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Village Polity of the Sumi Naga: Change and Continuity

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Abstract

The Sumi Naga is one of the major tribes of Nagaland. One of the important features of the Sumi is the institution of chieftainship. Every Sumi village has a chief whose post is hereditary. In the traditional times the Sumi chiefs were autocratic controlling the social, economic and political life of his subjects. However, with the coming of Christianity, modern education and adaptation of modern ways of life, and most importantly the introduction of democratic form of governance; the powers, functions and privileges of the chiefs have undergone changes. Nevertheless, the customary practice of hereditary chieftainship still continues. This paper attempts to analyze the Sumi chieftainship its changes, continuity and the chieftainship as an integral part of Sumi identity.

Keywords: Chieftainship, customary, hereditary, institution, Sumi Naga, village polity.

Introduction

Every society has its own system of political organization in order to regulate the behaviour of its members. It is through this institution certain norms are laid for the members to follow. Like any other society the Sumi Naga tribe have their own system of governance. The Sumi Naga is one of the major tribes found in Nagaland. Zunheboto district is the original home of the Sumis. However in recent times they occupy a larger part of Niuland district. Besides Zunheboto and Niuland districts some Sumi villages are found in other districts of Nagaland like Wokha, Mokokchung, Kiphire and Phek. Thus because of their highly migratory nature the Sumi have spread out in many directions. They are one of the most scattered and adventurous tribes of Nagaland. The Sumi Naga has its own distinctive characteristics. The Sumi polity is based and centred on hereditary Chieftainship. Accordingly, a basic characteristic of Sumi society is that every village has a hereditary chief. Davis (1821) remarked that the most distinctive nature which differentiates the Sumi Naga from other Naga tribe is the practise of hereditary chieftainship at the village level.

The study covers Sumi Naga society including two (2) districts namely; Niuland and Zunheboto. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Personal interviews were conducted on purposive sampling with elderly and significant people irrespective of gender of the Sumi community who have sufficient knowledge on the Sumi polity and traditions. The study attempts to analyze how Sumi chieftainship has undergone many changes yet still continues to be an integral part of Sumi identity.

Formation of Village

Every Sumi village has a chief who is the head of the village. In the bygone years the Chief of the village controlled the economic, political and social life of the people. According to the customary practice of the Sumi the one who established a new village becomes the chief. Hutton (1921) opined that it was customary for a chief's son to establish a village of his own taking a considerable number of household from his father's village. Nonetheless, a person intending to have a village of his own need not be the sons of the chiefs alone, but be someone who is physically fit to stand against any kind of challenges. Addition to his physical fitness, he should be wealthy enough to provide to the needy, brave, intelligent, adventurous and the calibre to lead others. The establishment of a new Sumi village is done in two ways: i) Through warfare i.e., by forcefully overpowering the early settlers, and ii) Occupying an empty land.

In order to occupy an empty space to establish a new village, a secret plan is devised under an able leader within a village. The leader gathers from his village people who wish to migrate to a new spot and start a village. On gathering sufficient number of people, they move out from their village to the new spot to establish a village. Much before moving out from the village to establish a new settlement, it is the sacred duty of the leader to spot and sought suitable virgin land free from all encumbrances for settlement and cultivation. In addition to these, Nekha (2017) opines that the intending chief/leader does a thorough survey of the spot he wishes to occupy such as – supply of sufficient natural resources in the surrounding and natural defence system to protect against from impending enemies. On satisfying with the above survey, the intending chief informs the neighbouring

villages of the place the spot he is occupying to start a new village. Prior to all these exercises and activities, the leader is to inform, convince and take permission from the chief of his native village to start a new settlement to avoid bad omens in the whole venture and prosperity of the new village. It is believed that if a village is being settled without the permission the village will not prosper. He also approaches his close associates whom he trust to help him in bearing the responsibilities in the formation of a new village. Thus after the establishment of village, considering their contributions the chief makes them his deputies and thus their status also becomes hereditary. The main leader becomes the head chief known as 'Akukatou' and under him are his deputies. This forms a sort of hierarchy among the Sumi chiefs within a village. The position and status of the Sumi village chief is hereditary. However, the chief could lose his status in case of him leaving his village permanently and settles in another village or township because his powers are limited within the village of settlement. A chieftain losing his position is a rare case among the Sumis. This points to fact, that an *Alukatou*/ chief gives his best and has outmost love for the village he has established. Another important point to note is, the Sumi villages are usually small in size because Chieftainship which constantly invite people to move out from their settlement. Hence the diaspora of the Sumi is large. Although a Chief is the most powerful person in his village, outside his village he is treated as an equal with others.

Traditional Powers and Functions of the Chief

In the olden times like any other Naga tribes, solidarity and honour of Sumi villages mostly depended on the chief. The chief ruled over his subjects with justice in accordance with the accepted codes and customs of his village. Usually the

chief was the judge, administrator, commander-in-chief and executive head of the community (Horam 1988).

Military Powers and Functions

Among the Naga tribes, the Sumis are considered as the most adventurous tribes because of their migratory habit which is inevitable because of the existence of Chieftainship. They were popularly known as the warring tribe. According to Nienu (2005) the Sumi method of warfare was a reflection of the role of governance that existed i.e., rule by powerful autocratic chief. In olden times there were constant inter-village and inter-tribal wars. The immediate village was the first enemy. In times of war the chief had to lead and also direct his subjects. Most of the chiefs were also great warriors. In addition to defending and protecting his village, a Sumi chief was the guardian of the weak neighboring villages. In return those villages had to pay him tax (Achumi, 2012). The chief also tried to maintain good relationship with the neighboring villages so as to avoid inter village conflict. It was the duty of the chief to turn out the village from any kind of danger.

Economic Powers and Functions

Among the Sumis landholding system is connected with the establishment of village. The one who establishes the village becomes the owner of the entire land within the demarcated land. Thus being the owner and ruler of the village, the land belongs to the chief and he distributes the land for cultivation (Sema, 1986). He had the power to deprive a person from cultivation if an individual displeased him. He has the power and authority to expel anybody from the village if he/she resisted his authority. The chief not only provide the members of the village with land but also with wives if they are unable to pay the brides price. He also feed them when they are

unable to do so and pays fines on their behalf imposed by other villages due to misconduct (Nshoga, 2009). He had the power to utilize free labour from his subjects and it is an obligation. Violation of this obligation invites punishment up to the extent of expulsion. On the whole in Sumi villages a reciprocal relationship is created between the chief and his subjects.

Political Powers and Functions

According to Hutton (1921) the real pivot of the Sumi society is the chief. He is the most powerful man in the village. All major decisions regarding his village are taken by him. He represents the village in all matters. It is his discretion whether to make peace or war with the neighbouring villages or communities. The peaceful coexistence with the neighbouring villages depends on the chief. During the headhunting days' raids were not made on those villages whom they had an alliance. He makes diplomatic relations with the neighbouring villages. In order to maintain his family status a Sumi chief wants his sons or daughters to marry the sons or daughters of another chief. Marriage between two chieftain families apart from prestige serves as an alliance that was very much helpful in the olden days in order to protect themselves from inter-village feuds and headhunting. Whenever any distinguished strangers come to the village for meeting or official purposes usually they are entertained at the chief's house. They are taken proper care where the best food and drinks are served to them. In this way a healthy relationship is built between them through hospitality. Settlement of disputes within the village is done by the chief with the help of his associates, but the final verdict lies with the chief and no one dares to go against his decision.

Religious Powers and Functions

Before the coming of Christianity, the traditional religion of the Sumi Naga was animism. The Sumis believed in number of spirits and their lives were full of superstitious beliefs. Like any other Naga tribe all life cycles of the Sumis had religious significance. Divinations and omens were observed before beginning any important works like sowing, reaping, going on a hunting expedition, war, establishment of village etc. All agricultural activities were also linked with religious practices. Therefore, in order to carry out the religious duties a village priest was appointed by the chief. In the views of Hutton (1921), a Sumi chief is usually a secular chief rather than a religious chief. However, being the head of a village it was his duty to be well versed with all the religious rites and rituals. Thus according to the *Sumi Centennial Souvenir* (1904-2003) in the olden days all religious rites and rituals were presided over by the village priest and the chief.

Since every activity of man was bounded by religious norms it was the foremost duty of the chief to have the knowledge of it and provide assistance. The chief is expected to know the rituals to propitiate the spirits, the days to be kept as sacred, things which were considered taboo for his subject and for the village as a whole etc. It was his duty to warn his subjects ahead of time about the observation of rituals and also warn his subject not to do things which were considered taboo in order to avert the wrath of the spirits. It was the duty of the chief to proclaim certain days to be observed as sacred to appease the spirits to avert calamities caused by the spirits. He announced the days set aside for clearing the village path and also for the purpose of war and peace (Hutton, 1921). According to Assumi (2009) celebration of festivals was declared by the chief. At the time of reaping

besides the first reaper and the village priest, the chief also played an important role in performing the rites of reaping. In the absence of the village priest he presides over the religious rites and rituals. For e.g., in many villages the chief performed the role of the *Awou* – the priest, *Ashiphu* - the first cutter of the meat. On the whole the chief assumed the general direction of the ceremony while the *Awou* performed the ceremonial act.

Traditional Village Administration

The administration of the village was not an easy task. Therefore, for the efficient functioning of village the most capable persons were selected as the chief's functionaries in the traditional Sumi society to carry out day today administration.

Chochou

Chochou is the Chief's Spokesperson and he occupies an important position in the village. He serves as a sort of herald within and outside the village. All kinds of information are passed through him. For any kinds of errand, the chief entrust him. However, when it come to decision making and settling disputes he does not have a say. He acts as supporters or advisor to the chief. No qualification was required however he should be smart and intelligent. He should be well versed with the customary laws and practices. He is selected from among a person who wins the confidence of the chief. The number of *Chochomi* in a village varies from village to village. In some village there are only one *Chochou* where as in some other there may be two or more. The post of the *Chochou* is not permanent and can be terminated any time if he loses the confidence of the chief.

Awou

Awou is the Village Priest and he is a prominent figure in the village. He proclaims rituals to be observed by the village and also fixes the days for festivals in consultation with the chief. He performs ceremonial acts for the village as a whole, for the families and for the individuals too. He announces the days of festivals and gives warning to the villagers for failure to perform rituals. He is usually selected from amongst the poor people. He does not enjoy any political power but he is the head of the village for all religious matters. He is respected by all. He is also privileged for two days free labour from his villagers *i.e.,* at the time of clearing the jungle for cultivation and during harvest (Yeptho, 1991). The post of *Awou* is not hereditary.

Amthau

Amthau is the first reaper. The first reaper is either an old woman or a man who is believed to have a prosperous hand. After the rite is performed for the harvest the first reaper goes to the field and cuts the crop puts it in her/his pouch and utters "my pouch is heavy this year we will have a good harvest". After that only the harvest will begin. In return each family gives her/him a small basket of paddy (a small basket tied around a waist where seeds are kept and used during the time of sowing). Prior to her/him/ no one should start the harvest because it is a bad omen. During the harvest she/he is restricted to eat any kind of slain meat left by wild beasts as it is a taboo. She/he also do not take any kind of food which produces pungent smell (Achumi, 2005).

Ashiphuu

Ashiphuu is the first cutter of the meat during festivals and performance of feast of merit. It is usually done by an old

man in the village. During festivals and feast of merit he is the first one to cut the meat of the animals which are being slaughtered to be used for the feast. No one is permitted to cut the killed animals before him as it is a bad omen. However, in some villages this role is performed by the chief himself (Assumi, 2009).

Lapu/Amoshou

Lapu/Amoshou is the official burrier of a village. He is chosen from amongst the people whose clan is the smallest in the village. He digs and buries the corpse of his villagers. During the head hunting days if the birds ate the human heads which were brought to village by the warriors it was considered a bad omen. Therefore, the *Lapu* was entrusted to boil the skull and keep it in a place where the skulls were displayed (Sema, 2012).

Settlement of Disputes

In case of settlement of dispute, the chief is assisted by his deputies, *Chochou* or *Chochomi* (Spokesman) and the elders from various clans whom the chief selects. However, the extent to which he consults his subordinates entirely depends on the personality of the chief. Cases that could not be solved within the family, clan or the disputed parties are brought to the chief's court. The highest court of justice is the chief's court (James, 2013). But in terms of decision making the chief takes the major role. His word is final. Today, this institution has taken the form of village council. The village council is headed by the chief and all his deputies are also the members. All matters of disputes within the village are settled by them according to the customs and practices of the village. This is the highest court of justice within a village. Till today, many people prefer the traditional method of conflict resolution

because it does not involve any expenditure, and the verdict is given without delay.

Change and Continuity

The Sumi Naga tribe have been governing themselves according to their traditional system of administration. All Sumi villages are ruled by the chiefs. Even after the occupation of the British colonial rule to the Naga Hills no new changes are made in the traditional system of administration. The British colonial rule found the Naga style of administration quite impressive. They wanted to spread their administration without disturbing their indigenous way of governance because they thought that if they suddenly impose a new rule it could estrange the natives. Therefore, they began to recognise the role of village chiefs and headmen as their representative to carry out the orders of the Government in their respective villages easily. Thus the traditional form of administration was rather reinforced under the colonial rule. However, this was purely done in interest of the British colonial administration to carry out the administration easily. The Britishers recognised the traditional leaderships and in recognition for their services gave them a red blanket (Sema, 1991). Even today, this red blanket is still used symbolising their status of being a headman or chief. Subsequently the British colonial administrators also introduced the institution of *Dobashi* (a man who know two languages). They acted as informants and personals of the intelligence department. All government orders to the natives were communicated through them. They acted as a link between the British administrators and the natives. As power was vested on them by the British administrators to act as a mediator between them it has somewhat affected the traditional form of governance.

With the coming of Christianity, modern education, democratic ideals etc., and also adopting the modern ways of life there have been some changes in the traditional system of governance. The powers, functions and privileges of the chiefs have been decreased. For e.g., the practise of head hunting decreased and therefore inter-village feud became lesser. The practise of keeping more wives, bonded slaves etc., got discontinued as it goes against the Christian principles and teachings. Almost all the chiefs have given up demanding free labour from his subjects. The functionaries of the traditional village administration disappeared which has been now replaced by the village council. The chiefs also became more liberal than being autocratic. Many of the powers and functions of the chiefs have been decreased. However, in spite of the diminishing role of the chief, the tradition of chieftainship is still alive among the Sumis. Chieftainship is the maker of Sumi society. Even after the attainment of statehood and the introduction of democratic institutions like Village Council (VC), Village Development Board (VDB) etc., the chiefs have become an integral part of these administrative bodies. They continue to play an important role in village administration and also in the tribal affairs. In fact, the Village Council Act of 1978 empowers the village chiefs to be the ex-officio member of the village council and also gave them the voting right (Angami, 2008). Moreover Article 371(A) under the constitution of India gives special rights to the Nagas to protect their customary practices. Therefore, despite many changes, the Sumi chief is still the head of his village. He has a strong voice in the village administration. All major decisions of the village are taken by him. He is still regarded and respected as the head and no one has the right to terminate him from his position of being a village chief. This institution remains to be an important identity of the Sumi Naga.

Conclusion

The institution of chieftainship existed in the Sumi society since time immemorial. Each village functioned under the chief whose post was hereditary. He played a major role in the administration of his village. His decisions were final and no one dare to against him. He was a father figure for his villager and was the most powerful man within the village. However in recent times due to many factors the powers and functions of the chiefs have decreased to some extent. Nevertheless he continues to remain an important figure in the Sumi society.

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