Rites of passage are a category of rituals that mark the passage of a person from one stage of the life cycle to another over time, from one role or social position to another, integrating the human and cultural experiences with biological facts: birth, reproduction, and death. These ceremonies make the basic distinctions, observed in all groups, between the young and the old, male and female, the living and the dead. The interplay of biology and culture is at the heart of all rites of passage. Rites of passage are present in every society, whether represented by birth or initiation ceremonies, sanctification of marriage vows, or the elaborate funeral rites in which the dead are separated from the living and incorporated into the community of the ancestors. It is said that these rites, when performed in the true spirit and manner, are capable of bringing blessings upon a marriage, protect pregnancies and childbirth, and send the dead to a peaceful hereafter to be with the ancestors who have gone before them. These rites serve to provide psychological satisfaction as they help to bridge and soften critical stages of human life. For example, wedding invariably involves a change of social role and status for the concerned individuals. By readily making available a predictable societal context for group or individual experience, such rites therapeutically relieve the anxieties that changes in age, status, or experiences bring.

Rites of passage often function within a religious framework and are therefore regarded as religious events. According to Van Gennep, the rites can be classified into three distinct types: separation, transition and incorporation. The transition stage is the transitional

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3. Ibid., p.1130.
4. Ibid.
period in which the individual ritually loses the former status but has not yet assumed the new one; the stage of separation is the period in which the individual is symbolically separated from his or her previous status; incorporation stage is the period the concerned individual formally assumes the new status and is re-incorporated into society. Van Gennep points out that these three stages are not emphasized to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern. Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages and rites of transition are notable during pregnancy, initiation ceremony etc. Similarly, the Lois perform ceremonies and rites when they entered different phases of life, for instance, ear boring ceremony (nahutpa) shows that the child has been incorporated fully in the world of human beings. The rituals perform at the time of marriage not only gives due recognition to the new status and new behavior pattern expected of the newly married couple but also ensures the continuation of the family. They also perform rituals at the time of death to facilitate the smooth incorporation of the souls of departed into the world of the ancestors. In short, from birth to death a Loi's life is marked by a series of rituals.

An attempt has been made in this chapter to analyze the cultural life of Sekmai and Khurkhul Loi villages using the main sources available from the fieldwork. Other Loi villages referred here are from the fieldworks conducted by other scholars in various Loi villages and the extracts are from the seminar papers that have been presented so far.

Birth

From the time of conception to the birth of a child, a number of rituals are performed. The rites of childbirth seeks to ensure the well being of the mother and child to reintegrate the latter to her new position in society as a mother, especially if she has given birth to a son. Right from the moment a woman is ascertained to be pregnant,

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6. Ibid., p.11.
she has to observe a number of taboos. The expecting mother is warned not to look at any handicapped person or at monkeys because it is believed that if she looks at them, the unborn child might suffer from physical disability or have simian features. 7

If a pregnant woman goes out in the night, she has to cover her head, as it is feared that she might come into contact with evil spirits. She should not kill any living being and her husband also has to observe similar restrictions such as not to kill animals and insects or be present on the scene where animal sacrifice is performed. The most important taboo is with regards to killing snakes because snakes are believed to be the descendants of god, Pakhangba. The people believe that if they kill insects and animals during pregnancy, the child would become deformed and disfigured hence to ensure for the well-being of the child the parents should avoid torturing or killing living beings.

When the woman reaches 7 or 9 months of pregnancy, her natal family invites her for a feast by cooking her favourite dishes and the parents of the expecting mother bless their daughter for long life and smooth delivery of the baby. Just before the baby is due, a purification ceremony called kokthok chamthokpa is performed so that the expecting mother will not undergo any trouble during the delivery. The maiba, while performing the purification ceremony makes offerings to a figure of an animal which is made of mud. The figure is seen as a substitute for the pregnant woman and is expected to carry all the evils, which might occur to her during childbirth. The figure is kept near the gate facing the direction from where evil things might come. In case earthquake occurs after this ritual, the ritual is performed again to protect the pregnant woman and unborn child from evil spirits.

7. In Koutruk Loi village, there was the practice of couvade till recently. During the wife's pregnancy, it was considered that the husband carried the child for 3 months and it was believed that he got weakness on the back of his knees (popliteal fossae). Nowadays this belief is no longer found. In the early stage of pregnancy, a woman can do any kind of work. But in the advanced stage of pregnancy long distance walking and carrying heavy loads are not allowed.
Childbirth

Childbirth is carried out either in a separate room or near the bed of the pregnant woman by making a temporary bed for the purpose. In the olden days a mid-wife (maibi or chabokpi) of the village used to be called to assist the expecting mother in delivery. Like other villages of the country, at present, the Loi villages have also started adopting modern methods like going to the hospitals or the village Primary Health Center (PHC). In Khurkhul P.H.C., the facility for delivery is not available, but it is available in Sekmai P.H.C. Orthodox people still resort to the traditional method of calling the mid-wife but others prefer to call a doctor or a nurse at home. As per customary practice, the husband of the pregnant woman calls the mid-wife but in his absence, anyone will go and call her. A group of four or five people is required to assist the labouring woman. The group should include a maiba, a midwife and one or two women.

If the expecting mother has problems during labour the midwife tries to find out the reasons for the problem. To ease the situation the midwife opens the doors, windows, chengphu (a vessel or pitcher in which rice is stored), and anything that has a lid. It is believed that the covers and doors of these household objects symbolize the expecting mother's womb and if they are kept open, the baby will come out smoothly without any obstacles. If this does not help and the midwife feels that evil spirits caused the problem, she places burning charcoals on sacred leaves (khoiju-leikham) to expel the evil spirits. If this fails the family members are asked to discuss the matter with knowledgeable persons or take the woman to the hospital.

The unmarried and pregnant women are not allowed to witness the delivery because it is feared that they will be afraid of the labour scene. However, there is a belief among the villagers that a person suffering from a particular disease called khoirai houba (a kind of dizziness) could be cured if he/she is touched by the feet of a child who comes out of the mother's womb with its feet first. Like the Javanese of South East Asia, earlier the Lois used a knife made up of
bamboo called *wakthou* to cut the baby's umbilical cord but now-a-days they have shifted to modern instruments like blade, scissors etc. for the purpose. After the baby’s umbilical cord is cut, the stump is tied up with threads. The process of cutting the umbilical cord varies from village to village. At Koutruk, if the new born child is a male, the umbilical cord is placed on the handle of an axe and then cut by leaving one inch towards the child and in case of a female child, the umbilical cord is cut after putting it on a *phisa utong* (a tube used while weaving). The belief is that by doing this the male child will become brave and courageous while the female child would be able to perform the job of a female. After the baby is born, if it fails to cry aloud, a tripod is turned upside down and a rod is used to hit the tripod that sounds like a bell. It is believed that the child would surely cry after hearing the bell.

After the delivery, male members of the family, usually the father or the uncle, buries the placenta. The placenta of the male child is buried on the right side of the main door and that of the female child on the left side. The choice of side for the burial of the placenta signifies male as a stronger-sex and female as a weaker sex. One can see strong preference for the male child than female child right from the time of birth itself. The placenta of the babies born in the hospital is usually brought home for burial purpose. Customarily, the placenta is buried because it is considered to be a part of the baby’s body.

The baby is then bathed and its body wiped thoroughly and wrapped up in a piece of cloth. After that, the baby is put on the winnowing fan. A fire is set to *Phunga*, the sacred fireplace located inside the house to warm the baby as well as to protect it from evil spirits. A relative or neighbour helps to bathe the mother. Then a

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9. Clifford Geertz observes similar practices among the Javanese of Indonesia. In this regard he writes: "The umbilical cord and after bath are wrapped ... and buried outside the house, in front if the child is a boy, in back if it is a girl, although some people bury both in front, the boy to the left of the door, the girl to the right." Clifford Geertz, op. cit., 1969, p.41.
woman who has a suckling baby feeds the child since the mother could not produce milk immediately after childbirth and this continues until the mother could produce milk. Nowadays, bottle milk or honey is given to the child instead of calling another woman. After feeding, the child is kept next to its mother.

Occasionally, it can be seen in the Loi villages that just after giving birth the mother ties a piece of cloth on her waist. And at least for a month her back is exposed to the fire daily to maintain the fitness of the body. The mother cannot enter the kitchen for three months after childbirth since she is considered to be polluted. During this time she cooks food in her room.

**Yupanthaba**

*Yupanthaba* is a purification ceremony to remove the pollution within the family and lineage caused by the birth of a child which affects not only the mother, but to some degree the unit as a whole. The ceremony is observed on different days in different Loi villages. In Khurkhul *yupanthaba* is carried out on the 5th day of birth irrespective of the sex of the child, but in Sekmai and Andro the ceremony is performed on the 5th day for the male and 6th day for the female child. The rite also serves as the first initiation ceremony of the child into the world.

One or two days before the ceremony, people are invited orally. This ceremony is usually performed in the morning. Relatives or neighbours wash all the dirty clothes used by the mother and the child. While this goes on, the baby is taken to the courtyard. After washing its face, the baby is made to worship the sun and the moon and the three great deities: Koubru, Nongpok and Thangjing, who are worshipped to bring long life and prosperity to the child. As a part of tradition, the midwife cuts 2 or 3 strands of the baby's hair to inculcate in the baby the art of cleanliness right from childhood. To

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the accompaniment of the chanting of the purification hymn (nahairoj), the priest sanctifies the mother, the child and also the house by sprinkling holy water. The mother then bathes with the same water to remove the pollution caused by childbirth. After this ceremony the woman is reintegrated to establish her new position in society as a mother, especially if she has given birth to a son.

Meanwhile the womenfolk make singju, a dish of green vegetables mixed with salt and chilly. After the preparation, the midwife places a small portion of singju and few pieces of meat on a plantain leaf near the gate of the house to appease the evil spirits. Thereafter singju and meat are distributed to all the invitees. The practice of making singju and meat prevailed in Sekmai but found to be absent in Khurkhul.

On the day of yupanthaba, the priest and priestess are not only specially invited but also given money as gratitude for their help. The midwife is also given a basket of paddy (phoudang) along with a small coil of cane, a plate of salt (meitei-thum) and few coins. The owner of the house or other relatives carries the paddy to her house. Even if the child is born in the hospital, the paddy is given to the midwife because she would render her help on the day of yupanthaba ceremony. In case of abnormal birth, the basket in which paddy is carried to the midwife’s house is not returned because it is believed that such unfortunate incidents would not occur if the basket remains with the midwife. But if it is a normal birth, the midwife is expected to return the basket after taking the paddy.

Yupanthaba is compulsorily performed at the time of a birth of a child. However, in order to emulate themselves to the status of Hindu Meiteis a few of the Lois started performing swasti puja11 along with Yupanthaba: The villagers may not celebrate swasti puja but yupanthaba is compulsorily celebrated.

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11. This is performed for the well-being of the child on the sixth day of the birth irrespective of the sex of the child.
On the night of yupanthaba, there is another ritual performed to Soraren, the sky god, and Prithi Nongdamba, who decide the chances of survival and welfare of the human being. The villagers narrated the story behind this ritual, according to which there was an argument between two gods over the fate of a child that was born in a particular family. The god Prithi Nongdamba decided the child’s fate by saying that the child had to die when it reaches 7 years of age. Soraren asked Prithi Nongdamba the reason for such a decision instead of predicting that the child would become a king or a wealthy, healthy and good-looking person. Prithi Nongdamba replied that it was because of his karma, that is due to what he had done on his last birth. Soraren told Prithi Nongdamba to re-write the fate of the child. On Soraren’s intervention Prithi Nongdamba destined that the child would live for 18 years. True to his decree the day the child reached exactly 18 years, he passed away. This story has influenced the people so much that they believe god Prithi Nongdamba decides their fate. As a result, the parents of any newborn baby pray to god Prithi Nongdamba to give their child a long life span and to bestow him/her with health and wealth.

**Chaumba** (first feeding of solid food)

When the child attains 3 months of age, first solid food feeding (chaumba) ceremony takes place. Sometimes, the parents of the child request the maiba to perform the ceremony or they themselves feed the child after ascertaining an auspicious day. This ceremony is not an elaborate one but they just pray to the household deities, Sanamahi and Leimaren and thereafter, the child is fed with the meals prepared out of offerings made to these deities. This day is considered to be auspicious to buy silver utensils for the newborn baby.

**Nahut Nareng Tamba Ceremony** (ear lobe boring ceremony)

When a child reaches a certain age, his/her ears will be ritually bored. In Khurkhul and Sekmai, the ear lobe boring ceremony is performed individually but at Phayeng (a Loi village), it is performed
collectively for the same age group. In those villages, where the
ceremony is performed individually, the ears of the child can be bored
on the day of yupanthaba. Otherwise, the ceremony is carried out on
an auspicious day when the child reaches 3, 5 or 7 months or years
because the Lois consider odd numbers are live (changba) ones and
the even numbers as (siba) dead ones. The maiba begins by sprinkling
water containing tairen (cedrela toona) leaves on the child whose ears
are to be pierced. Then the ears are pierced starting with the right ear
first for both the sexes. Sometimes, after this, the hair of the child is
shaved, but this is not mandatory in all the Loi villages.

At Phayeng where the ceremony is collectively performed once
in a year, it is celebrated for all the children who attain 3 years of age
to signify their transition from god like status to human beings. In the
conception of the Lois a child is like god. If a child, male or female,
does not have a hole in the ear, then the villagers believe that the
child is not fully human but is in a state of limbo between god and
human being. This ceremony signifies that the child has become a
complete human being and after this ceremony the child is fully
incorporated into the society.

The ceremony is performed at the house of the oldest male child
whose ears are to be pierced that particular year. The title ‘nahal’ is
given to this boy. It may be noted that a girl is not entitled to such a
name. An expert is called to pierce the ear of the children one by one,
according to the seniority of the age, but boys are bored first followed
by girls. Before boring the ear, charcoal mixed with turmeric powder
is used to measure the ear lobe. Thereafter, a gold or silver ear-ring or
sometimes even a black thread is used to adorn the hole of the ear
lobe. Chengkuk (a kind of plant) leaves are used as medicine to
prevent the hole from getting septic. The parents of the children share
the expenditure incurred for the ceremony.

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12 P. Binodini Devi, Cultural Heritage of Phayeng, Paper Presented in the Seminar on
Indigenous Cultural Heritage of Manipur, Department of Culture, Government of India, 14-15
April, 2001, p. 4.
Marriage

The next important event in the life of an individual is marriage conducted when a person becomes an adult. Like most societies in the world, marriage forms one of the most important institutions practised by the Loi of Manipur. Marriage provides a socially-sanctioned sexual relationship between a man and a woman as husband and wife. It includes procreation, economic corporate staying in the same house and establishing a family. It is the most important transitional rite which transforms individuals from social status to another. Marriage among the Loi involves commitment to a permanent union, which is recognized by tradition and custom. It establishes new bonds of kinship not only to individuals but also alliance of the two families as well as lineages. In Loi society, the bride is incorporated into the group of husband. It brings with it a new status and new behavior pattern regard to sex, duties, privileges and cultural mechanisms to ensure the continuation of the family. Thus, children born of marriage are considered to be the legitimate offsprings of the married couple. The legitimacy is important in matters of inheritance and succession.

Mode of Spouse Selection

In different societies of the world, there are different forms and sub-forms of acquiring a mate depending on demographic, biologic, economic, social, political and psychological problems existing in different societies. Likewise, there exist different types of mate selection in the Loi society also. We can identify three distinct forms of mate selection among the Loi viz: (1) Mutual consent (2) Elopement and (3) Capture.

Mutual Consent (Hainaba)

There are two types of consent prevalent among the Loi. The first one involves the mutual consent of a boy and a girl. In this case the boy and the girl already know each other and share their feelings; then they inform their respective parents about their relationships. They cannot reveal their feeling to their parents themselves, then
friend or relative would help them out by informing their parents, who would then make arrangements for the marriage.

The second relates to the consent of the parents of the parties concerned. In this case the parents of the boy and the girl reach an agreement of giving their daughter or son in marriage to the other party without consulting their son or daughter. However, the villagers believe that differences are likely to develop between the husband and wife, if they are married without their mutual consent. Hence, this form of marriage is hardly practised these days.

**Elopement (Chenba)**

Acquiring a mate by elopement is customarily approved and accepted among the Lois unlike in some societies, where elopement is considered as an act of disobedience of the elders. In this case, on an agreed day, the girl will run away from her house with the boy. Sometimes, some of the latter's friends would help the couple to carry out their plan. Usually, the girl is kept in a house of his relatives or friends for a short time before taking her to the boy's house. His friends would then inform the news of the elopement to his father who would tell them to bring the girl to the house. As the boy and the girl reach the *churitapham* (outer part) of the house, the father would ask the girl: "Did you elope with my son willingly or did my son force you"? If the girl answers that she has gone willingly, then she would be asked to pray to the household deities with the help of a *maiba* and she would bow down to his parents.

On the girl's side, the parents usually reluctant to believe that their daughter had eloped willingly would inform the lineage members and close relatives about it. Immediately on hearing the news, the girl's relatives would gather in her house, waiting for the boy's side to come. On the very same day, 3 male members mostly relatives and at times neighbours of the boy go to the girl's family as soon as they hear the news. Significantly, the three men chosen to break the news to the girl's family should not be widowers or handicapped persons. As they reach the girl's house, they bow down in front of the girl's parents and
other relatives and inform them that their daughter had eloped with their boy. If the boy’s family is late in breaking the news of the elopement, the girl’s family and relatives could charge them a fine, either in cash or in kind for violating established norm of the village.

In case, there is conflict between the two families, marriage may not happen. In such a case it is considered a disgrace to the boy if the girl rejects him after elopement (chenba). But the girl too is not free of stigma. Once a girl has eloped with someone, she would be called chelurabi and is not considered a virgin anymore. The stigma of having eloped is always attached to her.

**Capture (Chingba)**

This form of marriage involves the use of force. Acquiring mates by force was prevalent till some years ago in the Loi villages. During the interviews, some females claimed that their marriage was by chingba which means forcible capture of a girl by a boy usually with the help of his friends. In most of the cases, the kidnapped girl, usually gets married to the boy after hectic negotiations between the parents of the parties involved. Since marriage happens mostly within the village, both the parties know each other. Interestingly in such an eventuality, the usual pattern is for the boy’s family to repeatedly request the girl’s people to become relatives and to forgive and forget the mistake their son has committed. The girl’s parents might agree to the marriage after lots of persuasion from the boy’s side. If the girl refuses to marry the boy, the girl’s family and lineage may impose a fine on the boy’s family for the dishonour brought on their daughter. There is no fixed amount but whatever the girl’s side asks, the fine is given, albeit not without lots of bargaining by the boy’s family.

Empirical evidence suggests that acquiring a mate by elopement remain the most preferred form of choosing a mate among the Lois. Next comes marriage through mutual consent but obtaining a spouse

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by negotiations involves long procedure and money, thus making elopement the most convenient and easy way of acquiring a mate.

To sanctify the marriage, the Lois have four different types of rituals. They are (1) Keinakatpa, (2) Loukhatpa, (3) Laitin-thaba, and (4) Luhongba.

**Keinakatpa**

If the boy and the girl know each other and eloped with mutual consent and if the parents and the relatives of both the sides are in agreement, then they opt for the *keinakatpa* ceremony to formalize the relationship. *Keinakatpa* is a very simple method, which does not cost much money. If the girl’s family is poor, they usually opt for this method since the cost of other methods of sanctifying the union is higher than *keinakatpa*. If the day of the elopement is considered to be inauspicious, then the girl’s family might request the boy’s family to leave their daughter till they could find a favorable day for the ceremony. Then both the parties consult the village pundit and an auspicious day is decided for the ceremony to be performed. The girl’s family will arrange the items required for the *keinakatpa* purpose. The ceremony of *keinakatpa* usually takes place in the kitchen or the porch (*mangol*) of the girl’s house. The bride just takes a round of the stool where the groom is sitting and garlands him with two strings of jasmine (*kundo*) flower. The person who guides the groom (*borsennaba*) will separate the two strings of garland and hands over one of them to the groom to be garlanded to the girl.

After that, the couple bows down to the elders present at the ritual and before the bride’s household deities such as *Leimaren*, *Sanamahi*, *Apokpa*, and others. The offerings comprising sugar cane, parched rice, betel nuts and leaves and sweet-meats are made to the deities. In case the groom already has another wife and children, then neither his first wife nor his children can eat the eatables of the ceremony. The children should not be allowed to know that their father is getting married because it can affect them emotionally and lead to insecurity. Moreover it is not legally acceptable.
Loukhatpa

If the boy and the girl eloped because their families are not in favour of their marriage due to close blood relationship, such as belonging to the same clan (yek tinnaba) or because of difference of religion, in such cases, the girl would be ex-communicated not only by her parents but also by her lineage people, till they perform a ceremony called loukhatpa. Parents and relatives from the groom's family would request the bride's family to be kind to them and accept the couple by holding the ritual. This ceremony allows both the parties to enter each other's house. After the agreement a date is fixed for the ceremony.

On the appointed day, when the couple along with the groom's family arrive at the girl's house, they are made to sit on one side of the courtyard. The groom's family will bring eatables like parched rice, betel nuts and leaves, sugarcane and bananas to be given to the invitees. The groom is made to sit in the courtyard of the girl's house. The bride also sits in a corner of the courtyard and is not allowed to enter the house till the ceremony is over. When all the invitees are present, the piba (head of the lineage) gets up from his seat and goes and pats the head of the groom with the words "se se loukhatpire changaklo laklo" which signify acceptance and can now enter the bride's house. After that the bride and the bridegroom bow down in front of the elderly people as well as the bride's household deities. The priest then conducts the rites and offers some eatables brought by the groom's family to the deities to legitimize the marriage. After distributing the eatables brought by the groom's family to the invitees present, the ceremony comes to an end.

Lai-tin-thaba

The ritual of Lai-tin-thaba is more elaborate than keinakatpa/loukhatpa and is performed after ascertaining an auspicious day. On the first morning of the rite, the groom's family or relatives will carry meat, either pork or chicken, to be eaten by the people on the bride's side. This act is usually carried out secretly,
away from the prying eyes of others to avoid gossip. It is not associated with any ceremonial or religious activity.

Meanwhile, the elderly women of the groom’s side prepare the articles to be offered to the deities of the bride’s house as well as to the deities of the groom’s house. Similarly, on the girl’s side the elderly women will prepare things to be offered to the groom’s household deities. The groom’s family worships the household deities and village deities before going and after coming back from the bride’s house. The articles to be brought by the groom’s side to the bride’s house include 14 bunches of bananas which should be in odd number (chang thokpa) plus an extra bunch to serve as a substitute in case one of the others gets spoilt. Besides the bananas, 7 types of fruits (hei) and 45 buds of a sacred plant, langthrei, should also be taken.

The groom’s side hires 3 male and 3 female guides (lamjingbas and lamjingbis respectively) for the ceremony. The guides should be married persons (widows and widowers are excluded) whose first-born child must be a male. A short distance from the bride’s house, the guides walk twice to and fro up to the house without entering and on the third time, enter the bride’s house along with the people who carry offerings for the deity (laipot), followed by elderly people and others. Before climbing up the porch of the house, the guides touch the ground with their hands and then touch their forehead as a mark of respect. On climbing the porch, they bow down before the head (piba) of the girl’s lineage and elders. Then those who bring the articles to be offered to the deities enter the house one by one and keep the offerings in the corner where the deity is believed to reside. The articles meant to be offered to the ancestors (ashinman khangba) are kept near the verandah.

The eatables that are used as offerings to the deities include bananas, sugarcane, parched rice, fruits, pork and liquor. After arranging the items, the bride goes and sits in a room called ningolka whereas the groom remains outside. Before sitting down, the bride bows down in front of the household deities followed by her parents and elders. Subsequently, the guides bow down in front of the elders. After that, fruits and flowers are offered to the deities to secure the well being of the couple. And then the elderly women of the family request the maiba to begin the rite of ancestor worship (ashinman khangba or apokpa khuramba), which is conducted near the gate of the house. In this ceremony, the priest makes the offerings to 9 gods (Laipangthous), 7 goddesses (Lainuras) and village deities (Lamlais). Some offerings are also made to appease the evil spirits. After getting the signal from the priest about the completion of the rite, the groom is called inside the house to light the fire with some straw under the tripod placed in the phunga. The groom is asked to push the straw three times. This act signifies that from that day onwards, he has become the son-in-law of the household and the fire is the witness.

After that, lei langba is performed which denotes request for blessings by the son-in-law, who offers flowers to the household deities, parents, head of the lineage, and all the elders. The groom also gives flowers to the guests who attend the marriage. The bride and the groom then enter the courtyard and bow down a number of times, in front of almost each and every elderly person. On this day (of lai-tin-thaba) only the bride and the groom would be given lunch inside the house.

Such items as meat, liquor, parched rice, betel nuts and leaves brought by the groom’s family are kept in the courtyard. After that, distribution of food and drink to the invitees takes place. But the eatables, which are used as offerings to the different deities should be eaten by the lineage members only. The most important person in lai-tin-thaba is the piba, who gets the major share of the meat and other eatables. In case the piba cannot come, his share would be sent to his
house, as the meat meant for him cannot be eaten by others. The meat and other eatables, which have not been offered to the gods, would be distributed to all the people irrespective of age group.

On the bride's side also the same proceedings are followed. There would be lamjingbas and lamjingbis and those who carry the items for the deities will go in a row followed by the bride with her friends who are then followed by the groom and his friends. After reaching the groom's house the same ceremonies like the one, conducted in the girl's house are performed in the groom's house also. Then the ceremony of ancestor worship is performed followed by offerings to other deities. After the offerings are made to the deities, the bride will light the fire to show that she has been accepted as the daughter-in-law of the house. After lighting the fire, the bride will bow to the elders and in-laws. The furniture and other articles brought from the girl's house are kept in their proper place leading finally to the conclusion of the ceremony.

This is the most respected form of marriage ritual in traditional Loi society and is still widely practiced by the people. Many people still practice lai-tin-thaba. In urban areas, however, now-a-days luhongba is more prevalent than other forms of sanctifying the union. The Lois feel that luhongba is a practice brought by converted Hindu Meiteis and lai-tin-thaba is their original form of marriage.

Luhongba

This form of marriage emerged among the Lois around 1950 due to the influence of Meitei Hindus and inter-caste marriages. The ritual is elaborate and sometime covers a period of several months. There are different phases prior to the ritual of luhongba. If there is mutual consent between a boy and a girl and they decide to marry, then the boy or his friend brings the news to his parents. Usually three male members from the boy's side, all of whom should be physically fit and in a married state, would go to ask for the girl's hand. The visitors who come on behalf of the bridegroom's family
would be asked by the girl’s father to visit other relatives of the lineage such as uncles and grandfathers to get their permission for the marriage. In the Loi villages, the members of the lineage still play a very important role in decision-making.

A meeting is held between the members of the lineage to decide about the marriage. If there is any misunderstanding between the girl’s and the boy’s family, then it is resolved before the marriage takes place. Once the negotiation between the two families and also between the two lineages are over then they will seek the help of an astrologer to see the matching of the horoscopes and to fix a suitable date for the wedding.

**Waroipot**

Once the date is agreed upon an official announcement of the marriage (*waroipot*) is made, where the elder males of both the families prostrate themselves before the another. Relatives, friends and neighbours of the groom’s family go to the girl’s family carrying the affinal gifts. The items for *waroipot* are eatable things, such as meat especially pork, *shingju* and different types of country made liquor called *yu* and *waiyu*. Pork and liquor are to be brought by the groom’s family, but *shingju* (vegetable salad) is prepared in the girl’s house. The eatables are distributed firstly to the *piba* followed by elders and other invitees. According to one respondent, in the past rice used to be provided for eating along with pork and *singju* but this practice is no longer found now-a-days.¹⁵

**Heijingpot**

This is one of the most important ceremonies that is performed a few days before the marriage. To substantiate the declaration fully, the groom’s family makes a visit, with all their relatives and friends, to the bride’s house,¹⁶ along with offerings to the household deities, village deities and eatables to feed the people. According to the

¹⁵ The interview was held with Kh. Romon Singh on 15th February, 2001 at Khurkhul.
information provided by the villagers, some years ago, a kind of fish called *ngamu* (*officefalus punctatus*) used to be carried for *heijingpot* by the groom's family. The fish should be live ones and no dead fish was acceptable. The fish were kept in the basin for sometime before distributing among the invitees. Each and every invited family would be given 3 to 5 fishes, put in a line in strips of bamboo. One informant told the researcher that this was a very difficult task since one has to get the fishes over a period of time and the fishes to be taken to the bride's house should be live ones.\(^{17}\) Hence the number of invitees should not be more than 200. Now a days, fish has been substituted by varieties of fruits including banana, coconut, sugarcane, *heijang* (an edible fruit), goose-berry, apple, orange etc. Apart from these, parched rice (*kabok*), betel nut and betel leaf are the most essential items to be distributed among the invitees. Sometimes, instead of *kabok*, bread (*tal*) and sweets are also brought by the groom's family. Some years ago, country liquor was an essential part of the ceremony and was distributed and consumed openly. Today, the distribution of liquor is more discretely done though most of the menfolk drink. After the *heijingpot* ceremony, the groom's family takes charge of the girl.

**The Day of Luhongba Ceremony**

In the past, marriage used to take place in the morning and gifts given to the girl were less. These days, marriage ceremony takes place mostly in the afternoon. However, the gifts meant for the girl are sent in the morning to the groom's house. The wedding procession starts from the groom's house and along with the procession they also carry gifts to the bride's home which include vegetables, sweet meat and so on. The procession is headed by an "ideal woman" (one who is not a widow or divorcee and has a first-born living male child) and locally known as "*jatra pubi". Before entering the bride's house, the bridegroom and his party are received by the bride's mother and two other female relatives near the gate. During the wedding ceremony the bridegroom's mother assumes importance and hence, she sits in the

\(^{17}\) Irungbam Shatholei of Khurkhul told the researcher on 11\(^{th}\) January, 2001.
front row of the women’s section which is usually located in an outhouse (sangoi) or front part of the house. The bride’s family offers her a meyeknaiba fanek (lower garment worn by women).

The ceremony starts with the bridegroom sitting in the middle of the courtyard, a special seat arranged for him, followed by the entry of the bride into the ceremonial area. The bride’s unmarried sister, if any, or mother ties the couple’s hands together (the girl’s left hand is placed over the right hand of the boy) and a tray made of clay is placed on them. One bunch of bananas, coconut, betel nuts and leaves are placed on top of the tray. A village pundit chants some holy words and recites the genealogies of both the bride and groom.18 Thereafter, the bride’s mother is the first person to give blessing to the couple followed by other guests, who offer money on a tray placed before the couple. But it is not compulsory for all the guests to offer money. After the tray is removed and handed over to the groom’s mother, the bride walks round the groom seven times and at the end of every round. The bride showers flowers on the groom and folds her hands in front of him. She then puts two garlands of jasmine around his neck, one of which is taken out by the groom and put around the bride’s neck. With this, the ceremony in the bride’s house is complete and the couple then depart for the groom’s house.

When the bride arrives at her in-law’s home, she is received by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and close relatives. After that the mother-in-law gives the bride a wrap around (fanek) to change from her bridal dress. For the ceremony, the bride wears potloi or phanek mayeknaiba (bridal dress) on the waist and a velvet blouse is worn on top. The groom usually wears a white dhoti and kurta and also a turban.

18 Some years back those who had eloped were not allowed to have luhongba ceremony as the eloped woman is no longer considered a virgin but these days they are allowed. But even if they are allowed to have luhongba, the name of the 7 generations of the fore-fathers which is supposed to be recited by the village pundit during marriage ceremony is not recited completely. Only the father’s name is recited. It is believed that the forefather would go to hell if a girl who had once eloped goes through luhongba ceremony.
Luhongba is not only the most expensive form of marriage but appeared among the Lois due to the influence of Meitei Hindus and inter-caste marriages. Very few informants in the study area had luhongba ceremony. During the interview, majority of the informants reported that they did not go through luhongba but followed the traditional forms of formalizing the union like keina katpa, loukhatpa, lai-tin-thaba. The findings from the fields suggest that acquiring a mate by elopement followed by the ritual of keinakatpa or lai-tin-thaba to sanctify the union continue to be the most common practice of marriage system among the Lois. As pointed out earlier, many people feel that luhongba is a practice brought by converted Hindu Meiteis and lai-tin-thaba or keinakatpa is their original form of marriage. Nonetheless, all the above-mentioned four forms of marriage ceremony are socially accepted.

Significance of Marriage as a Social Event

Marriage is a sacrament among the Lois. It is considered as indispensable for every Loi because it provides children especially sons who would not only carry on the family name but would preserve the household deities also. Thus, if there is a death of an unmarried man, a doll made of cloth in the form of a woman is kept in his coffin. If the deceased is a woman, a doll having the figure of a man is kept in her coffin. The significance of performing such ritual is to recognize the marital status of the concerned person. This shows that a man or a woman, if not married, is regarded as incomplete individual in the society. The Lois believe that after performing such acts the deceased person would not be left alone in the other world but would be with his or her partner. Another ritual called “chuk saba” which is performed at the time of abnormal death is being performed for those who died unmarried in order to avoid the repetition of such disagreeable occurrence in the family and lineage. This points out that marriage is a sacred and desirable institution in the social structure of the Lois.
Chakouba

After marriage there is a feast called chakouba. It is usually performed on the 5th day of marriage without it marriage is considered to be incomplete because it is an occasion to meet the relatives of the groom and bride. On the day of chakouba, the bride's family invites the groom's family as well as the friends and other relatives of both the families for lunch. As stated above, chakouba is mostly performed on the 5th day of the marriage. If circumstances do not allow, then chakouba can be performed later. If a birth or death occurs within the family or sub-lineage then chakouba is postponed since the period is considered to be impure. Only after the purification ceremony is performed can chakouba be given. The youth of the lineage and other relatives usually cook the food if meat is served but these days, the villagers opt for the Brahmins to cook, provided the menu do not contain meat.

Dowry and Bride Price

The Lois usually try to give the impression to others that dowry system does not exist in their society. In reality there is hardly any family which does not provide their daughter with gifts at the time of her marriage. The gifts, however, are made voluntarily with no compulsion from the groom's family that the girl's family should give cash or other assets unlike many societies in India where the groom's family are known to demand dowry. But whenever a daughter leaves the house, the parents want to help her by providing some household articles. In most of the marriage ceremonies conducted in the area of the present study, it is observed that the dowry items primarily consist of brass utensils, two beds (one single and one double bed), 2 to 3 cupboards and gas stoves. In the groom's house, usually 1 or 2 rooms are provided for the newly married couple and the furniture brought by the bride will be arranged there. A bride is also given some gold jewellery. The expenses for the dowry is normally borne by the girl's parents but also often purchased with the money earned by the girl herself.
Significant changes are, however, discernible in the system of giving and taking dowry. Whereas in the past dowry was mostly in the form of household articles, these days some families are even providing their daughter with radio, television, scooter and even car, depending upon the capacity and social status of the parents. It is observed that the more educated and qualified the family is the more dowries are given. The reason for this increase range from the human vanity to display their wealth to the material fact that what was thought as luxurious items a few years back has become a necessity today.

Apart from dowry, bride price is also practiced in Loi society. Sometimes, if the family of the girl is very poor or if the girl’s parents are not in favour of having relationship with the ‘would be son-in-law’, the girl’s family might ask for bride price from the groom’s family. Like dowry, there is no fixed price to be paid by the groom’s family. At times, a large part of the money taken from the groom’s family is spent on buying the articles for the bride to be taken to the groom’s house on the day of the wedding. Interestingly, at the time of study, hardly any man admitted that his in-laws had taken money from him. Despite this denial, a few months before the study, it has been reported that a man’s family had given Rs.50,000 to the girl’s family, but even after receiving the money the girl is not allowed to enter her parental household. The girl is a Meitei from a neighboring Meitei village. When enquired about it a respondent said that the girl comes from a well-to-do family and there was no reason for her parents to take money from the groom’s family. However, the explanation given by the groom’s father is that the girl’s family was not happy with his son because of his link with a terrorist outfit in the state. He further claimed, when they eloped for the first time, the girl’s parents had tried to separate them, but the couple eloped again for the second time and hid outside Manipur for a long time, thus not giving a chance to her parents and relatives to separate them. This incident made the girl’s family very angry and hence decided to demand the
money from the groom's family. In present times, however, such incidents occur very rarely in the village.

The male respondents interviewed said that dowry does not enhance their social status and prestige. Many also feel that one can achieve these things through hard work and sincerity only and not from the dowry brought by the wife. One respondent said: “I value whatever articles my wife brought as dowry from her home but I did not marry her hoping that she would bring all the things that I wanted in my life”. He further adds, “if a woman brought a large dowry, people say the groom is so lucky that he has won a lottery but dowry never occurred to me when I got married. All I wanted was to marry the girl I love and not the dowry.” 19 Another respondent said that even if his daughter-in-law brings lots of dowry, if his son and daughter-in-law do not want to work in life and depend solely on the property she brought, after a few years the property will get over, problems would develop and finally lead to family crisis. He further added, to him that the girl’s character is more important than dowry.20 According to Kh. Joy of Sekmai, those who demand dowry are mean, narrow and business-minded people.21 He goes on to say that at the time of courtship, the couple decides whether they would be able to spend the rest of their life together. Once they decide to marry, the question of dowry never arises, and feels that if they are together, the necessities of life can be acquired with hard work. In the opinion of the villagers, the girls who bring a lot of dowry with them are mostly proud and do so only to show off.

Despite this show of indifference towards dowry, materialism is certainly raising its head in the Loi society. Some respondents reported that now-a-days even the girls themselves have started demanding expensive items such as, television, refrigerator and other household items from the parents otherwise threaten they would not

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19. The interview was held with H. Lor Singh on 12th March 2001 at Khurkhul.
20. The interview was held with Kh. Chandra Singh on 1st April 2001 at Sekmai.
21. The interview was held with Kh. Joy on 11th October 2001 at Sekmai.
marry. Also some of the respondents said if the girls bring dowry it is helpful for the family since they do not have to buy anything from the money they earn and that could be used for some other purpose. One woman commented that if the girl’s parents give dowry then it becomes her property and so it is useful for the new family.\(^{22}\)

Relatedly, in Manipur not only the Lois but most of the communities usually look for working girls who can generate income every month rather than a girl who brings dowry at the times of marriage only. Since more than 90 percent of the marriage is based on love cum elopement, the males profess they are not very particular whether the wife brings dowry or not, rather emotional ties, understanding and compatibility are the assets they look for.

This suggests that in Manipur in general and the Lois in particular, dowry lacked the ideological basis that is central to mainstream Hindu society where it is tied up with the ideology of kanyadan and the inequality between wife givers and wife takers. Among the Lois, bride takers and bride givers are of equal status unlike in many societies of India. In many Hindu marriages in India, the bride takers are always in superior position and bride givers are in many ways obliged to the bride takers. Many of the heinous dowry related crimes committed on brides in India has its roots in this unequal relationship which has also contributed to low status of women in the society. The opposite is seen in the state of Manipur. Before marriage takes place and till the time the bride reaches the groom’s house, bride givers have a better bargaining position than the bride takers. Whatever the bride’s family tells the groom’s family to do or bring some items of stuff, the groom’s family will respond positively to their demands without fail. If they failed to do so, then it is considered that they have failed in their obligation towards the family of the bride. This, however, is not to suggest that the position of women is superior to men. As would be seen in next chapter while

\(^ {22}\) The interview was held with Kh. Chaijon Devi on 10\(^{th}\) March 2001 at Sekmai.
oppression of women is rare gender inequality is not absent in the society.

Polygamy

Hodson opines that: "the Meitheis (Meiteis) are polygamous, and the Raja may have three principal wives, with as many as one hundred and eight subsidiary partners".23 In the words of Dun: "polygamy is common among the well to-do part of the population but the lower orders do not often indulge in it".24 Constantine mentions that: "polyandry has no social sanction while polygamy has".25 Authors like Dun, Hodson, and Constantine used the word "polygamy" to describe the form of marriage in Manipur though in the strict sense of the word 'polygyny' is more appropriate because women are not known to have more than one spouse. Polygyny is an accepted custom among the Loi/Meitei though according to Hindu Marriage Act either of the party should not have a spouse living at the time of marriage.26 The Lois do not practise polyandry. Monogamy is the usual rule while polygyny is socially permissible. The villagers also practise serial monogamy commonly after divorce or after the death of the spouse.

During the present study, it has come to our notice that there are some cases of polygyny, though the practices of such marriages are not very common among the Lois. Out of five polygynous marriages that we came across during the study, in two families, a man married two sisters. In a conversation with a respondent who had two wives, the researcher came to know that the wives of the respondent are sisters; the second wife is still alive whereas the first wife died a few years back.27 When enquired about his marriage to his sister-in-law, the man replied that he married her as his second wife because he had some argument with his brother-in-law at the time of

23. T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis (Delhi:Low Price Publications), 1908, p.76.
27. The interview was held with U. Apabi Singh on 10th October 2001 at Khurkhul.
his first marriage, following which he challenged his brother-in-law that he would marry both the sisters. At the time of marriage the younger sister was no longer a virgin and had eloped with someone, though she separated from her lover after staying with him for a few days. Subsequently, she married her brother-in-law when her sister was still alive. He claimed that his wives rarely fought with each other and if they ever did, it was over their children only. Another woman informant who married her brother-in-law reported that he was already married twice before she got married to him. After divorcing his first wife, he married her sister. Admitting that she was already married to someone else before marrying her brother-in-law, she pointed out that she married the latter not only because he is a caring and loving person but also because he wanted to have a son since her sister gave birth only to daughters. The sisters share a common kitchen and unlike other polygynous wives, they do not fight in public.

Another respondent Ph. Kokansingh has two wives. From the first wife he has two children, a son and a daughter. His second wife is also from the same village. She was a divorcee and already had two children from her first husband and a son from him. Though the wives live in the same compound, they have separate houses and separate kitchens thus reducing the chances of fights which frequently occur in such types of marriages. Most of the males in the present study area, who indulge in polygynous marriage, did not divorce their first wife. Some of the most frequent reasons for polygynous marriage are barrenness, prolonged illness or the wife’s inability to produce a son. But, sometimes there may not be any valid reason but the man may marry two or three times out of the sheer desire for women.

The practice of child marriage is generally unknown in the state of Manipur. Widows may remarry but cannot practise levirate. According to L. Iboongohal, there should be only one marriage in the

28 The interview was held with Ng. Angoubi Devi on 10 March 2001 at Khurkhul
lifetime of a female. There is a saying in Manipuri 'nupigi luhongbadi amuktani nupadi chamarak hongba yai' which means a female can be married only once but a male can marry hundred times. He further said that since there is no proper ceremony in case a woman remarries, she is not considered as a wife but a concubine.

Most of the persons interviewed are of the view that if a widow does not have a child she should remarry but if she has a child it would be better for her to look after the child and not marry again. The reason given by them is that if the widow has a child and married to someone else, she would not be able to look after the child properly and the child's step father may not treat the child like his own. Another version is that if the woman is financially independent she can look after the children on her own without the support of her brothers or another man in her life. Some people are, however, of the view that remarriage for women should be determined by the situation. For example, where the widow is young or do not have any support to fall back on she should remarry. Our field data shows that most of the women, around the age of 40 to 45 years, whose husband died young did not remarry though there are no rules that prevent them from remarrying. Many prefer to look after their children instead of marrying again out of fear that their new husband may not treat their children properly. It has also been observed that if women marry many times leaving their children from the previous marriage behind, people do not talk well about them. These views clearly reveal that no one is concerned with the widow's emotional, psychological and physical needs. The other needs of life become secondary whereas looking after the child is the primary issue in the Loi society.

According to the village monograph brought by the census authority in the State, sororate, levirate and preferential mating are neither practised nor disapproved of socially by the inhabitants. However, fieldwork findings show that while levirate and preferential

marriage are not practised the villagers practise sororate. It has come
to our notice that in some cases a man marries his wife's younger
sister even in the lifetime of the first wife. In one case a man married
his younger sister-in-law because he thought that she would look
after his children properly. In another case a man married his younger
sister-in-law to maintain the continuity of affinal ties between the two
families.

Khainaba or Divorce

While writing about divorce in Manipur, Dun wrote “a man can
put away his wife without any fault on her part.”31 Few women,
however, seek legal redress for divorce, instead, they just leave the
husband's home. In the olden days, the village court (loisang) used to
try cases of divorce. Nowadays, the village court is substituted by the
village panchayat and at other times, the police station acts as
mediator when a divorce takes place, before the case is brought to the
court. Divorce may take place owing to disagreement between the
husband and the wife or due to serious misunderstandings between
the families of the couple or when adultery is committed by either one
of the couple. The procedure for divorce is very simple and either
spouse may initiate divorce proceedings. If the divorce is made by
mutual agreement, the husband should take the children. However, if
at the time of divorce, the couple has a minor child below 3 years in
age, the mother is the custodian of the child. In such cases, the
husband had to give her Rs.6 and twelve bags of paddy as
maintenance for the child in the first year. In the second year, Rs.3
and 6 bags of paddy and in the third year no money was given but
only three bags of paddy has to be given till the child reaches 3 years
of age. When the child reaches the age of 3, it can be taken back to
the father's house. Strictly, there is no fixed amount of maintenance
allowance. In case of divorce, the woman's brothers and relatives
usually take back her dowry from the husband. But if the couple

consumes the dowry before the divorce takes place, the woman's family does not get any remuneration from the husband since both of them have used it together.

In one case, N. Rashi Devi, a 45 years old woman with four children, was divorced by her husband.\(^{32}\) She was given maintenance allowance of Rs.800 by her husband only after filing a case. The reason for the divorce was husband's infidelity, he was having extramarital relations with other women. Even before the divorce took place her husband was already staying with another women whom he later married. In another case, a 61 years old woman, divorced her husband because he used to beat her repeatedly.\(^{33}\) Addicted to alcohol and gambling, her husband kept demanding money all the times, which she could not provide. He also never made any contribution to the family but kept on drinking and gambling. In most cases of divorce, the wives returned to their natal households with or without children. However, the ties between the two families are not broken because of the children but where there are no children these ties are not maintained.

**Death**

Death is another occasion which demands ritual attention; it is considered to be very important not only for the deceased person as well as for the remaining members. The ritual involves a series of sacrifices starting from the time life ceased to function in the body till the performance of the last rite called Karma. Rituals help the afflicted family to cope with the situation by ensuring that the soul of their loved one is going to a better place. It is believed that if no ceremony is performed after death, the soul of the deceased would not be able to reach heaven and will go to hell instead. This idea is not unique to the Lois but widely shared by many societies. Highlighting the significance of death rituals in her article, 'The Symbolic Representation of Death', Meena Kaushik observes: “The death ritual

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\(^{32}\) The interview was held with Nunglepam Rashi Devi on 20 February 2001 at Khurkhul.

\(^{33}\) The interview was held with L. Leiramani Devi on 20 February 2001 at Khurkhul.
is an attempt to allow the profane individual to make contact with the sacred. The ensuing danger is neutralized through an intermediary category of the ritual specialists".34

When the person is about to die a ritual known as ghot puja is performed. Water, money, betel leaf and nut and tairen leaves are kept inside a pot and a place is arranged for the god near the pot with the belief that the god who is carrying the dying person sits there. Then the maiba will be the one who helps the spirit of the deceased to cross from this world to the other world (beita). At that time, the maiba places his hand on the patient and recites the name of god. After the maiba confirms/pronounces the death, a hut is made in the courtyard (khagenpham) to keep the corpse. Inside the hut a full plantain leaf is laid out on the floor and a plantain tree or straw is put in place of a pillow for the deceased. The news of the death is sent out to those who belong to the same singlup (association of families who contribute firewood in times of death) by beating the drums and blowing the clarinets. Besides friends, neighbours and kin, one male and one female of each family who belongs to the same singlup as the deceased must compulsorily be present at the funeral. If any person is found to be absent without any valid reason, he would be fined. The members of the singlup take the responsibility of the entire task such as, informing the distant relatives, doing the shopping, cooking, making the coffin, taking the firewood to the cremation ground etc. If a death takes place in the evening or at night, the cremation is performed in the early morning of the following day. As among the Javanese, among the Lois too, the deceased family will sometimes delay the cremation by an hour or so if some relatives are coming from a distance but would not wait for long.35

After the maiba announces that the person has expired, a hut is constructed and the body is carried out from the house by the maiba

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along with four or five men. Even after death occurred, the maiba cannot take off his hand from the stomach of the deceased till the corpse is put in a hut. The body is taken from the backside of the home and is kept inside the hut. The dead body is covered with a white cloth and a few coins are put in the courtyard of the house. The coins are meant for the smooth passage of the soul from this world to the other world. The villagers believe that one has to cross the Beitarani river after death. In this case, the courtyard is believed to represent the Beitarani river and the coin is put as fare for the boat to cross it. Three pieces of clothes are placed under the corpse above the plantain leaf and three pieces of clothes on top. The corpse's head is kept facing the northern side opposite to the direction the people face their head while sleeping. After the body is settled in the hut, the maiba can take off his hand from the corpse. After that the relatives of the dead carry the corpse out of the hut in order to give it a warm water bath. The corpse hair is washed with rice water (chenghi) to purify him of any sin he has committed in his lifetime. If the dead person is a male, his beard and mustache are shaved off. After the body is bathed and dressed, it is taken back to the hut.

Clothes, utensils, weapons, toothbrush, toothpaste, nail cutter, powder and other articles are kept near the corpse's head to be used by the deceased in the next world. Relatives and well wishers place offerings of money on top of the corpse with the belief that the deceased person will buy eatables with it in the other world. Fruits, such as oranges, bananas, sugarcane, biscuits and other eatables are also offered. The relatives of the dead kill a cock and divide it into many parts. Particular parts of the meat are offered to particular deities along with rice. At Khurkhl, the deities to whom the offerings of food are made after death are Chanuningol, Seroupailou and Yumgi yatra. Simultaneously, food is offered to the spirit of the dead as well. A maiba recites the sacred words while offerings are made in the presence of Kerapuba (a close male agnate and chief mourner who lights the funeral pyre) and Khoidousaba (brother-in-law or the son-
in-law of the deceased). The purpose of the ritual is to ensure that
the spirit of the dead is accepted by the ancestors who have gone
before. While the body remains in the hut, women sing meiring ishei
and girls perform a dance in honour of the dead. The idea of singing
and dancing, while mourning, is to give peace to the departed soul
and unite his soul to the other world.

Cremation Ground

The Lois believe that proper performance of cremation rites
incorporates the deceased’s souls into the world of ancestors.
Therefore, before the body is taken for cremation, a man from the
lineage goes along with few other members in search of a suitable
place to prepare the pyre. He carries a big knife (thangjou) in his right
hand and on his left hand holds a chicken egg, which is thrown up at
the cremation ground and the site where it falls is taken as the right
place for the purpose. The articles required for the pyre are four
posters made of bamboo (Chandawa), four stick (Chukhong), a canopy
(thakan) and two pots. In one of the pots, the fire which is taken out
from phunga and considered to be pure is kept. To keep the fire
burning till they reach the cremation ground, charcoal and husk are
added. The other pot is used for fetching water from the river during
the cremation ceremony.

On the eastern side of the pyre a pit is dug, which is filled with
water to provide comfort to the deceased’s soul at the time of burning.
The villagers believe that there are six souls in a human body. As
death occurs the five souls will leave the body but there is one soul
which keeps flying near the corpse. The soul is believed to sit in the
apex of the knife of kerapuba till the completion of the purification
ceremony.

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36 Among the kins, the sons-in-law (Khoidousaba) of the house or the lineage of the
deceased, take special responsibility for the proper completion of the funeral rituals. At
Khurkhul, only one khoidousaba is required for both the sexes whereas in Sekmai, three
khoidousabas for male deceased and two khoidousabas for female deceased are required.
The coffin where the corpse is placed is made in the shape of a house. The coffin is carried by four or five men to the cremation ground followed by friends and relatives of the bereaved family. During the journey from the house of the dead to the cremation ground, the man who carries the pot which contains burning charcoal (meikoi chaphu) marches ahead of the coffin. In case the death is of a village chief or other important officials, a man known as Khousaba, with a spear in hand, dances three times in front of the coffin. Firstly, the man dances when the corpse is just about to be carried away from the courtyard; secondly, when the procession reaches mid-way between the cremation ground and the courtyard; thirdly, when they reach the cremation ground. On the way to the cremation ground, flower petals and coins are thrown on the coffin. Whenever the coffin crosses a river, a thread which serves as a bridge for the soul, is put by one of the mourners. On reaching the cremation ground the body is kept on the pyre. The firewood or singkhan are then arranged in order. At Khurkhul, five rows of firewood are put for males and six rows of firewood are put for females, whereas at Sekmai, five rows of firewood is required for males and four rows of firewood is required for females. After taking bath in a river near the cremation ground, the kerapuba fetches water in a pot. He keeps the pot filled with water on his right shoulder and on his left hand holds the knife. Before lighting the pyre, the kerapuba followed by other people encircles it five times if the deceased is a male and 6 times if the deceased is a female at Khurkhul, whereas, at Sekmai, it is three rounds for male and two rounds for female. After that, the kerapuba ignites the pyre using the fire brought from the deceased’s house. As the pyres start burning, women and children go back to their respective houses.

Before the body is completely burnt, it is put off with water to collect a part of the bone from the charred forehead of the corpse. The

37. The Khoidousaba perform the spear dance in Sekmai.
38. Differences in arranging the number of rows of firewood called singkhan and differences in the number of circling the funeral pyre determine whether the deceased is a male or a female.
bone taken out from the forehead is divided into two, one part of which is crushed into powder and buried in their lineage leipung (mound). Among those who could afford the journey the remaining part of the bone is washed properly, preserved for sometime and taken to Koubru hill (a sacred place of the Lois), on an auspicious day and favourable season because the bone of the deceased is considered as a sacred element.

Among those who attend the funeral, a few men will break the corpse into pieces. The body is burnt till it turns to ashes, these and charcoal are left in the pyre only. At the place where the body is burned, mustard and cottonseeds are thrown on it so that greeneries will grow and help to restore the area to its original condition. Once the cremation is over, dirty and soiled clothes used by the deceased during illness are either thrown away or burnt. Whoever attends the funeral must take bath since they are considered to be polluted. The clothes worn by them should be washed. They have to cross a fire light up near the gate before entering their houses.

The chief mourner cooks his own food and cannot mix around with anybody till the house is purified. He offers a share of food cooked by him to the cot which was used by the deceased while alive and he himself takes his food only after the offering is made. He cannot touch anyone because he is considered to be polluted till the purification ceremony (yumsengba), since the soul of the dead is believed to be in his knife.

Yumsengba (Purifying the House)

At Sekmai, at the time of death, the household and those who belong to the same segment of the sagei, observes pollution for one day, whereas in Khurkhul it is for three days. The members cooperate and help the family members in times of need. It may be mentioned here that a strong solidarity is present among the kinsmen. At Khurkhul, a day before yumsengba, a cock or a hen is given to the bereaved family by close relatives and friends as offering to the deities and also to the ancestors. Elderly members are invited
orally. Death itself is a social occasion where lavish feasts are thrown up in honour of the death. On the day of yumsengba the deceased family gives a feast where all those who attend the ceremony are offered food. The feast is served, organized and arranged by the family. All kinsmen, affines and friends are invited to the feast.

Early in the morning, the chief mourner and close relatives take part in the purification rite in the presence of friends and neighbours. The ceremony is presided by the priest. Worship is observed at the cremation ground to the deceased followed by offerings made to the ancestors who have died earlier and to the deities: Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, nine Laipangthous and seven Lainuras. Eggs and chicken are offered in these ceremonies. Besides meat, other eatables such as oranges, lemons, sugarcanes, betel nuts and leaves are also offered and subsequently the food offered is consumed by those who participate in the ceremony. Once the ceremony at the cremation ground is over, they return to the house of the bereaved family. Before entering the house all those who had gone to the cremation ground including the priest take bath and cross the fire.

At the same time, while they are away the whole house is cleaned by the relatives of the deceased. The khoidousaba or the priest purifies the house by sprinkling water with bunch of sacred leaves over the persons and all around. With this ritual, the house of the whole group is considered to be purified. The relatives wash the clothes, utensils and other things used by the chief mourner and they themselves are also purified by taking bath and crossing the fire.

Thawai-kouba (Calling the Soul of a Normal Death)

The Lois believe that the soul (thawai) of the deceased keeps flying in and around the house until the ceremony called thawai-kouba is performed. This ceremony in which the soul of the deceased is called by a maiba is performed in the evening of the day the house is purified. Rice and chicken are offered to the soul. The maiba, while reciting the holy words, requests the soul to stay back till the last rite called karma is over. Karma is a ceremony which integrates the
deceased's soul into the community of ancestors where it remains in peace forever.

**Calling the Soul of Those Who Had Unnatural Death**

The Lois believe that the souls of those person who had unnatural death cannot be incorporated with the other dead ancestors. Thus the souls of such person keep wandering between the world of the dead and that of the living. In order to incorporate the deceased’s soul with other members of the lineage who died earlier the ceremony of *chuksaba* is performed. One day ahead of the ceremony, a priest calls the souls of the deceased. The priest, accompanied by one of the deceased's relatives, traces the place where the death occurs so that he can recall the soul. If the location of the incident happens to be very far, then the priest calls the soul facing the direction where the death is supposed to have occurred. After calling the soul, the imaginary soul is placed on the left side of the house called *ashithong* where a *phijang* (a cloth ceiling) is kept. In front of the *phijang*, rice, curry, fruits and vegetables are offered to the soul. A thread is lengthened from inside the *phijang* to the abode of the deity, *Leimaren*. After that, the priest invites the soul and the deceased’s spirit to attend the *chuksaba* ceremony on the next day.

**Chuksaba**

All unnatural deaths occurring in the absence of a *maiba* are considered to be *lamsi*. For unnatural death, a ritual called *chuksaba* is performed by the lineage. It is a rite performed to appease the god *Akan-athou* so that such catastrophe does not occur in the family and lineage in future. The Lois believe that the ancestors in the other world do not accept the soul of those who had abnormal death until this ceremony is performed.

Broadly, there are 3 different types of *Chuksaba*:

1. *Lai Chuksa*
2. *Phunga Chuksa*
3. *Chuksa Achouba Piba Phamba.*
The first two types of *chuksabas* are simple ones and do not require any elaborate ritual. The third type is the most elaborate one and held in high esteem. In this ritual, the head of the lineage and the village pundit are the most important persons whose presence is essential. Whoever comes for the ceremony brings some rice, some money, an egg and sacred leaves (*langthrei*). These items are compulsorily sent even if those members fail to be present.

A winnowing fan, a pestle (*suk*) and a sickle are borrowed from another lineage. Two pots which are called *nahaiphu* and *chindengphu* are necessary. A knife, an outer part of the plantain tree, a kind of grass (*tengthou*), and some hairs of the dog and sheep are placed on the winnowing fan. On the northern side of the house, a mound of rice (*chengbung*) is placed and at the apex of the courtyard a stool made of bamboo strips is kept for the deity. On top of it, a black piece of cloth is kept because the deity *Akan-athou* is believed to wear only black clothes. A specially designated place (*lukpham*) is kept for the deceased. Whatever offerings are made to the deities are offered to the spirits of the deceased also.

For the ceremony the courtyard is divided into two parts. The northern side is reserved for the daughters and daughter-in-laws of the lineage and the southern side for the males of the lineage. The head of the lineage sits in front of the mound of rice. In the middle of the courtyard a plantain leaf is placed, on top of it another mound of rice is poured. After that *laphutharo* (flower of plantain tree) covered in a white cloth is kept in the middle of the rice which is surrounded by eggs arranged in the shape of a hill.

Tabooed food, few plants and vegetables are kept near the mound of rice. The plants and the vegetables, which are used in this ceremony, cannot be used until the next *chuksaba* ceremony of the lineage. The tabooed food is replaced in every *chuksaba* by another object, not frequently used by the *sagei* members. For this ceremony, one male member of the *sagei* who represents the chief mourner is chosen to assist the pundit. He is considered to be polluted during the
ceremony and when the ceremony is over, he purifies himself by taking a bath and crossing the fire. He sits in front of the winnowing fan facing the village pundit during the ceremony. Whatever the pundit asks him to do, he follows it. For example, when the pundit asks him to cut the furs of the sheep, he follows his instructions. When the family cannot afford a sheep furs are used as a substitute.

At the end of the ceremony, the head of the sagei gets up and bows down before the deity, Akan-athou and washes his mouth three times. After that, he crosses the fire where sacred leaves are kept burning to ward off the evil spirits. After that, all the men and women who attend the ceremony bow to the deity and wash their mouth using the same water from the pot and then cross over the fire. The chief mourner breaks the pot (nahaiphu) and throws the pestle behind him with its apex pointing towards the south because evils are believed to be driven away towards south.

On the left side of the house, a siknang plant is placed in an upright position and nine leaves of particular plant called ashi-khangra are tied together dangling on the siknang plant. The leaves are tied to the plant by a piece of cane (lihing). Then, the pundit cuts the cane and throws the sickle in the courtyard. If the serrated blade of the sickle faces the house, it is considered to be a bad omen. Hence, the blade of the sickle should face away from the house. A winnowing fan is kept on the right side of the house. Whoever comes for the ceremony throws a coin on the winnowing fan and the coins should not come up on the porch, rather it should fall in the courtyard.

The pundit closes the ceremony with a prayer asking the ancestors to accept the spirit of the deceased into their fold. The Lois believe that after performing this ceremony the soul of those person who had an un-natural death would be incorporated into the world of the ancestors. The articles offered during the ceremony including the pots, paddy and eggs are taken by the pundit along with some money gifted by the concerned family. The leftover offerings cannot be taken
back to the house. The articles borrowed from other sageis are symbolically purchased from the Pundit after offering him some money and return it to the respective owners. All the things meant for the Pundit are taken to his house by a youth.

**Karma**

Unlike the Meiteis, the Lois do not perform *sradha* after death. Instead of *sradha* they perform *karma*. No shrines are constructed at the cremation ground in honour of the deceased. If the family desires to construct shrines or relics in memory of the departed soul, it is usually in the courtyard or near the gate of the house.

The last rite after death is called *karma*. For performing *karma*, an auspicious date is chosen by the family members in consultation with the village pundit and also on a date which is suitable to the deceased family so that they would be able to arrange the articles needed at the time of the ceremony. *Karma* is performed usually in the month of November or December after the harvesting season is over. Few days before *karma*, a tent is made in front of the house for the purpose. The villager spends lots of time and money while making the tent and also arranging other requirements for the ceremony. Neighbours and relatives especially the sagei members and those people who are likely to be invited for the ceremony, come to help the family of the deceased in making the tent, collecting the fire woods from the hills, cleaning up the place arranged for feast and also getting the plantain leaves from the hills. One informant expressed the view that in the past, cooking oil needed for the ceremony was made at home by hand, thereby consuming lots of time and energy.39

Till recently, the *karma*, being an elaborate affair, was observed for three consecutive days. The first day is called *phu houba*, which means lighting the fire for cooking. On the evening of the *phu houba*, a feast is provided by the family of the deceased to their kith and kin and food is also offered to the spirit of the deceased on all the three

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39. As has been told by Ng. Pheigoljao of Khurkhul on 14th January 2001.
days of celebration. The first and second day of the *karma* is celebrated in the evening and the last day of the *karma* is celebrated in the morning. The second day is called *ashinman khuramba* and the third day is called *karma* and the whole rite from the first till the third day of celebration is also known by the term *karma*. The food is cooked by the youth who are usually related to the owner of the house. Rice and meat are the main items. The cooks are not given any remuneration but are provided country liquor and cigarette to be consumed at the time of cooking. If Meiteis are invited in the functions, a separate kitchen is used for them. And Brahmin cooks are hired for cooking for which they are given not less than Rs. 100 after the ceremony is over. Along with these, gifts are also offered to the Brahmin cooks. When Brahmans are invited for cooking, rice and fish constitute the main items instead of meat.

On the day of *karma* a traditional instrument (*pena*) is played by a musician (*penasakpa*) before the people gathered at the time of the ceremony. The main theme of *karma* is to invite the soul of the deceased person and ancestors to attend the ceremony performed in honour of the deceased. Food to be eaten and clothes to be worn by the deceased in the other world are provided by the *maiba* on this day. The main purpose of performing *karma* is to ensure that the deceased live happily with the ancestors in the other world. In the morning of *karma*, a figure of the deceased is made with cloth. The figure is different for the different sexes. The female deceased are adorned with female dress and the male deceased are attired in male costumes. In front of the figure, the relatives offer food and drink and the *maiba* recites the sacred words. Between the recitations of holy words by the *maiba*, prayers are made for the soul of the deceased. This is often accompanied by crying by family members. After making the food offering to the figure of the deceased, the family members eat the offered food. The clothes used as representation of the deceased are

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40. At Khurkhul emulating the Vaishnavite Meiteis, a few of unconverted Hindu Lois starting employing *sankirtana* singers instead of *pena.*
gifted to the deceased’s friends and relatives after the ceremony is over.

*Karma* is a very expensive and time-consuming ceremony. A lot of money and labour is required for the ceremony. Earlier, the ceremony was held for three days but nowadays it is reduced to two days. In all these days, meat and fish are the main items of food. A villager recalled how he became poor suddenly after celebrating *karma* of his parents for two consecutive years. At that time his relatives helped him physically but not financially. At present, assistance comes from the close relatives too. There is a system called *potpang* in which all the invitees bring gifts to the bereaved family either in cash or kind. But such gifts are always reciprocal ones. In some of the *sageis*, the members provide certain fixed amount of rice and money to the bereaved family but such help is different from *sagei* to *sagei*.

When enquired from the villagers what would happen if the person is not able to perform *karma*, they answered that *karma* has to be performed compulsorily for the well being of the deceased. Informants expressed that if there are no relatives of the deceased, then the *sagei* members have to contribute in order to perform the *karma* of the deceased. If one cannot perform the *karma* at all, then the family of the deceased would request another family of the *sagei* to allow them to jointly conduct the ceremony for their deceased kin. Such cases of participating on the *karma* of some other families are very rare. However, one cannot join in the *karma* of other *sageis*. Because just as male members of the *sagei* are expected to remain united in their life time, they should also be united after death. Women, however are integrated into the *sagei* and clan of their husband and also with their ancestors. In the rare case when *karma* is jointly performed for two persons, then two separate figures would have to be made. All the items offered should also be doubled to cater to both the deceased members. In case another person in a *sagei* dies

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41. As told by H. Damar Singh on 29th March 2001 at Khurkhul.
before the celebration of *karma* for the one who died that year, then in such cases, the *karma* of the second deceased cannot surpass the *karma* of the first. In case the *karma* for the first deceased has not yet been performed and the *karma* for the latter is to be performed, in such cases the share of the food and drinks for the former is offered along with the latter. However, the *karma* should not be overlapped.

**Conclusion**

This chapter gives a brief account of the rituals carried out in the Loi society when a Loi passes through various stages of life. A variety of rites are performed by a Loi concerning the events of birth, marriage, and death to mark the passage of a person from one stage of life to another or from one social position to another. These ceremonies are important not only to validate the change of status brought about by these events but also to soften the psychological and social crisis that often accompany such changes. By ritualizing the event, it helps to integrate the individuals concerned into the new situation. As mentioned in the chapter, the Lois routinely observe *kokthok chamthokpa*, a pregnancy rite which is performed to ensure the safety of the pregnant mother and unborn child, *nahutpa*, the ear boring ceremony that marks the passage of a child from a god-like status and its formal incorporation into the world of human beings, and the series of rituals performed at the time of marriage and death of a person.