



The Interface of Traditional Governing Institutions and Modern Political Structures: A Study of the Ao Nagas

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Abstract: Every traditional Naga village functioned as a sovereign and independent entity following either democratic or autocratic principles. Similarly, each Ao Naga village was independent within its jurisdiction and was administered by a chosen council called Tatar Putu Menden/Samen Menchen. However, with the arrival of the Britishers, office of the Dobashis and the Gaonbora (GB) was established to assist in the governance of the Nagas in the villages. Post independence, the Government of Nagaland gave legitimacy and formal recognition to the traditional governing institutions as forms of local self-governance through the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act of 1978. As per this act every recognized village in Nagaland is required to have a Village Council (VC) and Village Development Boards (VDB)s with members elected by the villagers according to established customary practices and traditions, subject to State Government approval. While traditional and cultural practices have undergone changes owing to the influence of Christianity, education and modernity, the traditional governance institutions have shown remarkable resilience and have remained mostly intact. The paper is therefore an attempt to understand how traditional and modern institutions of governance coexists and interact with each other in the governance of the Ao Naga village. It will also analyse the cultural resilience and the political adaptations of the Ao Naga traditional governance institution i.e. the Putu Menden in the modern era. The paper is largely based on data obtained from secondary source.

Keywords-Traditional governing system, Putu Menden, Ao Nagas

Introduction:

Traditional societies lacked formal political organizations, legal systems or structured administrations. However, they still succeeded in maintaining social order and cohesion and representatives predominantly exercised political control in these communities (Yarang, 2022). In North East India, traditional institutions and authority structures show significant diversity. Haokip (2022) notes that they range from hereditary chiefs wielding near-absolute authority to highly democratic council systems. While few societies are governed by near-autocratic hereditary chiefs, the majority are led by a nominal chief supported by a robust village council, typically consisting of all adult males or unanimously elected representatives. Such institutions have an encompassing influence over the lives of the people. Similarly, Naga society reflects a unique combination of near-autocracy and extreme democracy. Hereditary chieftainship exists among the Semas. In contrast, the Konyaks are led by powerful chiefs known as Anghs, who are revered as sacred, and whose commands are absolute (Elwin, 1961). Whereas, the Republican form of governance were practiced by tribes such as the Angamis, Aos, Phoms, Rengmas, Lothas, Chakhesangs, Changs, Zeliang, Pochuris, Khiamniungans, Yimchungrus, and Sangtams.

The village served as the fundamental unit of administration in Naga society holding the utmost significance for every tribe. It was the core unit of political and socio-economic life. The villages were not only economically self-reliant but also functioned as autonomous, self-governing political entities for which they were often referred to as "village states" or "village republics" (Gideon, 2023). The apex political body in Naga villages was the Village Assembly, represented by individuals with expertise in customary law and a charismatic presence. Actual village administration was primarily carried out by the informal Village Assembly, which functioned as a crucial decision-making body (Nshoga, 2009). In Nagaland, the structure of traditional village governance differed among tribes and was known by various names such as 'Chochomi' among the Semas, 'Angh' among the Konyaks (symbolizing a powerful kingship), 'Pangti' among the Lothas and 'Putu Menden' among the Aos (Devi, 2015). Jamir (2011) observed that the traditional self-governance of the Nagas, in many ways, aligns with Gandhiji's concept of 'Village Swaraj,' where he envisioned a village as a self-sufficient republic, independent in meeting its essential needs but interdependent on others for various necessities. The villagers had a strong bond with their communities that an individual's identity was inherently tied to their village of origin. Similarly, every Ao Naga village in the past was a 'miniature state' (Jamir & Lanunungsang, 2005) or a 'small republic' (Elwin, 1961) administered by a chosen council called Putu Menden/Samen Menchen. A.W. Davis, in discussing the Ao Naga tribal constitution, further observes that it would be hard to find communities that are more thoroughly democratic (Elwin, 1969).

Significant transformations began to unfold when the Nagas came into contact with the British in 1882. While the British did not dismantle the traditional structure, they reinforced it, recognizing its relevance to the distinct socio-cultural fabric of Naga society (Venuh, 2004). The British also introduced institutions such as the Dobashis (custodians of customary law) and the Gaonburas (village government agents) to support their administrative objectives. These additions added new layers to the traditional governance system, creating a more complex administrative framework. Following India's independence, the scope of grassroots political institutions expanded further especially with the introduction of Article 371 (A) in the Indian Constitution which led to the existence of Village Council and Village Development Board (Humtsoe, 2013). Moreover, owing to the influence of Christianity, education and modernity many traditional and cultural practices have undergone changes. However, the traditional governance institutions have shown remarkable resilience. As Temjensosang (2017) observes despite the external influences, traditional governance institutions have withstood these changes and remained largely intact.

The Ao Nagas: A Profile

The Ao Nagas, a major ethnic group in Nagaland have maintained a rich tradition of self-rule rooted in communal life, kinship, and customary law. Traditional customs and culture are deeply rooted among the people despite the fast intrusion of modernity in their lives. They are composed of three phratries—Chungli, Mongsen, and Changki where there are certain innate differences in the customary practices despite belonging to the same community (Temjensosang, 2017). The Ao Naga is not a single unified group but is divided into six major clans, each with its sub-clans. The major clans include Pongen, Longkumer, and Jamir from the Chungli group, along with Imchen, Walling, and Longchar from the Mongsen group (Longchar, R., & Imchasenla, 2017).

The Ao Putu Menden: Traditional Governing System

The Putu menden is the highest assembly of people with supreme authority. They are the rulers, administrators and the high judges possessing the highest executive authority in the affairs of the village administration. They exercise their power through consensus amongst all the clans (Jamir & lanunungsang, 2005; Jamir, 2011). This system originated at Chungliyiimti, the village where the early civilisation of the Ao Nagas began. The system is founded on the tradition of meat sharing, where every member of a Putu receives a portion of meat signifying their clan affiliation and association with the Tatar Putu Menden. The word 'tatar' denotes an individual's entitlement to a designated share of meat. 'Putu' refers to a generation that consists of 30 years in Ao term and 'menden' means seat (Jamir & lanunungsang, 2005). So, Putu Menden means the seat of generation.

Among the Aos, there are broadly five recognized putus: Medemsanger Putu, Mejsanger Putu, Meponsanger Putu, Kosasanger Putu and Reongsanger Putu, each governing the village for a 30-year cycle while in the case of Mongsen system, it is more flexible. Within every putu, there are seven to nine age or peer group units known as Zünga. Each Zünga comprises individuals born within three years, forming a hierarchy within the Putu. The elders hold authority over their juniors, determining the distribution of work, roles, and responsibilities within the Putu. Throughout the 30-year governance period, different Züngas take over leadership as their time comes. At the end of the designated term, all councilors of the outgoing Putu step down, making way for a new Putu Menden to assume control (Jamir, 2011). Mills (1973) also observed that the structure of an Ao village is founded on two key principles. First, the entire village is organized into age groups (Zünga), each responsible for specific communal duties. Second, the administration of village affairs is managed by a council, with its election process and tenure differing across various language groups. Moreover, the chosen councils are representatives of various clans in the village so clans serve as the core of all administrative structures.

The Ao system of Putu Menden is generally composed of three tiers (Jamir & lanunungsang, 2005; Temjensosang, 2005)-

- i. Ontsudong formed by Onger who is a titular head of the Putu Menden and another deputy called Tonglu. The Onger is normally chosen from Imsong-Pongen clan.
- ii. The Tazung Menden functions similarly to a cabinet in modern administration, wielding executive, legislative, and judicial authority. It comprises various collective groups with distinct qualifications and statuses based on customary practices, such as the Tazung, Tekong, Lasupur, Wangsangmenung, and Tarjung. The senior and founding clans are eligible for positions in Tazung and Tekong, with distinctions made based on their seniority and merit.
- iii. Subsidiary Groups like Tsidongmen, Chidangongdang, Sosanglak, Sungtep and Jameja who assist the councillor or seniors when required and perform all the menial works.

Every Putu Menden must step down after completing its 30-year term, allowing a new group of representatives to take over. This transition, known as Mendentsüng or Putu Atsüngtep (succession or takeover), signifies not only the transfer of power but also the replacement of one generation by another. In some cases, a Putu Menden may leave office before completing its full term, typically about two years early, due to certain circumstances. When this happens, the existing members notify the Lanu Mapang (the senior-most zunga member of the next Putu) to ensure they have ample time to prepare for the transition of the Tatar Putu Menden (Nokmarenba, 2023).

Modern Establishments: Gaonbura, The Village Council & The Village Development Boards

The coming of British rule and the Indian Independence brought about certain developments in the governance of the villages. The Britishers established the gaonbora system to assist them in the governance of the Nagas. Dr. Sukhato A. Sema noted that the Gaon Bura institution was the first administrative mechanism introduced by the British Indian Government to oversee the villages of the Naga Hills. Appointed as government representatives, they were tasked with collecting annual taxes from the villages. Additionally, they adjudicated civil and criminal cases (excluding murder), delivering justice, and at times, resolving disputes case by taking oaths in accordance with Naga customary laws and practices ("Book on Gaon Buras of Nagaland released", 2023). Additionally, the Indian Government enacted the Indian Constitution whereby Article 371A provides a broad framework for preserving the traditional structure of Naga society by safeguarding its social practices and customary laws. It stipulates that laws passed by Parliament related to land and customary practices cannot be implemented in Nagaland without the approval of the State Legislature. In this context, the Nagaland State Government enacted the "Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, 1973," later amended in 1978 to strengthen Naga customary practices and protect indigenous customs. The Act provides that every recognized village shall have a village

council with members 'chosen by villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practices and usages, the same being approved by the State Government, provided that hereditary village chiefs, GBs and Angs shall be ex-officio members of such Council and shall have voting right' (Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978). Every khel (i.e. part of the village) and clan is given fair representation in the Village Council by allowing the khel/clan to nominate/elect its representatives in the Council. The strength of the Village Council varies according to the village size - smaller villages have fewer members while larger villages have more (Sangtam, 2022). Village Development Boards (VDBs) are also established as statutory bodies under Clause 12 of Section 12 of the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act, 1978 with the objective of assisting Village Councils in implementing development policies and programs.

Gaonbura:

Gaonburas (GBs), meaning "village elders" in the Assamese language, are nominated by Village Councils and officially appointed by the government to assist Deputy Commissioners in village administration. Their primary responsibility is to maintain law and order within their village, clan, or locality while also serving as spokesmen for their community. Over time, Gaonboras have become an integral part of village governance and administration (Jamir, 2011). The number of gaonboras in a village differs from one to another depending among the population of the village.

The Village Council

Village Councils play a vital role in the modern governance system of Nagaland. It holds a key position, serving as the primary authority responsible for administering justice within the village (Humtsoe, 2013). Under the provisions of the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act, every Ao village has a village council officially recognized by the state government. The council is led by a chairman selected from among its members, typically serving a five-year term, with the possibility of reappointment for consecutive terms or could be replaced by another from amongst the Putu Menden. The Act also allows for the appointment of a Secretary, who may or may not be a member of the Council. If the Secretary is not a member, they do not have voting rights. The Village Council must convene at least once every three months or whenever necessary.

Powers and Duties of the Village Council: The Village Council shall have the following powers and duties (Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978):

- (1) to formulate Village Development Schemes, to supervise proper maintenance of water supply, roads, forest, sanitation, education and other welfare activities;
- (2) to help various government agencies in carrying out development works in the Village. (3) to take development works on its own initiative or on request by the Government.
- (4) to borrow money from the Government, Banks or financial institutions for application in the development and welfare work of the Village and to repay the same with or without interest as the case may be.
- (5) to apply for and receive grant-in-aid, donations, subsidies from the government or any agencies.
- (6) to provide security for due repayment of loan received by any permanent resident of the Villages from the Government, Bank or financial institution.
- (7) to lend money from its funds to deserving permanent residents of the Village and to obtain repayment thereof with or without interest,
- (8) to forfeit the security of the individual borrower on his default in repayment of loan, advance! to him or on his commission of a breach of any of the terms of loan agreement entered into by him with the Council and to dispose of such security by public auction or by private sale;
- (9) to enter into any loan agreement with the Government Bank and financial institutions or a permanent resident of the Village.
- (10) to realise registration fees for each litigation within its jurisdiction.
- (11) to raise funds for utility service within the Village by passing a resolution subject to the approval of the State Government. Provided that all monetary transactions shall be conducted through a scheduled Bank or the Nagaland State Co-operative Bank,
- (12) to constitute Village Development Board;
- (13) power to do certain acts in the event of an epidemic. On the outbreak of an epidemic or infectious disease Village Council shall initiate all preventive measures.

Village Development Boards (VDBs):

The VDBs represent a significant step towards decentralized, grassroots-level planning in Nagaland. It was established in 1976 on a trial basis in Ketsapomi village of Phek district. Owing to its success, the state government launched a full-scale initiative in 1980 to expand this model across Nagaland, eventually formalizing the system through the VDB Model Rules of 1980.

VDBs operate under the direction of Village Councils to design and implement development schemes targeting village-wide or individual welfare. Their responsibilities span all stages of the development process—receiving and managing funds, selecting beneficiaries, monitoring project progress and expenditures, and ensuring completion. VDBs are accountable institutions with a mandatory system of bookkeeping that is open to audits and public scrutiny (Rural Research and Development Nagaland, 2014). Every permanent resident of a village is a member of the VDB General Body. From this body, the village council choose a Management Committee, comprising at least five and up to twenty-five members, and a VDB secretary. The committee includes both council and non-council members, with a mandate that one-fourth of its members must be women. This committee manages the affairs and funds of the VDB for a period of three years, unless the Village Council decides otherwise through a formal resolution.

Ngullie (2006) observes that the introduction of VDBs significantly accelerated development in rural Nagaland. Various infrastructure and assets such as roads, community buildings, fisheries, wells, irrigation facilities, and agricultural, horticultural, and veterinary establishments were established through different schemes. The success of the VDB model contributed to the evolution of the "communitization" policy—an innovative system of involving communities directly in managing public services, now adopted in sectors such as education, electricity, and healthcare. Humtsoe (2013) further notes that the successful

implementation of numerous key schemes was made possible through the active involvement of VDBs and the voluntary labour contributions from the community organized by them. This effective local governance structure is one of the key reasons Nagaland is exempt from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandates the Panchayati Raj system in other Indian states.

Interface of Tradition and Modernity:

While the gaonbora, Village Councils, and Village Development Boards (VDBs) are modern mechanisms introduced through legislation, their functioning continues to reflect strong elements of traditional customary practices. This is particularly evident in the process of member selection, which often emphasizes clan representation. In many villages, the gaonbora is either selected from each clan or appointed on a rotational basis among the different clans, depending on the village size. Though gaonboras are officially appointed under state law, their selection is made by clan members and forwarded by the Village Council to the government. Despite being considered government representatives, their roles are deeply rooted in customary norms and practices of the village.

The enactment of the Nagaland Village and Area Councils Act, 1978 did not replace traditional institutions but rather sought to formalize and strengthen them within the framework of state governance. Rather than displacing customary practices, the Act aimed to promote development, ensure uniformity in governance, and strengthen village institutions. It formalized traditional bodies like the *Putu Menden*, which still holds great importance. The *Putu Menden*, traditionally the highest decision-making body in Ao Naga villages, has essentially evolved into the Village Council. As Temjensosang (2005) observes, individuals selected to represent their clans in the *Putu Menden* naturally become members of the Village Council. Although the Village Council Chairman is officially responsible for administrative affairs and coordination with external bodies, the *Putu Menden* continues to hold the highest decision-making power within the village. At times, the coexistence of traditional and modern institutions creates a duality of authority, leading to overlapping jurisdictions between customary bodies and state-sanctioned organizations such as the VDBs. However, as Ngullie (2006) notes, the VDBs were modeled after traditional village administrative systems, grounded in the strong communal ethos of Naga society. Their establishment was also driven by the government's aim to ensure that development funds directly reached the village level. A notable feature of modernity in the VDB structure is the inclusion of women in its management committees, reflecting a shift towards greater gender inclusion in grassroots governance, something less common in traditional institutions. Similarly, Temjensosang (2005) reiterates that the Village Council is essentially a codified form of the traditional *Putu Menden*. While the Act legally empowers a Chairman to oversee village administration, customary institutions—such as the *Putu Menden*, clan-based representation, and the *Zünga* system—remain active and widely respected, underscoring the enduring strength of tradition within Nagaland's modern governance landscape. Haloi, as cited in Devi (2015), emphasizes that Village Councils in Nagaland are unique within the Indian context. The Act's recognition of customary laws and the structuring of these councils through traditional norms set Nagaland apart in its approach to democratic organization at the village level.

Conclusion:

The relationship between traditional Ao Naga self-governing systems and modern political institutions is characterized by both cooperation and tension. While traditional institutions have demonstrated a strong capacity to endure and adapt over time, they are increasingly expected to conform to democratic values and constitutional requirements. For instance, while the inclusion of women in Village Development Boards (VDBs) represents a move toward inclusivity, women remain largely excluded from traditional forums of decision-making. This exclusion stands in contrast to the constitutional commitment to gender equality, highlighting an ongoing tension between tradition and modernity.

Despite these challenges, traditional institutions continue to wield significant moral and cultural authority within Ao Naga society. They are often the preferred mechanisms for resolving disputes due to their efficiency, legitimacy, and deep cultural resonance. As Imchen (1993) observes, "wherever an Ao goes, customary law follows him," reflecting the deep-rooted influence of customary law in guiding individual and communal life. This indicates that, even in the presence of modern legal and political systems, the Ao Naga community remains fundamentally guided by its customary laws and practices, particularly in matters related to village administration.

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