making. Some incidental feasts and ceremonies often take the proportions of a village-wise festival. For example; *Luire* is essentially a seed sowing festival celebrated during spring time. It is the grandest of all festivals of the Tangkhul village community as whole where meat and wine are perennially served to all guests irrespective of birth and position. In the Tangkhul northern region (*Raphei*), pigs and buffalos were slaughtered by every family household or by group wise in order to celebrate seed sowing (*Luire*) festival.

Conclusion

The Tangkhul Nagas were tremendously influenced by their own culture and customs for their survival. They were collectively responsible for their success and failure. The individual had no right to build his house alone or on his own. The wooden materials were cut and hewn according to one's requirements much ahead of time with the help of his relatives, friends and villagers. When the construction time came, the entire men folk participated in the construction

work. The Tangkhul community always extended sharing of sorrow at the time of sorrow, and sharing of joy at the time of joy. In fact, in the community life, every individual was given equal opportunities and rights and there was absolutely no room for discrimination of any kind based on birth, wealth or rank.

Various festivals could not be observed or celebrated by individuals no matter rich or poor. Taking into account of *Luir* festival, it is not an isolated festival but a very important and colourful seed sowing festival of the Tangkhul community. In this festival every walk of life irrespective of old and young, rich and poor, so on so forth participated in the festival with joy and happiness mood. It is found that they lived together, slept together, work together, and ate together, learnt together at the *Longshim* (dormitory) which is the famous institution for the young boys and girls to shape their future life. Hence they are accountable in the society for the betterment of their life in future.

In community land every bona fide household has the right to use land without paying any land revenue to the given village authority. Any individual household can't claim more land than what one can actively make use of. The simple reason is that there should not be any waste of land in the name of cultivation because it against the convention of the village customary law of the Tangkhul community. Forest and its products is indispensable economic asset of the Tangkhul community.

Thus, the village community as a whole belongs to a farming community. They were very helpful in times of happiness and sorrow. Their lifestyles were simple, honest and co-operative. They liked singing and cracking jokes. The villages are sovereign state in nature and always a social, political and religious unit. The village community was a compact well-knit society where the customs and traditions are regulated accordingly.

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