

## TANGKHUL COSMOS: WEAVING OF SKY, EARTH, AND HUMANITY IN SYMPHONY

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The Tangkhul tribe, nestled in the Northeastern region of India, possesses a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in their cosmological framework. Their cosmology intricately weaves together the celestial and terrestrial realms. This paper aims to unravel the complexities of their cosmology, exploring its spiritual and philosophical underpinnings and shedding light on the tribe's beliefs, rituals, and way of life. Delving into the nuanced relationships between the sky, the earth, and humanity reveals the profound connections that shape their life and worldview. Drawing upon the wisdom of elders, cosmologists, and scholars, it investigates the fundamental cosmological concepts at the core of this society. It examines their relationship with the cosmos and their significance in guiding and influencing various aspects of their life. Central to this exploration is the concept of interdependent existence and the reciprocal relationships between humans, the natural environment, and celestial powers. Through rituals, ceremonies, and ancestral practices, they strive to maintain harmony and balance within this cosmic web, ensuring the well-being of both individuals and the community. The search string will be per the above query and include synonyms and alternative spellings using OR and AND combinations. The authors used boolean OR and AND to build search strings after finding the relevant keywords.

**Keywords:** Tangkhul, cosmology, ecology, celestial, earth, interconnectedness, beliefs, rituals

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## **Introduction**

Cosmology is a fascinating field of study that seeks to explain the origin and evolution of the universe, including its contents and underlying physical processes. The term comes from the Greek words ‘Kosmos’ (the world) and ‘Logos’ (discourse), which refers to the study of the universe’s origin, structure, and development. It is considered a branch of metaphysics that follows ontology and studies the nature and meaning of being while treating the universe as an ordered system. The resulting cosmological theories are shaped by an individual’s or group’s sociological, philosophical, or scientific preferences, making cosmology a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field of study (Nwala, 1985). Thus, it can also be seen as the collection of people’s beliefs about origin, life, death, happiness, fears, and the meaning of life. It encompasses a culture’s fundamental similarities, such as social structure, language, folkways, mores, and human productions (Etim, 2006).

Cosmology has played an important role in human culture throughout history. Many cultures have their own cosmological myths and legends that explain the origins of the universe and the place of humans in it. These myths often reflect the values and beliefs of the culture that created them. For example, the creation myth of the ancient Greeks tells the story of how the gods created the universe. This myth reflects the Greek belief in the importance of order and harmony (West, 1966). It is not limited to the scientific study of the universe but encompasses the way various cultures interpret and understand the cosmos and their place within it. In the vast tapestry of human civilisations, every culture holds a unique perspective on the mysteries of the cosmos and its interconnectedness with our earthly existence.

Each culture has its own unique beliefs about the universe, and these beliefs are often reflected in their art, music, rituals, myths, folktales, and oral literature. For instance, the Dogon people of Mali have a rich and complex cosmology that is based on their observations of the night sky. They believe that the universe was created by a supreme being called Amma, who created the stars and planets. The Dogon also believes in several other deities, including the Nommo, a race of amphibious beings that are said to have brought civilisation to the Dogon. Their understanding of celestial phenomena goes beyond mere observations, as their cosmology interweaves with their social and cultural fabric. The night sky, with its stars, planets, and constellations, serves as a celestial map, guiding the Dogon in matters such

as agricultural cycles, navigation, and religious rituals. Their cosmology, thus, influences various aspects of their daily lives, fostering a deep connection between the people and the cosmos (Azuoonye, 1999). The Aboriginal people of Australia have a different cosmology from that of the Dogon people. They conceive of the universe as comprising two realms: the 'Dreamtime,' the world of ancestors where the laws of the universe were established, and the 'present world,' where humans reside. 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' is a vital aspect of their spirituality, referring to the time of creation when ancestral spirits shaped the land and established customs and laws that governed both realms. The 'present world' mirrors the Dreamtime and serves as the dwelling place for humans (Stanner, 1979). Similarly, the Navajo's cosmology centred around the concept of the 'Holy People' who played a crucial role in creating the world. Their sacred narratives describe the emergence of the 'First Man' and 'First Woman' from the underworld, leading to the establishment of the current world. Navajo cosmology is closely tied to their spiritual practices and traditional ceremonies (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1946).

The diversity of cosmological beliefs across different cultures and communities is a testament to the rich tapestry of human thought and imagination. Cultures have developed their cosmologies based on their unique historical experiences, geographical environments, social structures, and interactions with the natural world. While some societies have embraced cosmologies rooted in religious or spiritual traditions, others have developed cosmologies influenced by secular philosophies or scientific worldviews. The study of cosmology from a cultural perspective enriches our understanding of human cognition, societal development, and the evolution of ideas. Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists analyse how cosmological beliefs influence human behaviour, rituals, and social structures. They explore how cosmologies contribute to a sense of identity, community cohesion, and worldview formation. One example of research in this area is Mircea Eliade's work in the field of comparative religion and the history of religions. In his book "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion" (1959), Eliade explores how cosmological beliefs shape religious experiences and rituals, demonstrating how the sacredness of the cosmos is perceived in diverse cultural contexts. By recognising and studying the diversity of cosmological beliefs, we gain insights into the complexity of human thought and cultural expression. This knowledge fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for the various ways humans have sought to make sense of the universe and their

place within it. It also encourages a more inclusive and respectful approach to the coexistence of different cosmological worldviews in our interconnected global society.

### **Tangkhul Cosmology**

Over the centuries, Tangkhul, one of the major ethnic communities of the Nagas inhabiting the northeastern part of Manipur, Ukhrul and Kamjong districts, has developed a rich cosmological framework that weaves the celestial and terrestrial realms together. Their profound understanding of the universe, passed down through generations, forms the foundation of their cultural identity and provides insights into their beliefs, rituals, and way of life. This paper seeks to unravel the intricate arras of their cosmology and delve into the depths of their spiritual and philosophical understandings, drawing upon the collective wisdom of their elders, cosmologists, and scholars. Exploring the nuanced relationships between the sky, the earth, and humanity sheds light on the profound connections that have shaped their life and worldview. It emphasises the interdependence between the celestial and terrestrial realms and the reciprocal relationships between humans, nature, and celestial powers. The study also examines the adaptability of Tangkhul cosmological beliefs and their relevance in modern times. Deciphering celestial and terrestrial connections enrich our understanding of their culture and provides insights into how they find meaning in the cosmos.

Tangkhul cosmology refers to the traditional belief system and understanding of their surrounding world. It is based on the concept of the universe, which is divided into three distinct realms: upper (heaven), middle (Earth), and lower (underworld). The upper realm is home to the supreme deity, '*Āmeowo*,' and other deities, celestial beings, and ancestors. The middle realm is home to humans and other terrestrial beings and is seen as a place of struggle and hardship, while the lower realm is home to the underworld and evil spirits believed to have the power to influence the living world. Each realm is interconnected and intertwined, and one realm's actions can directly impact the others. They believe all living beings are interconnected and interdependent and that humans are responsible for maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature and spirits.

Heaven is the abode of *Āmeowo*, the Supreme Being (deity) said to have created the universe and all living and non-living things similar to the Christian God, *Lakota* (Sioux), and *Cherokee's* Great Spirit (Money, 1902; Walker,

1980), is known by various local names, such as ‘*Kasa Akhava*’ (the creator), ‘*Zingwunga*’ (King of Heaven), ‘*Varivara*’ (King of peace), and ‘*Ngaleiwung*’ (King of the Earth) (Mataisang, 2002). However, the creation process has not been recorded in their myths. It may have been lost or not recorded in their historical narratives. They have tales about the appearance of the rainbow and the evolution of the Three Linear Stars. The folktales often reveal the significance of heavenly phenomena in their daily lives. For instance, the Six Stars (Castor) were believed to be home to incest couples after death as they were not allowed to live together with others. Folktales also explain the length of day and night, the origin of death, and the interaction between humans and animals (Luikham, 1983).

Tangkhuls closely observed natural phenomena, interpreting them as signs in their daily lives. They believed that natural events, such as the flowering of bamboo, could foretell good or bad occurrences, like an impending famine. This practice of reading signs from nature is found in many indigenous cultures worldwide, known as ethnoecology or traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes, 1999). Additionally, Tangkhuls share a strong bond with animals, as seen in their folktales and similarities with cultures like the Maasai, who have a close relationship with cattle as a divine gift (Spear, 1993). Similar to the Hindu belief that Shiva causes earthquakes (Singh, 2020), they believe that earthquakes are caused by the deity *Āmeowo* to test the existence of humans on earth. To alert *Āmeowo* and prevent further shaking, every family would shout, “We are here” or “We are alive” during an earthquake. It was also believed that the *Āmeowo* would continue to shake the earth if they did not respond. Thus, they needed to respond to the earthquake by shouting to alert Him who is responsible for natural disasters. This belief in natural disasters as divine tests is also found in various cultures, including Christianity (Nelson, 2014).

The Tangkhul tribe has fascinating cosmological beliefs that are reflected in their mythology. They perceive rainbows as significant celestial phenomena signalling the end of rain. In their myth, the goddess of the sky, *Kazing Philāva*, inadvertently allowed rain to continue despite the creator’s instructions. Consequently, she faced punishment from *Kasā Ākhavā*, who later created the rainbow as a divine sign of rain cessation. The Tangkhul view the rainbow as a bridge connecting heaven and earth; pointing at it is believed to bring harm.

Moreover, a rainbow encircling the sun is believed to foretell the impending death of a village chief. The appearance and location of the rainbow are believed to indicate future weather conditions, with a high-in-the-sky rainbow predicting sunny days and one just above the earth's surface foretelling more rain. Besides the disappearance of animals and plants, the drying up of rivers and the occurrence of natural disasters indicated a corrupt world where divine protection is no longer present. Thus, the people perform rituals and ceremonies to prevent tragedies and maintain a harmonious relationship with nature. These practices involved sacrifices, offerings, prayers, and hymns to appease the gods. They aim to safeguard their community's well-being and avert calamities by nurturing a balanced connection with the natural world.

In another legend, the Tangkhul associates the Three Linear Stars (Orion) with the 'hunting stars' called '*Khujao*.' This story revolves around Pengmayung, a skilled hunter, and his quest to capture a magical deer that continuously eluded him. His relentless pursuit, symbolised by the three stars, led him and his faithful dog beyond the village and into space, where their daily hunt continued. These tales offer an intriguing glimpse into the Tangkhul's unique cosmology and their profound connection to the natural and celestial realms (Horam, 2010; Khamuinao, 1999). Their cosmology is a rich and complex belief system reflecting their unique worldview. Their myths and legends offer a glimpse into their past and present, and they continue to play an important role in their culture.

The reasons why roosters crow and '*Chaklen bird*' can foretell the future have been explained in their folktale. The story suggests that after *Kasā Ākhavā* had created all the creatures on earth, he wanted them to decide the length of day and night. The tiny-eyed mole suggested that the day and night be separated by one year. Similarly, a beast known as '*Kharei*,' or lion, suggested day and night should last for one year each so that he could prey on and consume all the other creatures, but was dismissed by many of the creatures, who argued that it was impractical to work for a whole year and then sleep for another. Despite a lengthy discussion, no agreement could be reached on earth's length of day and night. Finally, a clever *Chaklen*, perched on top of bamboo, proposed that there should be brief rest and work periods. The assembly accepted this proposal, and *Chaklen* was chosen to predict good and bad events in reward for his brilliant idea. At the same time, *Kasā Ākhavā* appointed the rooster to determine the lengths of day and night. The rooster

was instructed to crow when he was tired to take rest, which would determine the day's length or setting of the sun. When the rooster woke up after having fully recovered his strength, he was to crow to determine the night's length or the sun's rising, thus ushering the day and night. Since that day, the world has regularly received light and darkness (Luikham, 1983). These folktales show how cultures strive to comprehend the natural world, providing valuable insights into the unique worldview and belief system of the Tangkhul tribe. It reflects the importance of balance and harmony in the natural world. Day and night are two essential parts of the natural world, and they must be in balance for the world to function properly.

### **Journey Beyond: Exploring the Tangkhul Perception of Death**

Death, the irreversible termination of biological processes necessary for life, is a complex and multifaceted concept explored by philosophy, religion, psychology, and biology. Philosophically, it has been debated as the end of life or a transition to another state. Religions offer diverse beliefs, such as an afterlife or reincarnation. Death impacts individuals and society psychologically, influencing behaviour and prompting grief and mourning. Death occurs biologically when vital organs cease functioning due to disease, injury, or ageing. It encompasses diverse interpretations and implications across different human understanding and experience realms.

Tangkhuls have a unique and fascinating perception of death deeply rooted in their cultural and religious beliefs. According to their traditions, death is not viewed as an end but rather as a transition to another realm of existence. It was seen as a normal element of the life cycle. A person's spirit departs from the body after death and goes to the next life. In this journey beyond, the soul continues its spiritual voyage, experiencing various stages before reaching its final destination. The soul journeys through different realms after death based on its deeds in life. Virtuous actions lead to higher realms of eternal bliss and reunion with ancestors, while negative actions may result in a lower spiritual destination. In paradise, the soul finds joy and harmony with loved ones. Alternatively, a lower realm entails purification and penance for spiritual growth. Accordingly, the living performs rituals and ceremonies to honour the deceased and facilitate the soul's transition to the spirit realm. When a person dies, their loved ones prepare the body for burial, dressed in fine attire and adorned with traditional ornaments, showing respect and facilitating a peaceful departure. Over several days, prayers, chants, and offerings were made

to *Āmeowo* and ancestral spirits on the day of the burial and Thisham<sup>2</sup> festival. These rituals bring people together to mourn and support the grieving family. The aim is to ensure a smooth transition of the soul and offer comfort to the living. They are deeply rooted in their cultural traditions and help ensure the well-being of the living and the deceased.

They believe that human beings possess multiple souls. They recognise primary souls called '*Manglā*.' The *Manglā* is the vital soul that gives life and consciousness to an individual. It resides in the physical body and is associated with earthly existence, which is believed to leave the body upon death and continue to exist in the spirit realm. Tangkhul cosmology encompasses belief in various spirit realms. They perceive the universe as comprising different dimensions, including the human world, the spirit world, and the divine realm. The spirit world is believed to be inhabited by ancestral spirits, nature spirits, and other supernatural beings. In this realm, the souls of the deceased continue their existence after death. The soul embarks on a journey after biological death, seen as transitioning from the earthly realm to the spirit realm. It then undergoes a process of purification and transformation before it can join the realm of ancestors. Ancestral spirits hold significant importance in their culture and are revered, and their guidance and blessings are sought for various aspects of life. They are believed to have a continued presence and influence in the lives of their descendants and play a crucial role in maintaining harmonious relationships with their God and the living.

While not all Tangkhul people believe in reincarnation, it is a concept that exists within their spiritual framework. Some villages believe that the souls of the deceased can be reborn into new bodies. The process of reincarnation is seen as a means for the soul to continue its spiritual growth and evolution journey. According to this belief, the human soul is divided into two parts: the '*Lairem*' and the '*Shongza*.' The *Lairem*, considered the immortal part of the soul, is responsible for an individual's personality and character and is believed to depart from the body upon death and journey to the land of the dead. The *Shongza*, on the other hand, is considered the mortal part of the soul, which leaves the body during sleep and returns upon awakening. They believed in reincarnation and an afterlife, where the souls of the deceased continued to exist in a realm known as the '*Mayang-rin*.' The realm is believed to be similar to the world of the living but only inhabited by the

<sup>2</sup> Thisham is a festival of the dead celebrated in Khayon kachāng (December) to honour the departed souls.

spirits of the dead. Similar to the Hindu belief, the actions of an individual in their previous life influence their soul's rebirth, and therefore, they engage in various rituals and offerings to appease the spirits of their ancestors. The *Lairem* soul can be reborn into a new body after death, but the process may take several years or even decades. The Tangkhul values leading a moral and virtuous life to ensure a better rebirth.

Tangkhul also believed that the soul permanently departs from the body after death and does not return. Accordingly, the soul is referred to by them as '*Manglā*' and is considered to be the essence of a person. It is an intangible and everlasting entity, while the body is mortal and tangible. This perception of the soul influenced their conception of the afterlife. They believed that the deceased's soul enters the "land of death" called '*Kazeiram*,' ruled by a king named '*Kokto*.' *Kazeiram* is believed to be near the eastern border of Tangkhul country, located at Hango Kaphung, a mountainous area around 50 kilometres east of Ukhrul and about 3 kilometres south of Chamu village (Shimray, 1994). *Kokto* resides in a grand mansion with guards stationed on all sides to prevent outsiders from entering. When a soul approaches the mansion, *Kokto* determines its identity (Hudson, 1911).

Life on *Kazeiram* is comparable to life on Earth, where a person would marry the same partner and have the same children as in the living world (Shimray, 2000). They believed that the rich would remain wealthy and the poor remain poor in *Kazeiram*, just as they existed in the living world. Thus, when a person dies, people bury various household items and the deceased's belongings, believing that these items will be useful in the *Kazeiram*, where people re-enact their lives on Earth. The deceased's soul will be welcomed by the relatives who have died earlier and exchange news and gifts. However, those who died unnaturally, such as through suicide or animal attacks, were stopped from entering *Kazeiram* and became wondering souls (Shimray, 1994). Their perception of death underscores their belief in the interconnection between the living and the spiritual realms. However, beliefs and practices within the Tangkhul community may vary due to personal interpretations, regional distinctions, and modern influences. Consequently, death is just one facet of their culturally and spiritually rich traditions.

### **Tangkhul Folktales: Where Myth Meets Reality**

Myths are traditional stories passed down through generations, believed to be true by the culture where it exists. They explain the origins of the

universe, humankind, and society, often featuring gods, heroes, and fantastic creatures (Mercatante, 1988). These narratives, known as myths, served important functions in traditional cultures: expressing beliefs, enforcing morality, and providing guidance. They narrate sacred history and convey fundamental truths about humanity's relationship with the world. Myths are social and communal, binding societies through rituals. They are not mere fiction but contain an expression of reality transmitted orally within each community (Malinowski, 1954). Thus, myths are an essential component of human civilisation and are not just a product of human imagination but contain an expression of reality transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community (Vansina, 1930; Eliade, 1963; Wellek & Warren, 1985; Kirk, 1970; Bulfinch, 1993; Coffins, 1979; Handoo, 1998; Bolaji, 1975; Anyanwu, 1987).

Tangkhul myths and literature demonstrate the impact of their belief systems on environmental attitudes, emphasising their role in their conservation initiatives. It reflects their harmonious relationship with nature, strong community bonds, and the significance they place on preserving ancestral traditions, allowing them to connect with their ancestors and the natural world around them. It bridges the mythical past and the present, where their myths come alive, allowing us to appreciate the profound cultural heritage and wisdom embedded within their mythological narratives. It is a testament to the enduring power of folklore and its ability to connect to the roots while embracing the ever-changing world. It contains and expresses their history, culture, and experiences. They use myths to explain how things came to be through the efforts of a supernatural being. It describes God as the Supreme Being who created everything in the universe, and after creating the universe, He lives in it and sustains its inhabitants. Their myths explain great human concerns and realities such as death, creation, the evolution of living things, and man's relationship with other living creatures in the context of their cultures. Some myths explain natural processes or events. Such myths, for example, explain how the leopard got its spots, how the dog got its fur, how rivers, lakes, and oceans form, and so on.

Tangkhul mythology highlights the profound connection between humans and animals, portraying them as sharing a common language and possessing human-like qualities. Folktales and fables personify birds and animals, showcasing the intricate relationship between humans and nature. The tales

often depict nature as intelligent and alive, with humans transforming into animals and vice versa, blurring the boundaries between them. Animals are seen as messengers for the gods, underscoring the sacred importance placed on the natural world. These mythological beliefs remain integral to their culture, shaping their identity and way of life. Below are some examples of myths that explore the symphony of sky-human-nature interconnections:

*The Tale of the Rooster's Crow: The First Human Death in the Tangkhul World:* Tangkhul has a tale about the first human death in the world. It begins with the rooster crowing to mark the start and end of each day. In this story, before the rooster crow, the flying fox, feeling hungry after a long sleep, accidentally drops a walnut on a passing crab, causing the crab to panic and destroy an ant colony. The enraged ants then attack a sleeping wild boar, mistakenly believing it to be responsible for the destruction. Distressed, the boar uproots banana trees, inadvertently destroying a bat's nest. Startled, the bat flies into an elephant's nose, provoking him to trumpet and stampede, ultimately leading to the first human death in their world. This event causes great turmoil and commotion. In response, *Kasā Ākhavā* calls all the animals to his court for a conference to determine and punish those accountable for the tragedy. After questioning each animal, *Kasā Ākhavā* decides that the flying fox should be punished by losing one of its legs. The animals then debated who should consume the flying fox's dismembered limb, with the magpie proudly accepting the task and becoming known as the oldest creature (Luikham, 1983). This story highlights the interconnectedness of beings and the consequences of their actions in the Tangkhul worldview.

*A Boy Who Married an Angel:* Tangkhuls believed heaven and earth folk were once constantly in contact, which is demonstrated in a folktale about a young orphan who married an angel. The story revolves around an orphan who, feeling left out during a village festival, decides to celebrate alone by catching a bird called 'chanva.' However, the bird speaks and convinces the orphan not to kill her, promising to bring him a beautiful girl to marry. The orphan follows the bird's instructions to care for her and is rewarded when the bird's waste produces beautiful lilies in the garden. Two angels notice the garden and decide to visit, but the bird advises the orphan to wait and choose one of the angels. The orphan successfully captures the older angel and shares his story with her. The angel agrees to marry him (Arokianathan, 1982).

*The Separation of Heaven and Earth—A Tale of Lost Interactions:* In Tangkhul mythology, heaven and Earth were once close, and their inhabitants interacted

freely. The story goes that during one such interaction, a princess from the celestial realm delighted in providing a poor man from the earthly domain with contrasting weather reports. It brought happiness to the princess but caused misery to the man. Seeking revenge, the man cleared a vast forest area under the guise of jhumming cultivation. When the leaves and twigs dried up, he set the area ablaze, causing the heavenly people to suffer from the dense smoke. Unable to tolerate the smoke, the celestial beings flew higher and higher until they were beyond the reach of the billowing fumes. As a result, heaven became so distant from Earth that there was no further interaction between the two realms (Shimray, 2000).

*A Crow Who Comes to a Boy's Aide:* In a tale from Tangkhul folklore, a boy faces hardship after being abandoned by his mother. Left to fend for himself, he and his sister encounter a man-tiger who devours their younger brother. Seeking help from their mother, they were met with denial and rejection. Determined to survive, the sister secretly cares for her brother while the mother plans his demise in the forest. However, a crow becomes their unexpected ally, devouring the food brought by the sister. The boy captures the crow, and, moved by her plea, he spares her life. In gratitude, the crow grants him a magical pot that fulfils any wish. The boy accepts the gift and finds a new home in a beautiful location with the crow's guidance. He brings his sister, and together, they find happiness and prosperity in their newfound abode (Shimray, 2000).

*The Messenger Crow:* In this folktale, an impoverished orphan seeks refuge with his affluent sister. After years of living in her prosperous home, his sister asks him to return to his village. Before his departure, he receives a mystical sword as a gift from his sister's husband, warning him to use it wisely. On his journey home, he accidentally injures himself with the sword while trying to clear a path. Tragically, he dies from the wound. A crow later delivers the news of his demise to his sister, who discovers his decomposed body under a tree. This tale highlights the strong bond between the Tangkhuls and nature, showcasing their reliance on birds and animals to fulfil their duties.

*The Tale of Shamuk - A Lesson in Compassion and Forgiveness:* In the enchanting forests of the Tangkhul region, a unique bird named Shamuk resides. This small avian creature, distinguished by her black and yellow stripes, captures the hearts of those who encounter her. But what makes Shamuk extraordinary is her lack of a tail, resulting from a fateful encounter

with a deer. A story passed down through generations reveals that Shamuk's tailless existence was born from an unintended incident. As the story goes, the deer inadvertently stepped on Shamuk's delicate tail while wandering through the forest. Filled with anger, Shamuk confronted the deer, seeking revenge. However, realising his mistake, the deer sincerely apologised for the harm caused and shared his tale of survival against human hunters. Touched by the deer's confession and recognising the interconnectedness of all living beings, Shamuk chose forgiveness over vengeance. This tale of empathy and understanding is a powerful reminder of the importance of compassion and forgiveness in a world where humans and animals coexist. It has become an integral part of Tangkhul folklore, immortalised in an oral tradition song that resonates with the community today.

Oh.....Achaolo ne thinivaile....

Oh.....Amuklo, einakareithei..

Eita mikumo naona...sokhai hui karei sanglaka torole...

In literal translation, it would mean

Oh...! deer, you would die

Oh ....! Amuk, how do I know...!

Human, along with dao, dog, and spear...!

*The Legend of Rangruti: A Bird's Connection to Rainwater:* The Rangruti bird is famous for her unique singing habits. She remains silent on sunny days and only chirps when rain is imminent, signalling the approaching showers. According to folklore, Rangruti's behaviour is rooted in a tale where she chose to seek nourishment in the forest instead of contributing to the communal task of cleaning a drinking water pond. As a result, other creatures denied her access to the pond, leading to her thirst and silence. Her melodious songs are now reserved for moments when rain is near, symbolising all living beings' interconnectedness and the harmony in the cycle of rain and thirst. This story reflects people's deep reverence for nature and the wisdom passed down through generations.

*The Tale of the Mole - A Lesson in Unity and Responsibility:* Once upon a time, in a land where animals worked together, a road was cleared to connect different parts of the realm. All creatures were called upon to lend strength except for a tiny mole. Instead of joining the collective effort, the mole chose to sleep the day away, claiming personal work and responsibilities. This act of negligence angered the other animals. Feeling betrayed, they boycotted the

mole and cast a curse upon him. The curse forbade the mole from ever setting foot upon the ground, with death as the consequence of defiance. Isolated and desperate, the mole sought refuge underground, tunnelling through the hidden depths of the Earth. In Tangkhul folklore, this tale is a powerful reminder of the importance of unity and shared responsibility. It highlights the consequences that can occur for those who disregard the collective effort and undervalue their contributions to the greater good. The mole's fate is a cautionary lesson, teaching us the value of working together for a common purpose.

*The Deceptive Beetle and its Cursed Task:* Why does the dung beetle live by rolling dung? According to a folktale, when all creatures coexisted and shared a common language, God gave a task to the black beetle to retrieve fire from humans. However, the beetle refused and falsely claimed that all humans had died. Uncovering the beetle's deceit, God became furious and cursed her by crushing her skull. As a result of this curse, the beetle was condemned to a life of rolling dung. The beetle's task became a symbol of its punishment, forever engaged in the laborious and seemingly meaningless act of rolling dung. In Tangkhul folklore, this tale serves as a moral lesson, highlighting the consequences of deception and the importance of honesty and obedience. The dung beetle's existence, tied to its cursed task, reminds us of the significance of truthfulness and the repercussions that deceit can bring.

*The Cicada's Chirp: A Tale of Transformation and Mother's Regret:* Tangkhul folklore also includes stories of humans transforming into animals, birds, and insects. One such tale involves a child who transforms into a cicada. A mother and her child went to their field in the story, and the mother left the youngster in the hut while she weeded her field. The toddler became hungry and exhausted, but his mother ignored him. The child threatened to convert into a cicada if the mother did not come. When the mother arrived for lunch, she discovered a cicada chirping on the hut's roof and understood it was her child. She attempted to grab it, but it flew away and did not return. When the mother returned to the field the next day, she saw that the child's meals had turned into mushrooms. Even today, people are reminded of the arrival of cultivation season when cicadas begin to sing, and their chirping also signals the time to return home from the fields.

*The Swallowed Woman:* A woman's harrowing journey unfolds in this tale. Kidnapped and mistreated by her husband's family, she courageously escapes

with her daughter. On their return to her village, they encounter a tree adorned with beautiful orchid flowers. Curiosity compels the daughter to request her mother to pluck them, unaware of the tree's hidden secret. As the woman climbs the tree, it unexpectedly swallows her whole. The villagers, witnessing this tragic event, cut down the tree and deliver it to the woman's family. Strangely, the woman emerges from within the tree, diligently performing household chores when no one is present. One day, an attempt is made to capture her, but she transforms into an egg and remains trapped within the tree forever. The story teaches us about the unseen consequences that can arise from mistreatment and abuse. The story emphasises the importance of treating others with kindness and respect, as our actions can have lasting effects on individuals and relationships.

The Tangkhul myths and folktales are deeply rooted in their natural surroundings, emphasising the intimate relationship between humans and nature. These stories reflect the attitudes and beliefs of society towards the environment, highlighting the importance of preserving traditional ecological knowledge for sustainable resource management. Traditional societies, such as those in north-western Yunnan, China, and Papua New Guinea, have demonstrated intricate knowledge of the natural environment and its resources and have sophisticated environmental knowledge to manage their resources sustainably (Bussmann & Sharon, 2006; Sillitoe, 2012). These folktales also convey moral lessons about nature and the interaction between humans and the natural world. For instance, the story of the owl and the deciduous tree teaches that pursuing impossible dreams can lead to futility, using the owl's waiting for unripe fruit as an analogy. These tales illustrate people's deep ecological consciousness and sense of reciprocity in their relationship with nature. This reciprocal interaction between humans and nature is supported by "ecological reciprocity" discussed in environmental philosophy, emphasising the interdependence and coevolution of humans and nature (Martinez-Alier, 2002). The Tangkhul's beliefs, such as the correlation between dew drops and rainfall or snow on Shirui Hill and a plentiful harvest, further demonstrate their worldview grounded in a profound ecological consciousness and mutual respect for the natural world.

### **Beyond the Veil: Tangkhul's Supernatural Omens and Divinations**

Omens and divinations play a significant role in various cultures and societies, as they are seen as signs or messages from a higher power or the

universe. Omens are events or occurrences believed to foreshadow the future, and their interpretation can be positive or negative depending on cultural beliefs and circumstances. For example, a rainbow after a downpour may be seen as a favourable omen, while crossing paths with a black cat may be unfavourable. The interpretation of omens is often based on predetermined cultural beliefs.

On the other hand, divination involves actively seeking knowledge or guidance about the future or the unknown through various methods (Simmons, 1956). It is a universally occurring social and psychological phenomenon that gives individuals and communities a sense of control and meaning in an uncertain world (Winkelman, 2009). Divination is used to negotiate relationships between humans and the supernatural or spiritual realms and is important in legitimising subsequent actions taken by individuals or communities (Hugh-Jones, 1980; Park, 1963). It can be categorised into possession and wisdom, with an intermediary category known as intuitive (Zuesse, 1975). Possession divination involves using oracular mediums, reading omens, and observing the movements of sacred animals or objects. This form is common in Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western folk religions. It relies on divine or semi-divine agents as symbolic mediums, embodying the energies that control or influence the present and indirectly communicating the divine will or decree. Animals and their use as omens hold historical significance and reflect a cultural connection to one's heritage (Wallis, 1914). Wisdom practices involve individuals who possess specialised knowledge, skills, or abilities related to the spiritual world. These individuals are often considered spiritual leaders or shamans. The intermediate category of intuitive includes beliefs and practices that may not necessarily involve possession or formalised wisdom but are rooted in a more intuitive understanding of the spiritual world. It encompasses a broader range of cultural beliefs and practices that may not fit neatly into the possession or wisdom categories.

Tangkhuls strongly believed in omens and divinations as direct communication from the supernatural, shaping their future. Their culture encompassed a diverse heritage rooted in a belief in supernatural phenomena and various forms of omens and divinations. Dreams are essential as they convey messages from ancestors, spirits, and deities, predicting events or offering guidance. Animal behaviour and movements served as omens,

reflecting the supernatural realm. For instance, ants leaving their nests during the rainy season indicated no rain, while dragonfly swarms during spring are seen as omens of war or fire. The chirping of the bird chaklen also held significance, with its melodies signifying good or bad omens.

Ritual sacrifices are performed to appease spirits and seek guidance. These rituals involve slaughtering animals or offering symbolic objects and are conducted by village priests communicating with the spiritual realm. While lacking scientific validation, consulting omens and divinations was essential in their daily lives, attributing prophetic meaning to every occurrence. Tangkhul's belief in omens led them to search for signs in nature, interpreting them as messages from the spiritual realm. Consequently, they have the skill to observe and interpret animal movements, connecting them to natural and social phenomena. Animal bones, like rats and lizards, were used in divination, thrown, and arranged to predict outcomes. Divination and omens contributed to their understanding of the universe's interconnectedness, aligning with their spiritual beliefs. Some of the powerful divination and omens practices among the traditional Tangkhul include:

*Kapā-khayang (bamboo splinter)*: Kapā-khayang is a form of divination involving a bamboo splinter, specifically from the kapā bamboo variety. It was practised in various situations, such as war, hunting, travel, marriage, etc. Women were prohibited from participating in this process, which took place at the sacred Rihai (sacred altar). The splinters are exposed to dew overnight, and the Sharva, a priest, would gather them in the morning to seek supernatural insight. The splinter is cut and pulled apart, and the length and condition of the bristles determine the omen. The bristles of the splinter are examined cautiously by saying, 'May it be good.' The bristle on the right hand, which is long and singular, is considered a good omen. However, if the bristle on the left hand is longer, it is considered a bad omen (Khamuinao, 1999; Shimray, 2000; Angkang, 1990; Horam, 2010; Luikham, 2006).

In more serious circumstances, additional ceremonies and offerings are involved in communicating with the divine. It involves sprinkling spotless cock's blood on the bamboo splinter, and offer a small amount of good wine or rice beer at the altar, and offering pieces of every part of the chicken as part of the oracle while murmuring mostly inaudibly. Finally, the Sharva addresses the Ameowo in the following manner and pulls the bamboo splinter apart.

### In Tangkhul

Oh Āmeowo, mikumowui kathi kharing nana kasingkho,  
 Ishili mina chipat hairakho, Manglā phangā, tharuk,  
 Tharada ākha shiman hairakho  
 Āthut hāngsang phalungrakho,  
 Zimiksho phangāthang wui thili kha chilli rai vatā rakho,  
 Āmeowo hangshing sālo,  
 Ātamchi chāka machā khalei,  
 Yuiraka kathā khalei, Mathingrik eina hāngmilo.

### English translation

Oh Āmeowo, Thou holdest death or life,  
 Some people have wronged us,  
 Five, six, or eleven are lost,  
 We must avenge the crime,  
 On the fifth day from now, we will attack the village,  
 Tell us accurately,  
 Will we be victorious or not,  
 Indicate clearly  
 (Luikham, 2006:66; Horam, 2010: 75).

*Hārkhō-khayang (movement of the chicken leg)*: Hārkhō-khayang is a divination practice where the movements of a strangled chicken's legs are observed. Different leg movements signify good or bad signs and success or failure. If the right leg crosses over the left, it is seen as a good omen, while the opposite crossing is considered bad. No crossing of legs is also interpreted as a bad omen. Other chicken parts, like wing spread and faeces, are also observed for omens. Neat wings or no faeces are seen as bad signs, while faeces to the right indicate good and to the left indicate bad. This practice is performed before significant events, and only men can participate. Unfavourable omens would halt further actions (Shimray, 2000; Angkang, 1990).

*Vavātui-khangānā (listening to vavā sound)*: The vavā is a fascinating bird known for its role in omen significance; larger than the chaklen and similar in size to the dunnock, the vavā captures the imagination of those who encounter her. Much like the chaklen, people have long observed the sounds produced by the vavā and interpreted them as either good or bad omens. One intriguing

aspect of the vavā's behaviour is its tendency to appear in pairs. It was believed to be a good omen if her sounds could be heard from both sides of the road, with the birds duetting or answering each other without much break. On the other hand, if the sounds come from only one side, it is considered a bad omen. The vavā's significance in people's collective imagination is a testament to the connection between nature, symbolism, and human interpretation.

*Paikhao-khanganā (listening to Paikhao):* The presence of the migratory bird known as 'Paikhao' in the Tangkhul hills during the summer has captured the attention and imagination of the local people. Her distinctive sounds serve as omens, interpreted as either positive or negative. The melodic 'kaotaling-kaokek' call is seen as a good omen, representing good fortune and favourable events. Conversely, the dissonant 'keo-keo' call is considered a bad omen, indicating potential difficulties or challenges. The bird's presence and unique sounds hold cultural significance in the hills, contributing to their diverse beliefs and practices.

*Chihai-khanganā (listening to Chihai):* The 'Chihai,' a type of cricket known for its distinct 'sit sit sit' sound during the night, holds a special place in the beliefs and interpretations of the people. These sounds are believed to carry symbolic meanings for events like war, hunting, and marriage proposals. The direction and movement of the Chihai's sound are crucial in interpreting omens. Approaching sounds signify positive outcomes, while sounds moving away or stopping abruptly indicate danger or misfortune. These interpretations shape the decisions and actions of the people, reflecting their deep cultural connection with nature (Khamuinao, 1999; Shimray, 2000; Angkang, 1990; Horam, 2010).

*Sarva namkashat (Divination of the flight of sarva):* In Tangkhul culture, the flight direction of a flock of Sarva birds held symbolic meanings for human interactions and conflicts. Flying in the opposite direction was seen as a bad omen, foreshadowing potential war or fights. This belief emphasised the connection between natural phenomena and human relationships, urging caution and peaceful resolutions. Their culture values harmony and positive relationships within the community, reflected in their interpretations of the Sarva flock's flight direction (Shimray, 2000; Horam, 2010).

*Tongtilā-khangapui (the flight of dragonflies):* Tongtilā, or dragonfly, holds cultural significance in their beliefs. Observing a group of dragonflies, called 'Khangapui,' during autumn is common, but seeing them in spring is

unusual and foreboding. A swarm of dragonflies in spring is interpreted as a bad omen, signalling an impending fire or war. The direction of the swarm is closely observed to determine the expected location of the disaster. This belief reflects the people's connection with nature and their belief in its ability to provide insights and warnings. The interpretation of dragonfly swarms as omens demonstrates their vigilance and preparedness in the face of potential dangers. These beliefs highlight the cultural significance of the dragonfly and its association with environmental awareness and the perception of threats.

*Kongtheng-kahei (Hydromancy)*: A wooden basin filled with water was used to connect with deceased loved ones in the afterlife. The shaman, known as a khanong, performed the ritual while family members remained silent and motionless. The water's surface was observed, and images and activities were interpreted as manifestations of the departed. It provided insights into their well-being and guided future events. The practice showcased the people's connection with nature and belief in the spiritual realm. The kongtheng-kahei served as a means of divination, allowing individuals to seek guidance and interpret the state of the departed through the water's reflection (Shimray, 2000; Luikham, 2006).

*Harra-khayang (egg's behaviour)*: Egg divination, or 'Harra-khayang,' was used for agricultural purposes and to determine the sex of an unborn child. By breaking an egg into a rice bowl and observing which part flowed out first, the diviner could predict the sex. If the yolk flowed out first, it was believed to indicate a boy, while if the white flowed out first, it was believed to indicate a girl. While egg divination is no longer practised today, its historical significance highlights how people sought guidance and meaning in different aspects of life. These divinations were deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, providing a connection to spiritual forces. Accuracy in predictions was important, and consistent incorrect predictions could lead to a Sharva's resignation from their priestly role.

### **Tangkhul's Natural Court of Judgement**

Tangkhul's judiciary and justice system are rooted in their customs and traditions, passed down through generations. The village council, called 'Hangva,' is central to this system. Comprising the village chief and clan elders, the council acts as custodians of customary laws and serves as the highest court of justice. They mediate disputes, enforce norms, and ensure justice within the village. These laws encompass a wide range of social, civil, and criminal

matters, including land disputes, marriage and divorce, property rights, theft, assault, and other offences. However, minor disputes were handled within clans, while unresolved cases were brought to the attention of the Hangva. In some instances, ordeals were used as a final judgment, invoking the names of heaven and earth, reflecting the importance of nature in their decision-making process. Nature was considered the ultimate enforcer of the law, and the will of God, the Creator, was interpreted through nature's verdict. Oath-taking procedures involved swearing in the names of natural objects such as heaven, earth, sun, and moon. Here are some examples of oath-taking lines while performing ordeals.

“May my family and I be destroyed and mixed with the earth,  
never to be seen again if I am found lying, committing perjury, or deceit.”

“Let heaven and Earth judge me if I have done wrong.”

“If I have done anything wrong, the sun and moon may smite me.”

The council prioritises restoring harmony and balance in the village through dialogue and compromise. Restorative justice is emphasised, aiming to repair relationships and reintegrate offenders into the community. Offenders may be encouraged to make amends, offer compensation, or participate in community service. However, in the contemporary Tangkhul society, their judiciary has adapted to modern challenges by incorporating statutory laws and legal mechanisms from the Indian legal system. While customary laws remain relevant, individuals can seek recourse in the district or higher courts for matters outside their scope. Some of the ordeals used to determine guilt or innocence are:

*Tara-kazang (ordeal through immersion in water)*: Tara-kazang, or the ordeal through immersion in water, was a traditional method used to resolve disputes. They believed in the inherent fairness of the natural world and sought justice by observing and participating in natural processes. In this ordeal, representatives from the disputing parties would immerse themselves in water and compete to see who could hold their breath and stay submerged the longest. The person who emerged first was deemed the loser, while the one who endured the longest was declared the winner. The outcome was seen as a reflection of God's will be expressed through nature. The practice aimed to align human actions with the divine order and demonstrate faith in the fairness of God's creation. While contemporary formal legal procedures have replaced this system over time, they provide insights into the cultural

values and beliefs of the people and their historical methods of seeking justice (Angkang, 1990; Horam, 2010).

*Thing-ngayap (flogging with stick)*: Thing-ngayap, the flogging with stick ordeal, was used to determine the guilty party in physical aggression disputes. This method relied on physical strength and quick reflexes as indicators of guilt or innocence. During the ordeal, both parties stood inside a marked area and held sticks of equal length. They would then strike each other with their sticks, aiming to land a blow while avoiding being touched or injuring themselves. The person touched or injured first was considered the loser and deemed guilty in the dispute. By subjecting the disputing parties to this physical test, it was believed that the natural abilities and reactions of the individuals would determine the outcome and ascertain the guilty party.

*Ngaleira-khamang (Drinking mud-water)*: Ngaleira-khamang was used to resolve land or boundary disputes. Mud from the disputed area would be dissolved in water. The two parties would swear in the name of Āmeowo and then drink the muddy water. The village council would decide the case within a year. Misfortune would indicate guilt before the year's end, while no misfortune led to equal division. This method reflects their belief in divine justice and a community-focused conflict resolution approach.

*Harmathin-Famathin khamakei-khamayui (Eating raw chicken or dog liver)*: When a case could not be resolved through compromise or by the village council, the 'swallow or bite' method was used to resolve disputes. Both parties consumed raw liver mixed with blood, and the one who first suffered misfortune or adverse effects was considered guilty. It was believed that supernatural forces would determine the outcome. The method relied on the belief that negative consequences indicated guilt or wrongdoing.

*Rihai-khanai/kakā (Biting or treading on Rihai)*: Tangkhus considered the Rihai, or sacrificial altar, the holiest place where their deity resided. Different techniques were employed to resolve disputes to ensure honesty and invoke divine judgment. These included eating cooked chicken, consuming altar mud, biting the pebbles, and smearing chicken blood on the stone while making solemn oaths. The belief was that by invoking the deity's presence and taking oaths before the sacred altar, the truth would be revealed, and justice would be served. These practices reflected their deep faith and reliance on divine intervention in dispute resolution.

*Sampā-kharur (Emersion of hair in the water)*: In this ordeal, a long hair from each disputing party was plucked and immersed in water. The hair that floated the longest was considered proof of innocence, and the person whose hair it belonged to was named the winner. This procedure was seen as a dependable method of resolving disagreements since it was believed that the guilty person's hair would not float for long because of the weight of their guilt. People had a strong respect for nature and its ability to provide justice, and this practice was one of many ways in which they trusted nature to offer a just resolution to conflicts.

*Fakhon kala Harkhon khangānā (Listening to cries of cocks and dogs)*: In conflicts related to the chieftainship, or clan elders, they employed a unique method to establish the rightful party. This method relied on the instincts of animals and was believed to be divinely guided. Both disputing sides would bring a rooster or a dog to an agreed-upon place in the evening. The judges, witnesses, and contenders would stay awake together, observing the animals closely. The winner would be determined by the first rooster to crow or the first dog to bark. People believed that the spirits or divine forces guided the animals in their instincts. Since the animals' actions were considered beyond human influence, it was seen as an impartial way to determine the winner. By relying on the animals' innate behaviour, they placed their faith in the natural order and divine guidance.

*Sāchum-kaphut (ordeal through animal trapping)*: Disputes related to village or kinship issues were sometimes resolved through a unique ordeal called 'sāchum.' Both parties would set a trap to catch an animal during this ordeal. The trap could be set for any animal of their choice, such as a bird, squirrel, or rabbit. The person who caught the animal first was declared the winner. This method not only served as a means of resolving disputes but also demonstrated the hunting skills of the participants. It was also believed that the deity blessed the successful hunter with good fortune and prosperity.

*Harkhari-kashai (eating of chicken intestine)*: They used this method to settle disputes when other methods failed to resolve them. The two parties in the dispute would each put a cooked chicken intestine in their mouth and begin eating without using their hands. The judges then monitored the contestants and declared the winner based on who ate the most quickly.

*Pangringkor eina masik khangarok (Pinching/twinging with a fingernail)*: Particularly in cases where there were disputes regarding the paternity of a

child conceived through the promiscuous behaviour of a woman, this method was used to identify the rightful father. It involves taking an oath in the name of heaven and earth before commencing pinching. The woman would declare, “Creator of heaven and earth, I swear in thy name that the child in my womb belongs to him,” while the man would state, “I swear in thy name that the child in her womb does not belong to me.” The winner would be determined by the person who sustained little or no injury during the ordeal.

Understanding these traditional methods provides insights into Tangkhul’s cultural heritage and their belief in divine intervention in justice and dispute resolution. It illustrates their strong connection and reliance on nature for their beliefs and justice system. While they did not have a written record of their moral norms and teachings, they passed down through traditional folksongs and tales from generation to generation. For them, nature embodies order and harmony, and they view it as enforcing their laws and regulations. Nature also serves as an inspiration for their moral codes, as they believe it is the enforcer of divine laws and regulates human behaviour. Every creature in nature is seen as a medium of communication that foretells future events, whether good or bad (Khamuinao, 1999).

However, the arrival of Western education and Christianity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century led to the erosion of traditional belief systems, which were viewed as primitive and outdated. Consequently, the people adopted Western ideas and beliefs, which resulted in a decline in the relationship between humans and nature. The ancient oral traditions and culture of the Tangkhuls are at risk of disappearing, and their intimate connection to the environment has been severely affected. The arrival of capitalism, globalisation, technology, and development has destroyed forests, plants, animals, and medicinal plants, leading to deforestation, soil erosion, water problems, frequent drought, landslides, and other natural calamities. It has also caused the extinction of certain plant and animal species. It is important to examine their ancestral relationship with the land, forests, and animals and how traditional values and practices have been passed down through generations to understand their attitude toward the environment.

### **Unravelling the Bond between Tangkhuls and Land**

The bond between the people and their land goes far beyond mere ownership or economic considerations. It is deeply ingrained in their cultural, social, and historical heritage, profoundly shaping their way of life. At the

core of this relationship is a strong connection with their ancestral land, which they believe has been inhabited by their forefathers for generations. The land holds immense spiritual and cultural significance as a repository of collective memories, traditions, and identity and identifies certain sites within their land as sacred. Such as hills, rivers, caves, and groves are believed to be inhabited by ancestral spirits and deities. They play a pivotal role in religious and cultural practices, serving as sacred spaces for rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. This spiritual dimension further reinforces the profound bond between the people and their land, as it is seen as a conduit to the divine and a source of cultural vitality (Wezah, 2011). Their connection to their land and territories has given them a sense of identity and belonging, contributing to their resilience and survival as a tribe (Deka, 2013).

The land also plays a vital role in the community's social organisation. Living in closely-knitted villages, the land is divided among different clans and families. Each village has its territory and boundaries, demarcated by natural features like rivers, hills, or deep gorges. This communal resource is managed through collective decision-making and management systems. Traditional practices such as rotational farming and forest conservation techniques have been passed down through generations, ensuring the sustainable use of resources and the preservation of the environment.

Early Tangkhuls faced numerous challenges throughout history, including colonisation, conflict, and social changes. However, the land has consistently served as a symbol of resistance and a source of strength in preserving their cultural identity. It has provided them with a physical and metaphorical space to assert their rights, express their aspirations, and maintain their distinct cultural practices by understanding the interconnectedness and recognising that the land is not merely a property but an integral part of their existence. Thus, this deep reverence for the land is evident in their myths, traditions, and view of themselves as guardians of the ecosystem. The land is regarded as the foundation of their culture, a source of nourishment, and a teacher that connects them to the past, present, and future (Dickie, 2005).

Moreover, it is valued for its profound cultural and political significance. Concepts such as motherland, ancestral land, homeland, and clan land carry broader cultural and political connotations, representing the community's identity and collective well-being. They firmly believe that the land belongs to the Provider and that human land ownership is only temporary. As a result,

their land represents the unity of all living creatures, and its loss would result in the loss of individual and collective identities. Traditional forest management practices, rooted in customary laws and regulations, had helped maintain the ecological balance and ensure the long-term productivity of the forest until external influence began to take hold of their practices.

Tangkhuls upheld strict customary laws to protect animals, birds, and the environment, believing in the consequences of violating these laws with severe penalties. They had beliefs and rituals associated with the forest, recognising the spirits of each species. Cutting down trees or hunting required specific rituals and offerings to appease the spirits. Certain restrictions were in place, such as prohibiting unnecessary tree cutting and preserving roadside trees. Cutting bamboo without consent and believing that even God could hear the sound of bamboo shoots being cut were strictly followed to avoid negative outcomes. Deforestation was strictly prohibited in certain areas, and they have a special law known as ‘Meiyan’ (law governing fire), which is enforced to safeguard the forest and its wildlife. Customary law-imposed fines on anyone guilty of setting fire to the forest. These laws reflect their deep reverence for nature and the interconnectedness of all beings.

However, today, various issues have greatly challenged their relationship with their land, for instance, land rights and territorial disputes due to the colonial era’s demarcation of borders and external aggressions (Kukis and Meiteis). Political tensions, population growth, and rapid development have exacerbated the issue, with the pricing of land values leading to more disputes. Before modern technology, farmers relied on natural manure, but introducing harmful chemicals has negatively impacted the forests and surrounding environment. Their forests were once vast and rich in flora and fauna, but the influence of various factors, including the cash economy, Christianity, artificial fertilisers, poppy, and ganja cultivations, has significantly impacted the forest and the environment.

### **Nature’s Symphony: Animals and the Rich Heritage of Tangkhul Practice**

Tangkhul culture was deeply rooted in their connection with nature, and animals hold a significant place in their folklore, rituals, and everyday life. They viewed animals as sentient beings, recognising the interdependence between humans and their world. They believed that maintaining a respectful and symbiotic relationship with animals is crucial for the well-being and balance of their community and the environment.

Certain animals were considered sacred and held spiritual significance. People believed all living things, including animals, have a spirit or soul and treated them with kindness and compassion. Tigers were highly regarded among the animals, and killing them was considered a grave offence, while Mithun held a special place in their culture as a symbol of wealth and prestige. It was often slaughtered in ceremonies, including weddings, funerals, and other important events. Buffaloes were another important animal, frequently used as a sacrificial animal during festivals and ceremonies. Deers were regarded as sacred animals, associated with fertility and prosperity, and believed to have therapeutic properties. Snakes, often feared and avoided in many cultures, were important to them. It was considered a protector and was frequently worshipped during festivals and other ceremonies. They also held the hornbill, a bird associated with good fortune and protection, in high regard as it was believed to be a messenger of the gods. Snakes, eagles, tigers, cats, foxes, and other animals that prey on living animals were prohibited from eating by the village chief and his family as they believed they shared a similar bloodline. Similarly, certain clans, such as the Keishing clan, did not eat buffalo because they believed it had raised their clan's son after his mother's death. Likewise, the Āyai family of Phungcham Village did not consume bear meat since they believed bears had raised their ancestor.

Tangkhul had a law called 'Shakeiyan' (the law governing animals). This law prohibits any form of cruelty, whether to wild or domesticated animals, except for ritual and ceremonial purposes. They strictly prohibited hunting and trap-laying during the breeding seasons of animals and birds, which were strictly followed for fear of being a curse or even death. They were also forbidden to kill animals while sleeping as they considered sleeping a time of rest for all living beings. They avoided keeping goats or consuming meat because they believed it was unclean in ancient times (Luikham, 2006). This belief was rooted in various myths and tales, one of which involved a woman giving birth to a boy with a purely white head after eating goat meat. Other included mysterious death, premature grey hair, and madness from eating goat meat. Women were also forbidden from eating bear and tiger meat because they believed it would cause severe labour during delivery. A crab was also forbidden during pregnancy for fear of miscarriage. Cats considered the keepers of the hearth and relievers from housekeeping burdens were respected and appreciated and referred to as "Āchon Āmei" (madam and sir), believed to be descended from the ruling class of animals (Angkang, 1990).

Buffaloes were forbidden to kill for sale and were only used for special occasions such as the erection of Tarung during Marān Kasā (feast of merit), weddings, and funerals for the wealthy. Tangkhul believed in treating animals with respect and forbade teasing or mocking them. For instance, if one mocked a monkey, it would destroy their crops. If they mocked a mouse, it would destroy their clothes (Horam, 2010). The use of poisonous roots or other methods that could harm fish reproduction from February to April because it was when fish lay their eggs was prohibited (Lukham, 2006).

While these laws and taboos helped protect animals from rampant killing, they also have important social implications in upholding their common identity and a sense of belongingness to the people who shared. Food taboos, for instance, contribute to a group's social and cultural identity and help create a sense of unity among its members (Rochow, 2009; Ruivah, 1993). Early Tangkhuls were careful and attentive to preserving their traditional way of life and the environment by adopting different conservation techniques. They knew that maintaining a balance between humans and nature was crucial to their survival and the sustainability of their community. Their understanding of their environment and sustainable practices remains a testament to their deep-rooted relationship with nature.

### **Tangkhul Wisdom: Understanding a Distinct Worldview**

Tangkhuls possess a unique worldview shaped by their cultural heritage, traditions, and beliefs. Exploring various aspects of their culture, including spirituality, social organisation, and relationship with nature, is necessary to comprehend their wisdom. Spirituality was significant in this community, with indigenous religious practices and beliefs. They deeply revered nature and believed all elements, including mountains, rivers, and trees, were sacred and imbued with supernatural power. Their beliefs were firmly rooted in animism (anima means souls), which is the concept that everything in nature possesses a spirit.

Moreover, they acknowledged numerous spirits and deities associated with different aspects of life, such as fertility, agriculture, health, disease, etc. They followed an intricate system of venerating their ancestors, as they perceived that the spirits of their forebears had an active role in the lives of their descendants. The ancestors act as mediators between the living and the deities, and people frequently offer prayers and make offerings to them with the expectation of obtaining blessings and guidance. Their wisdom was primarily

transmitted through oral tradition, and folktales, myths, legends, and folk songs were integral to their cultural heritage. These oral narratives passed on moral values, historical accounts, and wisdom gained from generations of experience. They served as a means of preserving and transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next.

The community is organised around clans; each clan has a distinct identity and plays a significant role in social cohesion and governance. Clan members are believed to share a common ancestry and often have specific responsibilities within the community or village. People place great importance on community harmony, cooperation, and maintaining strong bonds with their extended family and kinship networks. Collective decision-making and community life were fundamental aspects of their wisdom. Cooperation, mutual support, and egalitarianism were highly prioritised. Consensus-building and active participation in community affairs ensure decisions are made collectively for the common good, fostering a sense of belonging and unity.

Tangkhuks deeply respect nature and emphasise its intrinsic value ingrained in their traditional laws, beliefs, and moral principles. They practice sustainable agriculture, reflecting their understanding of the importance of ecological balance and environmental preservation. Their reverence for the environment is reflected in their rich folktales and songs. They believe in the ability to communicate with gods through the behaviour of natural beings, signs, and dreams, including birds, plants, and animals. Within their belief system, they recognise benevolent and malevolent spirits that exerted control over the environment, bringing blessings, rich harvests, disaster, loss of wealth, and even death. To invoke blessings and avoid misfortune and suffering, they offer sacrifices and present food or drink to these spirits during various occasions and events. They also perform ancestor worship and offer sacrifices to *Ámeowo* in sacred groves. According to their beliefs, spirits and gods reside in prominent locations such as hilltops, caves, large stones, lakes, and trees. Sacrifices and offerings were made to the gods and spirits to ward off misfortune and ill omens in battle, hunting, fishing, and even when falling trees to erect structures like the 'Tarung,' which is a wooden Y-shaped pillar erected in the courtyard during the feast of merit.

## **Conclusion**

One uncovers a profound connection between the people, the natural world, and the spiritual realm while exploring the symphony of their cosmology.

A culture deeply rooted in its environment and cosmological beliefs reflects a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements through their recognition of the interdependence of the three realms—heaven, earth, and the underworld—and their influence on each other. This worldview emphasises the responsibility of humans to maintain harmony with nature and its spirits. They interpret natural phenomena as meaningful signs in their daily lives, such as earthquakes and rainbows, which reflect their belief in the celestial realm's impact on earthly events. Tangkhul cosmology is enriched by folktales and myths that convey important lessons, explaining the behaviours of animals and natural phenomena while offering insights into their values and cultural practices.

Tangkhul's perception of death as a transition to another realm rather than an end depicts a strong connection between death and the living. Their rituals and ceremonies honour and guide the departing soul, ensuring a safe passage to the next stage of existence. The interconnectedness between the living and spiritual realms is fundamental to their wisdom, as seen in their reverence for nature and strong community bonds. Tangkhul mythology and folklore convey their wisdom and cultural heritage, emphasising their harmonious relationship with nature, ancestral traditions, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. These narratives preserve knowledge, provide guidance, and reinforce moral values and their cultural identity and way of life.

People's reliance on omens and divinations highlights the intricate relationship between culture, spirituality, and the interpretation of natural phenomena. These practices gave them guidance, meaning, and interconnectedness with the supernatural and the natural world. Their connection with land goes beyond economic and encompasses spiritual, cultural, and political dimensions. Their land was considered sacred, holding collective memories, traditions, and identity, with specific sites believed to be inhabited by ancestral spirits and deities. This spiritual aspect strengthens their connection and provides a pathway to the divine. Besides, the role of animals was crucial to their culture, symbolising the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. People demonstrated a profound respect for sentient beings through their belief in animal spirits. Sacred animals like tigers and cats were highly revered, while others, such as mithun and buffaloes, hold cultural significance in ceremonies and rituals. The people's strict adherence to customary laws and taboos regarding the treatment of animals underscores

their profound understanding of the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the animal kingdom.

Early Tangkhul people, nature, and spirits relationship exhibited a harmonious interplay and interconnectedness. It symbolises the profound relationship, likening it to a symphony—a beautifully orchestrated composition in which each element plays a vital role. Just as different musical instruments come together to create a harmonious melody, the celestial bodies, earthly realms, and human existence are believed to be interconnected, creating a cosmic symphony in Tangkhul cosmology. It signifies the balance, unity, and interconnectedness that shape their worldview and provides a metaphorical framework for understanding their spiritual and philosophical understandings. In a world where the environment is increasingly threatened, the wisdom of indigenous cultures like the Tangkhul can guide us toward a more harmonious and sustainable future. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of the sky, earth, and humanity and adopting practices that respect and protect the natural world, we can strive for a balanced and thriving existence. Studying Tangkhul cosmology invites us to reevaluate our relationship with the cosmos and the environment. It calls upon us to recognise the intricate connections between all elements of existence and to foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the earth and its inhabitants.

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