Traditional governance in transition among the Yimchunger Nagas of Northeast India

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The Yimchunger Nagas are among the seventeen 'official tribes' of Nagaland state in India, and largely inhabit the remote Tuensang and Kiphire districts bordering Myanmar. Yimchunger village governance, as with many of their Naga neighbours, has been noted for its sophistication despite a long historical association with inter-village raids and head-taking practices. Village elders - or Kiulongthsürü -, have traditionally performed what might constitute the legislative, executive and judicial functions of administration. The village, as the prime political entity in relation to its neighbours, is a unit mediated through patri clan membership, genealogies and institutions. The close-knit administrative structure, underpinned by unwritten clan laws, contributes to community stability, and these older systems remain largely in place and active. Modernising processes, as in minority societies across Asia, have introduced significant change, initially under the aegis of British 'non-interference', and subsequently under the policies of the Indian state. More recently, initiatives such as the Nagaland Communitisation Act of 2002, have sought to incentivise local governance structures to accommodate development goals by transferring ownership and management of education, health, and infrastructure responsibilities to village committees. This essay serves as a brief overview of Yimchunger social polity, and addresses these shifts in brief, with attention to continuities and discontinuities in traditional practices.

The Yimchunger Naga communities are generally located is the hilly areas west of Saramati mountain which sits on the Indo-Myanmar border, and Helüppong in the west.[1]

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[1] Hokishe Sema, p.7

Their lands share borders with Longleng district in the north, Phek district in the south, Mokokchung and Zunheboto districts in the west, and Myanmar to the east. Neighbours include the Khiamniungan Nagas in the east, the Changs in the north, and Sumi, Sangtam and Pochury communities in the west. Shamator town serves as a centre for the Yimchungers, and according to the 2011 Census the Yimchunger population numbers 66,972[2], spread into 92 villages in six ranges, namely, Pungro, Thsorunto, Shamator, Mango, Kewung and Showubah. Although they share much in common with their Naga neighbours, they are a distinct cultural-linguistic group, and self-identify as a distinct 'tribe' among the Nagas.

The name Yimchunger originates from two words; '*yim*,' meaning 'search or look for' and '*khiungrü*,' meaning 'those who reached or found'. One oral tradition suggests Yimchunger ancestors migrated from the east, crossed the Chindwin River (Myanmar), and established a village at Mekong valley. After some time they left and journeyed to Aruru, following the course of the Tezu river. From there, they migrated to Juri in Myanmar. Again following the river Tezu and Zunki, they went searching for a place to establish a permanent village. They were in two groups: One followed the river while the other searched over-ground for a safe and defensible settlement. The two groups remained apart for some time, and eventually settled together in one place. This is the reason why they are known as *Yimkhiunger*[3] (later written as '*Yimchungrü*') meaning 'reached' or 'returned.' Tradition also shows that Yimchungers were called by others by different names like Yachumi (by Semas), Yansongr (Aos) Yanchonger (by Sangtams) and Yansung (by Changs). Other migration stories trace the origin of the Yimchungers in closer association with the migration routes of other Naga tribes. Generally held to be mongoloid in origin,[4] linguistically they belong to Tibeto-Burman family along with other Naga tribes.[5] The Roman script is used with an addition of a letter, 'ü'.

Traditional governance

Traditional governance among the Yimchunger is centred around the village administration, which is genealogically linked to the village founders - *kiulongthsüpuh* /kiulongthsürü. *Kiulongthsürü* means 'those who make the village or those responsible for the village'. It is a collegial body that consists of the co-founders or their representatives. They exercised the juridical, executive and legislative power in the village. Their main duty is to share the responsibility with the headman in managing the affairs of the village. They speak on behalf of the people and their wisdom is relied on to solve community problems as they arise. Married men, deemed capable and responsible to lead, the represent the six Yimchunger clans, namely *Jankhiungrü, Jangrü, Khiungrü, Khiphurü, Küsünkhiungrü and Limkhiungkhiungrü*. In the village, the clans are clustered into agnate

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[2] *Census 2011*, Kohima: Government of Nagaland.
[3] The syllable, '*khiu*' was spelled out '*chu*' later causing the change the pronunciation over the time.
[4] S.C Sardeshpande, p.8
[5] M. Alemchiba, *A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland, p.3*

clan families or *kheang* (often referred to as khels), and each *kheang*[6] is represented in the person of the *kiulongthsürü,* namely the descendent of the 'village founders/owners'. These men exercise the juridical, executive and legislative functions in the village.

In the event that a new village is to be founded, it is the main leader, assisted with the other clan representatives, that makes the final selection, along with decisions about demarcation and boundaries. *Kiulongthsüpu/ Kiulongpütongpuh* is the title of the chief founder of the village. It literally means 'the village owner'. The co-founders make up the body of *kiulongthsürü*, of which *kiulongthsüpu* is the head. The chief along with *Kiulongthsürü* traditionally exercises full and final authority on all village matters. The rank of status depends on the role played in founding the village. In consultation and common accordance, the main leader becomes the responsible head and, traditionally, would offer a cow at the starting of a new village. For a second village, he would offer a pig; a third and fourth by a dog; and a chicken for the fifth and so on. The primacy of the leader is seen in the obedience to the decisions taken by him. Though his position is more ceremonial in contemporary times, he would be generally expected to impose strict laws and regulations, though unwritten, assuring and regulating all aspects of village life. The punishments would include fines, banishment from the village, customary lock-up, among others, which were generally seen as extreme. The status of 'headman' is a 'once and for all' position by the particular clan, beginning with the first leader and then handed over to the next generation on the principle of heredity; so also in the case of each *kiulongtshsürü*. In case the immediate descendent cannot replace his father, due to age, or physical ailment, the clan selects the person to replace the post temporarily. In the course of time when found fit to take over, the member of the first lineage takes assumes the position. There is no rule on age, or specified qualification but it is the understanding that the person to hold this post would be of noble quality and responsible in nature to lead the village and settle disputes when required. It meant moral uprightness and personal capacity for management.

Though new settlements following this pattern are now rare, the sites generally preferred are mountain summits that offer commanding positions and defence against enemies or unwelcome intruders.[7] Aside from the *kiulongthsüpuh* or kiulongthsürü, the *Limberü* refers to men holding non-hereditary positions in the village. The literal meaning of the word '*limberü*' is 'those who show the way or those who walk the way" (Lim means, 'way,' and 'rü,' means people). Generally, Yimchunger villages have a variety of offices understood as indispensable for the smooth running of the village. Some have remained important institutions despite the many changes brought about by colonialism, Christianity and modernisation. In the following sections, I list the series of offices that traditionally compose the administration of Yimchunger villages, and are now largely ceremonial.

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[6] *Kheang* means the subdivision of the village. It is cluster of families with their houses within a geographical portion of the village mostly belonging to the same clan.
[7] N. Chuba Yimchungrü*, p 3*

Cho-cho-rü

A messenger or secretary, this office refers to the person who assists the *Kuilongthsüpu* in passing information to others in the village. A trusted, generally married male, he works as the informant for the headman. Often a hereditary institution, these are trustworthy and active men that might be chosen by the headman in consultation with his colleagues.

Ayangrü

Prior to colonial forms of administration, safety and security were a major concern for every village. While the village was under the care of the headman and his assistants, there were further security measures taken by appointing a selected person for each *kheang*. These were called *ayangrü*. Their duties were to keep watch and secure the village when all others are at work in the fields. Each *kheang* nominated a person, usually a male, for determined days to keep watch over the properties of the *kheang* members. There was no fixed remuneration for the service rendered by the *Ayangrü*. The people in turn took care of their field work and assisted him with food grains and other maintenance means.

Limpurü

Limpurü refers to the 'peacemaker'. Historically selected from each village/tribe, this person had the mandate of the whole community to settle conflicts and strife through truces. His role was great in pre-colonial times when inter-village raids and head-taking among warring villages were not uncommon. The *Limpurü* carried a symbolic green branch during the day and a pine-branch torch in the night to indicate his presence. There was the common understanding among the villages and the tribes to respect and accommodate him. He was allowed to walk into any village and was not to be harmed. To do any harm to him was considered as an act of cowardice, disrespect and great shame. And if anyone did violate these, it was considered an act of war, inviting harm on the entire community.

Amiakiamrü

Offerings and sacrifice offered to the divine were part of daily life of the Yimchungers. Traditionally *Amükiamrü* (the priest) performed all religious functions. The person was selected by the elders of the village and it was a permanent office attached to the person. In general, the office of the '*amiakmrü*' was looked after by the family on a heredity-basis by practice, though not by customary law. *Amiakmrü*'s presence in all important life-stage events was generally expected. He enjoyed great respect and obedience from villagers. While he performed ceremonies of common importance, the father or clan elder would perform religious ceremonies at the family level, and this in times of sickness, death, marriage, and upon starting field-work.

Mahtsahrü, (the 'reconciler')

Mahtsahrü is something very peculiar to the Yimchunger Nagas. This is an office of peace and reconciliation. While the role '*limpurü*' is to build peace between the villages or tribes, the role of *Mahtsahrü* is within the village. He is expected to bring into unity and understanding two persons/groups feuding with each other. The person of quality and gifted in this line was chosen by the elders of the village.

British administration

The British continued with the time tested institution of traditional governance. However, they also introduced a three-layer system: *Gaonburas*, *Dobashis* (interpreters) and District administrators. The headmen, as they were called, were given the recognition as *Gaonburas*. While they continued to be the leaders of their people, they became an important link between the British government and the people. They received direction and supervision from the district officers though they had little say in formulating the policies regarding their own affairs. The second layer of '*Dobashi*'[8] was an important means through which the British government established successful relations with the tribal world. They were the interpreters between the British officers and the people. They were later appointed as judges to settle disputes basing on the customary law. In the course of time *Dobashis* became the judicial personnel. The power of headman or Gaonbura was limited to keeping law and order in a village. The District officer supervised the overall administration of the villages, framing and following up all the policies of governance. Thus the supreme authority was slowly transferred, in a way stealthily, away from the village headman. There was the loss of autonomy even at this lowest level of functioning and finally limited to deal with petty local matters.

Modern Administrative Policies

The Village Councils Act (1978), The Nagaland Village Councils Rules (1979) and the Village Development Boards Model Rules (1980), are the legislations through which the village councils and Village Development Boards got the recognition as in the present times. There are strict rules and regulations concerning the formation and functioning of the village councils. The Village Councils Act 1978, states for example, that 'a village council shall consist of members chosen by the 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 Anghs shall be ex-officio members of such council and shall have voting right'. While the selection process for council members and their number have not been imposed by the act (thus allowing traditional practices to continue), certain structuring to facilitate developmental activities have been undertaken. The village council includes all traditional leaders like the '*gaon burahs*' (village headmen)

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[8] *Dobashis* originally meant people who knew two languages. (Dui = two, bhasha = language).

and other representatives from all the '*khels*' of the village. The village council's tenure is five years after which it has to be re-nominated. Further, Village Development Boards have been constituted with all permanent residents of the village as members and the village council selects the Village Development Board Management Committee (VDBMC) for a three-year period, including a secretary who is paid an honorarium for assisting the Village Development Board and the Village Council. The Village Development Board structure was created to facilitate the institutionalization of a participative process for the implementation of development programs by benefiting from the strengths of the traditional institutions in the village. Each of the over 1,000 villages of the state has formed village council in alliance with the tradition and rules of the government. The council enjoys an autonomous status and they are federal units of the bigger body called Hoho (the apex body of the tribe). In principle there has been a lot of importance placed in surviving the traditional mode of the governing system into the present days. At the same time, it is a matter of greater concern to make it suitable in the larger organizational network of the state and nation as a whole. A village can't be secluded to itself in the present time as it was in the olden days. This calls for readjustment and rehabilitation of the mode and style of functioning from micro level to macro level.

Communitisation policy
The latest effort of the state government to organize the village polity, especially the management of resources, is the policy of communitisation. Having noted the extremely poor management of resources both material and human in the state, it was R.S. Pandey, the then Chief Secretary of the state, who developed this concept of governance. It suggested leveraging the funds, the expertise and the regulatory powers of the government with the social capital of the user community and combining the best of the public and the private sector systems (Pandey 2010, p.15). Privatisation of the resources in the user community is called communitisation and would lead to a way out of problems of the government as well as the private sector. It would be for the user community to discharge day-to-day management of the responsibilities. In this process it is not the state moving away from its responsibility but it is a shift of paradigm in which the state would perform the role of a partner, assistant, monitor and supervisor. It is a path towards empowerment, delegation, decentralisation and privatisation at the same time. It is based on the philosophy of Triple T: a) Trust the community, b) Train the community and 3) Transfer power and resources in respect of day-to-day management to the user community (Ibid., p.15). It builds up the community from being mere recipients to responsible managers of resources. Being consumer and beneficiaries, the user community has the intent, the desire and the intrinsic motivation to see the institution performing well. Along with trust and training, however, the most important part of communitisation is to transfer requisite power and resources from the government to the community so that it can discharge the expectations of day-to-day management of the institution. This act of transferring the

power and resources is called to be the true empowerment in the words of Pandey, "the more the share of power and financial resources from the government to the user community, the more is the empowerment" (Ibid. p.17). The communitisation program was mooted in the middle of 2001 and it was soon the process of implementation after due consultation and studies. The ordinance was promulgated by the Governor in January 2002 to enact the Nagaland communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2002. In March, 2002 the state Legislative Assembly ratified and passed the legislation which is the first of its kind in India and perhaps in the world.

An analytical view

Naga villages have been spoken of as 'village-republics' based on their independence of external forces and autonomous management of their own internal affairs (Hutton 1921). This makes them a distinct class. Ganguli (1984) asserts that 'every village is an independent, self-contained administrative unit' (p.54). This is considered as the basis of the ancient political system of the Naga people and they organized the sovereign village state with their own unique forms of government (Singh 2004). The Semas, Konyaks and Maos practiced hereditary monarchy. The Sema Monarch had absolute power. Among the Konyaks the chief, known as *Angh,* is highly autocratic. The *Angh* is the head of the administration and political affairs. Asoso Yonuo (1974) suggests that the 'Nagas are normally governed by the kings or chieftains of their respective villages, chosen for their bravery in war skilful diplomacy richness in the farm of cattle and land or power of oratory in contrast to the hereditary system in which the office of a king passes to the eldest son on the death of his father'. The village assembly alone is the apex body of the Nagas (J.P. Mills, 1922). The village is the highest form of the organization among the Nagas that represented political, social and religious bonds. Naga polity is based on equal representation of its constituents; large or small. The polity is based on consensus and not election, which promotes conflicts and power-struggles to the detriment of the people. Almost all the Naga organizations are motivated on this democratic principle of equal representation of all people without allowing the politically and economically powerful sections to dominate decision-making.

As argued above, the social organisation of Yimchunger society is built around the *Kiulongthsürü,* the centre of all governing authority. The establishment and maintenance of *Kiulongthsürü* were built on two major principles, namely patriarchal and patrilineal heredity, and participative democracy. The former ensured the organising principle of disconnected linage of the society from the founder of the village to the present day village-authority. The lineage of the founder of the village is continued through the office of *Kiulongthsüpuh* and the co-founders through *Kiulongthsürü*. The second principle of 'participative democracy' is a methodical foundation for running the affairs of the village. When fully enacted, it gave every member an opportunity to express themselves on matters affecting them. Discussions, meetings, and the settlement of cases, were conducted with the concern and participation of those mattered. Therefore, participation by the entire

community in decision-making processes was considered vital and a key principle in Yimchunger way of life. The self-ruled government in practice is more than the rule of the majority of our day. Here the emphasis is on participation, consensus and cooperation. Though only a few hold offices, the freedom to express one's opinion and to participate in the decision making was possible for all villagers. *Kiulongthsüpuh* has the final word on the matter representing himself on the wisdom of all. He is not an autocrat but the first among the equals. It is his responsibility to discern the true and best for his people based on the traditional wisdom and customary practice. In this perspective we can say that Yimchunger Governing system holds high the principle of democracy in its functioning. Though the members of *Kiulongthsürü* are inducted based on heredity, the freedom of choice, effected by the clan, ensures the selection of the best in a direct democratic manner. Among the many traditional values, the spirit of equality and belongingness to the clan/tribe were very dear to every Yimchunger. It is also assured that any authority, be it religious or social, is primarily to foster community's well-being. Thus we find various mechanisms, democratic in its application, are at work in order to usher and maintain peace, justice, understanding and resolution for all within the community, inclusive of the structure and functioning of the governing system.

Conclusion

Yimchunger communities have undergone significant change over the past century, experiencing colonial expansion, Christian missions and education, and processes of modernisation. Changes in Yimchunger governance came largely during British times, though the traditional institutions have not entirely disappeared. The premier body of village governance underlines the principle of democratic participation in all phases of life. While the primacy of the chief has slowly faded, the importance of individual participation, which was key in the decision making processes, has been carried over. The collective decision of the village elders often proved mightier and more effective than a system run on a code of written laws. They are rarely referred to in the early writings of the historians and other writers like the British historians making us to assume that there was very limited interaction of the Yimchunger communities with the outside world. This has perhaps positively helped them in maintaining the old traditions in many ways. The early writers on Nagas, like Hutton and Mills, observed that the elders of the villages, even older than the chief, contributed to the welfare of the village with their wisdom of experience. The unique feature of Naga village administration is the dynamic involved in the decision making that assured democracy and healthy involvement of the public in decision making processes. Shimray (1986) suggests, 'what was important and unique was the participation of the general public in the deliberations on any public issue, giving a chance to everyone to have a say' (p.63). This was direct democracy, the true and pure democracy in principle and in practice. Modernisation of the village management has

switched over the decision making to 'political power', making villagers mere pawns. This fragments the continuity of the traditional organisation of the village, and consequently causes a breakdown in the decision-making ethos of the people as a whole. The modern agencies of governance tend to limit functioning into mere management of economic projects through village bodies. Thus, the value system tends to deteriorate, and unique ways of governing pass into history.

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