



# “Symbolism of the Tangkhul Tarung and Its Relation to Dreams: An Exploration of Identity, Spirituality, and Cultural Memory”

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**Abstract:** This paper offers an in-depth exploration of the Tangkhul Tarung, emphasizing its rich symbolism and its impact on cultural identity, spirituality, and memory. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining ethnography, symbolism, and folklore, the study examines the Tarung’s role as a physical representation of ancestral heritage, bridging the past with the present. By analyzing oral histories and personal narratives, it reveals how the Tarung acts as a vessel for cultural memory and serves as a conduit between material and spiritual realms. The study further investigates the significance of dreams related to the Tarung, showing how they reflect both personal and collective identities and shape the spiritual and aspirational lives of the Tangkhul people. The paper seeks to shed light on the broader implications of cultural artifacts in shaping Indigenous identity, underscoring the Tarung’s importance in maintaining traditional knowledge systems through symbolic and spiritual practices.

**Keywords:** Tangkhul Tarung, Tangkhul Nagas, Traditional knowledge systems, Dreams, Cultural memory, Symbolism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Tangkhul *Tarung* is a cultural artifact that stands as a symbol within Tangkhul Naga society, emphasizing its impact on identity, spirituality, and memory. Using an interdisciplinary approach that merges ethnography, symbolism, and folklore, the paper highlights how the *Tarung* bridges the Tangkhul people’s ancestral heritage and their current cultural landscape. As a physical structure, the *Tarung* is more than a historical remnant—it embodies the beliefs, stories, and values that define the Tangkhul identity, making it a vital element of the community’s collective consciousness. The process of creating *Tarung* reveals the unique social fabric of Tangkhul Nagas, an Indigenous community residing in the northeastern region of India and the northwestern region of Myanmar. Each *Tarung* is adorned with specific motifs, such as *Seikui* (buffalo heads), *mikui* (human heads), *Khachon* (lion footprints), *Varang khamor* (hornbill beaks), etc. which vary from village to village and reflect local values. These symbols are not standardized across all Tangkhul villages, underscoring the diversity within the community itself. The carvings are integral to *Tarung*’s significance, with each symbol representing distinct aspects of honour, social status, and family lineage. For instance, the human head symbolizes bravery or victory. Through these various symbols or motifs, the *Tarung* becomes a repository of individual and collective identities, marking the achievements and social stature of specific families or individuals within the village. Notably, the cultural protocol around the *Tarung* underscores its sacredness. As noted by Luikham (2011), “No part of *Tarung* must be cut, not even when a part of the *Tarung* falls, this cannot

be burnt or used for any other purpose. It must remain as it is until the material is naturally worn out with time". This guideline emphasizes the community's reverence for the *Tarung*, highlighting its enduring role as a sacred symbol in the Tangkhul's cultural landscape.

While the *Tarung* holds significant cultural value, it does not serve as a totem in the traditional sense. Unlike totems, which are objects of worship or spiritual reverence across many Indigenous cultures, the *Tarung* functions more as a marker of social identity and cultural heritage. Totems can be objects, animals or symbols, each representing a "character, sign, mark, letter, ideogram or any other identity, etc." (Goswami, 2018: 2). They function as spiritual guides, protectors and embodiments of ancestral lineage, often connecting individuals to their communities, ancestors and the natural world. By contrast, the Tangkhul *Tarung* is celebrated not as a divine or spiritual being but as a respected artifact that reflects the social and personal accomplishments within the community. The rituals associated with the *Tarung*, such as selecting the tree, carrying it home and the carving process, are similarly non-religious. These practices are not performed as acts of worship but as ways to honour the spirit within the tree. In this regard, the Tangkhul people demonstrate a form of environmental respect, treating the tree as a valuable resource that deserves acknowledgment before its transformation into the *Tarung*. This process reflects the community's connection to nature and their ethical approach to utilizing natural resources without perceiving them as divine or sacred in the manner of a totem. Hence, not all cultural artifacts that involve symbolic carvings or rituals are considered totems, as illustrated by the Tangkhul Naga community's *tarung*.

Beyond its social and symbolic roles, the *Tarung* is a powerful vessel of cultural memory for the Tangkhul Naga community. Oral tradition plays a crucial role in Tangkhul society, transmitting stories, knowledge, and values from one generation to the next. The *Tarung* functions as a tangible anchor for these oral histories, embodying a physical connection to the past. Through the generations, the meanings embedded within the *Tarung* accumulate, creating a layered testament to the community's continuity and resilience. By examining the *Tarung*'s symbolism and its relation to dreams, this study illuminates the vital role of cultural artifacts in the continuity of indigenous knowledge and identity.

## II. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the symbolism of the Tangkhul *Tarung* and its role in cultural identity and memory.
2. To understand the *Tarung*'s function as a bridge between material and spiritual realms in Tangkhul spirituality.
3. To analyze dreams associated with the *Tarung*, exploring their reflections on identity and aspirations.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and literary analysis of oral histories and folklore. Ethnographic methods allow for direct engagement with community members, capturing personal narratives and interpretations of the *Tarung*'s symbolism. Symbolic and folklore analysis further illuminates the cultural, spiritual, and aspirational meanings embedded in the *Tarung*, offering insight into the ways this *Tarung* informs and preserves Tangkhul's identity and spirituality.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Historical significance and traditional beliefs associated with the *Tarung*

The *Tarung Maran Kasa*, or the "Tarung Feast of Merit," is a ceremonial practice that reflects the unique spiritual beliefs and social structures of the Tangkhul Nagas. Its historical significance lies not only in its religious and social aspects but also in its role as a bridge between humans and the natural world, particularly through its reverence for the spirit world and the *Tarung* tree, a sacred entity believed to house spirits. This feast epitomizes a traditional belief system where nature, community hierarchy, and spiritual guidance are deeply interconnected. One of the most important aspects of the *Tarung Maran Kasa* is communication with the spirit world, particularly with the spirit residing in the chosen *Tarung* tree. Before proceeding with the cutting of the tree, one of them (the elder) must seek permission from this spirit to ensure safety and respect. This step is crucial as it is believed that neglecting to communicate properly with the spirit can lead to harm to

any individuals who may or may not be involved in the ritual, whether during the tree-cutting process, transporting the tree, or erecting it. Such practices signify a respectful relationship with nature, acknowledging that every tree has a spirit, and only with its consent can it serve as the center of the ceremony. This respectful view of nature positions the *Tarung Maran Kasa* as a valuable cultural practice that embodies environmental ethics and spiritual unity with nature. Different villages observe varying protocols for the *Tarung Maran Kasa* based on their unique cultural norms. For instance, in Phungcham village, this feast is a privilege held exclusively by the *Wungvaq* (the chief or the royal family). This exclusivity reinforces the village's hierarchical structure, signifying the chief's prominent spiritual and social authority. In contrast, in Chingjui village, while the royal family still holds the primary privilege, wealthy individuals or *khalaknao*, are also permitted to host this feast. This inclusion of the *khalaknao* indicates a broader acceptance of individuals who have achieved social and economic status, reflecting a more fluid social hierarchy.

The preparation for the Tarung Feast of Merit is meticulous, beginning with a series of rituals to secure divine approval. The planning process includes rituals such as *Kapa khayang* (bamboo split divination), *Mang khamajut* (dream omenation), *Harkho khayang* (Fowl omenation), *Harra khayang* (egg omenation), which serve to communicate with *Ameo* (goddess) for guidance. Dreams and signs are interpreted as divine messages, and only after receiving positive omens can the individual proceed with selecting the *Tarung* tree. This system of seeking approval reinforces the importance of faith and divine intervention, demonstrating how traditional beliefs govern decision-making processes and moral boundaries in these communities. In sum, the *Tarung Maran Kasa* holds significant historical and cultural importance as it weaves together the social, spiritual, and natural realms. By honouring the spirits within nature and adhering to hierarchical customs, this feast exemplifies a traditional worldview that values interconnectedness, respect for nature, and a reverence for social order. These customs reflect how the Tangkhul Nagas view themselves in relation to the spiritual and physical worlds, preserving a cultural identity deeply rooted in ancestral beliefs and practices.

#### 4.2 Ethnographic Insights into Dreams and the Tarung

Dreams are often seen as channels for communication with spiritual entities, ancestors, or the divine. They act as metaphors, allowing individuals to interpret and prepare for potential events. In many societies, the dream world holds as much truth as waking reality, offering guidance, warnings, and insight. Dreams, within the framework of the *Tarung*, are considered a crucial element of guidance and premonition. Before venturing into the forest, the men involved share and interpret their dreams from the previous night. A negative dream is taken as a warning from the spiritual realm, urging caution and postponing the journey until more favourable signs appear. This ritual highlights how dreams serve as culturally significant signifiers, embodying an individual's connection with the divine and reflecting the societal belief in unseen forces that actively intervene in human affairs. Dreams, in this context, function as a bridge between the spiritual world and the physical realm, offering guidance and influencing key decisions.

- a) Sky and Water Symbolism in Dreams: Symbols related to the sky and water carry substantial meaning across cultures, often reflecting a connection with natural elements.
  - Clear Sky: A dream featuring a clear sky is generally associated with positivity, clarity, and optimism. The openness and lightness of a clear sky suggest a harmonious balance and future success. This imagery can symbolize freedom from obstacles, a sign that the path ahead is open and fortunate.
  - Gloomy Sky: Conversely, a gloomy sky filled with clouds may indicate potential trouble or uncertainty. This imagery taps into the feeling of being clouded or uncertain, highlighting the dreamer's feelings of unease or foreboding.
- b) In dreams, water can represent emotions, prosperity, and life. Different qualities of water signify varying psychological or emotional states:
  - Clear Water: Dreaming of clear, calm water represents peace, clarity, and purification. Water that is unclouded and free of debris symbolizes purity and open-heartedness, often aligning with feelings of emotional peace or a clear conscience.

- Muddy Water: On the other hand, muddy or turbulent water represents confusion or distress. As a manifestation of murky emotions or unresolved issues, such water might indicate emotional turmoil or a complicated situation that requires careful handling.
  - Fetching Water: In some interpretations, dreaming of fetching water is a positive omen associated with gathering resources or wealth. This act reflects abundance and careful preservation, symbolizing resourcefulness or the accumulation of assets.
  - Throwing Water or Drought: Conversely, wasting or throwing away water can signify loss, wasted potential, or a missed opportunity. Drought, too, signals scarcity, warning against overuse of resources or disregard for what is valuable.
- c) Animal and Person Symbolism in Dreams: Animals and people in dreams also carry particular symbolic weight, often mirroring emotional states, cultural values, or ancestral connections.
- Pigs: In many cultural interpretations, pigs symbolize a lack of success or a state of uncleanness. Dreaming of pigs may reflect fear of failure or a sense of personal inadequacy, acting as a prompt for self-reflection.
  - Deceased Persons: Dreaming of a deceased loved one can serve as a message about an impending rainy day or emotional tumult.
- d) Hair Symbolism in Dreams: In many cultures, hair represents personal power, wealth, or spiritual strength, with specific meanings attached to its length and state:
- Long Hair: Dreaming of long hair may reflect prosperity and abundance, particularly as it relates to *Phunghuila*, a goddess associated with wealth and feminine energy. This symbol can signify growth, fertility, and resourcefulness.
  - Cutting or Short Hair: On the other hand, dreaming of short or cut hair may represent loss or depletion of resources.
- e) Other Symbols: In dream omenation, personal characteristics and environmental upheavals carry deep meanings, often serving as metaphors for life circumstances or impending change.
- Flying: Flying in dreams commonly symbolizes growth and empowerment, representing the dreamer's ability to rise above difficulties. The act of flying is often seen as a metaphor for self-liberation or overcoming limitations, highlighting themes of self-empowerment or achieving goals.
  - Infant or Crying Baby: Dreaming of a crying baby may signify discord or noise, indicating social conflict or internal anxiety. Babies can symbolize new beginnings or concerns, and a crying baby often reflects unresolved issues or disturbances in one's life.
  - Gathering of People: A large gathering of people in dreams can symbolize mourning or feelings of collective sorrow. In some contexts, it may foreshadow a funeral or represent the impact of loss on a community level.
  - Landslide: Landslides are universally considered a bad omen, often symbolizing significant upheaval, loss, or the prospect of sudden change. This powerful natural image connects to feelings of destabilization and can serve as a warning about impending challenges.

The cultural interpretations of these dream symbols reflect collective values, fears, and hopes. Each symbol, whether of the sky, water, animals, or personal characteristics like hair, holds unique meanings based on a culture's lore and understanding of nature and human psychology. Each dream shared is weighed with equal importance and even a single negative dream holds the power to postpone the journey, indicating that community welfare supersedes individual desires. This consensus-driven approach reinforces unity, as decisions are made not by a sole leader but through shared spiritual discernment, a practice that resonates with many Indigenous beliefs regarding community interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

The ritual of selecting a *Tarung* tree in Phungcham culture reflects a respect for nature, intertwining spiritual beliefs, cultural symbolism, and environmental reverence. The process begins upon reaching the forest, where the selection of the tree follows a series of sacred steps. The community views this act not as simple resource gathering but as the start of a deeply spiritual journey, one that reinforces their relationship

with the natural world and the tree itself. The chosen tree must meet several sacred criteria: it must be flawless, untouched by human hands, free from past misfortunes like lightning strikes, and majestic in appearance. These requirements go beyond mere physical beauty, emphasizing spiritual purity and worthiness. The insistence on selecting an unblemished tree mirrors the community's broader reverence for nature. In their culture, physical purity often correlates with spiritual worthiness, reinforcing a belief that nature holds inherent sacredness. The tree's purity and unmarked appearance signify more than aesthetics; they represent an untouched, holy connection to the earth, an idea that has remained pure and free from the impacts of human intervention.

The ritual surrounding the *Tarung* tree selection holds symbolic meaning, particularly in the gesture of offering blood from the finest black rooster by the priest or elders. This act serves as a form of sacrifice and reciprocity, a way of honouring the tree as a partner rather than merely a resource. The tree becomes a revered symbol of life and fertility, embodying blessings from the spiritual realm. In this light, the community's engagement with the tree mimics a marriage ceremony, portraying the tree as a respected partner. This anthropomorphic view elevates the tree from a passive object to an active, valued entity, emphasizing the community's view of nature as a living, spiritual equal.

Once a tree is selected, the ritual continues with a symbolic cutting led by the priest or elders, who honour the tree in a gesture that signifies the beginning of a relationship. This act of respect aligns with traditional marriage customs, where a bride is honoured and celebrated. Here, the tree is treated as a cherished partner, embodying the community's unity with nature. By invoking the metaphor of marriage, the ritual reinforces the idea that nature is not something to be dominated or used up; instead, it is a cherished companion deserving of respect and honour. This view shifts the forest from a resource to an active, spiritual participant in the community's life. Throughout the ritual, the community pays close attention to omens and signs, reflecting their deep commitment to maintaining spiritual harmony. Any misstep or mishap is seen as an ill omen, leading to the entire ritual being restarted. This commitment to purity and correctness reveals the community's belief that the process itself must be spiritually harmonious. The careful interpretation of signs and dreams further reflects this worldview. Dreams, shared and interpreted communally, offer final validation from the spiritual realm, aligning the people's actions with divine will. This communal engagement in dream interpretation fosters mutual trust and a collective sense of purpose, binding the community through a shared ritual that transcends individual roles.

The ritual also involves the naming of the tree, with each name embodying feminine qualities and carrying significant cultural meaning. In Phungcham culture, three *Tarung* must be raised, each with a distinct name received through dreams. The names symbolize various aspects of wealth and abundance, adding another layer of symbolism. For instance, *Ravungla*, meaning "Abundant Spring," represents prosperity flowing endlessly like spring water. *Laklephy*, translating to "Queenly Wealthy," denotes a sense of royalty and affluence. *Lanlephy*, also meaning "Abundantly Wealthy," underscores richness and abundance. These names, each reflecting feminine qualities, emphasize the community's deep-seated cultural values and the high regard in which they hold the *Tarung*. Through this naming, the community ascribes a personality to each tree, further embedding it within their cultural and spiritual identity.

In essence, the *Tarung* tree selection, with its careful observance of dreams, symbolism, and rites, serves as a testament to how Indigenous cultural practices embody profound insights into the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment. This ethnographic exploration provides a window into understanding how ritual, respect for nature and collective spirituality intertwine, shaping a worldview that celebrates unity, purity, and the sacred.

### 4.3 The *Tarung* as a Bridge Between Material and Spiritual Realms

The *Tarung* serves as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms in the *Tarung Maran kasa* (*Tarung* feast of merit) of the Tangkhuls, embodying the inseparable connection between ritual practice and the realm of spirits. The *Tarung Maran Kasa* ritual is an integral part of *Maran Kasa* (feast of merit) and is celebrated as a culmination of spiritual, material, and communal efforts. Through a series of carefully orchestrated rituals, each step of the *Tarung's* journey—from tree selection to its final erection—invokes and engages the spiritual world, seeking blessings and avoiding malevolent influences. Rituals performed in each

stage of *Tarung's* process underline its dual purpose: to honour the spiritual world while grounding the community in a shared, sacred experience. Omenation practices like interpreting dreams, splitting bamboo, and observing fowl behaviour serve as a divinatory practice, guiding the participants and ensuring that each step aligns with the will of the spirits. The repetitive performance of rituals reveals a relationship of constant engagement with the supernatural realm, emphasizing the belief that success or misfortune in the endeavour depends on spiritual approval. One of the most essential rituals within the *Tarung* ceremony is *Hokharai*, a powerful invocation to *Ameo* (God), performed at every significant stage, whether in cutting or dragging the tree or erecting the *Tarung*. *Hokharai* involves repeated chants, beginning with a series of “*ho ho ho*” sounds followed by words beseeching the removal of evil spirits and calling upon benevolent ones for protection and blessing (“*Oh hahahahaha heih*, oh let the evil spirit go away oh so that no harm will befall us. *Oh*, let the good spirits take place, *oh* protect us, and help us! *Oh, Hui oh Hui oh Hui*”). The *Hokharai* chant, therefore, resonates as a spiritual call to the unseen forces that influence the lives of the community. By invoking the *Hokharai* at the onset of each task, the ritual embodies a plea for harmony between the material and spiritual worlds, setting a protective boundary that seeks to ward off misfortune.

The *Tarung Maran kasa* carries even more symbolic depth in the rituals performed following the selection of the sacred tree. The elder of the community addresses the tree with great reverence before it is felled, affirming the purpose behind its sacrifice and assuring it of its honourable role as the *Tarung*. By treating the tree as a living entity, the ritual acknowledges the interdependence between nature and spirituality. The elder’s words—“Oh, we did not cut you down without purpose but to marry you as our *Tarung*. So do not be angry with us; rather, accept us as your home”—are not merely symbolic; they reflect the communal understanding of spiritual reciprocity and respect for the natural world. The *Tarung's* behaviour during transport further reflects the *Maran kasa* (feast of merit) belief that the structure (tree trunk or stone) embodies a living spirit. The tree trunk or stone can feel heavier or lighter depending on the spirit’s satisfaction, symbolizing the spirit’s cooperation or resistance. When the community drags or carries the *Tarung*, there may be moments when it becomes mysteriously heavier, resisting movement. The elders interpret this as the *Tarung's* reluctance to be carried, a phenomenon that calls for ritualistic appeasement. By mounting the *Tarung* and sweet-talking, it becomes a symbolic ritual akin to wooing, invoking tenderness and reverence. By treating the *Tarung* with gentleness, the elders hope to transform the tree into a willing participant in the journey, reflecting the belief that the spiritual realm responds to respect and affection. This ritualistic communication aims to shift the spirit’s attitude, making the *Tarung* lighter, and reinforcing the idea that harmony between the physical and spiritual realms can facilitate cooperation. This relationship between physical resistance and spiritual reluctance is well-illustrated in oral traditions like that of *Phungcham Faremwo Tarung*, where the *Tarung's* refusal to move served as a reminder of the need for respect and engagement. According to an oral account, the *Tarung* once halted overnight in a place, refusing to proceed. Only after an elder performed the appropriate ritual and offered pleasing words did the *Tarung* agree to move the next day. This narrative highlights the belief that spirits respond to reverence, communication, and perhaps even humour, reinforcing the idea that the physical world can only be navigated with the support of the spiritual. The tradition of coaxing the *Tarung* reflects the understanding that spiritual beings are not indifferent objects but entities requiring compassion and understanding.

Following the installation/erecting of the *Tarung*, additional ceremonies and offerings are performed to appease and honour the spirit believed to reside within it. Sacrificial offerings, particularly those involving blood, are central to this process and are considered essential acts of respect toward the spirit within the *Tarung*. Through these offerings, the community seeks blessings, protection, and harmony with the forces believed to influence their lives. Animal sacrifices are commonly performed as part of these rituals. Blood, in particular, symbolizes life and is dropped onto the *Tarung* as a mark of deep respect, reverence and sanctity. Blood offerings carry an intense symbolic weight, representing a direct and powerful way to gain the spirit’s favour. The scale and variety of sacrifices vary across different villages. Human sacrifices, however, are extremely rare and reserved for the highest forms of devotion, given their profound symbolic and material implications. The act of sacrificing a human life carries the heaviest weight of reverence, signifying an ultimate gesture of submission and respect. Human life, in this context, is the most valuable gift one can offer, reflecting the highest degree of devotion to gain favour, whether for a successful harvest, victory in warfare or protection

from natural calamities. Such sacrifices, though seldom enacted, symbolize the community's deepest respect for the spirit and its dependence on the blessings and guidance of the spiritual realm. Oral traditions recount instances where human sacrifices were performed as part of the *Tarung* rituals. The tale of the *Phungcham Faremwo Tarung*, for instance, highlights a particularly intense ritual known as *mi khamasei*. In this rare and solemn ceremony, a human life was reportedly offered to the *Tarung* spirit through acts as severe as gouging eyes, dripping blood and hung the body. Although these narratives are unambiguous and disturbing, they reveal the depth of significance attributed to the *Tarung*, illustrating how the community resort to such measures to honour and appease the spirit believed to reside within it.

The *Tarung Maran kasa* ritual transcends mere cultural practice; it is an embodiment of the community's spiritual ethos. Each ritual gesture serves to bridge the gap between the earthly and divine, binding the material and spiritual realms in a dance of reciprocity and reverence. The ritualized actions surrounding the *Tarung* reinforce a shared worldview, one that sees human life as intricately interwoven with the forces of nature and spirituality.

#### 4.4 Broader Implications for Indigenous Identity Formation

The indigenous identity formation of the Tangkhul Nagas is intricately tied to their cultural artifacts and traditional practices. One of the most important artifacts among the Tangkhul Naga community is the *Tarung*. The *Tarung* is more than a wooden structure; it is a living emblem of the Tangkhul people's heritage. From selecting the tree on their own land to performing rituals to seek *Ameo's* (goddess) blessings and carving significant motifs serve as a reminder of their historical and ancestral rights to the land, grounding their identity in tradition and a specific physical space. This emphasis on creating the *Tarung* from local resources rather than external ones underscores the importance of territorial sovereignty in their cultural identity. Further, the ritualistic journey of the *Tarung* from tree to artifact is symbolic of the Tangkhul people's connection with the land and the divine.

The motifs carved on the *Tarung* serve as visual expressions of essential cultural values and roles. For instance, the *khachon* (lion footprints) motif represents leadership and dominance. Similarly, the *mikui* (human head) motif symbolizes bravery and strength, resonating with the ancient tradition of headhunting, which played a significant role in the Tangkhul's warrior identity. Although headhunting has long been abandoned, the motifs preserve the essence of the values associated with bravery and courage, sustaining a sense of honour and pride linked to the past. Thus, the *Tarung* not only strengthens individual identity but also unites the community around shared values, encouraging future generations to carry forward these traditions.

The crafting and symbolism of the *Tarung* are integral to the Tangkhul knowledge system, encompassing ecological awareness, spiritual beliefs and artistic expression. The detailed carvings of motifs like the *seikui* (buffalo head) and *Varang khamor* (hornbill beak) reflect a deep understanding of their environment and spiritual world, which has been passed down through generations. Each motif is not merely decorative but is laden with meaning; for example, the *seikui* motif stands as an emblem of wealth and abundance. Traditionally, buffalo ownership was a symbol of economic power and the *seikui* motif echoes this connection with prosperity, reinforcing the community's respect for and reliance upon the natural resources around them. The practice of crafting the *Tarung* keeps traditional knowledge systems alive, ensuring that such skills and symbols are remembered and cherished. By engaging in the making of the *Tarung*, the Tangkhul people continue to honour their ancestors and reinforce the values, beliefs and practices that define them. This process of passing down knowledge through the creation of symbolic artifacts is crucial for preserving indigenous ways of knowing, serving as a counterbalance to the pressures of modernization and external influences that might otherwise erode their culture.

The *Tarung* stands as a powerful symbol of the Tangkhul Naga's identity, values, and spiritual beliefs. Through its intricate carvings and symbolic motifs, the *Tarung* contributes to the formation of Indigenous identity by reflecting the community's history, cultural values and connection to their land. In crafting the *Tarung*, the Tangkhuls perpetuate traditional knowledge systems, ensuring that the meanings embedded in each motif and ritual are preserved for future generations. The *Tarung*, thus, embodies both cultural preservation and resilience, allowing the Tangkhul Nagas to retain their unique identity amidst changing times.

#### 4.5 Feast of Merit and the Role of Tarung

The *Tarung*, a cultural artifact of the Tangkhul Naga society, holds profound significance within this community. Through the lens of identity, spirituality, and cultural memory, the *Tarung Maran kasa* not only serves as a tangible reminder of the ancestral legacy of the Tangkhul people but also plays a vital role in shaping the collective consciousness of this Indigenous group. Erected as part of the *Tarung Maran Kasa* ritual, it embodies the essence of the “Feast of Merit”, an honour bestowed upon the individual who contributes meaningfully to the community. The erection of *Tarung* involves a long and elaborate process that requires substantial preparation and resources. The host prepares for the event by brewing large quantities of rice beer and organizing the slaughter of animals such as buffalo, bulls, and other livestock to provide ample food. This *Maran Kasa* can last for several days or even weeks, leading to high expenses and making it accessible primarily to the wealthy. As a result, the celebration has traditionally been associated with affluent individuals within the community. The Tangkhul people practice various forms of the “Feast of Merit” (*Maran kasa*), such as *Maran Lengcheng Shim kasa* (construction of a house by the royal family or by the wealthy individual), *Ngalung Maran Kasa* (the erection of stone monoliths) and *Samkhok/Bedkhok Khuikasang* (communal beds), each with its symbolic and social importance. As T. Luikham (1961) notes, “...big villages like Hunphun (Ukhrul) and Humpum (Hungpung) when a rich man celebrated the feast of merit 12 buffaloes, 2 bulls, 12 pigs, 1 dog and 1 cat would be killed”. This scale of animal sacrifice underscores the importance of wealth in establishing social status within the community. However, these rituals vary across villages, showing the diversity within the region’s traditions. For instance, in villages such as Phungcham, Chingjaroi, and Somra, there is no set number of animals to be sacrificed. In Chingjaroi village, wealthier individuals tend to slaughter more animals, thereby enhancing their social standing. This practice illustrates a reciprocal relationship between wealth and social recognition, where one’s financial capacity directly influences their standing and honour within the community.

Analyzing the *Tarung Maran Kasa* through an interdisciplinary approach that merges ethnography, symbolism, and folklore is essential for a holistic understanding of the artifact’s significance. The ethnographic study provides insights into the rituals and practices associated with the *Tarung*, helping to contextualize its place in everyday life. Symbolism offers a lens through which to interpret the cultural meanings attributed to the *Tarung*, exploring how it functions as a visual and spiritual language. Folklore, meanwhile, reveals narratives and oral traditions that sustain the artifact’s meaning, shedding light on its historical and mythical origins. This interdisciplinary framework not only deepens the understanding of the *Tarung*’s role in Tangkhul society but also illustrates how cultural artifacts can be studied within Indigenous contexts. Such approaches offer valuable insights into how indigenous communities encode their identities, values, and spiritual beliefs into material forms, transforming these artifacts into living cultural documents.

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