



Transition of Traditional Political Institution - Vhe (Chief of the Village) among the Poumai Naga Tribe of Manipur

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Abstract

Most of the tribal societies revolve around through different traditional institutions in regulating almost every aspect of community life. The traditional political institution of the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur is a remarkable example of this, where social, economic, political and cultural activities are governed by the Vhe (Chief of the Village). However, it has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of modern state structure, formal education and Christianity. Therefore, this paper was an attempt to explore the changing facets of the political institution - Vhe (Chief of the Village) while encountering with the modern state system, non-state forces and other influential modern elements. The central focus of the study was on the institution of chieftainship who has historically occupied a central position in the socio-political organization of many tribal societies. Central to these processes, the paper highlights the negotiations between continuity and change as this institution aligns and adapts to modern state governance while maintaining its community identity. The present study was mainly based on primary data collected through oral narratives, in-depth interviews (with village chiefs, elders, council members and youth) and observations by the researcher from the field of the study which was further substantiated by analysing the existing secondary literature. The study finds that while some traditional systems have retained their relevance and legitimacy, others have been reshaped or diminished under the influence of modern state structures.

Keywords: Traditional Political Institution, Poumai Naga, Chieftainship, Transition

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Introduction

In many tribal societies, the daily way of life was based and administered by the traditional political institution. The term traditional political institutions refer to all those forms of social and political authority which have their historical origin in the pre-colonial states and societies (Crook, 2005). In this institution, chieftainship, Kingship, village council and so on could be noted. This institution plays a crucial role in regulating social, political, economic, cultural and judicial aspects of community life through customary laws, indigenous practices and collective decision-making processes. However, the advent of modern state structures, colonial administration, formal education, Christianity and globalization has brought weighty transitions to tribal societies, weakening the indigenous system of governance. Moreover, the influence of westernization and modernization had distanced the younger generation from its historical root, posing a great challenge to its continuity and survival (Interview, June 2025).

Amidst these challenges and transitional crossroads, traditional political institutions have gradually become an important topic of academic and policy discussions. As Synniang (2017), observed that the traditional institutions have attracted the attention of policy makers, researchers and social scientists. In India, there had been new concerns about traditional institutions in the 1990s mainly because of the advent of globalization which, among others, focused on multi-centered governance. There has been an unexpected return to the prominence, re-invention and resurgence of traditional institutions in Northeast India.

The study of traditional political institutions is imperative to understand the mechanisms of indigenous governance in Northeast India. Among the Naga communities of Northeast India, the institutions like chieftainship and village councils represent longstanding forms of socio-political organisation grounded in customary law and oral heritage. Every Naga village is a “sovereign village-state” (Poji, 2011), administered by the Village Chief and Village Council. They together uphold traditional practices and oversee overall administration in accordance to the ancestral customs and traditions of the people that are passed down through generations (Kapesa, 2017). For the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur, these institutions historically guided daily life, conflict resolution, land management and inter-village relations (Leo, 2018). However, the emergence of modern state structures, colonial interventions, post-independence constitutional provisions has brought a significant change to these institutions.

Review of Literature and Research Gap

For the present study, some of the literatures relevant to the topic were analysed as follows:

Pao (2024) examined that the traditional role of the Village Chief of the Poumei. As the spiritual and administrative leader, the chief performs rituals and ceremonies on behalf of the villagers to promote prosperity, good fortune and harmonious living. He enforces the

observance of gennaas well as rituals related to agricultural activities, social and cultural festivals. Moreover, the Chief is instrumental in village administration and the dispensation of justice, making him a central figure in governance.

Punii (2021) had observed that Poumai Naga governance was traditionally community-based wherein, all disputes are often settled informally by Vhe and Chiimewho hold significant authority in making collective decisions. The village assembly was considered as the highest legal body. Customary laws prioritize reconciliation over punishment, reflecting a strong emphasis on social harmony and collective well-being.

Kapesa (2017) highlighted that the Mao Naga traditional political system centres on two key institutions: Movou (Village Chief) and Enule Kotsümei (Council of Elders). Movou, the hereditary village chief, oversees law and order, upholds traditions and performs political functions. Enule Kotsümei: a council of clan representatives assists the Movou in administration based on customs. Historically, these institutions have governed the Mao Naga since ancient times. While colonial rule reduced the authority, both remain cultural symbols of heritage and identity, reflecting a rich tradition of collective leadership.

Kamei (2015) had examined that the social change and adaptation of Rongmei tribe under the influence of Christianity, state intervention and urbanization. It argued that many traditional practices have transformed, but the core cultural identity continues to survive through adaptation rather than complete disappearance. It also highlights how chieftainship negotiates modern social realities and continues to govern contemporary society.

Crook (2005) examined the continuing relevance of chieftaincy in modern Ghana amidst various challenges. The study argued that traditional institutions remain influential, but their role must adapt carefully within modern democratic structures. It highlights how traditional chieftainship survives, transforms and negotiates with the modern state.

In fact, several studies have been done on customary laws, village administration and indigenous governance systems among tribal community particularly the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur. But they are very general in nature. There is a limited scholarly attention particularly on transition, adaptation and continued relevance of traditional chieftainship among the Poumai Naga in relation to modern state structures. The existing literature primarily focuses on traditional system and indigenous governance, while the interface between traditional authority and modern governance systems are still not thoroughly examined. Moreover, there is limited empirical research on how institutions like Vhe (Chief) negotiate continuity and change under the influence of formal education, Christianity, state legislation, globalization and democratic governance. Therefore, this study examines the transition, adaptation and contemporary relevance of Poumai chieftainship within the broader context of institutional transition and indigenous governance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the historical background of Vhe – chief of the village of the Poumai Naga

Tribe of Manipur.

2. To assess the role and functions of Vhe – chief of the village in regulating community daily life of the Poumai Naga tribe.
3. To examine the impact of modern state structures, formal education and Christianity on Vhe.

Research Methodology

For the present study, Senapati district of Manipur was considered as the Poumai Naga tribe mainly inhabit in this district. The present paper is qualitative in nature, relying on both primary and secondary sources. For primary data, oral narratives, interviews (Village Chiefs, elders, village council members and youth) and observation by the researcher from the field of the study were adopted to collect primary data. While the secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, reports, official documents and other relevant scholarly literature related to the study.

An Overview of Poumai Naga Tribe

The term ‘Naga’ is an exonym and a generic nomenclature. It refers to the large cultural communities living in their homeland in the present state of Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. Among the Nagas, Poumai constitutes one of the important sub-tribes of Manipur (Punii, 2021). The Poumai Naga tribe inhabiting in Senapati district of Manipur is broadly divided into three blocks namely Paomata, Lepaona and Chilivai. They share borders with territory of Nagaland in the North, Thangal Villages of Saikul Sub-Division of Kangpokpi District in the South, Tangkhul villages of Ukhrul District in the East and Mao and Maram Sub-division of Senapati District in the West.

The term Poumai is derived from two words ‘Pou’ and ‘Mai’. The term ‘Pou’ is the name of the great grandfather/Progenitor of the Poumai Naga and the term ‘Mai’ refers to people. Therefore, the word Poumai literally means ‘People of Pou’ (Pao, 2024). The Poumai Naga was recognized as the 30th Tribe of Manipur in Part X, under the Constitution of India of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2002 on 7th January 2003 (The Gazette of India, 2003). Until then, the Poumai Naga was recognized as Mao Naga tribe as they were clubbed together by the Colonial Rulers (Stephen, 2014).

Historical Background of Poumai Political Institutions– Village Council and Vhe

The Poumai Naga villages are governed by customs and practices which have been passed down from time immemorial. The system of governance is ‘geronto-domocratic’ in nature, that is, governed by village council, elders or elected members representing each clan and the village Chief (Thomas & Stephen, 2017). The Village Council is locally known by different names as Tsiimai, Chiime or Chikumai and the Chief as Vhe. Leo (2018) and Liba (2021) highlighted that, each Poumai Naga village operates as a sovereign village-state,

where traditional governance was embodied in the role of the Chief and the village council. This system, deeply rooted in custom and tradition and has played a vital role in maintaining law and order, resolving conflicts and facilitating the administration of the village over generations.

The village council constitutes the highest law-making and decision-making body with the chief as the symbolic and customary head of the village. Theoretically, the village council has to assist the Chief in executing his functions, but practically, the council members carry out all the administrative and executive functions of the village in his name. Decisions on all matters of the village are generally taken with their approval. They are also expected to be well versed in traditional laws and practices (Leo, 2018).

With regards to the Vhe (Chief), some Poumai Village Chiefs stated that the living being whether its animals, birds, bees or ants has its own system of leadership designated as kings and queens. Likewise, human society too requires organized leadership to maintain order and harmony in the community. In the words of Punii (2021), every traditional Poumai village was governed and headed by Vhe. Traditionally, the first settler or the wisest, bravest and most capable man of a new settlement became the Vhe. (Punii, 2021 and Kapesa, 2017). Once the Vhe is selected, it is inherited by his descendants. In the absence of male descendants, it is inherited by the closest male relatives. But the Vhe must be from royal patrilineage. (Interview with Village Chiefs, June 2025 and Article 18 of the Constitution of the Poumai Naga Village Chiefs Association 2016).

Position, Powers and Functions of the Vhe

The Vhe is the overall head of the village and his authority is applicable to the entire jurisdiction of the respective village. As Leo (2018) stated that the village chief holds a prominent position at all social and religious gathering in the village. He symbolises unity and authority of the village. He performed the dual role of both the socio-religious and the secular head of the village. The Vhe is also the village priest and had legislative, executive and judicial powers in the village administration. Both the civil and criminal cases are decided by him in accordance to the customs and traditions of the community and at time in consultation with the village council. The Vhe, as such exercise a considerable power but is definitely not an absolute ruler as he was also bound by the unwritten customary laws and practices.

Unlike the modern political systems, the traditional political institutions are not well structured and separated. So, the powers and functions of the Vhe and village council are interwoven and are mostly exercised by the village council in his name while some directly by himself. As the head of the Village, his first and foremost duty is to protect and ensure security to his people and village from any danger. In the words of Stephen (2014), at the time of “head-hunting” his primary concern was to defend the village. Then, Vhe oversees the entire village administration and maintained law and order with the assistance of his

council members. The Vhe also ensured the strict regulations and observation of the traditional norms and rituals by the villagers for favourable fortune and prosperity. In the words of Elwin (1961), the Naga Vhe along with village elders and council played an important role in preserving customary laws and traditions of the community.

The Vhe, being the custodian of cultural calendar, he decides and announced dates for all the village festivals and other occasions. The villagers relied on his announcements and initiation of various activities such as seed sowing, transplantation and harvest. The chief also observed various rituals and gennas for the welfare of the people, fasting and communicating with the Supreme God, seeking blessings for good harvests, health and peace within the community. (Interview with Poumai Village Chiefs and Elders, June 2025, Punii, 2021, Leo, 2018, Shimray, 1985 and Kapesa, 2017). As Stephen (2014) and Pao (2024) stated that whenever there was any important feast in the village, he was the first one to taste the rice beer and bless it. He initiates the social gathering by invoking God's blessing upon his people and the village.

The Vhe is also the chief of judiciary and the final appellate authority. His judicial powers are exercised by the Court of Chikumai and he act as advisor. If any case remains unresolved and irreconcilable, the Vhe acts as the final authority of appeal. His judgment is final and binding upon both parties (Ngupanii, 2010). He also can declare war or peace with its neighbouring villages. Therefore, according to John (2001), the village chief is the chief judge, the chief administrator and also the chief commander in the time of war and head-hunting.

Findings and Discussion

The integration of tribal societies into the modern Indian state has profoundly altered their traditional political institutions. The village chief and village council once autonomous and central to tribal governance have undergone significant structural and functional transition under the influence of modern governance, education and Christianity. While traditional authority persists symbolically, the practical dynamics of governance have shifted toward democratic and bureaucratic norms. A similar context could be noted with the status of the Vhe of the Poumai Naga tribe of Senapati District, Manipur. The chiefs of the villages have expressed that their position has undergone a significant change under the influence of modern state administration, democratic governance, Christianity, formal education and globalization. It is an undeniable fact that, these forces have altered the traditional structure, authority and functions of Vhe, reducing its exclusive political, religious, administrative and judicial authorities in the village to a great extent. Parsons (1951) in his work the Social System, argues that institutions are not static entities; they evolve in correspond to the social, political, economic and cultural needs and changes while attempting to maintain stability and continuity.

From the study, it was further found that modern education and Christianity are two main

factors which impact the position of the Vhe of the Poumai Naga tribe. The education introduced by the Christian missionaries and by the State Government played a significant role in shaping the attitudes and outlook of the people, resulting in rapid and fundamental social changes within a short period of time. It further facilitated the gradual influence of Western culture and lifestyle on the indigenous society (Yeptho, cited in John, 2001). As a result, many traditional beliefs and customary practices were viewed as superstitious, evil and were abandoned (Kamei, 2015). Furthermore, Poumai people accept Christianity and thus slowly began to reject their ancestral religious rituals and festivals in which the Vhe played a great religious role. In the course of time, the educated Christians also started to form secular as well as religious organisations which reduce the authority and relevance of the Vhe. John (2001) also substantiated that the Christians refused to worship, perform rituals and observe the gennas where the Chief himself was the priest. He further stated that Christians even refused to pay the customary contribution of meat and free labour to a chief who was not a Christian. It was further pointed out by Ngalengnam (2014) and Kapesa (2017) that Christianity weakened many rituals and religious role of Vhe because, priests, catechists, pastors and church leaders assumed moral and spiritual authority. They have taken over many of the roles and responsibilities which were once performed by the traditional Vhe. A village elder observed that we do not get to hear Vhe announcing genna anymore which was very common earlier on the eve to remind the villagers about the observance. One of the respondents opined that the new generation has very little regard and respect for the traditional Vhe (Discussion, December 2025). Thus, modern education and Christianity together are responsible for gradually weakening the position of the Vhe. Then, various governmental political and administrative reforms particularly Manipur State Hill Peoples (Administration) Regulation Act, 1947, The Manipur Village Authorities (in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 and The Manipur Hill Areas (Acquisition of Chief's Rights) Act, 1967 further debilitated the Vhe status. With the enactment of 'The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956,' the official powers and functions of the Vhe and the village council have been replaced by the Village Chairman and the Village Authority. Thus, it has resulted into the position of leadership with administrative ability, literacy and political influence rather than the lineage as practice in traditional political institutions. This also led to the emergence of an educated middle class with growing political consciousness and aspirations for participation in decision-making processes. As a result, the role and status of the chief shifted from sovereign authority to a more limited and negotiated form. But John (2001) argues that such act has not really changed the essence of the institution. In fact, tradition, custom and usages are still being followed.

Nevertheless, this transition does not signify institutional decline, rather it reflects how state intervention reshaped traditional governance by integrating customary institutions into formal administrative systems. It evolved into a hybrid structure functioning alongside the modern state. Mamdani (2018) justifies that, the colonial governments did not abolish chiefs, they just restructured them into an instrument called "decentralized despotism,"

using customary authority to govern rural people indirectly. These changes facilitate the Vhewith administrative power, judicial authority, control over land and local governance. This validates that, Poumai traditional Vhe could adapt depending on social and political circumstances without losing its legitimacy. As it was found that institution of chieftainship continues to exist in approximately 70 villages among the Poumai Naga tribe of Manipur till date. The existing institution of chieftainship is in the 36th generation as recorded. It can also be noted that there is a considerable variation across the villages in governance structures as some are administered by a single chief, others by multiple chiefs, while few villages function without a formal chief (Personal interview with Poumai Village Chiefs and Elders, June 2025). As Punii (2021) observed that Liyai village has one Chief, Purul Atongba village has also one, Oinam village has two and Saranamai village, the oldest village among poumai has four Chiefs. According to the some Saranamai elders, oral narratives informed that, this variation was determined by certain natural signs observed during the selection of a settlement site, such as the number of cock crow and the banging sound of iron (Interview, June 2025).

The continued existence of the Poumai chieftainship amidst various social, political and religious changes reflects its strong adaptive capacity even though the institution has changed its traditional structure and authority and continues to retain its customary legitimacy and cultural relevance. It was further supported by study of Stephen (2017) that the institution of chieftainship though not strong and effective as before but still prevailed in many villages of Poumai community. In addition, the formation of Poumai Naga Village Chiefs' Association (PNVCA) with its constitution adopted by its General Assembly on 28th Day of November 2016 further strengthen the Vheadaptability. Article 26 of the PNVCA Constitution highlighted that the chief shall be the custodian of the customary laws and culture and will be responsible for preserving artifacts, maintaining village records and chronologies, safeguarding historical and judicial documents, maintaining agricultural and customary calendars and functioning as the chief priest of the village (Poumai Naga Village Chiefs' Association [PNVCA], 2016). This codification of the powers and functions of village chiefs proves their legitimacy and authority even till today to preserve the collective identity and indigenous knowledge systems. As Mamdani (1996; 2018) pointed out that customary authorities continue to survive in postcolonial societies because they mediate between the state and local communities. In the Poumai context, chiefs assist in implementing development programs, mobilizing village participation, preserving customary laws and representing community interests before government agencies. Their role has therefore shifted from autonomous rulers to mediators, coordinators and custodians of customary identity within a hybrid governance system.

Despite numerous modern challenges and influences, the institution of Vhe continues to play an influential role in contemporary society of the Poumei Naga tribe. Although, traditional powers and ritual practices have declined or transformed over time, the Vhe

still remains an important symbol of customary authority, cultural identity, unity and social harmony within the community (Shils, 1981; Weber, 1978). For instance, the role of the Vhe remains highly relevant, especially in villages where the followers of the traditional indigenous faith, locally known as Zhaosomai, still exist. Zhaosomai literally refers to those who drink the traditional rice beer called zhaoche. The term Zhaosomai is referred to non-Christians or pagan, the followers of the ancestral religion that existed before the spread of Christianity. The traditional practices, genna observances, rituals and festivals are deeply rooted in the life of this Zhaosomai community. Whenever the community observes genna or celebrates traditional festivals, the Vhe plays a central ritual and spiritual role. The Vhe performs customary rites and offers libation of rice beer before the onset of the festivity. He invokes Divine blessings for peace and prosperity of the community as well as their protection from calamities and misfortunes. Even today, villagers wait for the Vhe to ritually initiate agricultural activities such as sowing, plantation and harvesting, reflecting the continuing respect for his authority and blessings.

The Vhe also continues to play a crucial role in the social and communal life of the village. It can be noted that the house of the Vhe of Liyai village still serves as a centre for meetings and discussions of village authorities. The authority of the Vhe, as well as his traditional position, continues to be acknowledged and revered by the community. In most social gatherings, customary events and village festivals, Vhe is invited to begin the programme, invoking blessings upon the people. As a gesture of honour and respect, Vhe is often presented with gifts such as traditional attire or portions of animals, especially the leg portion. Then, in Saranamai village, Vhe(s) still blesses the important village programmes and festivals. For instance, on the eve of Paoshete (paddy transplantation), before the traditional wrestling competition begins, Vhe offers blessings and prayers for peace, protection from injuries during the games and the safe return of participants coming from neighbouring villages. Such practices clearly demonstrate that although society has undergone significant changes, the institution of chieftainship continues to retain its cultural, ritual and social relevance in contemporary Poumai society.

The Vhe also still continues to regulate customary laws, settle disputes, maintain social harmony and preserve cultural identity. As the cases related to land, inheritance, marriage and village relations are mediated by Vhe through reconciliation and restorative justice and at times in consultation with the Village Council. The traditional mechanisms of settling disputes are still preferred by many because they are culturally familiar, accessible and effective in restoring communal relationships, while modern mechanisms are too complex and expensive (Mamdani, 2018; Parsons, 1951). Furthermore, the Poumai Vhe still remains as the custodian of traditional knowledge as the chief embody cultural identity, community unity and traditional legitimacy of the community.

Conclusion

Traditionally, Vhe derived its legitimacy partly from ritual and religious functions associated

with indigenous belief systems and thus, exercised extensive judicial and administrative powers too. With time, traditional and customary powers of the Vhe have declined due to various factors such as modern education, Christianity and Governmental Reform. However, Poumai chieftainship system continued to exist thus represent the adaptability and also represent its vital position in the society. Thus, Vhe institution has adjusted its roles and functions to fit the modern system while still maintaining its customary legitimacy, showing the resilience of indigenous political institutions in changing socio-political conditions.

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