CHAPTER - VI

ROLE OF ORACLES AND WORSHIP
Ritual is the core component of all religions. The rules governing ritual behaviour are transmitted orally or through the liturgical texts of a formally organised religion. Through ritual action flows the well-being not only of the performer but also of the performing society. The social world is thought to be protected by ritual. Hence, ritual is, by definition an obligatory social behaviour prescribed for occasions that have reference to belief system. It is also a symbolic act that holds the ritual participants together as a community of belief and community of action. Ritual provides a system of meaning which validates both social world and the cosmic world. Sharing of ritual experiences generates a deeper feeling, a truly human bond - intimate and personal.

Omen and performance of rituals amongst the people of Tangsa is a common feature. The stated objective in observing the rituals is to cure the people suffering from any type of disease. They believe that these rituals can protect them from all sorts of spirits, wild animals like tigers, bears, birds like hornbill. They also perform the ritual to prevent the spread of epidemics. But before performing the rituals they have to determine the cause of
the illness. They believe that as there are a number of evil spirits prevailing on this earth who are responsible for the different kinds of diseases. First task, therefore, is to find out through the process of identifying the omen the cause of the problems. More specifically which evil spirit is responsible for the problem.

Role of Oracle and associated Rituals: Belief in Omen and Oracle

The system of omen in the Tangsa community is an age old tradition. A Tangsa is concerned to procure a good harvest, success in hunting wild animals and protection against all sorts of diseases.

A samal/sama is approached when a family member suffers from some unknown disease. They go to him along with the person who is sick with a roll of thread and a small bundle of banana leaves, broom sticks on which the omen is to be seen. The samal/sama then recites some hymns and tears the leaves into ten strings and thereby seek the opinion of the evil spirit or the heavenly spirit alternatively to forecast the type of rituals to be performed. First of all the samal will try to seek the opinion of the evil spirits on earth to forecast their demand through the omen and then seek the opinion of the
spirits of heaven. A peculiar thing about this ritual is that both the spirits are not called on the same day, either the spirit of heaven is summoned or the evil spirit of earth is summoned.

The general notion among the Tangsa community is that the limthong (spirit of heaven) does not inflict much harm through diseases on the human race. It is the evil spirits on earth who inflict untold miseries on the human race, sometimes even resulting in death. According to the samal, the spirits of the evil or demons are believed to have been formed from the spirits of human beings after death. The causes of death of such human being are unnatural. For instance, death due to drowning, falling from a tree, accidents caused by vehicles or even death occurring in the process of delivery, etc. After determining the evil spirit that is responsible for the problem, a person is suffering with, the samal looks for remedies.

Performance of Rituals

As per the prediction given by the samal through his omen the people of the Tangsa community performs the ritual in various ways in order to get rid of the problems. If it concerns the spirit of the river, a river worship is performed called jungseting. Necessary arrangements are made and a priest is called to perform the ritual. In this
ritual either a pig or a matured dog is sacrificed because a mere hen or cock would not be sufficient to satisfy the river evil spirit.

The priest on arriving at the victims house makes a plain bamboo basket. A pig is brought and its legs and mouth are firmly tied with cane-strips. With the help of a sharp bamboo spear the pig is pierced through the heart repeatedly until the pig dies. Thereafter, the priest decorates the basket with blood of the sacrificed pig, local beer, a little bit of cooked rice, flour, placed on a leaf and small pieces of meat about sixty to seventy pieces. The patient is then made to sit near the central post of the house and the articles mentioned above are placed near him which he touches. Then some hymns are chanted. Chanting the hymns the priest appeals to the evil spirit to accept the offerings and leave the sick man. For example, the following hymn is chanted, if the suspected devil is a river devil:

Su-ah, su-ah.

ah; ha ----

ah, chingkhim tanal singku ma sejo ---
tashat shingku na sejo.
tatat shingku na sejo.
Go away, go away, hey go away
the evil spirit that your are
still in the body of the sick
Chingkhin (name of sick man) let
him be cured, leave him to be
afreshed and let him get up
from the sick bed.

oh, ha piklam taningka-eh,
nintu thima ira se shumphung jo ---
oh, yes you (evil spirit)
you might have caught
him while he was on his way
to or from the river and caused
him ill, so here is an offer for you
a- ah; til sah -a to ninhu
thima sejo-
khān linga the nintu thima sejo
ngam phak -a ta mimtu thima
ira sejo

if not, you (evil spirit) might
have seen him eating rice, drinking
rice beer, eating meat and caused him
ill but all are now already offered to
you.
su-a ah, nang maira se thijukphiyo
chingkhin xapshing ku nu sejo
tatat shing ku na sejo
tahsat shing ku na sejo,
devil go away,
I am offering you in huge quantity so you
must be out from the body of Chingkhima
and he should be cured, afreshed and
leave his sick bed.
su- a ah; ira sejo
xe seat wa thaji sejo
Samat wa thagina sejo
bang xat wa thaji na sejo
tikshuh, wa thaji na sejo
all devils go away, with these offerings,
those who fell from the bridge and
got drowned in the river, and those who
fell from the trees and also those
who died during the course of delivery.
su, a-a ah, chung wang
luh, na sejo
Jungwang luh na sejo
su- ah; su- ah;
go away go away
to your destination, there's nothing more for you
to get and now let Chingkhin be cured.

After that, the priest takes away the articles to the jungle. The priest takes his meal consisting of rice beer, boiled rice and meat which is also offered to the patient and to the other members present.

Wangjang Worship

Wangjang worship is an important ritual performed by the Lungchang group of Tangsas. It involves much expenditure along with a number of restrictions which have to be strictly followed. It is generally performed by the well to do people as it is not possible for the common people to offer such a ritual.

The wangjang worship has a special significance and it is done with the objective of achieving certain things. These objectives are the welfare of the family members, procuring good harvest for the coming year and also to seek protection against various diseases.

The wangjang worship is a day long affair, but the actual preparation starts one day ahead.
The above shows the host receiving rice beer from the married sisters and nieces and nephews to celebrate Wangjang ritual.

The above shows the special distribution pattern of the sacrificial animal according to family designation.

"A" represents the distribution of raw meat to carry home. "B" represents the cooked food to be served on the spot.
In the ceremony they sacrifice buffaloes the number of which is always odd like 5, 3, 1. In order to carry out the process of sacrifice they use a special kind of wood which is called tangchasah. This wood is derived from the sacred tangchasah tree. Another interesting feature is that the number of wood pieces used are always even in numbers. Suppose if they sacrifice one buffalo thus they use two wood pieces. If the number of buffaloes are three, the number of wood pieces are six and so on. This is so because they tie the front foot to one wooden piece. On this occasion they prepare rice beer and rice to feed the invitees. The rice beer that is served should come from the niece (sisters daughter) and the married sisters(D2).

\[
\begin{array}{|c|}
\hline
A \\
B \\
C \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

A = Rice

--- Main food of this ritual

B = Prepared Rice beer

C = Meat (buffalo)

On the day before the ritual, they raise earth to plant a wooden post. The next day members of the family or clan will plant the wooden post. They tie the buffaloes to these posts with ropes and prepare them for sacrifice. To tie a buffalo they use pieces of ropes. For this purpose they use a special kind of rope which is derived from a particular type of "bet" (cane) brought from the hill side.
They tie the neck, horns and legs of the buffalo to the post so as to balance the animal properly. After this, the priest recites certain hymns (which is reproduced below).

The hymns –

Jangsung-hah Longchang-hah.
Tokung-hah Rangnang-hah.
Narao-hah Nanang-hah.
Ratao-hah Lakphi-hah.
Longlung-hah Jungbang-hah.
Longbu-hah Songjun-hah.
Riju-hah Rama-hah.
Rataw-hah Kamnai-hah.
Chaman-hah Rash-hah.
Kap-haloh Haphaluh.
Jak-phum-tharong haloh Jacen-tharong-haloh.
Warog-hah Changbong-hah.
Changton-hah Thambe-hah.
Ngaichang-hah Janghan-hah.
Kambong-hah Kanglang-hah.
Jungpak-hah Junghong-hah.
Changlang-hah Changkan-hah.
Kap-haloh Hap-haloh.
Jak-pam-tharong haloh Jacem-tharong-haloh.
Longran-hah Changkoi-hah.
Woorai-hah Changphang-hah.
Changram-hah Tinrin-hah.
Woolung-hah Jang khai-hah.
Shangsai-hah Shoilang-hah.
Longpha-hah Warang-hah.
Phongpang-hah Phungseng-hah.
Wawoh-hah Samo-hah.
Longrok-hah Lambeen-hah.
Lungbha-hah Changjung-hah.
Longrang-hah Zankang-hah.
Salom-hah Chamzung-hah.
Loilung-hah Ngaichang-hah.
Washo-hah Thamchang-hah.
Longrang-hah Kamchang-hah.
Jangshung-hah Longchang-hah.

These carry significant meanings regarding the background of their ancestor's, past history, original settlements and their subsequent settlements at various stages. The frequent changing of their settlement was owing to the fact that they were in the habit of practicing Jhum cultivation. Their settlement in the Longchang village, where they started the system of wet cultivation, had put an end to the nomadic pattern of life they used to follow. It was this step which led to a sedentary life.
The priest of the Tangsa tribe are very particular about maintaining the sanctity of the hymns. They would never chant the hymns without making any sacrifice or even inside their homes. They would never chant the hymns nor narrate the significance of the hymns to any inquisitive stranger, as they believe that if it is done it could bring some disaster to their family. In case someone wants to know the significance of the hymns, the priest would then say some prayers to god and offer some sort of sacrifice.¹

After the sacrifice is over, the meat is distributed but the striking feature of the sacrifice is its peculiar distribution pattern. Some parts of the sacrificed animal is cooked and some left raw to be carried home. The different parts of the animal is distributed among the relatives and that is done according to the importance of the relatives. The neck portion of the animal goes to the niece and the nephew and the leg portion goes to the uncles (mother’s brother), After distributing the raw meat, rice beer is served. It is first given to the uncle. The uncle after

¹. When I insisted on the priest to explain the significance of the hymns, he agreed to do so on a certain condition. He told me that he would do so only in my camp and not in his place, as it might bring some disaster. Accordingly, he came to my camp in the evening to narrate the hymns. Before doing so he offered some prayers and started explaining the hymns.
accepting the beer would pour a little quantity on the ground and then he notes the direction of the flow, which if it is lengthwise indicates good omen, and if it flows breathwise it indicates bad omen. After this, the girls and women carry the raw meat to the uncle’s place. They also distribute the raw meat in the neighbourhood. After distribution, they start cooking the meal. The meat is exclusively cooked by the menfolk. The preparation of the rice beer usually starts 3-4 days before. In preparing the rice beer they observe strict regulations – it can only be prepared by their clan members and they also take care to see that other clan members do not touch it. For preparation of the food on the spot, they light the fire afresh. They prepare rice and meat there. The food is then served on a leaf. After eating their food, the invitees go back to their homes. But the worker who help in arranging the ritual stay back for 3-4 days and take their food there. During those days they are forbidden to work in the fields. Even after the worship is over, the family members and the clan members are expected to observe some sort of restriction for a period of one month. They are not suppose to touch some food which remains as taboo for them. Such food are kankai (watergourd), louri (pumpkin), arou (any creeper), andcamsuri (cucumber). They also do not visit the graveyard during that period. After completing one month they again
sacrifice a pig. Thereafter pork is cooked with watergourd (which is compulsory). Only after this they are free to continue with their normal function of daily life.

To sum up, the Wangjang worship is an indispensable social function among the Lungchang group of the Tangsas. From the functional point of view, it fosters a sense of unity. Every member of the society takes an active part lending a helping hand and contributing whatever is possible to make it a success. For instance, the rice beer is prepared by the married sister, niece and nephew and in return they are given a part of the sacrificial meat to be taken home. Sharing of food is essential. As the sacrificial meat is considered to be sacred, it is distributed among the neighbours so that they are not deprived of the sacred meat. Some amount of the sacrificial meat is also cooked and served to the invitees after the rituals are over. The distribution of raw meat is done according to rank and social position. For example, the maternal uncle is given the leg portion of the meat. The leg portion is supposed to be the most prestigious part and hence it is given to the maternal uncle. The neck portion of the meat is given to the nieces and nephews. Another important function of this ritual is that it gives the oral history of the Lungchangs.

For this ritual the sacrificial animal which is used is always buffalo as it is a prestigious animal. The post to
which the buffalo is tied is also derived from a particular sacred wood called tangsasah. Again, to balance one buffalo, two pieces of wood are used. In case of three buffaloes, six pieces of the sacred wood are required and so on. For this ritual, the number of buffaloes used is always in the odd number which is considered to be auspicious. It is also observed that for any ritual, rice beer, boiled rice and meat are compulsory items. After performing the ritual, the family and clan members observe certain restrictions regarding food. Some food are forbidden for a period of one month. After completing the month, to break this restriction, meat is cooked with watergourd and from that day, they can take any kind of food.

Observance of Kholick Ritual

Kholick ritual is observed by the Moklom's of the Tangsas. It is done by the people who can afford it and the stated purpose of the ritual is to ensure the general welfare of the family. Omen is read before the ritual is performed. If the outcome of the omen is favourable, then the ritual is performed. The articles required for this ritual are a buffalo, rice and rice beer. The number of invitees is not fixed - if the family can afford, they may call a large number of invitees. But the essential guest is the maternal uncle. At first they bring a special kind of
wood from a particular tree called ketri or suppol. The piece is then cut in such a way that one end is slanting and pointed and the other end is blunt which is fixed on the ground. This wooden post is considered to be sacred. This ritual is performed in front of the house. The buffalo is then tied with a cane rope to the sacred post and the priest chants a hymn:

lipong jakhel chamwangphoo
wakla jakhel chamwangphoo
chamsal namkap jakhel chamwangphoo.

This means that we are offering this food in order to procure a good harvest and also to protect every family member and the domestic animals from all evil.

This is followed by the ritual sacrifice of the animal. The sacrifice is done in a peculiar manner. The priest takes a spear and pokes at the animal until it dies. Then it is cut into pieces and the blood is rubbed on the sacred wood. The liver is taken out and examined properly. If there are any spots on the liver, it indicates something bad, and if it is spotless, it is a good sign. This way of reading the omen is common among the tribes of North-East. During the "Baisak Bisu" festival of the Lalungs, fowls are sacrificed. From the manner of death of the bird the elderly villagers foretell the future of the village during the year. If the bird dies facing the sky then dry weather will
prevail. The weather will be favourable if the bird dies keeping the face towards the earth (Sharma Thakur, 1985).

The meat is cooked with vegetables and salt by boiling or roasting and the rice is boiled. Just before the serving of the food, the maternal uncle ties a thread obtained from the bark of a tree around the wrist of the niece and the nephew in order to protect them against all evil. The uncles are given special honour and privileges. They are offered the legs of the sacrificed animal as a token of respect to be taken home. The food is then served to the invitees. First the rice beer is served followed by rice and meat. Before eating the food, all the invitees and the host leaves aside a little food so that no evil befalls them.

In the following evening the head of the sacrificed animal is hanged on the wall of the outer room where similar other heads are already hung. This display of animal heads on the wall indicates the prosperity and the status of the family. Before putting the head on the wall, the head of the family chants some hymns. Some cooked and some uncooked rice and pepper are put on a leaf which is shaped into a funnel and this is tied to the head of the sacrificed animal. Some more hymns are chanted while pouring special rice beer three times. With this the Kholick ritual is concluded.
To sum up, the Kholick is celebrated in order to get the blessings of the supernatural for their general welfare. To satisfy the supernatural they sacrifice a buffalo which is a compulsory item along with rice and rice beer. In this festival the maternal uncle plays an indispensable part and is considered to be the most privileged person throughout the ceremony. Thus it is seen that in most festivals the maternal uncle gets the most privileged honour which I shall try to explain in the next chapter.

Cultural Belief, Attitude and Preferences

In the Tangsa community, the people follow certain cultural and social beliefs relating to food. There are also different restrictions and rules regarding the taking of food.

Among the Tangsa community the custom of referring to pregnant women as unwell is an indication of the physical change occurring in the women. During this period, the pregnant women follow certain restrictions regarding the diet and other food habits. For example, they believe that if they take fish caught by a net, the child to be born will not have a very clear vision. They do not eat snakes because of the belief that the child to be born may have a tongue which would be protruding outside. Therefore, the pregnant woman and her husband will not eat or kill a snake during
that period. Flesh of the monkey is avoided as they believe that the child may be born like a monkey. Egg is also avoided because it might lead to the development of white eyes. Such beliefs are not only common among the Tangsa but also among some other tribes. For example, among the Koirengs of Manipur, during the period of pregnancy, the woman and her husband should not kill any living being as far as possible, especially a snake. If a snake is killed, it is feared that the child will have a tongue like that of a snake. The mother should not eat crab meat as the child will have saliva oozing out from the mouth (Kabui, 1987). Again in Nazma Rizvi’s chapter on food categories in Bangladesh and its relation to food beliefs and practices of vulnerable groups, she has mentioned that in Bangladesh too, pregnant women are expected to avoid certain fish (mirka, gojan, baing, kalibaush and chitol) because the characteristic features of these fishes are believed to produce ill effects on the mother and the baby (Rizvi, 1986).

Certain combination of food too is avoided by the Tangsaa of Changlang district. They do not take food procured from land and water together. For example, fish and chicken are not taken together. They think that if they take these kind of food together, they will get allergy while they get down to the water. They also avoid taking two
bitter things together as they think that such a combination becomes poisonous and so on.

They have also classified food into various categories which are as follows:

Hot food - beef, mutton, black pepper, chilly and rice beer.

Cold food - any fruit.

Strength producing - meat, fish, rice.

The following story illustrates the belief pattern among the Lungchang group of Tangsa.

Among the Lungchang, barking deer occupies a significant place having a direct bearing on the position and status of the maternal uncle. The maternal uncle occupies a significant position among the Lungchang tribe. The story behind this trait is related directly or indirectly to killing and eating of deer. One day a maternal uncle and his nephew went hunting in the jungle. During the hunt, the maternal uncle disappeared mysteriously and the nephew began looking for his uncle. He cried out desperately "Where are you, uncle?" As he was calling out, a barking deer suddenly appeared barking in its usual tone. The nephew thought that his maternal uncle had turned into a barking deer. Loosing hope completely, he came back to the village and informed the villagers about what had happened in the jungle. The villagers followed him to the jungle with
curiosity. They too could not find the maternal uncle but came across the barking deer. They then came to the conclusion that the maternal uncle had turned into a deer.

After the occurrence of such an unusual incident, the Lungchangs had imposed certain restrictions. They do not take the flesh of the barking deer and the maternal uncle and nephew do not go to the jungle together from that incident onwards. They believe that the maternal uncle might get lost again.

In Lungchang society, the maternal uncle has a special position and role to play particularly in relation to their nephews. However, it is not easy to establish a relationship between the barking deer and the maternal uncle, but the Lungchangs do not kill the barking deer and there is no question that they will eat its flesh.

Observation of Rites during the Construction of a House

Shelter is a basic need and every human being build their houses in accordance to what they consider to be comfortable, suitable for their environment and the availability of materials. For the Tangsas, building of a house is a sacred occasion. They perform some rites so that the house is free of all evil spirits and no harm befalls on them.

For the Lungchang, when the house is constructed, the performance of ritual is important. The family members
go to the jungle to collect bamboos, satham (wood), rekoi, jangsi, lak, rik, hali etc. and a kind of leaf called shapjack, kara, jatshap, lolak, sijack etc. These leaves are used as material for constructing the roof of the house. Ropes made out of soft bamboo is also used for the construction purpose. Before the construction starts, the foundation is laid after consulting the priest who selects the site and also reads the omen. For this they use a special kind of leaf. The priest then recites the hymns and prays to the God that the selected site remain safe and sound, and is protected from all evil things. Then holes are dug on the ground. Prior to this, an elderly person surveys the land and after making necessary adjustments in the measurement which will be suitable for constructing the house, rice beer is served to the labourers (the labourers are their family members/clan/villagers) which is compulsory. Before drinking, the rice beer is poured into the ground and the direction of flow is noted. On this basis they find whether the omen is good or bad. During the construction period, rice beer is served at intervals to the labourers and along with it, they offer boiled arum instead of rice. Another notable feature is that a special kind of rice beer is served during the period which is regarded as a prestigious drink. When the fire place is made and the roof is raised the women too render their help in carrying the
straw and handing it over to the menfolk as it involves less physical labour. The roof is made of bamboo and leaves. Soon after they start constructing the fire place in each and every room, due care is taken to see that the main fire place is built in a particular room where the fire is lit soon after completion. Here again they follow some rigid customs. When the fire is lit all the family members are present and in case of an absence, they replace him by bringing his garments near the fire place, as a token of his presence. They then sacrifice a pig by uttering appropriate hymns at the central post of the house which is considered to be sacred. They sacrifice the pig with a "dao" and examine the liver of the animal. If the liver is not damaged and is intact, it is considered to be a good sign and vice-versa. The wife of the head of the family then recites some hymns and pour some more beer on the three stands of the fire place. They do this and seek the blessings of the "Kawa" so that there will not be scarcity of food at any time and their granaries would always be full. Soon after that rice beer is served which is followed by the cooking of the rice and meat. They also preserve a portion of the raw meat for the next day. After the cooking is over, the invitees and the host take the meal. The invitees consists of friends, relatives and the people who helped in the construction of the house. The finishing touches to the
house is given in the next two to three days. In honour of the new house, a special worship is observed during the "Moh" festival. On this occasion too, a pig is sacrificed and shared by the invitees along with rice and rice beer.

The Moklom house building ceremony is almost similar to the Lungchangs. The Mokloms always build the house facing eastwards, and the main hearth facing westwards. Another unique feature present in both the tribes is that the head of the sacrificed animals are hung on the wall of the outside room. The head hanging on the wall should be properly smeared in blood. The number of animal heads displayed on the wall of the outer room is a symbol of their prestige and status and it also brings to light the hunting skills of the family members. The people take great pride in displaying the animal heads.

To sum up, it is seen that the Mokloms and Lungchangs follow some elaborate ceremony during the construction of their houses. They also follow a number of customs in order to keep the household free of all evils. It is also seen that the basic pattern of customs followed by both the Lungchang and Moklom are similar. It has also been observed that along with the family members, the helpers (other villagers) too are served with rice beer, rice and other foodstuff during the construction of the house. When finally the house is ready, another sacrifice is done and
all the people who were engaged in the construction are once again offered food as a gesture of goodwill.

In the next chapter (Discussion), the significant findings of each chapter will be highlighted and the interrelations will be discussed.