CHAPTER 5
MEDIATORY ROLE OF THE RITES OF PASSAGE

This Chapter will deal specifically with the *Rites of Passage* or the three important stages of our lives that we all go through and the various social mores and religious significance and practices linked with these rites. These rites of passage are signifiers of the critical aspects of the life cycle and are largely related to Buddhist philosophy and are at the same time pertinent to the followers of the Buddhists tradition. Most of the discussion on the rites of passage is common to all Bhutanese Buddhists in general however, we have also dealt with the practices peculiar to the Gangtey Goenpa Monastery. This chapter is also crucial to our main study of the mandala/khilkhor for the following reasons: (a) the mandala/khilkhor is an aid to liberation and liberation entails freedom from the cycle of birth-death and re-birth; it is therefore pertinent that we look at the rituals and semiotics of death ceremonies; (b) birth is also looked upon as a freedom of birth from the lower realms, hence, birth ceremonies need to be analysed; and (c) marriage being the intermediate stage between birth and death as well as the regenerator of a new life form, marriage rites too form a crucial part of the study and the entire belief system that is attached to the mandala/khilkhor. Moreover, the mandala/khilkhor is as we have seen in the previous chapter inextricably linked with our daily lives, whether we are conscious or otherwise about it. For instance, offering seven or even one bowl of water to the household deities is an act of offering the mandala/khilkhor for the sake of all sentient beings. Also, when a person dies, the monk leading the funeral procession carries the Serpa Khorlo/ Wheel of Life Mandala/Khilkhor with him and the same is burnt along with the corpse, thereby speeding his/her essence towards moksha/ liberation/ nirvana.

Then again, we are not merely analysing individual or distinct issues in this study. We are analysing the theoretical framework of the mandala/khilkhor, looking at the symbolism of the various elements that compose the mandala/khilkhor, and then analysing the monastery as a three-dimensional form/extension of the mandala drawing/khilkhor, while also studying the discourse between the monastery/ the ecclesiastical world and the world of the laity. Thereafter, we look at the rites of passage.
as part of the complete cycle of events that are related to a person’s life and the role of the mandala/khilkhor and the monastery within that cycle. Hence, the need is felt for a detailed examination of the semiotics of birth, death and marriage ceremonies in this chapter. Therefore, having studied the conceptual relationship between the mandala/khilkhor and the monastery, it is not only essential but also desirable as well to talk about the mediatory role of the Rites of Passage. What do we mean by the term Rites of Passage? Rites of Passage is defined by the Webster’s New World Dictionary as “ceremonies or formal, solemn acts, observances, or procedures in accordance with prescribed religious rules or customs, for instance, in the case of marriage rites. It also goes on to say that Rites of Passage could include any formal, customary observance, or procedure for say the rites of courtship”. In layman’s terms, it is the process whereby one is born, lives (marries), and dies, the three crucial phases of a person’s life while on this earth. Rites of Passage exist in every culture, every tradition. The Hindus too have a four-fold system indicating the passage of a person’s birth, his/her schooling/education, marriage and then movement towards religion in his/her old age and finally renunciation of all worldly ties. These four stages are described as Brahmachari, Grihasti, Van Prasthan and Sanyas. This Chapter will look at rites and customs relating to birth, marriage and death as depicted by Bhutanese culture in the general context of the life of the Bhutanese people.

In studying these three aspects of Bhutanese life, it is difficult to decide in which order to discuss these. Do we analyse the birth ceremonies first or those rites dealing with death, for without birth there can be no death and without death, birth cannot exist. In the course of our discussion, we would prefer to deal with death first, followed by birth and marriage. This is a convenient and suitable point from where to begin the study as the rites of death are extremely elaborate, difficult, esoteric and important. Hence, let us deal with the most important rite of passage first.

Death Ceremonies in Bhutan

When a person is ill and on his/her deathbed, it is believed, (as in many old cultures) that, s/he will always know when the moment draws near. While near and dear ones, or
even medical experts may not be able to ascertain that moment of truth, the Bhutanese believe that the dying person always realises that his/her end is near at some stage. Eventually, even his/her relatives will be able to discern that the sick person’s end is drawing near and they too try their level best to be close to the dying person. At this stage, it is always advisable for the relatives of the dying person to locate a Tshoy Lama/ the Root Guru.

A Tshoy Lama is a highly qualified and skilled ordained monk. In fact, he is so well trained and educated that he is given the designation of a lama/ordained monk/ gelong. In Bhutan there exists certain terminology for the classification of monks/lamas as may have been discerned from the previous chapter but it needs to be mentioned here as well that all those monks who leave the monastic order to start a family are called getre or retired monks. A tulku or rimpochè is the reincarnation of a great master the reincarnations of whom form a well-established line of descendants. Gomchens are half-lay men, half-clergy, belonging to the Nyingmapa School of Buddhism. They stand in for monks in isolated villages. A lama may be ordained monk or a married (lay) religious person. It does not translate into monk per se. He may be a gelong, or a tulku, or a gomchen. The term lama implies a religious, honorific title given to a man by virtue of his knowledge and wisdom of religion. Anims are nuns, whose communities are under the supervision of a monastery of monks (please note that the lay term monk does not translate into lama in the Buddhist world).

The Tshoy Lama is one who is especially trained in the secret esoteric tradition of dying, and is the one who will guide the essence of the dead person through the Bardo Thodal/ the intermediary world into the next. We have to understand that Buddhists all over the world believe in the transmigration of the soul/essence and the passage of that essence from one realm/world into the next depending on the person’s Karma or course of action, within his/her life span.

Before we get to the part where the Tshoy Lama makes an appearance much as a priest does before the last sacrament or the Brahmin Pandit does before a person dies, we also
have to classify the pre-death conditions. The Bhutanese have a three-fold classification:

(a) The death of a highly skilled practitioner of the Buddha dhamma like high lamas and monks
(b) The death of a practitioner equally skilled and qualified but not as healthy (physically) as the first and
(c) The death of the lay practitioners of the Buddha dhamma or ordinary people.

Let us now examine each of the following.

**Pre-Death Ceremonies to be observed when a High Lama/Monk Passes Away**

In the case of the death of a highly skilled practitioner of the dhamma like high lamas and monks, he will always get an indication of his time of death in a dream sequence. Such a possibility would be unthinkable and incomprehensible for us mere mortals. This is possible because of their deep meditative skills and their high degree of discipline, prayer and practice of the Dhamma. Alexandra David –Neel in her book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* says:

*I said that – according to Tibetans – a mystic initiate is capable of keeping his mind lucid during the disintegration of his personality, and that it is possible for him to pass from this world to the next fully conscious of what is happening. It follows that such a man does not need the help of anyone in his last hours, nor any religious rites after his death.*

Once a high lama or a monk has such a dream and becomes aware of his impending mortality, he will call all his near and dear ones, his kith and kin to his deathbed. He will, then handover all his personal wealth to the one trusted person from amongst his near and dear ones. This trusted person will have to pledge to offer one portion of the dying lama’s personal property for the benefit of all sentient beings. This portion to be offered thus is not meant for furthering one’s personal income or generating more funds, but is meant specifically for the purpose it was meant to serve. Since, this high
lama/monk is so highly qualified and a skilled and devout practitioner of the Dhamma, he need not have a Tshoy Lama present at his death-bed. From this statement, the role and significance of the Tshoy Lama becomes evident.

This lama will then inform his kith and kin of his impending mortality and will instruct them not to disturb him under any circumstance, after which he will go into deep meditation. After issuing these instructions, he will also make known the date when the door to his meditation cell should be opened. Such high lamas will often go into meditation for a minimum of three days and a maximum of 21 days, the day of death or passing away into a better realm normally occurring between 3 and 7 days. The high practitioner may be in his monastery/Goenpa or at home, but he will have called all his near and dear ones close by and will also have instructed them well on the observance of the rules he has laid down. A calm and quiet atmosphere is to prevail throughout the Geonpa/monastery or house and even if ritual prayers are to be conducted, total silence or quiet is to be observed at all times. On the day that he has chosen, his followers/subordinate lamas will open the door. Once the door to his meditation cell/room is opened, the next task is to discern whether or not he has indeed passed away to a better realm.

How are they to know for sure whether or not the great passing has occurred? There are two clear indications of such a state of being. Firstly, his dhudham/ rosary/prayer beads will have slipped through his lifeless fingers and he will be seated in the lotus posture, secondly, the two fluids – one red, the other white, collectively called the Jhasem Karma will have started flowing out from his nostrils. Jhasem Karma also means the Bodhicitta secretion or literally the red and white body fluids that, is believed will have started flowing from his nostrils upon his physical death. These two clues are clear indications of his having passed away to a better realm.

But before the high lama enters his retreat in order to prepare for his passing away into a better realm, he will have to prepare the retreat prior to beginning his final meditation. His retreat will have to cleansed and decorated beautifully with all the ritual items washed and shining. He will have to perform all the seven offertory steps that we talked
about in Chapter 3. The *thangkhas* scroll paintings on his walls will have to be uncovered and displayed (religious scroll paintings/ *thangkas* are normally covered at night). He will have to light the ceremonial butter lamps/ *karmis* and richly scented incense sticks/ *shang* ought to be burnt as an offering to the divine ones. He himself must be fully attired in the robes of the lama that suit his stature/rank and personify his qualifications and attributes, in other words he should be attired according to the *chagho*. It should be noted that the hierarchy of monks can chiefly be distinguished not only by their titles and the role they play within the monastic order but also by their attire, which however lay people may not be in a position to discern. The Bhutanese know *Phowah* to mean the process whereby such a great practitioner goes into deep meditation and contemplation in order to await death and pass away into a better realm, a term that also loosely translates into “the liberation of the soul essence from the body”.

As the word soul is derived from a Latin origin (*anima*) and has Christian connotations, a Buddhist practitioner from Bhutan would prefer a non-religious term like essence, hence, the usage. When a person has passed away the term used to describe his/her passing away is *shane* in respected circles and *shini* as a lay term. For instance, when we talk of the passing away of learned monks/ lamas or other prominent personalities the term *shane* is always used to describe their physical death.

Having talked at length about the death of a highly qualified practitioner of the *Dhamma*, it is now time to turn towards the second classification we made earlier on - that of the death of a qualified practitioner who, however on grounds of physical ailment is not strong enough (physiologically) to perform the *phowah* ceremony by himself. What we see here is a beautiful example of the conceptual and the real, the intangible and the tangible. While in a conceptual/intangible framework there would be no physically weak practitioners of the *Dhamma*, in the real and the tangible world we would have to make such allowances, there could and there are physiologically weak members of the religious order as well.
Pre-Death Ceremonies to be followed in the Case of the Death of an Equally Qualified Practitioner (Not Physiologically Strong Enough to Alternate His Essence into a Better Realm)

Since these high lamas are equally qualified and devout practitioners of the Dhamma as the first category, they too will realise that they are approaching the end of their lives. This is not to say that a lay person will not know when his/her end draws near, all human beings at that crucial moment in time, would be aware of their impending death. It is just a way of making clear the message that such skilled and devout practitioners of the Dhamma are more aware, more conscious of their mortality than other lay practitioners caught up in the web of what is known in Sanskrit as Maya and Mohah, the samsaric world as the Chogyum Trungpa Rimpoche uses the term in his lectures on “What is a Mandala”. 2

The physiologically weak practitioner too would call his kith and kin near. Having dispensed his personal property in like fashion he would like to enter his specially prepared retreat and wait for his passing away/ phowah. He would be attired as befitting his stature and hierarchy in the monastic community, but being physiologically weak, it is not mandatory for him to be seated in the lotus posture. He is allowed to attain his phowah in the reclining posture, the posture in which the Buddha, the master of the Dhamma, passed away into Parinirvana. If the practitioner is not extremely physiologically weak, he may be capable of attaining the state of phowah without the help of another person. However, if his physiological condition is, such that he cannot attain phowah without the aid of another high practitioner then he would need to observe the following steps. He would need to call on his Tshoy Lama or the Root Guru for his final moments or he would have to take the help of one of his close and trusted fellow Dhamma practitioner. This close and trusted fellow Dhamma practitioner would have to be of the same qualification and someone with whom the physiologically weak yet highly qualified practitioner has received the teachings from preferably the same teacher. With the aid of his fellow Dhamma practitioner he would then be capable of passing away into a better realm. Before he can attain that level, he would have to be
prepared for the process much like the highly skilled, qualified and devout practitioner mentioned in the first classification.

The retreat or the altar room where the dying practitioner may want to meditate and perform his phowah will have to be decorated elaborately as mentioned earlier. He would have to be attired correctly, befitting his rank and there ought to be peace and quiet and no disturbance whatsoever. Once the preparations have been done and the code of ceremonially conduct adhered to, his Tshoy Lama or fellow practitioner will help him attain that state of being earlier described as the phowah. Once the phowah has been performed, the Tshoy Lama or fellow practitioner will instruct the kith and kin of the dying person to seal the doors of his (the latter’s), retreat and will also inform them about when the door to his sanctuary is to be opened. Once the phowah has been performed and the instructions given, the Tshoy Lama’s fellow practitioner’s (Choedah as he is known in Bhutan), role is over. It is generally believed that once the phowah has been successfully performed the dead person’s essence will not wander between this world and the next, nor will s/he be born in a lower realm.

The Bhutanese, in fact all Buddhists believe that after a person’s death and the performing of phowah before the person actually dies will result in his/her passing away into a better realm /the Heaven of Dewa Chen/ the Heaven of Sangye Yuh Phame/ Heaven of the Buddha Amitabha. The Buddha Amitabha is the Buddha of the western Gate of the Mandala/ Khilkhor. He is the Buddha of infinite light symbolised by the lotus or the peacock and the Buddha of Spiritual Rebirth and Growth. He is also the head of the lotus family of deities like the Analokitesvara/ Cherizi/ the God of Infinite Compassion, Kurukulla, Padmanartesvara and Guru Padmasambhava. He can also be identified by the ambrosia/ amrita of the semen. The phowah ceremony is a closed and highly secretive, well guarded esoteric tradition that can be performed only by the most skilled and qualified practitioner as mentioned in the first classification, and with the help of the Tshoy Lama or Choedha in accordance with the second classification. This ceremony is a means of ensuring one’s rebirth in a better realm or the Heaven of Sangye Yuh Phame/ the Buddha Amitabha. Once the essence of the dead reaches this realm, it
should be noted that s/he will still, be practising the Dhamma there. This is also the realm/plane of existence where the essence of the dead will merge with the Sangye Yuh Phame/the Buddha Amitabha and become one with him.

As suggested in the second chapter, it may be discerned that the very purpose of meditating upon a mandala/ Kkilkhor is to become one with the deity in whom the initiate is taking refuge. At one level, a person’s passing away after having the phowah performed at the crucial moment minutes after his/her physical death is also an indication of how an esoteric tradition like the practice of the mandala/ khilkhor is at once also a system whereby a lay person may also become one with the Buddha Amitabha/ Sangye Yuh Phame, without his/her knowledge per se.

The term phowah will continue to recur as we deal with the ceremonies of death and may even prove to be too confusing for a lay reader but being a non-initiate and therefore excluded from the esoteric tradition, it is a very difficult term to explain. Suffice it to say that phowah is a means of transferring one’s spiritual essence from this samsaric/ worldly realm to the next. However, in the course of the discussion, the explanation of this term might become more understandable even though it is a closed tradition. Having discussed the pre-death ceremonies to be observed in the case of a highly qualified and skilled practitioner of the Dhamma, and that of the highly qualified practitioner who is physiologically weak, we shall now turn towards the pre-death ceremonies and rites to be followed in the case of the death of lay practitioners of the Dhamma.

Pre-Death Ceremonies to be observed in Case of the Death of A Lay Practitioner of the Dhamma

Once it is ascertained that a lay practitioner is about to die, it is essential, or in fact imperative that his/her family take good care of him/her during his/her last moments particularly. His/her family, friends and relatives should not lament the fact that s/he is about to die and should not weep and mourn. Unlike the Western tradition that organises a wake ceremony after the death of a person, or a rudali session as in some
eastern/Indian tradition, Buddhism does not prescribe such lamenting. It is preferable that the person be allowed to die in peace and that his last few moments be tranquil. It is also extremely important that the Tshoy Lama/root guru be present at his/her deathbed much like the priest performing the last benediction/sacrament. But how does one recognise death? According to the Buddhist tradition once again there are two ways of recognising death. Firstly, the external breath stops and secondly, the internal essence too has to be guided to a better realm than this world. In that split second moment when a person ceases to breath and his/her heart stops beating and when his/her internal essence passes on to better realm, the phowah ceremony has to be conducted. This duration is not hours or mere seconds, it is described as the amount of time needed to eat a hot plate of rice or drink a hot mug of tea - or is also known as the Thoencham/ Jhaencham in Bhutanese parlance/langue.

As soon as the person stops breathing and is pronounced clinically dead in lay terms the phowah rites have to be performed. It is only after these rites have been duly performed and concluded that the dead person’s internal essence will be liberated and alleviated to the Heaven of the Sangye Yuh Phane/ Buddha Amitabha. If the Tshoy Lama/ root guru is present at the dying person’s deathbed and performs the phowah rites at the right moment, this lay practitioner no matter how simple and lowly s/he be will have the opportunity to be born in the Heaven of the Buddha Amitabha/ Sangye Yuh Phame, to which all human beings aspire. In fact, it is largely believed to be the predictions of Guru Rimpoche/ Guru Padma Sambhava/ the Second Buddha as he is popularly called, that while all other Buddhas have the power to meditate and grant lay people an entry into this better realm, he alone can liberate a lay person’s inner essence to the realm of the Buddha Amitabha/ Sangye Yuh Phame, even though s/he be not a devout practitioner or is a non practitioner of the Dhamma. Once the person has passed away and the phowah rites have been performed in time, an astrologer/ Tshi will have to be consulted.

At this stage it is also important that we talk about the role of the Tshoy Lama. The Tshoy Lama is to guide the dying/ dead on his/ her journey through the intermediary
world/ the Bardo/ the intermediary world between this physical world and the next that
the person may be born into. The Tshoy Lama begins by telling the dying/the dead about
the impermanence of life and the impermanent nature of all things on this real, physical
world. He also talks about how everything is temporary and in a state of flux, and how
everything that is born has to die. The Tshoy Lama has to explain to the dying/dead the
nature of the intermediary world/ Bardo through which the essence of the dying/ dead
will have to travel. Through the course of his teachings/guidance, the Tshoy Lama will
tell the dying/ the dead about the various sights and the various realms s/he will travel
through. He provides a brief description of what sights could meet the eyes of the dead.
For instance s/he could see beautiful at other times strange heavens, beautiful people
living in these heavens or grotesque and horrifying beings, etc. He will also constantly
reassure the dying/the dead that he gives him/her proper guidance through this journey.

The Tshoy Lama also has the difficult task of preventing the dying person from “falling
asleep, or from fainting, or falling into a coma”. The Tshoy Lama has to draw the
attention of the dying/dead, man/woman, to the fact that s/he has begun to loose the
faculties of his/her five senses gradually - the senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and
touch. The Tshoy Lama’s work does not end here. He has to make the essence of the
dead person leave the physical trappings of this mortal body next. The essence it has to
be noted may only leave the mortal body through a crack at the top of the skull, for it is
believed that should the essences leave through some other part of the dead person’s
physical anatomy, it will affect the course of his/her future re- birth.

This task is a very difficult and dangerous task as the Tshoy Lama is required to extract/
release the essence of the dead person. The Tshoy Lama has to go into deep meditation
and serious contemplation for he has to be able to identify himself with the dead person
completely. This it may be pointed out is what the initiate to the mandala/ khilkhor
needs to do as well, identify themselves completely with, the deities that they have
sought refuge in and are offering the mandala/ khilkhor to. After this complete
identification with the dead person, the Tshoy Lama has to propel the essence of the
dead man on his/her (the latter’s/ dead person’s) behalf through the crack at the top of
the skull. Ideally, all enlightened human beings should be capable of causing the release of their own essences but in the real world due to various differing circumstance and our own actions, words and deeds/karma, we are incapable of doing so, hence we need the assistance and guidance of the Tshoy Lama. Moreover, we are too caught up in the web of worldly attachments, Maya and Mohah and in the Samsaric World that we cannot even begin to think of Freedom/Salvation/ Moksha/ Nirvana. Therefore, the Tshoy Lama has to be roped in to not only release the dead person's essence from the physical trappings of this world but should also be able to ensure the release of the essence of the dead person through his/her skull. It is believed that the highly skilled and learned lamas like the Tshoy Lama who are extremely well trained in the art of the Bardo can not only actually make the essence of the person rise but can also while uttering the "liberating cries of Hik! And Phat! When they feel their end approaching, and so free themselves without help." Once the essence has left the body of the dead, lay Buddhists believe that essence travels through strange lands that really exist and that people/animals/demi­-gods etc inhabit. However, the more skilled and learned lamas know these to be mere visions, visions that the dead person conjures up in his/her mind which are the result of his/her innate nature and in his/her actions/ Karma in his/her past life.

There is also the belief among certain groups of highly qualified, learned and skilled lamas that just after the essence leaves the body of the deceased the essence has a split second view of Sunyata/ the Infinite Void/the Supreme Reality. If the essence is capable of recognising the Infinite Void or what Alexandra David-Neel calls the Supreme Reality then the essence will be free from the cycle of birth- death and re-birth. The essence/the dead person will have attained nirvana/ moksha/ salvation/enlightenment. Normally this however, does not happen. The essence will be frightened by the brilliance of that dazzling light and therefore, too afraid to grasp that one last chance of freedom, being still bound by the chains of the Samsaric World of attachment, and will miss the entire significance of that bright light and the chance of instant liberation.

While, the family of the deceased observes the funeral and the post cremation rites, the essence of the latter will be travelling through the Bardo/ the intermediary world. S/he
may visualise/conjure up beautiful people and places, or horrifying beasts and tormented places. S/he could conjure up brightly coloured paths, and strange sights, apparitions that could frighten him/her and cause him/her to be confused and hence, wandering around aimlessly. If, the essence can hear the guidance of the Tshoy Lama and is able to follow his advise then s/he will be re-born in a better realm, as s/he will have entered the Bardo in an Awakened/ Conscious state of mind, having received the teachings of the Tshoy Lama at the time of his/her death. On the other hand, those who are still held by the chains of the material, the tangible, the physical world then s/he will not be able to make any progress through the Bardo and all the teachings of the Tshoy Lama will have gone to waste. Such beings are supposed to be born in the realm of the animals. If the essence of the beings are well guided by the teachings of the Tshoy Lama, and they are able to hear his teachings and guidance even when they are travelling through the Bardo then, they may be born in the realm of the human beings. Those misguided beings who regret the life they have left behind and are still attached to the physical, the material world are believed to mistake the lower realms as beautiful and pure places and they enter these realms inadvertently, thereby, determining where they will be born in their next life. Such misguided beings could be re-born as dogs. While those who are able to hear the guidance of the Tshoy Lama as they wander through the Bardo may be born as human beings.

Then, there are those who fail to grasp that brief, bright illumination that would have provided instant nirvana. The essences of these dead people are believed to wander around frightened of everything they see, visualise or meet till they finally reach the Court of Lord Shinje/ the Lord of the Dead. The Lord of the Dead/Shinje, as was mentioned in the preceding chapter in a discussion on the Dance of the Shinje weighs the good and the bad deeds the individual essences have performed or committed and if the bad deeds are heavier, s/he will be born in a lesser realm. Shinje/the Lord of the Dead is also believed to determine the exact “species of beings among who the ‘spirit’ will be re-born and the particular conditions that shall accompany this re-birth, such as physical beauty or ugliness, intellectual gifts, social standing of the parents etc.”

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Having discussed at length the role of the Tshoy Lama one may wonder what the role of an astrologer/ Tshi could possible be particularly, when the Tshoy Lama/ root guru has already performed the most crucial and difficult task! But the death ceremony does not end with a person’s death. The astrologer/ Tshi will read the charts prepared at the birth of the deceased, note the time and date of the person’s death and draw up a fresh chart called the Tshimoh/ astrological chart related to death. Having drawn up the Tshimoh he will predict the right date, time and direction of future events. These future events being when (date and time) and from which direction, the dead body should be taken out of the house, on the last leg of his/her journey to the cremation ground. Not only this, but the Tshi/ the astrologer is also in a position to interpret the Tshimoh/ astrological chart for the dead and let the relations and family know whether or not the deceased has completed his/her full term on this earth. If the deceased has died before his/her time, then the Tshi/ astrologer will also make known how many years of his/her life were left and where a new baby is likely to be born, and what rituals/poojas/religious ceremonies need to be performed for both the deceased who has exhausted his/her years on earth and the one who has died an untimely death. If in the case of a person who has not completed his/her full term on earth and predictions are of him/her being born in a lower realm instance, the realm of the hungry ghosts or animals, then remedial measures in the form of various religious ceremonies will have to be performed, to prevent such a birth and also to ensure his/her birth in a better realm like the realm of the human race or that of the Gods and the Demi-Gods. Buddhist all over ascribe to the wheel of life or the Serpa Khorlo tradition, where the cosmos is divided into six realms of existence, the highest being that of the Bodhicittas and the lowest that of the realm of hell with it’s burning fires and immense heat. The Six Realms of the Serpa Khorlo/ the Wheel of Life are also known as the six forms of re-birth or the gro-bai-rigs/ Gati in Sanskrit. These six realms include the following as listed in order of hierarchy.

- The Realm of the Gods/ Lha/ Sura/ Deva – or the highest form of existence.
- The Realm of the Titans/Ungodly Spirits/ Lha- ma-yin/ Asura/ Demi- Gods
- The Realm of Mankind/ Mi/ Nara.
The Realm of the Beasts/ Du- Do/ Tirjayak.

The Realm of the Tantalised/ Hungry Ghosts/ Yi- dag/ Preta and finally

The Realm of the inhabitants of Hell/ Nyal- wa/ Naraka, the lowest of all forms of existence. 6

The Tshi/ astrologer will also discern which of the Lhos/ twelve astrological signs may see/touch the dead body. The Buddhists/Tibetan calendar is divided into 12-year cycles, each year corresponding/represented/signified by an animal much like the Chinese calendar. These twelve years are arranged as follows:

- Jhuwa/ Rat
- Lang/ Bull
- Rid-thai/ Tiger
- Yeauh/ Rabbit
- Druk/ Dragon
- Duill/ Snake
- Ta/ Horse
- Lu/ Sheep
- Tay/ Monkey
- Jha/ Bird/ Rooster
- Khe/ Dog
- Pha/ Pig

Each individual born in a particular year therefore, gets the astrological sign/ lho of the animal that s/he is born into. For instance, 2002 was the Year of the Horse, 2003 the year of the Sheep, 2004 the year of the Monkey, 2005 the year of the Rooster, 2006 was the year of the Dog and 2007 is the year of the Pig. This has to be observed very strictly, failing which severe complications may arise and the deceased may or may not find his/her way safely into the next realm. However, if the deceased has specifically requested the presence of one/more of his/her relatives who may be listed as the ones who are not supposed to see or touch the deceased, in keeping with his/her dying wish,
such strict observances may be relaxed, but once again remedial measures like putting a black mark on his/her forehead have to be observed. The Tshi’s/ astrologer’s role does not end here. He will also have to make known to the family members and relatives of the deceased, the lhos/ the astrological signs that may see the deceased. This is essentially to identify and make known to the people who may look at the body of the deceased, as at the time of folding the body of the deceased, in preparation for the final journey to the cremation ground the body of the deceased will be naked.

But before going any further into the Post Death Ceremonies, it ought to be noted that after a person’s death, the head of the deceased should always face the north. The Lord of the northern gate of the mandala/ khilkhor is the Buddha Amogasiddha, symbolised by the colour green, endowed with infallible success and also signified by the ambrosia/amrita or human flesh. He is the God of action and the head of the Karma family like the Green Tara. Without really realising, one could slip out of this world not knowing how crucial a role the principle and practice of the mandala/ khilkhor plays in our lives. On the one hand it is a closed esoteric tradition of the highest tantric practice – the Anuttarayoga Tantra, yet it merges so subtlety with our daily lives that without realising it we do the things we are told to do.

Once the person has died and the phowah ceremony has been performed, prayers or merlams have to be performed day and night till the 21st day after his/her death. We will talk about the significance of the 21st day post death ceremonies a little later in this Chapter. The Tshi/ astrologer has been consulted, does and don’ts have been discussed the dead body/the phumpho has to be prepared for the journey after death. Just after the death of the person, the bed on which s/he died has to be cleansed. This cleansing is done in the following manner. The blankets, linen etc., used by the dead is removed immediately and the body is disrobed completely, then placed on the floor, covered by a white cloth. In the meantime, the Tshoy Lama and other monks are already at work, carrying out the religious prayers and rituals, in order to enable the departed one on to his/her destination swiftly.
Post Death Rites/Ceremonies

The dead body/ *phumpo* will now have to be prepared with great diligence and care. The body/ *phumpo* must be put into a certain position, before anything else can be done. It must also be mentioned that only male members of the family/relatives/friends may touch the body (*lohta*/* astrological sign permitting). This process of molding the dead body into a certain posture is known as the *Phum Ghomtsha/Droh Dhomtsha*, and includes the molding of the body into the *Padma Asana/ Lotus Position/ meditation/adamantine/ *dhyana*/*vajraparyankasana* posture, with the back held straight, legs folded and crossed with the soles of both feet turned upwards and resting on the opposite thigh, and palms turned upwards.

But, before the body is positioned in this manner, it needs to be bathed and cleaned with hot water, milk, nutmeg/ *jai phal*, saffron and other religious ingredients. This is technically the last bath of the dead person. After bathing the body, all the external exits of the body like the olfactory organs, the auditory organs etc., have to be blocked with butter. Not being able to find a religious explanation behind this practice, it may be surmised that this is more of a medical/practical approach to death. If the exits are not blocked, it could result in the leaking of bodily fluids. Once cleansed, the body is then dressed in the following manner. Normally shrouds made of linen, decorated with the prints of the foot and hand of the Buddha is used, to cover the head and face of the body. However, if the family does not have access to this, also called the *Sangye gyi Tshapha and Chapa*, ordinary clean linen may perform the same function. Then a small amulet called the *thradrul* is tied around the neck of the deceased’s body. The *thradrul* is a means of attaining liberation, much like the display of the huge *thangkas/thongdruls* during *Tshechus* in Bhutan, which are believed to provide liberation through sight, while the *thradrul* is believed to provide liberation through use. After this has been done, a strong, clean, white linen bag that has been prepared already, is used to enclose the body. Once the body is enclosed inside the linen pouch, then a wooden box much like a coffin is prepared to carry the body on its final journey. But this box is brought out and prepared only on the day the cremation is to take place.
While some male relatives prepare the body in the manner described earlier, others are busy organising the area where the cleansed body will be placed. The area is cleansed, sanctified and four poles at the four cardinal points of the compass are erected. White cloth is draped around the poles to create a type of shield or curtain. Coloured ceremonial scarves/khadas are then draped on the four poles. Outside the enclosure, a low table called a chudrom is placed. When we talk of poles being erected, these are low poles of a height of 3-4 feet only not higher than that. Having placed the chudrom in front of the body, certain paraphernalia have to be placed on it as well. A butter lamp/karmi has to be lit and placed there, followed by the personal belongings of the deceased, that are to be placed in the form of a Chaka/ a rectangular box with a lid, intricately carved and used for carrying the fresh areca/betel nuts and paane leaves and the Trimia/ a small round box with a lid again intricately carved and used to carry lime, if the person eat doma. Both these items are often made of silver or of gold. Doma is the name given to fresh areca/nut and paane/ betel leaves with a little bit of lime.

As most Bhutanese eat Doma, one would invariably have to place, the doma chaka and the trimi on the chudrom. Apart from this, his/her prayer beads/phem, his/her things used on a daily basis, offerings of fruits, ritual cakes and water are laid out. If the deceased used a traditional Bhutanese wooden cup/phob for drinking tea, then that phob/cup should be placed on the chudrom, along with an offering of tea. A special bamboo woven, round basket, in which people carry food, much like round steel tiffin boxes, called a bhachung is also placed on the chudrom. Relatives, friends and well-wishers often offer money to the deceased, instructing him/her to accept it as a present (also known as Lamay Chanzay). These monetary offerings are also placed in that bhachung. Sometimes a small receptacle placed on a low chodrum next to the body replaces this bhachung. Along with this receptacle a pen and a notebook are also placed on the chudrom. This has been specially placed to make a note of the monetary offerings of the friends and relatives. A responsible person from among those present, makes a note of the finances, without the knowledge of the giver. This is to ensure that the givers too are helped financially in times of need. This offering by relatives and friends is known as Nendah.
The house of the deceased will continue to be thronged by friends, relatives and well-wishers both from near and far. The family of the deceased has to offer them tea, refreshment and food. Everyone chips in to help with the preparation of food and in serving the visitors. The monks meanwhile are hard at prayer and at performing ceremonies. They too have to be taken care of. Normally the appointed day and time/ Zhakha, for taking the deceased to the cremation ground will be a minimum of a day to a maximum of three days specially if they have to wait for the arrival of loved ones from afar. During this time, all present have to be fed and looked after. Every night around six, the family members and relatives will join the monks in prayer for the departed. This will continue for about an hour a day or more depending on the will and desire of the individual members, but till the body is cremated.

The person was on his/her deathbed, the Tshoy Lama was called for, the phowah performed, the body has been bathed and dressed appropriately and all the ceremonies are taking place as per rules laid down by the scriptures. It is now time to prepare for the pre-cremation rites.

**PRE-CREMATION RITES**

If the death of a person takes place in his/her village/ Eukha, the relatives will collect the wood for the funeral pyre. Each relative will collect at least one Tshingkhum of wood. One Tshingkhum would be a bundle of dry wood big enough for a person to carry with ease. If the person dies in a town or city where it is difficult to go in search of wood, it can also be brought from agents in the Forest Department. If the dead person was dearly loved by his /her near and dear ones and if they can afford it, or if s/he is a high ranking official, special arrangements will be made to procure sandal wood and other aromatic woods and herbs that will then be used to burn the body. The day before the cremation takes place, the family of the deceased will have to go to the Dhatshang/ main monastery/ dzong and seek the help of the highest lama and his monks for performing the last rites. If the person dies in Thimphu or Punakha, his/her relatives will have to go to the Dhatshang at the Dzong to ask for the highest religious authority the Jhe Khenpo/ the religious head of the country, and his monks to perform the last
rites for the deceased. If the Jhe Khenpo is not already tied up with prior engagements, he will attend the funeral ceremony and perform the last rites for the deceased. If he is otherwise engaged, he will delegate either one of his Four Lopens or the Meshi Lam who is officially designated for the performance of these duties. If the deceased belongs to the rural areas or one of the districts then, his /her family will have to visit the local Goenpa or Monastery and seek the help and guidance of the Netay (the local abbot). If the Netay is not available, the family of the deceased need not despair, for there is once again a Meshi Lam nominated to perform this sacred task even at the district level.

Having contacted the Dzong or the local Goenpa and sought the help of the Meshi Lam, observed all the prerequisites to the funeral, the funeral procession is now ready to move to the crematorium or funeral grounds/ dhuthay. The bundles of wood called Methay, the special astrological chart on a flag pole, called a Chitham, the shell of a tortoise, the horn of the mountain goat (a high altitude Mountain goat with spiral shaped horns), will have to be carried before the dead body. This flag/ Chithan is also carried during joyous occasions and does not necessarily mean an inauspicious sign. It may in fact be looked upon as the symbol of life with both joyous and sorrowful occasions forming a concrete whole. Leading the procession will be the monk body and followed by the gomchens or lay practitioners. Walking behind the monks is the pall - bearers while, family and friends of the deceased bring up the rear. Normally, the funeral procession walks to the funeral ground, but in case the cremation ground is at some distance from the house of the deceased, nowadays, vehicles are used as the means of transportation for the last leg of the dead person’s journey.

Once they reach the funeral ground, the dead body will be placed on the pyre. It may be noted that some of the relatives of the deceased and a few monks will have collected the wood and formed the pyre, prior to the arrival of the funeral procession. According to the Durkpa Kagyupa Lineage of Buddhism that is practiced in modern day Bhutan, the Methup Khilkhor/ Mandala will have to be placed on the ground above which the pyre is assembled. It is also important that all the rites and ceremonies peculiar to this particular Mandala/ Khilkhor be observed during the cremation process. The Mandala/
Khilkhor and the practice of it, is necessary in order to assure the welcome of the deceased into the Heaven of the Buddha Amitabha. The corpse is placed on the funeral pyre and brightly coloured flags surround the funeral pyre in the same manner as was done in the house of the deceased where the body was laid at rest. The head of the corpse is turned to face the directions of the monks/ the Khenpo and where the final prayers, rites and rituals will be conducted. In front of the corpse is placed all his/her belongings, offerings of food and drink as was done in the house of the deceased. After the death of a person sur will have to be offered continuously. Sur is the mixture of Kapchil buckwheat flour, butter and sugar that is sprinkled on embers smouldering with incense leaves and sticks. Why does sur have to be offered continuously?

The answer is simple enough. Bhutanese believe in feeding the dead till the 49th day from the time of death. As the person is already dead and no longer has a physical form, s/he cannot eat food meant for the mortals. The fragrance and the smoke of the sur will enable his/her essence to smell the food and to satisfy his/her palette. The monks handle all rites related to the cremation of the deceased. The family and relatives of the deceased however, have to assemble near the body of the deceased and offer food once more. During this final food offering ceremony, the Jhe Khenpo also accompanies the family. Once the food has been offered for the last time, the funeral pyre is now ready to be lit. Four specially selected pieces of dry wood are kept ready at hand. Along with the wood are incense sticks and fragrant herbs. These four pieces of logs are lit and carried to the main lama (either the Jhe Khenpo or the Meshi Lam), who will then performs the Zhenga or oral incantations, the Four Lopens (the next in order of hierarchy to the Jhe Khenpo or the Netay) will touch the burning logs to the pyre symbolically, from the four cardinal points - the North, South, east and the West. The relatives will then perform prostrations before the Lama first and then turn towards the dead body and do the same. But all this can be done, only once the corpse is initiated through the oral incantations of the main Lama. The relatives and family members will then offer the Khada/ Ceremonial scarf with money wrapped inside it, for the use of the deceased in his/her next life, after which the Meshi Lam or His Holiness the Jhe Khenpo
(as the case may be), will light the funeral pyre. Those who know the Mani will then sing it along with the monks while the body burns.

After the body has burnt completely and is more or less reduced to ashes, the deceased will be offered food once more. This is called the Theytho/ literally translating into food for the ashes. Along with the food serving ceremony, special prayers are offered after which the changeb/ those present at the cremation make cash offering. Once the merlam/ prayers are over, the duty of the monks are now over and they prepare to leave. They pour buckets of water into which milk, ritual and medicinal herbs have been mixed to cool off the smouldering ashes. During the course of this offering certain rules of conduct have to be observed. The main master of ceremonies could be the Jhe Khenpo/ the Meshi Lam/ the Nutay. All of them have to be offered sunkhey (three-fold of whatever is being offered to the monk lowest in hierarchy), the next in the line is the Umzeyl the conductor of the rites and the Kudung/ the monitor of the ceremony who will both receive two-fold the amount, while lay monks will receive chankay. A person will normally offer only as much as s/he can, even if one is poor and cannot make the monetary offerings, there are no demands made to the same. Having observed the rites of etiquette to be extended to the monks, the relatives of the dead wait for the heat of the ashes to cool. The family has to then collect the burnt remains of the dead. A sack, either red/yellow/even white is kept at hand, to collect the burnt remains of the bones and the skull of the deceased to be immersed later into the river. Just as the body was carried to the funeral grounds all decorated with ceremonial scarves, the sack containing the remains of the dead too have to prepared and carried in like manner.

In the mean time, while some of the relatives collect the remains, friends and other relatives offer chang/ country brewed liquor, fruit and doma-paane/ areca nut and leaf/Indian paane) as a leave-taking ceremony or shuzha/ of the dead. In the name of the deceased as a leave taking process, all present have to partake of it. It should be remembered that be it a marriage, a birth or a death, the whole village/block in the towns will come together to help those in need. The neighbours look after the serving of tea and refreshments during the funeral, while the family prepares the Zhet/ the food and drinks prepared specially for the deceased. After the cremation is over, the relatives
of the deceased have to make arrangements for a meal along with local beverages for those who have helped during the course of the person's death and his/her cremation. Even while the corpse is burning and the monks are immersed in chanting the prayers that go with the rituals of death, the eldest son/son-in-law/brother/father (whoever has taken it upon himself to make all the funeral arrangements) has to receive gno (a dedication of prayers for all sentient beings) from the main lama and has to make offerings of money to all the monks present there. The money offered could be as little as Rs. 5 depending on the financial capacity of the giver. Various other members of the family may also make this monetary offering. However, if they do not do so due to some circumstances then, the person responsible for the arrangements will have to make the offering himself.

Once the left over bones are collected, they are then crushed to powder and mixed with clay (that has been dug out from sacrosanct grounds), medicinal herbs after which wooden blocks with cut out figurines and writings from the scriptures called the chacha/votive tablets is used to make impression on the soft mixture of pounded bones, clay and medicinal herbs. A religious ceremony called the ramnay has to be performed in order to consecrate the chacha. These chachas will have to be immersed into the waters of the holy river Ganges or be left at scared places high up on the mountains. Once all this has been done, it is time for the funeral procession to leave the cremation grounds and head home.

However, since these people have been to a funeral ground and have attended the funeral ceremony, they have come into contact with the pollutants of death. There are two types of pollutants – one of birth and the other of death, which need to be cleansed both after the funeral and the 49 days ceremony is over and three days after the birth of a child. The chief lama will then perform the Thilsay, before the procession enters the house of the deceased. The attendees to the funeral will then have to wash their hands, face and feet, sprinkle water over the head, in an attempt to symbolise the ritual cleansing from the pollutants of death. They will also have to inhale a bit of the incense and generally wave their arms around to make sure the refreshing smell of the burning incense cleanses the smell of the funeral grounds. The family will then offer Jhal
Chang to the people. Jha means tea and Chang means locally brewed liquor. Once the funeral is over, all is not over. There are a number of post funeral ceremonies and rituals to be observed and conducted. It must also be mentioned that children are not cremated but are exposed to vultures or thrown into the river or buried or left in empty caves. As has been noted by Alexandra David-Neel in *Magic And Mystery in Tibet*, sometimes after the death of the person, the dead person may desire that his/her body be served as his/her “Last gift to nourish those tormented by hunger.” She has quoted extensively from a work called the *Tshe Hdas Kyi Rnamshes Thog Grang* A guide for the ‘spirit’ of the dead in the next world, and lists the following four methods.

- The body is transported to the top of a mountain. It is dismembered. The four limbs being cut off with a well-sharpened knife. The entrails, the heart, the lungs are laid out on the ground. The birds, wolves and foxes feed themselves upon them.
- The body is thrown into a sacred river. The blood and the humours are dissolved in the blue water. The fish and the others eat the flesh and the fat.
- The body is burnt. Flesh, bones and skin are reduced to a heap of cinders. The Tisas, who are the demi-gods who feed upon odours, are, therefore, nourished by these odours. It should be noted that while some Tisas/ demi-gods prefer sweet fragrances, others like odours that are often repugnant to us mortals like the smell of burnt flesh.
- The body is hidden in the earth and worms suck the rotting carcass, bones, and skin.

It may be pointed out these practices, may still be prevalent in remote parts of the Himalayan Buddhist World.

**POST FUNERAL RITES AND CEREMONIES**

The day after the funeral and even the night after the funeral, monks will still be in the house of the deceased, offering prayers and guiding the essence of the deceased to his/her next plane of existence. The next day however, the effigy of the dead will have to be prepared. The effigy is called a *Chen Jhang* or a *Mei Jhang* in lay terms. Just as a
low table/ chodrum was placed before the body of the deceased prior to the funeral, now the same low table/ chodrum will be placed before the effigy of the deceased, and offerings akin to those made before, will have to be placed on the chodrum, along with monetary contributions and offerings for the dead. On the fourth day after the funeral, a special rite called the Kashal/ Chizum is performed. This rite is the conducting of prayers for the deceased. The word Chi means knot, Zum is performed at intervals of 4, 7, 14, 21 and then 49 days. Depending on financial constraints the family may stop the prayers after 21 days while, those with the means to perform prayers throughout till the 49th day. As long as the effigy stands, food during meal times will have to be offered to it. This is done till the 21st day ceremonies are concluded.

Once the food is laid out before the effigy on the chodrum, The Book of the Dead/ Bardo Thodol, is recited to the essence of the deceased. The monks will call out to his/her essence, evoke them and guide them to the next realm. All these ceremonies however, are to be observed only till the 21st day. It is generally believed that the deceased can both see and hear his/her near and dear ones, and his/her essence will still be lingering on, around familiar places, afraid of heading down the un-trodden path. Several prayers and ceremonies will have to be conducted during this period, right till the 21st day, as this phase is the most crucial phase of the deceased’s journey to the next realm. It is also believed that the family of the deceased should not fight over his/her property as the essence of the deceased will still be around and will be able to see and hear all arguments and tears. This will sadden the essence of the deceased, and s/he will linger on longer in the Bardo/ the intermediary stage between two realms, which is popularly conceived of as being an inauspicious omen. If the family of the deceased observes and performs all the ceremonies properly, then the deceased will be able to alleviate his/her essence and transcend into a state of heavenly bliss, if, however, this does not happen then, his/her essence will linger on and be lost forever in the state of Bardo. The main prayers and ceremonies are conducted on the 4th, 7th, 14th and 21st days after the death of a person.

However, a group of people along with some monks, should maintain vigil on the Cheng Jhang/ the effigy, and see to it that the meals are offered on time and every
ceremony conducted and prayer offered, for as long as possible. The Chief monk/lay person designated to watch over all these activities is called a Mishi Choenap. On the 21st day the effigy is cremated and all family and friends assemble at the house of the deceased once again. Special prayers are offered and rites performed. This technically ends the rituals to be observed after the death and the funeral ceremony. However, those who are not bound by financial constraints will create another effigy on the 49th day, special prayers will be offered and the entire process will be repeated once again. After which, there will be the offering of food and drink. Once this is over then the death anniversary of the person is observed religiously for three years, during which the ceremonies may be conducted in the lhakhang of the dzongs/fortresses, or at home, but the 21st and 49th day ceremonies will have to be observed at home.

Apart from these ceremonies that have been discussed in considerable detail, there are many other minor variations to the same ceremonies as well. For instance when a person is about to die, a Tshoy Lama is called for and he starts reciting the Bardo, into the ear of the dying person. He also has to place a silver coin inside the mouth of the dying person. Once the person is dead, if his/her mouth and eyes are open then the Tshoy Lama has to close it as soon as possible. In some instances, the Tshipo/Astrologer is called for as soon as the person dies, and then he has to discern the direction from which the essence of the deceased will depart from the body. This practice is called the Nempar Shepar and is not followed in all parts of Bhutan nor is it followed in the Phobchika Valley where Gangtey Goenpa, the Monastery under study is located.

Sometimes, the body of the deceased is washed and then formed into the foetal position after which it is placed inside a wooden box. This practice is not followed in Gangtey Goenpa. The monks also blow a conch every evening as long as the dead body is in the house. People come with Khadas/ceremonial scarves and rakabl/money for lighting butter lamps. This custom is also followed by the Bhutanese, Sikkimese and the Tibetans alike and is also called the Thuksol/Lump sum. While the monks and the visitors to the household are served meat in Bhutan, in Sikkim and Kalimpong (West
Bengal) meat is not used at all. The members of the household where a death has occurred also hang an earthen pot and, a linen bag made of white cotton containing roasted wheat flour and two sticks of broom in it. This bag and the pot are kept outside for a purpose. At meal times, the members of the family of the dead have to light a fire inside the pot and burn the wheat flour on the fire. The essence of the deceased is believed does not realise that s/he is dead and it comes home during meal times. The burning of the wheat flour serves to fulfill the hunger of the deceased. In Kalimpong, erstwhile part of the territory of Bhutan, among the people of Bhutanese descent, every evening during meal times, the monks blow a conch, whereas in the neighbouring state of Sikkim, along with the blowing of the conch, the monks also beat drums and play the gyaling/ a long trumpet to call the deceased to partake of the food offerings. Before the body of the deceased is taken out of the house for the last leg of his/her journey, the lamas perform another ritual called the Yang-ku/ the reinstatement of good fortune. When somebody dies in the family it is believed that the good fortune/ Yang/ Lakshmi leaves the house along with the deceased, hence the observation of the ritual by the lamas. Once the body is taken out of the house, it is kept for a short while in the courtyard to enable members of the family and friends who have not made their farewells to the deceased to do so. Relatives and friends are supposed to circle the coffin three times and to offer prostrations/ chag three times before the body. Sometimes a man carrying the Serpa Khorlo/ the Wheel of Life Mandala walks before the Tshoy Lama.

For a year after the death of the deceased the family are supposed to be in mourning. During this period, no auspicious ceremonies or ventures may be started. There can be no marriages, no entering into any business transactions or construction of houses. Finally, after the year is over the death is commemorated with the hosting of 108 prayer flags and special poojas are offered in memory of the deceased. All the family and friends gathered partake of a grand meal and are then cleansed from the pollutant of death. They are now free from the bonds of impurity and can resume normal lives.
When high-ranking officials of the State pass away, particularly in Bhutan, the rituals discussed earlier are observed on a much grander scale. For instance, the Chief Abbot/the Je Khenpo will be there to conduct the ceremonies for the deceased. The retinue of monks will be much larger and several hundred cars will form the funeral procession. Sometimes, the poor who want big and important lamas to consecrate their dead wait for the funeral of important dignitaries. Then their dead are also blessed by His Holiness, the Je Khenpo the Chief Abbot of Bhutan and may be assured a safe path through the Bardo. In houses where deaths/births have occurred, traditionally the Tsham-Shingl the perimeter tree/a sapling with the bark shaped off is planted in front of the gate so that people are suitably warned of the pollutants of death/birth.

What has been discussed so far is the death ceremony of the majority of the population of Bhutan. Even though the country is so small and has a population of a mere 7,000,000, some lesser-known ethnic groups like the Lhops of the Am Mo Chhu Valley, in Samtse district of southern Bhutan too have distinct rites and rituals. Recent reports presented at a colloquium in Bhutan, indicates some of their religious practices related to the dead and their death ceremonies. The Lhops believe that the essence of the deceased needs to be appeased so as to ensure no harm to the surviving members of the family. In case of unnatural death like accidents, the fear of mishap befalling the family is all the more intense. This community believes that the essence of their dead will need companions as they traverse to the next world. However, since human sacrifices are
unheard of they normally sacrifice an ox to accompany a deceased male and a cow to accompany a dead female member of the community.

Since this ethnic group is semi-nomadic and lives in remote villages, owing to the lack of rituals involving religious men/lamas, they do not have a cremation. Instead what they do is bury their dead in coffins made from the planks of a particular type of tree called Lhe Shing/ Tshende Shing in Dzongkha. If the Lhops do not have access to this tree then the coffin may be made from the planks of another tree but a piece of wood from the Lhe Shing is a must. Once a member of the Lhop community dies s/he is kept in the front room of the house for three days and once again not every one can touch the corpse. The person who is permitted to touch the corpse cannot leave the side of the corpse at all. The other members of the deceased’s family too avoid social contact with their friends and neighbours during the time of mourning. They observe a restriction in their diet as well avoiding salt and fried food. On the third day, the corpse is wrapped in a white cloth and folded with its knees against the chest and bound with ropes made of cane, and then rolled in a soft bamboo mat and placed inside the coffin. At the selected site for burial, the ground is cleared and stone slabs are laid to raise the area to about six circles above ground level.

The coffin is in then placed on the raised ground. Around the coffin, they construct a round monument using stone slabs. They also keep the personal belongings of the dead person such as knives, cups, plates, baskets, pots, pans, clothes, and shoes on top of the mound. In days of old, the Lhops used to leave expensive ornaments and valuable goods belonging to the deceased on top of the grave, but with the various waves of modernity and civilisation hitting them, they simply keep a few coins/currency notes in small denominations, along with the old clothes, tools and utensils of the dead. A young girl then walks around, the mound, scattering cereal and cottonseeds.

The spouse of the deceased cannot offer any food to other people for three years neither can s/he touch the food meant for others. They do not enter the houses of their friends/relatives. They believe that they are afflicted by pain, sorrow, evil and suffering and that by interacting socially with others they may transfer their misfortunes to them.
Some male members of this community do not cut their hair as a symbol of mourning and neither do they remarry during this period. As mentioned earlier due to the absence of lamas, they have very few rituals and ceremonies to follow/to complicate life.

Having talked about at length about the death ceremonies practiced in Bhutan among the majority of the population and a minor ethnic community of Buddhist, we may arrive at the following inferences. Buddhism plays a very significant role in the lives of all Buddhists, be it in Bhutan or Nepal or India/other parts of South Asia. Death is treated more as “passing away into a better realm” and therefore nor as sorrowful an occasion. All Buddhist believe that life is transitory and that we are all here in this world of the living as a result of our past Karma. Our actions in this world will be decisive in whether we receive liberation from the cycles of life and death, and will also decide in which realm we will be born into. Death becomes crucial because, it generates life in a different world, because it is the dividing factor of our lives. If the death ceremonies are conducted properly, we are at once assured of liberation or birth in a better realm, the realm of the Buddha Amitabha.

Buddhists are also superstitious about accidental deaths (here referring to a person’s death in a violent accident) and suicides. If people die violent deaths, no doubt it is the result of his/her past actions but special attention needs to be paid to his/her death ceremonies. Suicidal deaths are frowned upon as Bhutanese believe that if one commits suicide, then s/he will be reborn seven times and will take his/her life in the same manner time and again. So for each suicidal death, you will in fact be born a further 7 times; implying you will never be free from the cycle of birth – death and re-birth. Usually the vast majority of the dead do not return after the observances of the 49th day ceremonies, respecting the wishes of their near and dear ones, who request them not to come back to this world as they are dead and no longer belong to this world at all. Normally, the families of the deceased believe the dead person to have reached his/her final destination through the Bardo and conclude that they will not visit their families and relatives.
However, sometimes the dead visit their family members in their dreams and strange things are known to happen in their homes. If such strange incidents occur and the family keep dreaming of the departed member then they believe that the essence of their dead relative is unhappy and suffering and therefore, calling out for help from them. When this happens over a period of time, the family is bound to consult the Tshi/Diviner who needs to be called upon during such troubling times. He will then order the performance of certain rites and rituals or will instruct the family to give gifts to the monk body or have Holy Scriptures recited, in an attempt to offer solace to the ‘unhappy’ essence.

But sometimes, the family members of the deceased are not satisfied with these rather tame methods of the Tshi/ the Diviner and will proceed to consult a male medium called a Pawo or a female medium called a Pamo who will then provide his/her voice to the ‘unhappy’ essence. This practice is an ancient Bonpo tradition that is still followed in various parts of the Himalayan Buddhist World. The Pawo/ Pamo will begin the séance with chanting to the accompaniment of the bell and a little hand drum. S/he will begin dancing slowly and then gradually gather speed till s/he finally starts twirling around at great speed and falls down after convulsing for a while. By this time, the physical body of the medium is, believed to be, visited by the ‘unhappy’ essence. The medium will then begin talking in broken sentences, in a voice that supposedly resembles the voice of the deceased. The essence will then, through the medium, convey the reason for his/her sorrow/angst. Once the ‘unhappy’ essence has made known through the voice of the medium, the reason for his/her sorrow, the family members of the deceased do everything in their capacity to liberate the essence by freeing it from its source of unhappiness. For this, once again a Bonpo sorcerer is sought who will perform this miraculous, fantastic feat.

These practices as mentioned still exist in Bhutan and the Buddhist pockets of neighbouring Indian states such as West Bengal, particularly in Kalimpong, which used to be a former Bhutanese territory. However, under the influence of Buddhism, animal sacrifices that are normally called for, for these rituals are now avoided altogether.
While, this is one view of how the essence travels through the *Bardo*, there are the other groups of skilled and learned Lamas who disagree with all these views. For them, the *Bardo* is purely a "subjective vision"⁹. These visions are conjured up by the innate nature of the deceased and the ideas that s/he has held in life. This learned lamas even go as far as to say that these various realms, the different paradises and the hells, and the Court of Lord Shinje/ the Lord of the Dead, only appear to those who actually believe in these things when alive. The people of Bhutan and those Buddhists living in Kalimpong, Darjeeling in West Bengal, and those living in Sikkim (India) and even some of those living in Nepal definitely believe in the existence of all these realms, paradises and hells. This brings us to the next important section of this chapter – Birth Ceremonies and the Practises Followed in Bhutan.

**THE SEMIOTICS OF BIRTH CEREMONIES IN BHUTAN**

When we talk about the ceremonies of birth, we will no doubt be talking about a young married woman expecting her first baby, but it should be remembered that the Bhutanese do not look down upon pre-marital sex or children born out of wedlock. An unmarried girl expecting a child will not be shunned by society or castigated for her misconduct. She is allowed the freedom of having her child and raising the baby by herself with or without the natural father. This does not indicate a sexually promiscuous society but an evolved one, as it allows women freedom to choose their own partners and social acceptance. After the marriage of a young boy and girl, once it is known by natural means or with the help of a medical facility, that she has conceived the family take certain precautions for the protection of both mother and child-this ritual is also called “preparing the drain before the flood arrives.”

The family will then consult a *Tshipo* Astrologer who will ascertain the special poojas/ceremonies to be performed and holy places to be visited and unholy grounds not to tread on. These ceremonies are to be conducted for the protection and well being of the expectant mother and her unborn baby. In case a couple is unable to have a baby even after several attempts at conceiving, then again the *Tshipo* is sought for, who will read the stars and the signs and discern the cause of the impediment. Even in the case of a
couple unable to have a baby due to the wife's miscarrying the foetus time and again, or if she carries the baby to full term, but the baby is still born or dies after a while, not surviving into childhood or adolescence, then too special ceremonies will have to be performed, prayers said and visits to certain holy places (nhe) made.

Apart from this, sometimes it may also be recommended that a woman whose child does not survive into adulthood, take certain precautions like have the baby brought up by someone else, whose astrological sign is deemed most suitable or pushing the baby through the mouth of one mud thabi fire place and out through the other or the baby is put into a big basket to ensure the longevity of the baby etc. If a woman has only daughters and wishes to have at least one male child, she is often advised to go to a particular monastery Chimmey Lhagha in the Wangdi district and pray there for a son, after which a son shall be born to her and she should take the baby there and thank the guardian deities of that monastery for the baby. There are plenty of such stories about birth practices in and around Bhutan, which will be mentioned as and when the opportunity arises, but for now we shall go back to talking about what happens once a woman conceives a baby.

The pregnant woman is often advised against visiting funeral grounds/cremation for fear the pollutants of death affect the baby. She is also told not to walk over a horse's tether, for fear of her own pregnancy lasting 10 months much as a horse's gestation does. Bhutan we must remember is an agricultural economy, hence most of the dos and don'ts are connected to/related to farm life and animals. A fertile woman with several children to her credit is generally welcomed while barren women are not encouraged to visit the expectant mother. Incidentally, it must be noted that these are cultural practices and not dictated by the scriptures at all. In a society where women are accorded equal respect, political rights and rights to family property, (in fact the Bhutanese follow a matrilineal line, whereby the property often goes to the girl/female children, particularly the youngest daughter, though of course with changing times both male and female children have equal rights), such undesirable welcome accorded to barren/infertile woman is a
contradiction, a strange paradox, which could have come from ideas imported from the plains of neighbouring India or through the Nepalese immigrants to the country.

In order to ensure her safety as also the life of the unborn, an expectant mother is often advised to perform the Cheydup or a ritual and prayer for longevity. Chey - means life and drup implies longevity. Very often the astrologers/ Tshipos also try and predict the gender of the unborn and very often, if the Tshipo is genuine and an adept at his work he will be able to predict the gender of the unborn child. Expectant mothers are also advised against visiting households where death/birth has occurred and going out once the sun has set, as in the darkness evil lurks. If the woman conceives during her Lhokha/ bad year then she must consult the Tshipo/ astrologers and perform certain rhimdos/ prayers to ensure her well-being as well as that of the child. We have talked about the 12 - year cycles earlier on. If the expectant mother was born in the year of the rat and has conceived in her 24th/ 36th/ 48th year, then these years are considered to be her bad years.

During these years misfortunes may befall her. This happens not only in the case of women but applies to men as well. Though almost every village has a BHU (Basic Health Unit) and severe cases/patients are referred to the hospitals in the districts or to the Jigme Dorjee Wangchuk National Referral Hospital, in Thimphu, the capital, most rural women have their babies at home. Even in case of infertility/inability to conceive, women will prefer to perform religious ceremonies, consult various astrologer, oracles and re-incarnated Lamas, visit religious places rather than turn to medical science. The medical doctors and the hospital are the last resort. If a woman cannot deliver due to some reason, then she is made to cross a traditional bridge made either of bamboo, rope, wood or even iron. It is believed that on crossing the bridge her delivery will speed up and she can give birth easily. If the crossing of the bridge does not work, she may be advised to hold a train ticket/even a plane ticket over her forehead. If easily available the expectant mother is also advised to eat the fat, meat or powder made from the horn of the tarkin to ensure an easy delivery. The tarkin is a mountainous animal found only in Bhutan. If however, a woman has eaten tarkin meat before then the effect of eating
the same to ensure easy delivery may not really work for her. Two months before the
baby is born, when the mother is in her final trimester, rice beer is prepared for the
family and the mother to drink particularly after her delivery. If the women has
problems delivering, the casket containing the rice beer will be opened and offered to
the Gods, deities and local guardian spirits to symbolise the delivery process and to
appeal to the Gods for help in the delivery. Once the baby is born, the mother must not
drink cold water, have tea or eat the doma-paane/ areca nut and paan leaves for 11 days.
That could be another reason why a new mother is fed nutritious food, rich soups,
broths and rice beer and warm water. The rationale behind it is that a woman needs
warmth after the physical ordeal her body has gone through, she also needs to have
enough nutrients in her body to nurse the baby. A black spot/Jhana is also put on the
baby’s face to ward off evil spirits. Till the ritual cleansing/ thrisey of the mother and
child, the mother may not enter the prayer room/perform any religious ceremonies.
Once the mother and child have been cleansed, then the rest of the household is
cleansed similarly with holy water, only after which people, friends, relatives, well-
wishers may visit the new mother and her baby. This pollutant is called the Kyei-dhip/
pollutant of birth. It is only after the mother, child and household have been purified,
cleansed and sanctified that they may participate in any social visits or religious
ceremonies. A new-born baby is not to be taken out of the house till certain
precautions have been taken. As mentioned earlier the birth of a baby, death in a family
and a marriage, are all considered to be pollutants of various sorts that need to be
cleansed.

To cleanse the spirit of pollution, much like the catharsis of ancient Greece, Lhabsang
or cleansing ceremony has to be performed by a Lama after the third day of a baby’s
entry into this world. The Tshipo/ astrologer also needs to be consulted for the
preparation of the baby’s birth chart/horoscope. This is deemed essential, as the
horoscope will provide insight into future unforeseen mishaps/misfortunes/dangers that
might befall the child during various stages of his/her growth and development. This
horoscope/ Kyeakha will also provide guidance to the various remedial measures like
the performance of certain religious prayers, ceremonies to overcome such mishaps in
later life. The Kyeakha/ horoscope is made according to the year, time of birth, month of birth and position of stars at the time of birth. The astrologer will also indicate a name for the child. This name is an esoteric one and not to be revealed and neither will the child ever be addressed by that name. Normally a child will be named by the Head of the family or his/her parents or by a prominent Lama/ Rimpocche.

If the baby is a boy, the 9th and the 37th year are considered to be harmful/troublesome years, for a baby girl, the ages of 8 and 25 are said to bring trouble and sorrows. In order to prevent any major disaster or catastrophe, certain religious ceremonies have to be performed. A Tshama-Tshing/ Weeping Willow is hung outside the house to indicate a pollutant, till the Lhabsang ceremony of cleansing is performed. If the baby is a boy, his hair must not be cut till he is three years old. Earlier on, traditionally the three-year old baby boy’s hair would be burnt with an incense stick as scissors being made of iron should not touch the baby boy’s head. This practice has been replaced over time, by a lama cutting a tuft of the baby’s hair or his grandfather doing that, only after which a barber may cut and style it.

Once a child is born and the umbilical cord is cut, a little portion remains attached to the baby’s navel. Once that little bit loses nutrients from the baby’s body, being cut off it dries up and falls off. The dry piece of the umbilical cord is made into an amulet that the baby wears around him/her self to ward off evil. Then whenever a baby suffers from a stomach - ache the dry bit of the umbilical cord is immersed in a bowl of water, which is supposed to lessen the pain/the ache. Till about two weeks after delivery the mother must not touch cold water or eat chillies. If she touches cold water it is generally believed that her body will swell. Till twenty days after delivery she may not soak in a hot bath, she has to pour hot water over herself and have a bath. It is believed that if she soaks in a tub of hot water or showers with cold water, she will suffer from aches and pains and various ailments that may relapse at any point of time later on.

Each locality will have its own special guardian deities and spirits. So a new-born baby will have to be taken there to be blessed and watched over by these protective deities. For a baby that is born in the capital Thimphu, the parents are advised to take the baby
to Changhangkha Lhaghang or Dechecholing Lhaghang or Decheypu Lhagong. If however, the baby falls ill, even after visiting any/all of the above mentioned places, ritual offerings of ara or distilled local beer, eggs, meat and money along with three aspects of the Ku - Sung – Thu/ the Image/the Text of the Buddha, and the Body of the Buddha as represented by the Stupa/ Chorten have to be carried to these holy places as well as the offerings made to appease the guardian deities.

If possible every month the Boum/ Prajna Paramita Sutra (in the condensed form) also known as the Wisdom Text will have to be recited for the well being of the child. The tiger sign is not considered auspicious for a girl child, whereas a dragon sign is very good for a male child. If the baby is a male, he is not to be taken towards the northern direction and if the baby is a girl, then she must not be taken to the south. If the baby boy/girl has to be taken in the directions taboo to them, then certain remedial measures have to be taken. An effigy of the child is made and taken out towards that direction so that any ill luck that may befall the child befalls the effigy, the symbol instead of the real child. The real baby may then be taken out to that direction. It may be noted that the astrologer is the one who will carry the effigy out as though it were a child.

To take a baby out of the house for the first time, the following procedures have to be observed as per instructions from certain old texts. An astrologer/ Tshipo will have to be consulted. He will then discern when and at what time, the baby may be taken outside the house for the first time. It is not just that an astrologer will discern the time and day, but a whole lot of preparations need to be undertaken. The baby will have to be prepared on the one hand, while on the other, certain other festivities have to be prepared for as well. We shall deal with the preparations for the festivities before we begin the preparation to be done on the baby. Rice cakes also called Jhonjay will have to be made. This cake will consist of eggs, zhinjay and milk powder. The parents would need to walk around the presiding monk thrice, carrying with them a sacred text, (normally the Baoum), a container of milk, rice cakes and the baby. The rice cakes are then offered to the Gods and the spirits before being distributed to everybody. Then the Chima -Kapchu a mound of buck - wheat flour with butter is offered to the Gods and
some of it is smeared on the child's head. The child's head is also covered with cotton puffs to symbolise the aging of the child, the hair turning grey, indicative of well wishes for a long life. Sometimes cotton puffs are used to cover the child's head at other times a silk scarf will serve the same purpose. A small piece of peacock feather is also placed on the child's forehead, and black soot from the fire-place is smeared on the baby's nose to ward off evil spirits. The child is then secured on the back of the mother or an older relative whose astrological sign is benign to the baby's.

On the left side of the child's carrier, a small cup containing roasted wheat flour/\textit{Tshampa} with butter on top of the mound of \textit{Tshampa}, and on the right side a \textit{Childhar/} an arrow of long-life decorated with five different coloured scarves – blue, green, red, white and yellow is placed. A relative carrying the holy book \textit{Ghatongba/} the summary of the \textit{Bauum} leads the procession. Arrangements are also made outside the house the performance of a religious ceremony called the \textit{Zhugdrel Phuensium Tshogpa}, (which was discussed in Chapter 3), where tea/wine/fruit etc., are offered to the local deities and guardian spirits. Once the guardian deities have been appeased and the protection sought for the well being of the baby, then people-namely, family, relatives, friends and neighbours who have assembled there to celebrate, partake of the feast. In case a newborn baby has to be transported from his place of birth to his own home that could be another locality, the religious ceremony to be performed will differ. Such observances will differ from place to place for instance the places in \textit{Wangdi} district may observe different rituals, while \textit{Paro} or \textit{Wang} district may follow separate rules.

In the district of \textit{Wangdi}, since \textit{Gangtey Goenpa} falls within the jurisdiction of the \textit{Wangdi District}, a bamboo basket containing \textit{Zhaw/} roasted flat rice/ \textit{murai} mixed with honey, butter and \textit{silam} and sugar, and carried by one of men/women in the procession following the child out of the birth-place. If the procession arrives at a mountains pass or a \textit{La/ Deorali} (in Nepali) a handful of the mixed \textit{Zhaw} will have to be scattered in the general direction of the North, South, East and West, as an offering made by the baby to the deities of the pass. Similarly, if they pass a \textit{Stupa/ Chorten} or even cross a
bridge, the Zaw is placed once again in the four directions. On reaching home, the Zhugdrel Phuensium Tshogpa ceremony is performed in the manner described earlier.

However, in the Paro or Wang districts, on reaching home, a special religious ceremony quite like the Zhugdrel Phuensium Tshogpa is performed but it has a different name. The rice cakes/ Mengay mentioned earlier are prepared and offered to the local deities and then distributed amongst the children of the locality, followed by festivities for the elders. With the opening up of the country gently but steadily through the years, the custom of celebrating birthdays like in the west have emerged. Parents now order cakes for the birthday of their children, place candles on them, blow it cut and have the child cut the cake. The cake also has the child's name written on it. A party for both grown ups and children is organised and the birthday is celebrated. But, traditional Bhutanese considers this practice of blowing out the lit candles on the cake, cutting the cake with the baby's name written on it, with a cake knife, inauspicious.

During the process of growing up, if the child falls ill, his/her birth chart/ Kyeakha is opened and read by a lama, who will then prescribe the special rituals to be performed, prayers to be said for the well being of the child. It is generally believed that only the instructions and guidelines provided in the Kyeakha prepared according to the time, day and place of birth, can provide some spiritual benefit to the child. If the instructions given in the child's Kyeakha are performed throughout a baby's childhood, adolescence and youth, if his/her Kyeakha is consulted during every important occasion of the child's life, then it is believed that the child will have a long life and will live right up to the age specified in his Kyeakha in good health and prosperity. When relatives and friends come to visit a new -born baby and the proud mother, they normally bring with them flannel nappies, eggs, horlicks, biscuits, fruits etc., as presents for the mother and the baby. The family of the new -born baby has to provide food and rice beer to all the guests and well - wishers. The people bring eggs for the mother's speedy and healthy recovery, but it could also be a symbol of fertility. If it can be afforded, Lhabsang should be performed at least thrice once a baby is born.
So far, we have talked about the death ceremonies to be observed and the dos and don'ts as well religious ceremonies to be observed during and after the birth of the baby. What we have discerned so far is the role of religion in the day-to-day lives of the people and the practitioners of the religion who, provide solace, hope and comfort to the laity during times of trouble but also take part in the lives of these people. Why have we dealt at length with the *Rites of Passage*, why is it so integral to our understanding of the *mandala/ khilkhor* or of life itself?

When we try and understand the ceremonies of death, what do we find? A society, a culture, and some rules to be observed, is that all that there is to it? No, we find the entire structure of the society trying to grapple with death. What is death? Is it the passing away of a beloved one never to return and therefore to be mourned, or is it the movement from one plane of reality to another? For a family that has lost its dear one, it is no doubt a sad and tragic incident, but at the same time, emotions and sentiments do not detract the feeling that s/he has passed on to a better realm and all who are born must die. The physical body may shrivel up, burn, waste away, the life breathe may have stopped for ever but the essence of the person lingers on and transcends into a better realm, a realm we must indeed all hope to attain at some stage. Many may even attain enlightenment/nirvana and may be delivered from the cycle of the life-death and re-birth. It is the cherished hope and desire of every well-meaning practicing Buddhist that s/he attains nirvana/salvation/moksha/enlightenment one day, and therein, lie the function of the *mandala/ khilkhor*. For a layman on the streets *nirvana* would mean freedom from birth and death but s/he would not know the real purpose behind a *mandala/ khilkhor*.

In the proceeding chapters we have talked at length about what a *mandala/ khilkhor* is, but the role it plays, or what it means to lay people, or the relationship between death and salvation remains to be understood. It is only when we look at the *Rites of Passage*, when we reflect on the observances of certain religious ceremonies, the manner in which they are to be conducted, the procedures to be followed, do we realise how the *mandala/ khilkhor* interacts with lay people without their even knowing about it or
realising it. While salvation/ moksha/ enlightenment/ nirvana is a sacred and esoteric concern, birth, marriage death occurs in every household and is known to every human being, yet, where does the sacred and the profane meet? How are they inter-related that is what this section of the chapter and the discussion of marriage ceremonies is meant to depict. On the one hand we have the natural processes, the natural phenomenon whereby a child is born, grows into adulthood, marries, begins raising a family and dies, on the other, is the sacred, the super natural phenomenon salvation/ moksha/ nirvana/enlightenment may happen to anyone but it does not necessarily mean one knows what it is, how it may be attained and how it affects our day-to-day lives.

While day-to-day living is rooted in the living, the real, the natural and the anthropological world, the process of attaining freedom from the cycle of birth and death, is symbolic, supernatural and cosmological. How is it related to the mandala/ khilkhor? It is directly and indirectly linked to the mandala/ khilkhor because, the practice of the mandala/ khilkhor, is what will eventually guarantee a person’s salvation. It is on the one hand so sacred, so esoteric and taboo to the uninitiated, while on the other hand it rules the course of all our lives, and is to be found in every aspect of life, be it a religious occasion or a joyous festivity.

The mandala/ khilkhor strikes a balance in our lives and is the force behind all our actions/ Karma, thereby at once becoming profane. This fine complexity and balance between the sacred and the profane is what this entire study is dedicated to. Yet another important aspect of the Rites of Passage needs to be discussed and that is the life giving process-marriage. We shall study the semiotics of marriage ceremonies in the next section of this chapter.

THE SEMIOTICS OF MARRIAGE CEREMONIES IN BHUTAN

It is generally believed that marriages arranged by the parents of both the bride and the groom, are the best matches. This may have come about to prevent young girls from marrying outside the community in earlier times, or the scriptures could have had a say in this matter. Traditionally, it is said that the origin of this notion comes down to us
from the realm of the Gods. This is however, not to be confused with the realm of the
Buddhas. As mentioned earlier Buddhists believe in the six realms of existence of
which one realm belongs to the Gods and the Demi-Gods, the realm of the Buddhas is
higher than the realm of the Gods and the Demi-Gods as the former have already
received enlightenment and are free from the circle of birth, death and re-birth. Though
this belief is said to have originated in the realm of the Gods, and the demi-Gods, it is at
the same time deeply rooted in and connected to the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Having talked about the origin of the belief that parents arrange the best matches, we
shall take a closer look at the marriage system that has existed in the past and still exists
today. A common practice and now almost a tradition is the carrying of liquor/\textit{chang}
(locally brewed) to the bride’s house. The boy’s parents may have decided to create a
matrimonial alliance for their son with the girl from a particular family. To achieve this
end, the boy’s family has to carry liquor and go to the girl’s house for the ‘begging of
the bride ceremony’.

Once the girl’s family agree to the proposal, and are ready to give their daughter in
marriage to that particular groom, then they will consult an astrologer/\textit{Tshipo}, who will
set them an auspicious day/\textit{Zhaka} during which the marriage ceremony is to take place.
Sometimes and in some localities (basically villages/districts), the boy’s party will have
to carry meat in the form of pork/\textit{phag-tsha} and beef/\textit{gnouh-tsha}, along with the
liquor/\textit{chang} when they go to ask for the girl’s hand. There are basically three types of
marriage systems: (a) marriages arranged during childhood (b) love marriages and (c)
marriages arranged when the boy and girl are of marriageable age. We shall discuss
each of these marriage systems subsequently.

\textbf{Marriages Arranged During Childhood}

This type of an arrangement would normally take place when the parents are fast friends
and on very good terms with each other. They might decide to forge a stronger bond
between the two families and thereby arrange the marriage of their children while still in
their infancy. Though this may sound like a case of child marriage practiced in some
parts of India, this is not the case in Bhutan. The parents decide to get children married in their infancy, but in this case, the parents will get together and perform a small religious ceremony to sanctify the union of the two children in anticipation of the future, and a feast is prepared for relatives, friends and neighbours. Both parties may contribute equally or one set of parents may contribute a little more than the other set. Having got the children betrothed to one another officially, both children return to their homes and continue to play together as friends. It makes little difference to them whether they are officially engaged or not, they are merely two children who were dressed up for a day and who feasted that day/night. However, on growing up if the two children decide that they like each other and would like to build a home together, they are married according to the ceremonies that will be discussed a little later in this section. But, if the children grow up and realise that not only are they not suited to each other, but that there is no love lost between them, then they have the option of terminating the arrangement, planned when they were toddlers/children.

It should be mentioned that ending a marriage/engagement like this does not make either parties “look small” nor is it a dishonourable thing for the boy to do, nor will it create a scandal for the girl, which may prevent her getting married thereafter. For the young couple to break-off their engagement, all that needs to be done is to compensate the set of parents that had made a larger contribution during the engagement ceremony. Once this account is settled, then the engagement is officially nullified. Such arrangements are looked upon more as a marriage of hope or even anticipation than a marriage of certainty/an abiding relationship. It is just that the parents hope to forge stronger ties with each other through a marriage between their children. There is nothing legally binding about this marriage/engagement and one party cannot sue the other for breach of trust!

**Love Marriages**

This is a relatively simple marriage process, whereby boy meets girl, falls in love and they decide to tie the proverbial knot. They would then seek the consent of the parents,
with or without which, they will still either set up house together or go through the entire marriage ceremony.

Marriages Arranged in Adulthood

When a girl is of eligible age, then the boy’s parents would seek out the girl’s hand in marriage with their son, following which a wedding is arranged according to the terms and dictates of the time, place and status of the two families. The marriageable age for both boys and girls is normally considered to be sixteen years and above. Actually it would not be altogether wrong to suggest a fourth category of marriage process whereby the young couple simply set up home together and are deemed married by society. Any child born out of this relationship would not be considered as born out of wedlock or called names. S/he would have as much rights as a legitimate child born after the marriage ceremony is conducted. Let us now take a look at the actual marriage ceremony that takes place, after the hitherto mentioned processes have occurred.

The Semiotics of Marriage Ceremonies/ The Thenday Ceremony

In this discussion, we shall take a hypothetical case where a boy and girl have met and liked each other and want to spend their lives together, what follows next is essentially the process which all marriages must go through. The boy’s parents will have to go to the girl’s house to ask for her hand. The boy’s parents however will not do the actual ‘begging for the bride’. For this, the services of a Garwah Dhomsum/ a negotiator with excellent public relations and the gift of the gab are sought, since he has to be able to convince the girl’s parents of the boy’s suitability. This tradition of involving a negotiator has a historical origin. When King Tshotshen Gampo (629-664 A.D.) of Tibet sought matrimonial alliances with the Nepali princess Bhrikuti Devi and the Chinese princess Wen Chen, he despatched his minister as his emissary to ask for the hand of these royal ladies. This minister who negotiated on behalf of his King was called Garwah Thongchen. It is from his royal duties as an emissary of the King that this tradition has come about, being handed down from generation to generation.
If the Garwah Dhomsum is successful in his request for the girl’s hand, then as a sign of gratitude he is normally compensated for his efforts and for the pleasure and joy that has been brought about as a result of his intervention. The boy’s family will have to take with them two caskets of country-brewed liquor – one white and the other black. The white, distilled liquor is Narchang while the black distilled one is called Karchang. They will have to be accompanied by the Garwah Dhomsum, who will then speak on behalf of the boy’s family. Firstly, they would have to present the two caskets of Karchang and Narchang to the girl’s parents, after which the Garwah Dhomsum is to initiate the conversation. He has to follow a certain protocol even while doing this. He will have to begin the conversation by saying that their son (the boy he represents) is of marriageable age and highly eligible, he should then draw attention to the fact that the daughter too has reached marriageable age. Once he has set the conversation rolling and if the “begging of the bride” ritual works in their (boy’s side) favour, then the two families would either call the astrologer/ Tshipo immediately to the house or would accompany the Garwah Dhomsum/ Negotiator, to the astrologer’s/ Tshipo’s abode to seek an auspicious date for the wedding.

If the auspicious date is, close at hand then the wedding would have to take place so both families would be busy with the preparations. However, if the wedding is even a month or so away, another ceremony will have to be conducted to ensure that the girl is not married off to somebody else. This ceremony is called the Jurten/ confirmation of the proposal. The term is derived from two words meaning changeless or permanent. The Garwah Dhomsum, the boy and his parents will have to go to the girl’s house once again, taking with them one pankhab/ ceremonial woven mat, for the girl’s mother and another one for the father. The rest of the family will have to be given ceremonial scarves/ Khadas. Once the Jurten/ confirmation of the proposal ceremony is conducted, then the girl is officially engaged to the boy and cannot be promised to anyone else. Having mentioned the pankhab to be presented to the girl’s family, let us digress a little and look at how cloth/fabric has served to play such an important function in Bhutanese culture.
In Bhutan, gifts of cloth have always been a way of expressing the closeness one shares with the members of one’s family or with one’s society. Such gifts are a reflection of the larger relationship between and among various members of the family. There was a time in Bhutan when fabric was considered to be a major source of wealth and a girl’s wedding trousseau always had huge quantities of old and traditionally woven fabrics. In modern times however, these fabrics form family heirlooms and are only taken out of their storing boxes when it is time to perform the annual lochu\(^10\)/pooja for restoring and praying for future prosperity of the household. Hence, these fabrics find a place in the yanggam/ the box of prosperity of Bhutanese households.

These fabrics may include the ceremonial textile/ changsi pangkheb or archaic tunic/ kushung, a man’s gho, a woman’s kira and kera. These fabrics, jewellery and food grains are the objects of worship during the annual poojas. Woven fabrics have an important role to play in Bhutanese culture. When given as gifts, the choice of the gift would be largely governed by the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the gifts. Bhutanese society has well defined rules of social convention that needs to be strictly adhered to. The gift would be determined by who the giver is:

- A gift for one’s equal is called a chom
- A gift for one’s superior is called a changje
- A gift for one’s inferior is called a soera

The choice of fabrics too would be governed by this relationship between the gift, the giver and the receiver. Cloth is presented during promotions, marriages, and birth ceremonies. When gifts of fabrics are made they are known as zong/ zongcha, and must be given in odd numbered sets of three, five, seven and nine or more. When a child is born, the friends of the couple could gift the baby with a yathra/ patterned woollen cloth (from Central Bhutan), however, there are no such rigid formalities to be observed in the case of the birth of babies. However, the Royal Government of Bhutan has now put a stop to this tradition of gifting zong/ zongcha. We shall now discuss the ceremonies to take place a few days before the wedding and on the day of the wedding.
Arrangements to be made at the Groom's House

The day prior to the bride’s entry into the groom’s house, the arrangements have to be all over and done with, no decoration or ceremonial arrangements should be pending. Once all ceremonial arrangements have been made and the stage is set, only will the householder’s breathe a sigh of relief. On the same day the Lhabsang ceremony will have to be performed in the morning, during the day the monks will perform the chosung ceremony invoking the local deities and seeking their protection for the family, after that they will also invoke the protector deities of the family and the protector deities of the faith/ Dhamma. This practice of course will bear some degree of change from one locality to the other. On the day of the marriage, the boy’s family will have to go the girl’s house, to escort the bride. Once again they will have to take the pankheb or ceremonial woven mats, liquor and khada/ ceremonial white silk scarves for the relatives and siblings of the girl and her family.

The bridegroom’s entourage will go in a procession along with horses for the bride to sit on, on her way to the boy’s house. This is quite similar to the Barat ceremony of Indian marriages. In the meantime at the girl’s house, her family, friends, well-wishers relatives and neighbours will have assembled to wish her well, to celebrate and to take part in the festivities. When both parties have assembled there the groom’s parents will have to deliver a short speech, in which they designate the bride as a representative of her household and family and as being the representative of her parents’ “body, speech and mind” in the groom’s house. A few words about the Body, Speech and Mind of the Buddha are called for at this moment though we have discussed it in the previous chapter. A Buddha by definition is not the historical Buddha but one who has through his actions, abandoned all “obstructions to knowledge and their remnants.” He is someone who “perceives the reality of all phenomena directly and has fully developed compassion through meditation, so he spontaneously works for the welfare of all beings.”

The Buddha/ The Body of the Buddha is represented by a monk, or as one of the wrathful deities like Guhyasamaja/ Sangwa Dupa, or as one of the female dakinis or
even as a rabbit or an elephant. The Buddha’s Speech/ Dhamma is the teachings of the
Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas. The religious books of Buddhism represent the teachings
of the Buddha. The Buddha Mind is one that is free from all obstacles and has acquired
knowledge and is represented by a Stupa/ Chorten. They also mention that they will be
taking the daughter of the house as a bride to their house and urge the gathering to wish
the couple and to pray for prosperity – both material and marital, happiness and peace.
The astrologer/ Tshipo would in his infinite wisdom let both parties know the right time,
when the groom should leave his house, should arrive at the bride’s house, and also the
right moment when the bride should step out of her own threshold and enter the
groom’s threshold.

These timings are auspicious and are strictly adhered to, for should mishap occur later
on, the blame would inevitably fall on bad timing. The boy’s house is not the only
household in a flurry of activity the girl’s house too has to make several arrangements
for the wedding ceremony. The girl’s parents have to prepare special food and beverage
for the festivities. They have to nominate several people for select jobs. This is listed
under as follows.

- A Lady in Charge of the Drinks in the Store
- A Lady to Carry Drinks from the Store to the Venue
- Two Young Girls to Serve the Drinks
- Four Men to Cook, Serve and Offer Hospitality to the Guests
- Two Female Singers

These ten people will be part of the bridal entourage to the boy’s house. When the
auspicious hour arrives and the girl is supposed to leave her house for the boy’s, her
parents will arrange her gifts/ lamchu. They will present her with gold, money, land,
livestock etc. Once the girl soon to be bride steps out of her threshold, the boy will have
to give gifts to his soon to be in-laws, the siblings of the girl and anyone else in her
family who will not be accompanying her to the boy’s house. These gifts made by the
to be son-in-law are called Tshitsha/ tshewrah. If the distance between the girl and the
boy’s house is considerable then the neighbours or relatives of the girl’s side have to
make arrangements for tea, snacks and beverages mid-way between the two houses, for
the bridal entourage.

This was a custom strictly adhered to in days of old when long distances had to be
covered on horseback. But with considerable modernisation, distances have been
lessened as travelling has become quicker and easier with cars. However, this practice
is still followed in the villages and the rural areas.

Coming back to the marriage related rituals, the bridal entourage is now about to reach
the boy's home or arrive at the boy's house, a carpet would be spread from the gate on
which will be placed the marchang. The marchang is liquor prepared mainly for the
wedding and put in a special bronze pot, along with the marchang is a yanday an
auspicious decoration made of butter or wood or even radish. This special arrangement
of liquor is made for the local deities, the bride and the groom will have to offer it to the
local deities, before they step any further. After this is over, the bridal entourage may
partake of the elaborate bridal feast that has been laid out. However, the entourage is not
supposed to enter the religious room/ choesham or the pooja room just yet.

It must be noted that while the bride has entered the main gate she has not set foot into
the main house, she has just crossed the initial barrier. When we use the word barrier
here, we do not intend to imply that the bride has to overcome certain obstacles, what
we are referring to here obliquely is the circle of fire of that surrounds the mandala/
khilkhor, the barrier that blows away ignorance and cleanses the mind of ignorance and
sheds light on the practice of the mandala/ khilkhor.

The boy's family would have already prepared a special seat for the bride and the
groom in the inner sanctuary/the religious prayers room/the tshochum of the boy's
house, along with seating arrangements for the main lama and the other monks. The
bride and groom have to be seated in such a strategic corner of the prayer room that
both the main prayer alter and the monks are visible to them. A special chudrom/ a low
wooden table traditionally carved and painted will be placed in front of the bridal
couple. A special arrangement of fruits on a three tier silver fruit bowl called a thoki
will be placed at the centre of the table/ chudrom, next to the thoki which is merely ornamental are to be placed other bowls of fruits, hard boiled sweets, dates, raisins etc., This arrangement is called a shinday. Atshima/ a bowl of buck wheat flour, raised to a mound with butter marks in three corners and one on top of the mound should be at the centre of the table/ chudrom in front of the thokhi, along with two cups of chang/ liquor for the bride and the groom, once again with yanday butter on it.

All this of course would have been arranged prior to the arrival of the bride and the groom into the chosham/ prayer room/ altar. The bridegroom will then usher his bride towards the internal/ nang gho/ main door of the house. Once again, the bride has crossed yet another barrier and is poised outside another door that opens inwards. At this door will be placed a container filled with water, with flowers floating on top and on the left is placed either a blazing fire/a light/a piece of fire wood, anything symbolising fire. The concept of fire occurs yet again but this time mainly to represent the continuation of the family line so that, after marriage the lineage will continue. This arrangement of water, flowers and fire is called the Mojhu tshy lay rewah. It is the fire that signifies a continuous family line without interruptions and also to signify luck glowing like a blaze of fire, after marriage.

It is normally believed that when one dreams of a blaze on his forehead, it is considered extremely lucky. After this the groom is made to hold a container full of milk, symbolising prosperity overflowing like an ocean of milk/ om gye gyamtsho. While the groom carries the milk the bride has to carry the torch/the fire wood/ a log that is blazing to the kitchen/ thabchang. She will then have to put the flame into the mouth of the thab/ the oven while the boy places the container of milk on the fire. After they have performed this ceremony in the kitchen, they will then proceed to the main prayer room/ tshoshum. Upon entering the prayer room/ choesham, they will prostrate thrice before the lama and thrice towards the main altar, after which they will take their seats. While the main religious ceremonies and prayers will have been performed the previous day, the prayer for prosperity or yangkhu will be performed. During this prayer and the ritual chant that accompanies it, several offerings of sweets, beetle nut, tea liquor, deshi
a type of sweet pulao will be offered to the Gods, the local deities, the lama, the other monks, the bride and groom and the parents of both sides, relatives and friends.

It should be noted that the immediate members of both families, close family friends and relatives of both sides are present in the prayer room/ tshoshum at this time, it should also be observed that the lama gives the instructions for the serving of each item through the course of the prayers. One of the important ceremonies at this stage is the drinking of wine by the couple. The mediator of the marriage/ the Kharwah Dhoshum will take the boy’s cup of wine and make the boy drink, after which he will offer it to the girl. Then he will do the same to the girl’s cup, after she drinks from it, he will offer it to the boy, who will then drink from it. In the meantime, if lunch has not been served as yet, it will be served to the guests. The Dha Tshay or the offering of ceremonial scarves will then begin.

The main lama will offer the scarf, one each to both the boy and the girl, along with a wedding present, followed by the parents of both the boy and the girl and then by relatives and friends. In the meantime food, accompanied by drinks will be served and dancing will have begun. The groom’s family is responsible for the festivities while the bride’s family designates people to cook, serve and entertain. If the groom’s family can afford it then the festivities carry on for three days, otherwise a one-day function will do just as well. The couple is presented with gifts specially fabrics that are always presented in quantities of three, five and seven.

Once the food is eaten, the wine drunk and the guests have left the bride’s parents will stay in the house of the groom for three days. Even if the boy’s side cannot afford to entertain and feed guests for three whole days, the bride’s parents have to stay in the groom’s house for the mentioned duration. The main religious ceremonies are also over on the day of the marriage itself and the monks take leave, having performed the task they had set out to do. The couple has been welcomed to the family, accepted, blessed and now deemed married in the eyes of both God and society.
The bride’s parents will leave for their own home after three days, along with a man-servant who is deputed by the groom’s family to work at the bride’s home for six months. Before the bride’s parents’ leave, their son-in-law will have to give them gifts. The custom of sending a man-servant over to the bride’s family has been handed down once again by the great Tibetan King Tshongtshen Gampo, whose emissary had to stay behind in China for six months, while the Chinese princess went across to Tibet to be wed to the King. The groom has to give gifts to the bride’s parents, her siblings and anyone else who has come to his house as part of the bridal entourage.

The mediator/the negotiator/ the gharwah dhomsun is then given several presents as a token of appreciation for the great service he has rendered to the groom’s family. These are normally understood to be gifts presented to somebody out of appreciation, gratitude more than payment made for a job well done. In olden times, when the boy’s parents looked for a bride for their son, they would be quite aged and quite ready to renounce the world of samsara. So, once the marriage ceremony was over and they handed over household duties and responsibilities to their daughter-in-law, it would be the groom’s job to construct a meditation retreat near a monastery on a hilltop. Occasional visitors to Bhutan may note that normally all monasteries are away or always built away from habitation, on secluded hilltops. While urbanisation has not permitted monasteries that seclusion in Kalimpong or Darjeeling in West Bengal, or even in Thimphu, the capital, monasteries away from the centre are still able to hold on to their seclusion. Once the meditation hut is constructed the grooms’ parents will then forsake this life of worldly possessions/ samsara and enter the retreat together. This was normally observed in an effort to attain good karmic points.

The newly wedded couple has to undertake the duty of supplying provisions till the old parents pass away. The newly weds have to provide for their parents (the groom parents) in this manner, to ensure that their children will do the same for them, when it is their time to renounce the world. Bhutanese have a very strong belief system and they have great faith in the saying, “what goes around comes around.”
It should however be mentioned that the following traditions are however not really practiced today and even if they are, it is done so only in the remote villages. The traditions are as follow:

- The practice of the bride’s parents staying in their son-in-law’s house for three days
- The groom sending a manservant over to the bride’s house for six months and last but not the least important
- The tradition of renouncing the world once the son is married.

After the religious, ceremonial wedding is over the couple are now encouraged to get their marriages registered in courts of law. The marriage ceremony being performed all does not end here. Sometimes marriages end in divorce and if the wife seeks divorce in order to marry or live with someone else then, her new partner will have to pay a fine to her former husband. In the course of the discussion an important element of the marriage ceremony has deliberately not been discussed till now. We shall take it up presently. This next section will deal with the clothes and the jewellery to be worn by the bride and the groom. The bride and women of all ranks (particularly at official gatherings) must wear a red striped scarf with fringes over their left shoulder, folded in three length wise and then doubled over. This scarf is called a *rachu* but also known as *Kabne. Driglam Namzha/* the code of etiquette has to be adhered to very strictly as will be made known by the presence of the Master of Ceremonies who has to be there at every important function – be it a birth, a wedding, a promotion or a death ceremony.

**THE BRIDE’S CLOTHES**

The bride, particularly if she is affluent, will normally be dressed in hand woven silk *kira* or a *kushuthara kira*. The *kushuthara* could have a white background or a blue background/ *ngasham*, or a green background/ *jangsham*, or a black background/ *napsham*, or a red background/ *marpsham*. These days it is not surprising to find modern day brides wearing *kushutharas* of a “hot pink, creamy yellow, and pale blue backgrounds” too. The *kira* is worn over a “Tibetan style *wonjhu*, a loose, long- sleeved
blouse of silk,” 12 and a “short, wide-sleeved jacket” 13 / thego. The sleeves of the blouse/ wonjhu and the jacket/ thego are aligned and folded back into “cuffs worn a little above the wrist”. 14 Her kira is held in place by round brooches/ Komas made either of silver or of gold and intricately carved by hand, with a turquoise in the centre. Some of these brooches/ komas are also designed to resemble the thunderbolt/ vajra/ dorje or even to look like flowers. The brooches/ komas are joined together by thick chains of gold/silver as the case may be called the jabtha/ black cord. She will be adorned in traditional jewellery like the dobchu/ thick traditional bracelets made of silver or gold. These bracelets/ dobchus could be plain and solid or inlaid with turquoise. Her earrings/ sinchu if traditional will be in the shape of a teardrop with an inlay of turquoise in the centre. These earrings are “inlaid with a turquoise and fastened to a ring that passes through the ear.” 15 Her blouse/ wonjhu will be made of exquisite hand made silk from China and her jacket/ thego will be made of rich brocade imported once again from China. The designs on the brocade are very often of dragons.

Her necklace could also include a gold amulet/ ghow inlaid with precious stoner like turquoise, corals, pearls and diamonds attached together with multiple strands of fine rice pearls and huge corals/ bhiru and black agate with white patterns/ zhi threaded together. The bride is normally dressed in the best clothes that her family can afford. As mentioned earlier each bride will dress according to her social and financial standing. It should also be noted that these exquisitely woven hand silk kiras could cost anything ranging from a few thousands to lakhs of rupees and every bride wanting to look the best on her special day will take every care to ensure that her kira is exquisite.

If she comes from a well to do family, she will wear a silk kira with golden threads embroidery. She will also wear a lot of gold jewellery if she can afford it, if not silver jewellery will adorn the glowing bride. Bhutanese also love wearing corals and agate etched with white lined called zhi. She may wear a necklace of zhi and enormous corals that could be part of her family heirloom. The Bhutanese also wear a lot of turquoise, though this blue stone is not as commercially viable as the zhi/ agate or the bhiru/ coral.
THE GROOM’S CLOTHES

The groom too is not to be outdone. His robes/ gho will be woven of the finest wool/silk depending on the time of the year when he is getting married. The groom on the other will be dressed in a silk/ a woollen gho, Bhutanese traditional shoes, hand made by skilled craftsmen and if a Dasho/ red scarf official (conferred upon him by His Majesty the King as a reward for his services) will wear his red scarf (kabne), without fringes and carry his sword. If he is a deputy minister he will wear an orange scarf without fringes, if a full minister than the same scarf, but with part of it folded on the left shoulder.

Men are nowadays known to prefer wearing robes / ghos made of aikapur, and montha fabric with blue or black supplementary- weft patterning peculiar to north central Bhutan. Men are also known to wear finger rings made of gold inlaid with corals, turquoise and black agate with white patterns/ zhi. Driglam Namzha / the code of etiquette demands, that all high-ranking officials wear their scarves according to their designation to public and social occasions. The men are also required to wear their swords should they be entitled to it by rank. If the groom is a commoner then, he will wear a white scarf with fringes.

We have already discussed how once the bride’s parents agree to the proposal made by the groom’s family the astrologer is called for, who will determine an auspicious date for the wedding. What we have not discussed is what happens should the boy and the girl’s astrological charts/ kyaekha /their elements/ kham or their animal signs/ lhos do not match. In case the khams/ the elements of fire, water, earth, wood and air do not match then, the parents may either cancel the alliance altogether or they could follow alternative religious traditions that will provide a solution to all these problems. They might be asked to perform several prayers or ceremonies to forestall and luck, for it is a common belief that should mismatched signs get married then misfortune will befall them.
However, there are solutions, prayers and ceremonies to be performed for every mismatch and as long as one visits the astrologer / the Tshipo, he will also always come up with a solution. It is actually rather difficult for the elements / khams of two people to match, but once the astrologer / Tshipo is consulted a remedy will always turn up. It should be remembered that the matching of the signs and the elements/ the bhagchi is more important for marriages than for the kyeakha/ astrological sign to match. The Manikaboum is the religious text that deals with the life of the great Tibetan King Tsongtshen Gembo, and his marriage to the two princesses from China and Nepal. It is in this religious text that marriage and the ceremonies to be followed are mentioned and it is from here that it has been handed down to us through the ages to the followers of the Mahayana tradition.

Since we have talked about the death ceremonies of the Lhops of the Am Mo Chhu Valley, it would not be amiss to look at their marriage ceremonies briefly. The Lhops live closely and generally marry within their own community they are not averse to marryng their own cousins. Marriage outside the community is not encouraged as it is in direct opposition to their ancestral traditions. Since they marry within their own community and often with their cousins, every Lhop is related to the other. Due to several generations marrying into their own blood there are a large number of cretins in the community. The youngsters normally chose their own partners from within their communities but they always seek parental consent first. However, this too is a dying tradition nowadays.

The other major community in Bhutan is the Nepali community. The Nepalese being Hindus by religion follow their own rituals and traditions for the entire Rites of Passage, as do the minority of Christians both Roman catholic and Protestants who are citizens of this small mountains kingdom, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, wedged between Tibet in the north, the Indian states of Sikkim, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the East, Nepal on the West and West Bengal in the south. Though this chapter was to deal primarily with the rites of passage, no study or discussion of the rites of passage would be complete without a discussion on life thereafter.
Hence, the long treatise on what happens once the essence of the human being has left the physical human body. Of course, if we are to go into details there are also instances of people having come back from the dead after a period of time, but these instances could be too difficult for some of us to even begin to comprehend and may prove to be too fantastic, but Alexandra David-Neel has recorded several such instances in her much referred book, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. She says these beings are called *De logs*/*they who have returned from the beyond to the world of the living*. These delogs have been known to tell fascinating stories of their travels in the *Bardo*. But going into the question or even the nature of the return from the dead to the world of the living would be beyond the scope of this chapter and could be the basis of another research project, hence suffice it to say that there are also instances of the dead having come back to the world of the living and narrating stories of all that they saw, the events that took place, and the places they travelled to. This, in fact, makes the Buddhists all over the pan Buddhist world believe more firmly in the existence of the *Bardo*. Our main objective, in this chapter has been to analyse the *rites of passage* as observed by the people of Bhutan and to examine the rites, rituals and ceremonies attached to these *rites*.

Suffice it to say that where there is life, there is death and where there is death, life will soon follow. However, the main aim of all sentient beings is to strive for freedom from the cycle of birth-death and re-birth and to attain *nirvana/ moksha/ salvation* within this life span only. But while we are on this earth, born into the realm of the human beings, we have to go through the motions of life as prescribed by the dictates of society and culture. It should also be mentioned that Buddhists believe that our next passage/re-birth will depend on the course of our actions, thoughts and words/*karma* in this physical, tangible, real life. Hence, Buddhists regard it very important to lead exemplary lives in this world and to prepare accordingly for our next journey into the next world in keeping with the teachings of the *Bardo Thodal*. This is important for we, as Mahayana Buddhists believe that once we have left our mortal and physical remains behind, we will wander through the *Bardo* and only the guidance we receive before dying and our good actions will see us through to our final destination. Thoughts and deeds/*karma*
can redeem our essences and free us from this cycle of life or the Serpa Khorlo/ Wheei of Liberation or grant us a place in heaven, as the Christian would put it.
4. Ibid., p. 39
5. Ibid., p. 45
9. Ibid., p.49
12. Myers, Diana K & Susan S Bean, Ibid, p. 94
13. Ibid., p. 99
14. Ibid., pp. 99-100
15. Ibid., p. 101