

ON THE MARRIAGE CUSTOMS OF THE BANGNI

—DAVID W. M. DUNCAN

The Bangni, whose dialect belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages, inhabit the eastern half of Kameng Frontier Division and the western areas of Subansiri Frontier Division in the North East Frontier Agency. Their land is bounded by Tibet to the north and by the plains of Assam to the south. The Bangni are the sons of Abo Tani in his form of Kolo Tani and their Mother was Sachingne, The Earth. They worship Doini-Pollo, the Sun-Moon God of their ancestors, and they propitiate the spirits of their ancestors and the spirit of Good and Evil, the spirits of the mountains and their rocks and the spirits of their valleys and their many streams. It was my privilege to serve them as their Assistant Political Officer from 1955 to 1959 in Sepla Sub-Division which is predominantly inhabited by the 2 Sub-Tribes the Yanu Bangni and the Tagin Bangni; and the marriage customs which are briefly described in the succeeding paragraphs pertain more specifically to the marriage customs of the Yanu Bangni, although there is good reason to believe that the Tagin and Krodang Bangni also observe the same customs. The tribal words where they occur in this article are in the Yanu Bangni dialect.

A Bangni takes a woman as his spouse for the purpose of procreation and for economic reasons. The Bangnis are a practical people. They are nevertheless capable of expressing the purest and deepest affection for their marriage partners; but a dubious virgin sighing and weeping by the side of a lake with water lillies in the background would be as incomprehensible to them as Einstein to a new born baby. They do, however, believe that a couple who have been joined in marriage will be re-united in the after life; and with a few exceptions a Bangni husband does show more affection towards his wife than towards his parents and other relatives.

The Bangni are exogamous and polygamous (polygyny), and marriages are arranged either by the parents or next of kin, or by the man himself if he is in a position to acquire a wife for himself. Marriages are also effected between a couple who are in love with each other provided that the man is capable of paying the bride price. When a marriage is arranged by the parents or next of kin not much attention is paid to the age of the girl or the boy; and marriages have been arranged between a matured girl and a boy who has not yet reached the age of

puberty, and there have been marriages between an old man and a mere child. Marriages have also been arranged between a young boy and a young girl who have not yet attained the age of puberty. In such cases, where the physical consummation of marriage is impracticable, the girl will continue to remain in her own home until she is considered fit to become a wife in the physical sense. This is the general rule, but there are exceptions, especially if the girl's parents are poor and desire to secure the bride price as early as possible. On the other hand, if the bride price has been paid in full, it is not unusual for a matured girl who is married to a young boy to go and live in her husband's house, and it is not considered an offence for the husband's male relatives to cohabit with her at this stage and even after the husband is in a position to perform his marital duties.

BRIDE PRICE When the interested parties to a proposed marriage get together for the purpose of discussing the bride price, the meeting is known as the NIDA GAHNA. In this meeting a decision will be taken in respect of the bride price and the time when the girl will leave her parents' house to join her husband in his house or village. The bride price is called DAMRE. Two witnesses are to be present at the NIDA GAHNA. The one from the boy's side is known as the BUNGTE and the one from the girl's side is known as the CHENE. The BUNGTE and the CHENE each receive a fee called the BUJO and CHENE DUNGTOM respectively. Such a fee rarely exceeds one mithun (*bos frontalis*) in value. The DAMRE is paid only by the man, his father or next of kin, and it is very rarely less than one mithun in value, and I did come across a case where the DAMRE was valued at 70 mithuns. In those days the price of a full grown mithun was Rs 600/- Salt, erichadars, meat (mithun, beef, mutton or pork) are also included in the DAMRE, and if the man is fairly rich the costly necklaces known as TASANG and Tibetan prayer bells known as LAKTE are also given and count towards the value of the DAMRE. In this connection it may be mentioned that the TASANG, of which there are many varieties, are distinctly Tibetan in origin and the people believe that God had given them the TASANG, and as far as I could gather the number of TASANG in the Bangni area had never been augmented by direct purchase from other areas. The Tibetan prayer bells are all without handles and have been given names and are endowed with the quality of being either male or female. Their origin, as far as the BANGNI are concerned, is the same as that of the TASANG.

The DAMRE can be paid all at one time or in instalments and it is expected that the girl will join her husband when the full DAMRE has been paid.

After the NIDA GAHNA has come to an end, a mithun will be slaughtered in front of the girl's house by the man's family. This signifies that the betrothal has taken place. A mithun so slaughtered is called the PAGAH and counts towards the DAMRE. If a man is unable to afford a mithun he will offer erichadars (Assamese silk) instead and such an offer is known as the PAH-GAH. If the presentation is a sword (CHEGE) it is known as the SEGAH.

The DAMRE is received by the girl's father or by her brother or brothers or by the guardian of the girl if she has no close relative. Whoever receives the DAMRE takes upon himself the responsibility of giving the girl in marriage to the man who paid the DAMRE, or to the man on whose behalf the DAMRE was paid. It is customary for the wife to live in her husband's house but on certain rare occasions if a man is unable to pay the full DAMRE he will go and live in his wife's house and work for her parents until the full DAMRE is paid, or until such time as his wife's parents are dead when he will take his wife to his own home.

THE DOWRY A dowry is paid by the girl's parents to the man's family only when the DAMRE is more than seven mithuns in value. There is no collective name for the dowry; however if the dowry presented is in the form of mithuns (SEBE) it is called BECHE, if TASANG are given the dowry is known as SANGCHE, and if a male slave (NIERRA) or a female slave (PAHNE) is presented the dowry is called RACHE or PAHCHE respectively. In addition the girl's parents can also give necklaces (TASANG) if the DAMRE is more than four but less than eight mithuns in value. If the DAMRE is five mithuns in value then the girl's parents will give one TASANG which will then be known as the DALLAM TASANG. If the DAMRE is six and seven mithuns in value then the additional TASANG given by the girl's parents will be known as the GALLAM TASANG and ALI TASANG respectively.

The different names given for the dowry are used only if the marriage was arranged at a NIDA GAHNA, after which the girl went to live in her husband's home. If, however, a girl elopes with a man and stays in his house as his wife, and if the girl's parents do not object to the marriage and a NIDA GAHNA is then held after the elopement, then the dowry (if there is to be a dowry) is known by other names. A dowry of mithuns would then be known as SORE, a dowry of TASANG would be called FARGE DOHPUM and a dowry of a male or female slave would be called SENGLÉ PATAH. Such dowries are generally given if the DAMRE is far in excess of ten mithuns in value.

POLYGYNY A BANGNI can marry any number of wives, but the number of wives he does marry is usually determined by his ability to pay the extra DAMRE, or by the number of wives left to him as his inheritance. I rarely came across a BANGNI having more than four wives at any one time.

The first wife is the important wife and she exercises considerable power over her husband and his household. The husband must get his first wife's permission and consent before he can marry a second or third wife otherwise there are endless quarrels and the second or third wife is apt to be mistreated by the first wife. The first wife also tells the husband which wife he is to sleep with on any one night. A man's wives will continue to sleep around the same hearth until one of them gets a child. The first wife will then tell the husband to make a separate hearth for the wife who had the child. A BANGNI does not have sexual intercourse with a woman who is menstruating, and a menstruating woman cannot sleep around the hearth but has to sleep in the back verandah of the house.

If a man has paid the DAMRE for a girl who is unable to leave her parents because of her young age and if in the meantime he marries another girl (matured) and brings her to his house, then the second girl becomes the first wife. Such cases are rare, and a matured man generally starts off by marrying a matured girl first.

If a girl whose DAMRE has been paid dies, then her DAMRE has to be returned or her sister or some other girl is to be given in marriage. This is particularly true if the young girl dies before going to her husband's house. The DAMRE is not returned if a dowry has been paid and the wife dies in the husband's house. If no dowry was given then the DAMRE is to be returned.

THE WIDOW A widow does not return to her parent's house but continues to live with her husband's family. The widow becomes the wife of either her late husband's son (by another wife) or the wife of her husband's younger brother. Herein lies the reason why many an old man will marry a very young girl. It is to provide a 'paid for' wife either for his son or younger brother in the event of the old man's death.

If a man dies before his wife has come to his house, and if the DAMRE has been paid, then the wife will be given in marriage either to his son or younger brother, or another girl sent in her place. In such cases a new DAMRE is not given, although one or two extra mithuns may be given especially if another girl is sent.

INCEST The BANGNI are exogamous and I did not come across a case of incest during my stay in Sepila, but when there are prohibitory laws in existence one can assume that incestuous relationships do sometimes occur. A man who is found committing incest is immediately sold as a slave (sometimes killed) and a woman is either reduced to slavery or married off to some one else. It has also been said that a woman who has indulged in an incestuous relationship incurs divine displeasure and her urinary bladder falls out of her body.

A. A BANGNI male can marry the following females:-

1. Father's brother's wife (MEI)
2. Wife's brother's daughter (MEI, RUKME)
3. Mother's brother's daughter (MEI, RUKME)
4. Mother's sister (MEI, RUKME)
5. Wife's sister's daughter (NIANGME)
6. Mother's sister's daughter (NIANGME)
7. Wife's sister (RUKME)
8. Elder brother's wife (MEI)
9. Father's other wives (MEI)

B. A BANGNI male cannot marry the following females :-

1. Daughter (PAPPI)
2. Mother (ANE)
3. Sister (AME, AI, ATE, BORME)
4. Sister same father different mother (AME, AI, ATE, BORME)
5. Sister same mother different father (AME, AI, ATE, BORME)
6. Brother's daughter (BORME)
7. Father's brother's daughter (AME, BORME)
8. Father's sister (AI, ATE)
9. Father's sister's daughter (MEW)
10. Mother's brother's wife (AYO)
11. Sister's daughter (DUNGNE KAU)
12. Son's daughter (KAU, MEFA)
13. Father's mother (AYO, ANE LAKI)
14. Mother's mother (AYO, ANE LAKI)
15. Daughter's daughter (KAU, MEW)
16. Wife's mother (AYO)
17. Son's wife (NYAFUNG)
18. Wife's brother's wife (AYO)
19. Son's wife's mother (AYO)

C. A BANGNI female can marry the following males :-

1. Husband's brother's son (REGO)
2. Father's sister's husband (MAHTE)
3. Father's sister's son (TETE, PAI)
4. Sister's son (HME KAU)
5. Sister's husband (MAHTE)
6. Mother's sister's husband (YAO)
7. Mother's sister's son (RUKME KAU)
8. Husband's younger brother (DOBO)
9. Husband's other son (REGO)

D. A BANGNI female cannot marry the following males :-

1. Father (ABO)
2. Son (FEFA, NAHFA)
3. Brother (ABUNG, BORO)
4. Brother same father different mother (ABUNG, BORO)
5. Brother-same mother different father (ABUNG, BORO)
6. Father's brother (TETE, PAI)
7. Brother's son (BORO)
8. Father's brother's son (ABUNG, BORO)
9. Mother's brother (ATO)
10. Mother's brother's son (KEI)
11. Husband's sister's son (KAU)
12. Son's son (KAU)
13. Daughter's son (KAU)
14. Mother's father (ATO, ABO LAKI)
15. Daughter's husband (MAHTE)
16. Husband's father (ATO)
17. Husband's sister's husband (BARBORA)
18. Father's father (ATO)
19. Daughter's husband's father (ATO)

AGE AT FIRST COHABITATION It would be difficult to say at what age a Bangni boy or girl begins to indulge in sexual intercourse. A Bangni girl is considered nubile when her hair, which was shaved in infancy, has grown to a point below her shoulders. I would put this age roughly at 13 years, and it is possible that a girl will have had her first sexual experience before she has started menstruating. Rape is unknown and the Bangni appear to be happily free from many of the sexual aberrations that plague a more sophisticated society.

ADULTERY The Bangni do not draw any fine distinction between adultery and illicit intercourse, and both offences are punishable by custom. The word YOSHI covers any sexual union punishable by custom and the fine in such cases is known as YOGO.

In cases of adultery the man has to pay YOGO to the aggrieved husband, and the fine is never less than one mithun but not more than two mithuns in value. An adulterous wife can also be scolded and abused by the husband, and a more jealous husband will go to the extent of cutting off his wife's plaited hair. A wife who commits adultery more than once during her stay in her husband's house is generally sent back to her parents who have to return her DAMRE.

An unmarried girl is generally not punished in cases of illicit intercourse, but the man who is caught indulging in illicit intercourse with an unmarried girl will have to pay YOGO either to the girl's father or to her brothers if the father is dead. It is not considered an offence for a man to cohabit with his elder brother's wife or with his clan brother's wife, and a man can also sleep with his father's wives, other than his mother, during the father's lifetime and no punishment is inflicted. Such affairs are, however, not disclosed out of respect for the father. It is also not an offence for a betrothed couple to sleep with each other, but if the girl becomes pregnant then she goes to her husband's house and if the full DAMRE has not been paid then efforts are made to pay the balance as early as possible. A man who cohabits with a married girl, who has not yet gone to live with her husband, will have to pay YOGO if he does not belong to the same clan as the husband.

MARRIAGE BY CAPTURE A Bangni will sometimes capture a girl and take her away to his village from where he will make arrangements to pay her DAMRE later on. This form of marriage is known as NIEME SENA but is seldom resorted to. The girl might have been or might not have been married at the time of her capture, and in most cases the girl herself may have permitted the capture. The capture of a married girl leads to a bitter dispute between the husband and the captor in which their respective families, villages and clans are often involved. I seldom came across a case in which a girl was actually bound and taken away by force.

DESERTION Amongst the Bangni it is the woman who generally deserts the husband. There was only one case on record in which the man, probably seized by wanderlust, deserted his wife and children and kept moving from village to village. He returned to his village only when his wife had left his house and gone to stay

with another man, and he returned to claim back his wife. A wife deserts her husband if she is repulsed by her husband's physical appearance or if she is maltreated by the first wife or the husband himself. Sometimes a woman falls in love with another man and her lover will entice her to leave her husband, and there are times when the parents themselves will entice the girl to leave her husband so that they can marry her off to some other man. If a free born woman discovers that her husband's mother was a slave she will leave her husband and go back to her parents. Custom requires that a wife who deserts her husband should be sent back to him, but when it can be established that the cause of her desertion was maltreatment either by the husband or first wife then the village councils invariably take the side of the girl and she is allowed to stay with her parents who have to return her DAMRE.

Some Bangni husbands take positive steps to prevent or deter their wives from running away. The husband either makes his wife take a solemn oath that she will not desert him, or else he keeps a lock of her hair and her pared finger nails so that the wife shall know that he will resort to sorcery and cause her harm if she leaves him. When a deserting wife is subsequently returned to her husband he will quite often put her feet in wooden stocks for a few days to ensure that she does not run away again.

DIVORCE The offer of the PAGAH and the giving of the DAMRE indicate that a woman has become the legal wife of a man. She ceases to be his wife the moment her DAMRE is returned to the man or to the persons who paid the DAMRE. A wife may for various reasons not live with her husband but she is considered to be his wife as long as her DAMRE has not been returned.

The Bangni follow the patrilineal line of descent and the children always take the father's clan name. In the case of a divorce the children will remain with the father, but if at the time of divorce there is a child who is still being breast fed then the child will remain with the mother until it is in a position to return to the father's house. If a woman is pregnant at the time of divorce then the child will continue to live with the mother and become adopted into the mother's clan or take the clan name of the man who eventually marries his mother.

SLAVES AND MARRIAGE The marriage customs for slaves are the same as those for the NITE (free born), but in the majority of cases it is the ATO (master) who arranges a wife for his male slave (NIERRA). Such a wife would also have to be a slave, a female slave being termed a PAHNE. In such cases it is the ATO of the NIERRA

who gives the DAMRE and it is the ATO of the PAHNE who receives it. Sometimes a NIERRA will arrange his own marriage if he has sufficient wealth of his own. Although it is considered shameful, disgraceful and unthinkable for a free born to cohabit with a slave, it is not considered to be a crime or an offence to religion, and there have been cases of a NITE man marrying a PAHNE and of a NIERRA marrying a NITE woman. In two such cases which came to my notice I found out that in one case the man had remained a bachelor for many years and was quite poor. His elder brother, however, had some property including one PAHNE. On the death of his elder brother the man received all the property and as he was unmarried he took the PAHNE as his wife. In the second case it was a question of pure physical attraction. The man was quite rich and he had two wives, but he was so enamoured of a PAHNE that he brought her home with the intention of marrying her. He actually enticed the girl away from her NIERRA husband. There was an uproar from all sides and the girl was eventually returned to her NIERRA husband.

When a NITE man marries a PAHNE the offspring become NITE, although the mother may still be regarded as being a PAHNE depending upon the circumstances under which the man married her. In most cases, however, a PAHNE becomes a NITE when she marries a free born man. A NITE man who marries the PAHNE of another man is entitled to receive one mithun as compensation from her ATO. This compensation is called PAHTIK and the reason behind it is that a NITE should be compensated for taking a PAHNE out of a state of servitude. If a NIERRA marries a NITE woman, then, in addition to the DAMRE, he has to pay one mithun as compensation to the girl's parents. This compensation is called RAA-RIK. Marriages between a NITE girl and a NIERRA are extremely rare and they only occur when a NITE is so poor that he is unable to give his daughter in marriage to a NITE man, and is prepared therefore to give his daughter in marriage to a rich NIERRA. The offspring of such marriages are considered to be slaves.

It is also rare for a NIERRA to have illicit intercourse with a NITE woman, and if a NIERRA does cohabit with the wife of his ATO he is likely to be severely beaten or else sold to another man. The wife may also be sent back to her parents and her DAMRE demanded back.

A man who falsely accuses another man of having illicit intercourse with a woman is required to pay a fine called RU-MUM-TYP valued at one mithun, and it is immaterial if the woman in question was a NITE or a PAHNE.

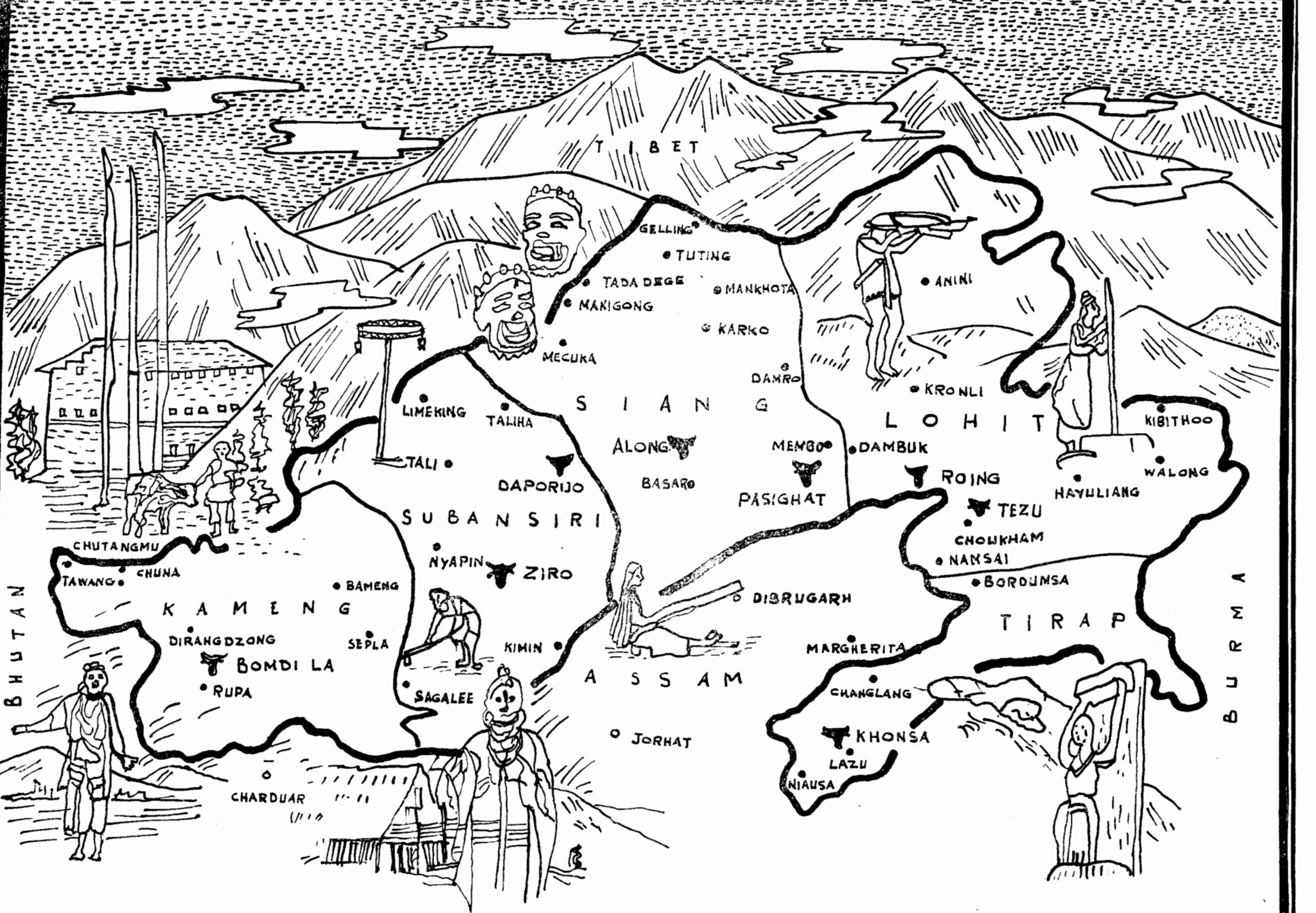
CHILDREN BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK

I seldom met a bastard in Sepla, and one reason for this is that a girl is invariably 'married' at an early age, so if she does become pregnant one can always say that the child is the offspring of his father (sexual intercourse between betrothed couples is permitted). It does not mean that in every case the child is the offspring of its rightful father, but it does mean that the child does ultimately have a legitimate father. Even when a man knows that his wife is bearing another man's child he will claim the child as his own. The guilty man will of course have to pay YOGO unless he is a clan brother.

Abortion is sometimes resorted to if the girl does not wish to have a child and I was told that a pregnant girl will ask her friend to step upon her abdomen and thereby cause her to abort.

There were a few individuals who were definitely half-breeds, and the Bangni admit that such individuals were fathered by tea garden labourers from the plains. The oldest was then about 50 years and the youngest around 12 years of age. They were all treated as slaves but were allowed to reside with their mothers who were invariably slaves themselves.

The Bangni are a fine virile tribe whose manner and way of life will undoubtedly undergo certain changes with the passage of time and through frequent contacts with other people. When such changes do occur I sincerely hope that it will be the tribe itself that wrought the change in its desire to bridge the gap between a primitive and a technologically advanced world; and that the BANGNI did not give up their way of life through extraneous coercion or through a sense of shame.



THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY