

Performing Personhood: Rites, Rituals and Cultural Practices of Tangkhul Nagas

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Abstract:

This research attempts to study the performative aspects of personhood as observed through rites of passage, different rituals and cultural practices of Tangkhul Nagas. Changes and transformations brought about by Christian missionaries led to the understanding of the world around in different manner, affecting the nature of cultural performances including rituals in the everyday life of the people. However, several pre-Christian rituals and performances continue to exist. This research locates itself within the coexistence of pre-Christian belief systems alongside the present Christian beliefs and practices, exploring the remnants and memories of the past as an active presence in the present. Along with the change in belief systems and socio-cultural practices, the notion of personhood also transformed. This research focuses on the transforming ideas of personhood within the community, as seen through festivals, ceremonies and rituals around rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. The research shall thus examine how the idea of Tangkhul personhood gets formulated through the interaction between the individual and the community, human and non-human entities, material objects and immaterial practices.

Rationale and intervention

The misrepresentation of the belief systems and practices of the Tankhul Nagas¹ in particular, and the Nagas in general, by the early missionaries, colonial ethnographers and administrators may be understood as a conscious attempt to justify their controlling, ‘civilizing’ proselytizing mission in the region through a somewhat distorted reading of the form of religion, world view and ideas of personhood. Tangkhul Naga history records a number of impacts like the arrival of Western Colonialists and the American Baptist Missionary William Pettigrew² during

¹ Tangkhul Nagas are one of the Naga tribes situated in the contiguous frontier areas of North-East India and North-West Myanmar. Linguistically they have been classified under Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. This research is confined to the Tangkhul Nagas locating in Ukhrul district Manipur.

² 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.

the ending of the nineteenth century. Traditional beliefs and cultural practices as well as the ideas of self-understanding were marked as deeply problematic by the western missionary. Many of the core beliefs and practices were discredited and devalued leading to renunciation of such traditional systems. From the early twentieth Century, Christian missionary sought to transform the belief and practices. At present, vast population of the Tangkhul Nagas are converted Christians. The process of conversion though begun early in the 20th century, reached its crescendo in the 1940s and sixties after the students of William Pettigrew started evangelizing even in remote rural villages. Along with the spreading of Christian religion, they introduced modern education system, and more importantly established the written culture³ for the Tangkhul Nagas. This has led to the transformations of seeing and understanding the world around, ultimately leading to changes in the nature of cultural performances including rituals in the everyday life of the people.

The Tangkhul Nagas still are trying to negotiate their selfhood and space in between the past and the present which makes it essential for this research to understand the idea of personhood through both the current practices of the Tankhul Nagas and the remnants of the past – hidden deep in the crevices of everyday lives. Remnants may be material and immaterial remembered through actual remains, memories and nostalgia. The thesis hopes to look at the remains through material and immaterial lenses: the immaterial aspect explored through the belief, socio-cultural practices and performances while the material aspect explored through long beds *Petkhok* (long bed) of the *Longshim* (*Morung* or Dormitory), the *Lencheng* (Specific House), the *Tarung* (Y- shaped totem post), and the megaliths *Onra* (Megalith). Materials like Megalith, *Lencheng*, Y-Shaped totem post are some of the materials remains that have lost their significant functions as well as their performative importance but continue to exist as remains from the pasts. Most festivals and ceremonies related to death have been stopped by the missionaries including *Thisham* Festival (Soul-Departure festival), *Chikhur Khamathai* (Grave sanctification ceremony), *Chikhur Kharui* (Grave Shifting ceremony), *Onra* Ceremony (Monumental Stone erection ceremony), *Onra Khamathai* (*Onra* Sanctification ceremony), but there remain a number of other festivals related to harvest, sowing of seeds as well as marriage, which have continued in somewhat changed but

³ The culture of writing came to the Tangkhuls only after William Pettigrew, an American Baptist Missionary introduced it during the late 19th century. Only after the Christian missionaries brought Roman script, the Tangkhuls began to transcribe using the new script.

recognizable forms. The performative practices of gift exchange, the ceremonial feasts, and the community celebrations for births, marriages and deaths in the villages involving the larger community beyond family, remain evidence of the past socio-cultural significances established and reiterated through performances of the community. As the memory of the past is slowly vanishing with the demise of the elders among the Tangkhul community, it is important to collect and document these knowledge systems before complete erasure.

In this research I propose to look at the soul as a remnant from past belief systems. The Tangkhul Nagas believe that once a person dies, the soul of the dead leaves the body in the form of a small flying being generally accepted as the honey bee. The soul of the dead hover close to the family unable to move on and thus resides close to the locality until *Thisham* Festival (Soul Departure Festival) is observed by the end of the year as a send-off celebration that releases the soul. This soul of the dead, according to their belief, migrates to a place called *Kazeiram* (Land of the Dead) where all Tangkhul ancestral souls resides. There, new souls are welcomed by the spirits of their kin and relatives and live like the life in the world of the living. They also believe that the ‘*Mangla*’ (souls) of the dead sometimes returns to its place of origin, usually that person’s own father’s village. It is a common saying among the people ‘not to be afraid of the dead when they come to visit’. The dead persons are called ‘*Kathinao*’. It is believed that death is caused by ‘*Kameo*’⁴ who are generally considered as the powerful spirits of the surroundings. This cosmological theme of the Tangkhul Naga culture continue to encapsulate the concept of life after death for the Tangkhul Nagas -even after extensive conversion to Christianity among them. For them even now life is a journey and a person inherently a traveler. This thesis intends to analyze the process of becoming an ancestor within the community as one of the principle inquiries into construction of personhood.

Some Naga writers have suggested that since the intervention of Christianity most of the beliefs and practices were abandoned, and most specifically the mortuary rituals were affected.

⁴ Kameo are spiritual being 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.

Therefore, it is necessary to ask why those rituals and ceremonies were hugely affected and transformed. It has also become important to understand the reasons behind the replacements of some of those celebrations by other practices like burying of the dead in a cemetery instead of burying in a family grave, as well as the reason for the reassertion of traditional value system. Presently, there is a gradual realization within the community the necessity to reconstruct the past. It will be the contention of this thesis to sought an intellectual approach in understanding the complex socio-cultural practices of the Tangkhuls. I would argue that even though many beliefs and practices are no longer performed, their present culture, beliefs and practices were built on the debris of the pre-Christian way of living. Festivals, ceremonies, different rituals involve in the rites of passage and even the physical materials including the landscape would provide an important gateway to explore the concepts of Personhood in a transforming society. Attempt will be made to see how the idea of Death and personhood are closely associated, death being considered central to life. Keeping this in mind, I would attempt to study how this complex interconnected concepts and practices are reflected more broadly on how cultural changes is understood. Keeping this problems in mind, research would be conducted in Ukhrul district of Manipur.

Literary Review

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. 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), T.C Hodson’s *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (2011, 2nd ed), E W Dun *Gazetteer of Manipur* (1886), G.A Grierson’s *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903), Alexander Mackenzie’s *History of the Relation of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (1884), J. P Mills’ *The Rengma Nagas*(1937) and *the Ao Nagas* (1926), J.H. Hutton’s *The Sema Naga* (1921) and *The Angami Nagas with some notes on the neighboring tribes* (1921). Also, Some of William Pettigrew’s writings include ‘*Step by Step*’ (1897), *Tangkhul Primer* (1897), *Tangkhul Naga*

Grammar and Dictionary (1918), *Twenty-five years* (1922), T.C Hudson's *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911). In addition, there are some articles which was later published in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* during the early 20th century. They include J.H Hutton's *Leopard-Men in the Naga Hill* (1920), *Head Hunters of the North East Frontier* (1936), *The significance of Head Hunting in Assam* (1928). William Pettigrew's *Kathi Kasham: Soul Departure Feasting of Tangkhul Nagas Manipur, Assam* (1911). T.C Hudson's *The Native Tribes of Manipur* (1901), *Head Hunting Among the Hill Tribes of Assam* (1909) and *Some Naga Customs and Superstitions* (1910).

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 as suggested by the title of the books. Among a host of other Tangkhul writings, two crucial works which figure out dominantly are T. Luikham's *Wung (Tangkhul) Okhot Mayonza (traditional law)* (1961) and Stephen Angkang's *Hau Shiyan Chikan (Tangkhul Customary Law)* (1999). Some important books written by a Tangkhul in english and tangkhuls are: Maiya Gachui's *Hao Miun Ngashan kala Tangkhul Khararchan (History of Tangkhul)* (1986), N. Horam's *Naga Polity* (1975), *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas* (1977), K.K Hugh's *Awo Ayi Lan* (1999), Khamuiwo's *Wung (Yang) Tangkhul Naga Wurtam kala Mayonza* (1999).

TSA⁵ published two books: *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective* (2014) edited by R.Vashum and *Rethinking Education in the Hillas of the Northeast India* (2015) edited by A.S Yaruinagam. In the first book, *Encountering Modernity: Situating the Tangkhul Nagas in Perspective* (2014), Khongreiwo's article *Land scape, Memories, and Pre-*

⁵ Tangkhul Scholars Association is an open academic researcher forum formed by some few like-minded scholars living in Delhi in order to persue an aim to preserve and expand the knowledge confining on the Tangkhul.

Christian Tangkhul Nagas Eschatology critiques the misrepresentation of the early missionary constructions of the absence of religion and religious institutions depicting the Tangkhuls discussing the landscape and the pre-Christian belief systems. The misrepresentation of the Tangkhuls and the assumption of the non-existence of any belief systems during the pre-Christian times by the colonial administrators and missionaries will be questioned and further investigate the concept of personhood within the Tangkhul Nagas socio cultural structure in the contemporary context.

To give a bit of an over view on the concept of personhood, the origin of academic discussion on the concept of personhood can be traced to Marcel Mauss (1938)⁶ who argues that the concept of personhood is socially constructed, based on his observation of interactions between the western and indigenous cultures. He suggested that different cultures had different conceptions of moral agency and they were embedded in who was or was not considered to be a person. This understanding was later nuanced by Meyer Fortes' work which agrees that personhood is a societal construct, but also includes the way in which an individual understands, internalizes and changes his behavior based on his change in status.

Further nuances were added to the category of personhood through the work of Ann Fienup-Riordan⁷ and Bird David⁸. Riordan expands the category to argue that personhood is acquired throughout the life span of both humans and non-human. David argues that among the Nayaka, maintaining of relationships with fellow Nayak is critical to the maintaining of One's personhood and also argue that the relationships between individuals and objects in their environment are equally critical to the production and maintenance of personhood.

Some important research questions which tentatively structure my enquiry are:

⁶ Mauss, *A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person: The notion of Self* (1938)

⁷ Ann Fienup Riordan *The Real People: The Concept of Personhood among the yuk'ip Eskimos of Western Alaska* 1986.

⁸ Bird-David "Animism Revisited: personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology (1994)

1. How do the Christian and pre-Christian belief systems co-exist in Tangkhul understanding of its cosmos? Where and how do the remnants of the past reside and how, in the everyday lives of the Tangkhul Nagas?
2. How does one attain personhood among the Tangkhul Nagas? Can the rites of passage and the ceremonial performances around them provide a structure of the idea of personhood in the community?
3. How does one understand the transformations of individuals as well as community through the study of the performances and celebrations as they are practiced now and where does one look for the remains from the past?
4. What are the constructive mechanism as well as the boundaries of the two regulatory bodies i.e. Church authority (under the leadership of Pastor) and the Village regulatory body (Hangva- Under the leadership of the Village Chief) and how does one understand the influence of these two in the construction of personhood.
5. As particularly targeted rituals that have been forcibly stopped as a part of the process of conversion, can the present mortuary rituals as well as the associated remnants (gathered from past publications and interviews) be analyzed to further the understanding of the construction of personhood?

Methodology

At the present juncture when most of the cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas have either been Christianized or modernized, a significant source to their past are the memories of the older members of community, who were born before the large-scale conversion to Christianity during 1930s till 1950s. Thus, memory and remnants inevitably become important tools to strengthen the concept of Tangkhul Personhood that is complicated by the presence and influence of the past in the present moment, the traditional and the transitional lives that the Tangkhul Nagas live in the contemporary world. Since this research will involve the study of everyday practices, performance will be seen both as a praxis and episteme to carry out the investigation. This research shall not consider past as distinct from the present, rather the past and the present with the future

shall be looked at as a fluid state that were strongly inter-related and hugely affected by one another.

This section shall elaborate on methodological framework to study memory, performance and personhood – three concepts central to this research.

In the book *On Collective Memory* (1950), Maurice Halbwachs observes that human beings' memories of the past are determinatively shaped by present day concern.⁹ It is at the moment of reproducing the past that our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu.¹⁰ For him, remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present and memories in that way get build up across changing times. According to him, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."¹¹ Memories of the past are framed, constituted and constructed in and through the interaction of specific community. Since 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. He also claimed that memories of the past are framed by the physical spaces in which acts of remembrance take place. This thesis proposes to borrow methodical insights from Halbwachs work, in terms of locating memory among Tangkhul Nagas through the three determinants discussed above. Such an approach also corresponds with Astrid Erll's work¹² in memory which suggests that versions of the past change with every recall which is in accordance with the change in the present situation.

In his book *How Societies Remember* (1996) Paul Connerton argues that the past becomes habituated and sedimented through various kinds of- 'incorporating' and 'inscribing'.

⁹ Ibid., 49

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 38

¹² In Erll's *Young Memory in Culture* suggested that the act of remembering is an act of "assembling available data that takes place in the present". For her "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". Therefore, 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.

Though inscriptions are not a common form of remembering for Nagas, ‘incorporating practices’ could be a useful methodological tool to study remembering among the Tangkhul Nagas.

The methodological focus here is on the ‘act’ of memory, inquiring into the processes of making, constructing, enacting, transforming, expressing and transmitting cultural memory through stories, dance, festivals, ceremonies, songs, narratives. As Diana Taylor reminds us, ‘to perform’ is a verb¹³. It is ‘to do something, e.g. a piece of work’, as the dictionary states. So, to remember is also to do something. This thesis locates the use of the term performance in Diana Taylor’s understanding as seen in the book *Archive and the Repertoire*. It agrees to Taylor’s proposition of the performative repertoire, which builds itself through embodied acts of transmission. It is through these performative acts that communal memories, histories and values are transmitted from one generation to another and knowledge is formulated. This thesis shall further Taylor’s approach to study the performances and the knowledge transmission of the Tangkhul Nagas.

As the research attempts to bring the historical past of the Tangkhul Nagas in association with the present, it becomes important to acknowledge that the past will not be replicated or repeated, but represented, shaped, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed.¹⁴ A useful methodological entry point here is through Joseph Roach’s understanding of the three-sided relationship of memory, performance and substitution. Roach proposes how cultural past is replaced, repeated, represented and re-created by a process called “Surrogation”.¹⁵ This could be a useful category to study whether Christian belief systems and rituals practiced in the post Christian era substituted the Pre-Christian way of life and belief systems.

As discussed previously, personhood is socially constructed within a community. Appell-Warren adds an additional dimension to this understanding by suggesting that personhood is attained through “the attainment of physiological, psychological and social competence as it is defined by a given culture. The attainment of different level of personhood is marked throughout

¹³ Diana, 2003:14

¹⁴ Denning *Performances* 1996:

¹⁵ Roach *Cities of Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performane* 1996.

the life cycle by rituals, rites of passage and by other culturally recognized markers”¹⁶ Of interest to this thesis, is his stress on the term competence which he sees as crucial for attaining personhood. Competence can be read as the ability of an individual to perform given tasks to completion. These tasks can be related to following social norms of conception, birth, marriage, death and ancestorhood. Methodologically, competence shall be a key category to analyze the performative underpinnings of practices in Tangkhul Naga community.

Methods: This research will rely strongly on ethnographic methods, like in depth interview with the elderly people in the community, and participant observation in rituals and practices of the community. This ethnographic work shall be supplemented by analyses of available secondary sources such as texts and old documents. However, there are less written accounts in the past, and oral tradition is major mode of transmission of knowledge. This research will look for sources in the Oral history and narratives including songs, stories, folk story and myths. Being an insider in the community, having access to practices and language shall be an added advantage. However, one will constantly have to guard against insider bias.

CHAPTERIZATION

Introduction

In the introduction, the object of study and introduction to the general scope of the thesis with the outline of each chapter will be mentioned. The historical and cultural past of the Tangkhul Nagas will be highlighted and reflect as to why there is a need to research the historical changes brought about by the socio-cultural reforms. It will also highlight the importance of constructing the chapters based not on the comparison of past and the present but actually by configuring the remains or the remnants that are present within the contemporary practices of the Tangkhuls. The introduction will also focus on the methodological concerns of this thesis in terms of absence of

¹⁶ Laura P. Appel Warren “*Personhood: An examination of the History and use of an Anthropological Concept*” (2014)

written history, and the use of oral history, ethnography and performance theories to configure the research objectives.

Chapter One:

Co-existing Beliefs: Continuity and Changes

The Tangkhul Nagas remember and constantly reminisce about their own “original” traditional belief system. In Pettigrew’s writings as well as the recent books such as: *Encountering Modernity*, some details of the belief system and practices around the soul, spirits and the cosmos are discussed. The belief in the Sacred Being i.e. Ameowa or Kasa Akhava (Creator), the interrelatedness of all creation and the understanding of the presence and activities of ‘Kameo’ (spirits) were the essential elements of their belief system. For them, the ‘well-being’ of a person and the community was linked directly to the nature of their relationship with the Supernatural and natural being. Their purpose of living was to attain a balance and maintained a prosperous life. Many scholars have seen Tangkhul ritual practices as animistic, born out of a harmonious ecological relationship between objects and nature, animals and the humans as evident in songs that remain as tenuous connection to the community past. The hierarchical presence of the Supreme Being and the other spirits also constructed a polytheistic ritual network as evident from the details available within the historical documents. The close relationship between the spirit and the community members also get highlighted through the descriptions of specific rituals shaped to propitiate benevolent/malevolent, male/female spirits.

Much of the rituals performed were around the elaborate belief systems around death. Once the person died, the soul leaves the body, but hovered in the surrounding until a particular festival called Thisham Festival (Soul Departure Festival) was performed to release the soul. Only then the soul of the deceased became an ancestor and lived with the other ancestors in the Land of the Dead called Kazeiram. Thus, the cosmos for the Tangkhul did not hold only the spirit and holy being but also the ancestors and the process of becoming an ancestor remained one of the most

elaborate performances of the community where the impersonation of the death and a formal farewell to the soul marked his or her transformation from an earthly being to an ancestor.

This traditional belief system was transformed drastically when Christianity was introduced during the late 19th century like many other ethnic group in the North-Eastern region of India. In fact, at present, vast majority of the Tangkhul Nagas population have converted into Christianity. During the process of proselytizing, many fundamental beliefs like the translocation of soul to Land of Dead and practice like sending gift and articles to the ancestors have been discontinued and many are no longer retrievable. Despite the major loss and the discontinuity of many beliefs and practices, the remnants are seen in rituals, festivals, rites of passages mostly in the mortuary rites. This chapter shall thus trace the remnants of pre-Christian beliefs that are now intricately intertwined with the Christian belief and practices.

Chapter Two

Regulatory Bodies: Village Authority and Church Authority

All Tangkhul Villages are self-governing but not necessarily independent. Villages possess what one might call ‘internal sovereignty’ i.e. a government that wields a rule of law within a given territory over a given population. The political system is neither fully monarchical nor republic as the system has the feature of both the systems. The administration and governance of the village is vested in the institution of a Chief (Awunga) and council of clan elders (Hanga). The village council or Hanga Shim is the principal organ of every village. The village Chief is hereditary with chieftainship flow from the line of the ruling chief to his eldest son. However, the village Chief cannot assume, autocratic power because he is just the guardian of the village territory and not the owner of the land, the village territory is owned by the village community. Traditionally the elders of the clan represent in the village council. There is no separation of politics and religion in the Tangkhul political system. No political action 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. But, with the coming of Christianity, religious institution like Church and Schools were set up within the jurisdiction of the Village authority and thus became a contesting ground for exercising authority. This chapter shall foreground the contested boundaries of these two regulatory bodies i.e. Church authority and the Village regulatory body. It will attempt to analyze how these two governing bodies influence in the construction of Tangkhul personhood.

Chapter Three:

Cycle of Festivals – Christian and Pre-Christian Calendars

The third chapter will discuss some of the important festivals of the Tangkhul life in the post conversion times. Christian Festivals and commemorations includes—Christmas, New Year, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanks Giving Sunday, Church Foundation Day, Jubilee and so on. Traditional Festivals that continue to be celebrated are: *Luirā Phanit* (Seed Sowing Festival), *Yarra Phanit* (Youth Festival), *Chumphā Phanit* (Granary Sanctifying festival). However, there are several festivals which discontinues to be celebrated mostly the festivals and ceremony surrounding death like - *Thisham Festival* (Soul-Departure festival), *Chikhur Khamathai* (Grave sanctification ceremony), *Chikhur Kharui* (Grave Shifting ceremony), *Onra Ceremony* (Monumental Stone erection ceremony), *Onra Khamathai* (Onra Sanctification ceremony). Every festival that was introduced by the missionaries includes singing Christian hymns, short Sermon by the Pastor and praying. They usually happen inside the Church, organized and conducted by the Church authority. On the other hand, Seed Sowing festival which was once celebrated for ten to twelve days is now celebrated for only three to four days. This festival is organized by the Village Authority and held both inside the church and in the open ground. During this festival, the Chief of the village chant “Kashi Shoklo, Kapha Ungzanglo” (May the bad things Leave and Goodness Comes in) marks the beginning of the traditional agricultural calendar. Looking through some existing festivals, effort will be made to analyze how the past that are engraved in the memory and ‘sedimented’ in the body revived during festivals and ceremonies. It will be important to connect elements like festivals, songs, dances, artifacts, sites, locations and use such elements to research how they continue to perform and mark their

significance in a community. The question of ‘who’ perform ‘what’ and ‘how’ during festivals and ceremonies will open up a discussion on the notion of personhood.

Chapter Four

Death Rites: Journey of a Person

In this chapter, focus would turn to practices and performative rituals in an individual's life especially that of the mortuary rituals. Performative rituals have a transformative potential in an individual's life. In Anya Peterson Royce book *Becoming an Ancestor* (2011), “the rituals... are the mechanism of transformation.”¹⁷ These transformative rituals in a person's journey through life are not only lived but also performed with the community. There are number of rituals, sacrifices, ceremonies, festivals performed in different stages of life, i.e. birth, puberty, marriage, and death. The research does not aim to simply document the present practices of the rites of passage but would wish to examine how the idea of Tangkhul personhood gets formulated through this interaction between the individual, the community and the ritual practices in different stages of one's life especially that of the death rituals. In socio-cultural registers, beginnings of life are constituted through processes of social recognition and are contingent on the attribution of personhood and sociality. Endings (deaths) depend on the culturally acknowledged transformation of a living person to something else a corpse, nonperson, spirit or an ancestor. This chapter will attempt to explore the distinctive cultural markers among the Tangkhul Nagas and the expectations that are framed as social obligations and responsibilities. This chapter will attempt to show how and why Death rites are significantly transformed and in many case discontinued. At the same time, despite Christian interventions, we shall discuss how the traditional practices and beliefs relating to death still continue to exist in the everyday life of the people. Through the study of one's rites of passage giving importance to death rites, this chapter shall attempt to lay out the idea of Tangkhul ‘person’ and ‘personhood’.

¹⁷ Royce, 2011:201

Chapter Five

Personhood: Constituted and De-constituted

Personhood is frequently understood as a condition that involves constant change, and key transformations to the person occur throughout life and death. People may pass from one state of personhood to another. Personhood is attained and maintained through relationships not only with other human beings but with things, places, animals and the spiritual features of the cosmos. Some of these may also emerge as persons through this engagement. People's own social interpretations of personhood and of the social practices through which personhood is realized shape their interactions in a reflexive way, but personhood remains a mutually constituted condition.

Human beings are constantly in transition from the present into a future which soon becomes the ever receding past. We deal with this temporal dislocation by seeking to preserve, retrieve, reinterpret or appropriate past experience. As individuals, we carry the remnants of our past with us in the scars, wrinkles, tattoos and as well as in our memories; and as members of a community, we carry the remnants 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 such as individual memory and a shared cultural memory, permit the transgenerational transmission and inheritance of values, norms and social practices, all of which will contribute in understanding the concept of personhood.

This chapter shall use two key concepts - Memory and remnants to study the concept of Tangkhul Personhood that is complicated by the presence and influence of the past alongside the present, the traditional and the transitional lives that the Tangkhul Nagas live in the contemporary world. This chapter will further enquire whether every individual can attain a personhood among the Tangkhul Community?

Conclusion:

Conclusion shall collate the findings of the research, highlighting the gaps and possibilities of further research in the area.

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