Chapter VI
LIFE CYCLE

Birth

Dr Brown who was a Political Agent of Manipur in late 19th century described the birth custom among the Tangkhuls in the following manner: "The child immediately after birth has chewed rice placed in its mouth and is immersed in water heated nearly to the boiling point; this treatment is supposed to render the child hardy and prevent it in after life from suffering from pains about the back and loins. The mother of the child is also made to sweat profusely by being wrapped in hot water blankets until faintness ensues; this is repeated two or three times, and on the third day the woman is allowed to go about as usual."¹ During less than a century changes have made inroads into the Tangkhul society that the ancient practice associated with the birth of a child has been given up or forgotten. In the contemporary Tangkhul society where more than 90 per cent of the population have become Christians it is but natural for the primitive custom associated with the birth of a child to have a natural death. Today, even among the non-Christians also, most of the cumbersome practices have been given up and it is not surprising among the educated and enlightened section of the population to have the pregnant women admitted

¹ R. Brown, op.cit, pp. 39-40
in the hospital to avail the services of trained nurses for delivery. In most of the villages including the remote and interior ones where modern medical facilities are not available immediately, the delivery of the child is performed by professional dai of the village.

Birth in Tangkhul society is more or less an affair of the family concerned. The family life goes on as usual without much disturbance and there are no religious rites to perform. The pregnant woman performs her daily domestic chores till the day of delivery. During pregnancy, the woman has to observe a few simple restriction on diet. She should not kill snakes or crabs lest the child be born with snake-like tongue or crooked limbs. In some places doves and jungle fowls are also avoided. In no case should she eat the head of any creature. Twin bananas are also avoided by both the woman and her husband for fear of birth of twins.

When the labour pain starts a local midwife or any woman who is known for her skill at child-birth is called in for assistance. The delivery takes place in the corner of the living room. Children and male members remain outside the house and only a few female attendants remain inside the house. At the time of delivery, kneeling or squatting position is assumed by the parturient woman.
After the delivery the mother lies down on a low bed. The navel cord is cut with a sharp bamboo and the after-birth is buried outside the house. The baby is washed with lukewarm water and is placed by the side of its mother. A fire is kept constantly burning by her side to keep the room warm. For about a week, the mother will not do any routine household works like cooking etc.

The naming of the child is done when the child is about a week old. It is done by an elderly member of the family. Well-to-do families may offer food and drinks to the invitees. After Christianisation of the Tangkhuls liquor has been given up and in its place tea is taken. On this day, the new baby is carried out from inside the house and shown to the villagers present.

The baby is breast-fed for about two or three years, though it is encouraged to take solid food from about six months onwards. Initially the mother chews the food into a paste before putting it into the mouth of the child. As the child grows up the mother starts giving all types of food. After the third year the child is weaned normally unless a subsequent pregnancy of the mother causes an abrupt weaning of the child. In case the mother fails to produce breast milk, the child is fed with boiled rice mixed with the juice of sugar-cane, or some bearing woman
may be asked to do the wet-nursing. During the early period of infancy, the mother seldom remains away from her child for a long time. In case she goes to the field for work she carries her child with her. When the child is about two or three years old, it is often left under the care of its elder sisters or brothers or any other person of the family while the mother is at work. When the child is old enough to run and play, it roams about in the village playing with other playmates. Thus the children are brought up with greater freedom from early childhood. In the old days, piercing of the ear-lobes was done for both the sexes and it was also a practice to distend the earlobes as wide as possible by putting pieces of sticks and other materials into the ear holes. Such a practice for distending the earlobes has been given up already and the piercing of the ear-lobes is confined to the females only chiefly for enabling them to wear ornaments. The piercing of the earlobes now is performed by an elderly person of the house when the child is about one month old. It is the duty of the family to inform the church of the birth of a child as soon as possible on a suitable day like Sunday when all the villagers attend the church. Baptism of the child takes place when the child attains the age of twelve years or so.
Marriage

The clans are exogamous and the marriage of boys and girls belonging to the same clan is customarily prohibited. Child marriage is not practised in the Tangkhul society and the marriage of a girl takes place after she attains the age of puberty. The selection of a bride is normally in the hands of the parents of the boy unless the boy elopes with the girl of his choice. Cross-cousin marriage is preferred by both the Christians and non-Christians and in this form of marriage, mother's brother's daughter is chosen and not father's sister's daughter. With the coming of Christianity, the traditional form of marriage has been given up by the people and the present-day form of Christian marriage is conspicuous by its simplimity. However, a look into the traditional pre-Christian marriage custom of the people will be pertinent in order to assess the impact of the new faith in shaping the cultural and social mores of the people on the one hand, and to observe the geographical factors if any, in the widespread abandonment of the rich ancestral marital custom which survived for centuries till the dawn of Christianity in the Tangkhul regions.

The pre-Christian engagement began with the presentation of one spade and a rupee by the parents of the boy to the parents of the girl. "The price of wife to those
well off is one methna, others pay in cowries or Manipur 'sel', about the value of ten rupees. ¹ If the marriage was agreeable to both the parties, the final engagement known as 'Chanpunsa' is held in which the parents of the boy gave some amount of money (about Rs. 20 or 30) or two cattle, three pigs and some fowls to the parents of the girl. The girl also presented some clothes made by herself or bought from others along with some animals to the boy's guardians. After 'Chanpunsa', the marriage might take place on a day suitable to both the families. "In instituting the preliminaries for a marriage, omens are taken, as amongst the Kowpois, by holding up a fowl and observing how it crosses its legs; if favourable the preliminaries may be arranged either by parents or friends." ² The marriage was held at the house of the bride. Singing and dancing of both boys and girls and wrestling between boys of both the parties took place in gay abandon and rejoicing. Sating and drinking were indispensable item of the Tanokhul marriage.

¹. Ibid., p. 40.
². Ibid., p. 40.
Since the families were of different economic conditions, it was not possible to have more or less a uniform amount of expenses to be incurred by both the families of the boy and the girl at the time of marriage. Rich families would spend exorbitantly while the poor who had little means would spend the minimum amount that they could afford. On the basis of economic conditions of the families there were four types of celebrating a marriage among the Tangkhuls and these were called Thakdiga (Thakrei), Mayarlava, Songnowda, and Lewmiron. Thakdiga type of marriage was resorted to by the rich families in which at least one buffalo and two cows were given as manho or bride-price, which were killed for the marriage feast. The parents of the girl presented 4 bracelets or 'Kazow', 3 bangles or 'her', 2 long necklaces (kongsangpung), 1 pair of ear-rings (nira), one iron staff (larimachu) and 1 bamboo basket (somthen) as bridal gifts. A feast was also arranged for the bride's party by killing 4 pigs. The next type of marriage was performed by the middle class families. The boy's family would kill one buffalo or a cow for the villagers and some amount of money was also presented as manho to the bride's family. The parents of the bride presented 2 'kazow' or bracelets and 1 'kongsangpung' or long necklace as manho. If the family was unable to afford
these items, they would give at least one iron staff and 20 bangles or 'her' as the bridal gifts. The third type of Sangnowda was resorted to by poor families generally in which the boy's family offered some amount of money to his friends and elders by way of manho. The bride's parents presented at least one 'kazow', (bracelet), one 'larimachu' (iron staff) and one 'somthen' (bamboo basket) as bridal gifts. The presentation of other types of ornaments was not compulsory. At least one pig was killed to entertain the members present. Under the last type of marriage viz. Lewmiron, if the boy belonged to a very poor family and was unable to pay the bride price, he would ask the bride to meet him in the field. They then returned together to his house. Some of his friends called the priest and arranged a potful of rice-beer and one fowl for the priest to perform the sacrifice to solemnise the marriage.

As soon as the marriage was over, the bride was escorted by her friends and relatives to the house of the bride-groom. Her friends slightly covered her head with her cloth and sang jointly expressing farewell to her relatives and friends. An old woman led the procession carrying a basket containing rice-beer and cooked chicken. When they reached the house of the groom, the old woman handed over the basket to the bride. The bride would cross the iron bar put at the door with her right
leg first while entering inside the house of her husband. She presented the rice-beer to her husband. The husband first drank it and then offered it to his wife to drink. The cooked chicken was also consumed by them. The consummation did not take place for a few days and the period differed from place to place among the people. At Chingjaroi village for instance, for the first six nights, the newly married did not sleep together. On the contrary, six men slept with the groom and six women slept with the bride separately. On the seventh night the young couple were allowed to sleep together. At Huimi village on the other hand, though the young couple were allowed to eat and drink together, they were not allowed to sleep together for two days. On the third day, consummation took place in the following manner. The groom took his bride to his field. If they found any cosy place, the bride first said 'Ke-ku' and the groom replied 'Gar-er'. The first sexual intercourse took place in the field. Thus, marital intercourse within the dwelling house was prohibited for the initial nights of the married life.¹ The people were said to exercise more free will in regard

¹ T.C. Hodson, op.cit., p.87.
to their marriage arrangements than any of the other tribes. Elopments were not unfrequent when the parents of the couple did not agree. "The couple in this case ran to another village and remained there until they were recalled by the parents in due course. No disgrace or punishment followed, but the accustomed price must be given." If the boy and girl belonged to the same clan they were expelled from the village for violation of a fundamental law, "a punishment which would have meant death in days now past, but not remote, for there were no cities of refuge to afford shelter to such mistaken persons." Polygyny or a man having more than one wife was socially permissible and this practice was no doubt an influence of the Haniouris. In the present-day Tangkhul society many are found to have more than one wife at a time.

Widow remarriage was socially permitted and according to the old Tangkhul custom, "the widow is free to remarry, after the final funeral ceremony, any person to whom she might lawfully have been married as a spinster. They do sometimes marry their deceased husband's younger brother, but such marriages are entirely of inclination, not of compulsion." Under normal circumstances the deceased husband's younger brother happened to be unmarried before marrying his elder brother's widow.

3. T.C. Hodson, op.cit., p.99
4. Ibid., p.95.
Divorce was very expensive and hence of rare occurrence though allowed on the faults of either party. Expenses were incurred in providing the village elders with an ample store of food and drink to aid their deliberation.\(^1\)

Marriage among the Christians is held in the church very often during the yuletide and both the bride and the groom wear western dress at the marriage. Though the people have been westernised to some extent as an impact of Christianity, most of the traditional customs associated with marriage have not been completely given up by the people. Giving of bride-price in the form of domestic animals and money as in the past is still in vogue and the bride also gives the traditional cloth 'changkhon-phi' to the boy's parents as it was done among the non-Christians. After solemnising the marriage in the church, the bride returns to her house and the groom also returns to his house. In the evening, the bride goes to her new house being accompanied by her parents, relatives and friends. The guests were treated with eatables and drinks. Among the protestants, drinking of liquor is prohibited.

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\(^1\) Ibid., p.97.
Death

The Tangkhuls inhumed their dead bodies. Among the non-Christians, the village-priest or khanong was consulted when a person in the family was sick. Sacrifices of animals and birds were made by the priest to appease the spirit so that the sick person might recover. When a person died, a wooden coffin was made and in it the dead body was put along with his personal belongings like clothes, weapons, drinking vessels etc. Rich families would kill a buffalo and its head was kept in the coffin with the belief that the animal would open the gate to heaven. Others would kill a cow or a pig. In the case of burial of a headman, the people resorted to head-hunting going to distant places and the head of the victim was buried with the dead-body of the headman. It was the general belief that in the land of the Dead, the slain victim would serve the headman as his servant. Since head-hunting had been abolished by the British long ago the burial of a headman took place without involving burial of human head with the corpse. When a person died, his kith and kin were informed and the burial was normally delayed until such close relatives turned up. The burial of the dead body took place within the village except for unnatural deaths like death
by snake-bite, by drowning, by a fall from a tree, by a tiger in the jungle, or women who died in childbirth. Such unnatural deaths were buried outside the village boundary.

Every family in which a death took place kept aside a little quantity of the cooked food daily for the soul of the deceased until the last annual rite was held. The general belief was that the spirit of the deceased did not leave the village until the annual and final ritual known as Kathi Kesham was performed. The purpose of this ritual which was performed in January for ten days was to bid farewell to the spirit of the deceased showing him the way to "Kazairam" - the final place of abode, by going in rows holding lighted torches. Animals were sacrificed and besides offerings of sacrificed animals to the spirit by the priest, eating and drinking were the main feature of the celebration.

Among the Christians, the above mentioned practices had been given up and the ritual connected with the burial of a dead body was a simple one. At the death of a person the bell of the church is rung three times nowadays in order to inform that a death has taken place in the village.

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1. Ibid, pp. 153-159.
Before burial, the dead body is taken to the church in a wooden coffin for service by the pastor. After the service is over, the coffin containing the dead body is taken to the cemetery for burial. After the final prayer by the priest is over, the coffin is taken down the grave and buried. The bereaved family, close relatives and friends lay bouquets of flowers on the grave. Erecting of a cross or a monolith with name of the deceased engraved is done by every Christian family at the death of a member in the family.