

Historical Perspective of the Role of Village Chief of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century

Console Zamreinao Shimrei

Research Scholar, Dept. of History, Assam University, Silchar, Diphu Campus, Karbi Anglong, Diphu, (Assam)
India

Abstract

The headman played a pivotal role in the spectrum of administration, judicial, economy, defence, social, festivals and other activities of the village. The village councillors were also closely worked together with the headman in all the village matters. The village chief was accountable for the effective defence of the village. He was also responsible for crimes of the village. All the agricultural activities of the village were carried out according to his consent and active participation was required in order to fulfill proper cultivation of the paddy fields. Besides, all the festivals of the Tangkhul Nagas were fixed by the village chief with consultation to the village councillors in a democratic form of governance. Thus, headman was responsible for the successes and failures of the village.

Key Words: *Āwunga*- Headman of a village, *Piba*- Head of the clan, *Philava*- wife of Headman, *Khul-lakpa*- Chief of the village in Manipuri language, *Luk-lakpa*- village elders in Manipuri language

The State of Manipur is bounded on the north by Nagaland, on the south by Mizoram and Myanmar, on the east by Myanmar and on the west by Assam.¹ R.B. Pemberton wrote "The territories of Manipur have fluctuated at times with the fortunes of their monarch".² The present boundary of Manipur with an area of 22,327 square kilometer, forming 0.7% of the total land surface of the Indian Union. It is situated between the parallels 23° 50' N and 25° 41' N and the meridians 92° 59' E and 94° 45' E.

Manipur is geographically divided into the hills and the Imphal valley. It is commonly known Imphal valley is oval shaped. The plain or valley is approximately 2238 sq. km. accounting to 10% of the total state area. Out of this an area of 550 sq. km. is

occupied by lakes, wetlands, barren uplands and hillocks.³ 790 metres above sea level and surrounded by the hills in all sides. This geographical division is one of the determinant factors in the socio-political historical development of the land. The Imphal valley inhabited by the Meiteis is one-tenth of the total area of the state.⁴

Ukhrul district is situated in the east district of Manipur and bounded on the north by Nagaland State, on the east by Sagaing Division of Myanmar, on the west by Senapati district, and on the south by Imphal east district of Manipur. Ukhrul district has 4,544 sq. kilometers out of which 22,327 sq. kilometers belongs to Manipur state. Thus, the land is the chief source of production and the most important of livelihood.

Role of Village Chief

Every village had three officers, namely *Khul-lakpa*, *Luk-lakpa* and *Lampu**; and other officers were appointed on need basis. The Chief or *Khul-lakpa* was a rich person and influential man in the village. The posts of *Khu-lakpa* and *Lup-lakpa* were inherited as per the customs of the respective community. *Khul-lakpa* was the chief of the village (*Leikai*) and *Luk-lakpa* was the village elders or councillors. Whereas the *Lampu* was appointed by the British when they conquered and rule in Manipur in 1891. The Manipur Government did not interfere in the administration of the village matter. Indeed, the administration was left entirely in the hands of the village authority headed by the village chief.⁵ The primary unit of administration was the village. Several families combined and formed what was known as *Leikais***. These families had different ancestors whom they worshipped. The family belonged to different clans.⁶

In accordance with the tradition and custom of the Tangkhul Nagas, appointment of *Āwunga*/Chief involved in a series of religious rites and worships to their deities.⁷ In some cases, the leader of the first settlers naturally became the headman of Tangkhul villages. He was the founder of village. Other cases, when the *Āwunga* death leaving without son then his brother son succeeded the throne. Besides, when the brother also left without son then the chieftainship went to another brother son. Another case was that when the entire brothers left without son then the chieftainship went to another male lineage of the *Āwunga* clan. In order to become the village headman; an individual had to perform certain duties.⁸ Thus one

who fulfill above criteria became the village *Āwunga*.

In every village, whether it was big or small had a chief. The office of the chief was hereditary by custom of primogeniture.⁹ The chief was respected by the villagers because he was the defender and protector of a village in times of war. He was the chief dispenser of justice. He was the chief administrator at village level. He enjoyed a number of privileges such as free labour for cultivation of his lands and construction of houses. He had the largest and the best plot in the *jhum* field. Similarly, he had a major share in hunting and fishing. The chief had certain obligation to the people. He looked after them and helped them in times of distress and sorrow. He was responsible for the safety and development of the village. He was instrumental in the field of village development for example construction roads, bridges, water tank etc. He decided the civil and criminal cases for the welfare of the village. He was also in-charge of organizing developmental activities. He had powers to punish to the culprits. He was a symbol of the unity of the village. He was obliged to take advice from the members of the village council for smooth functioning of the village administration.¹⁰

The chief was assisted by a village elders consisted of the most senior male of the clans of the village. The chief was responsible for the promotion of the general happiness of the people, for all social and religious gatherings and festivals of the village. He was the administrative head of a village. If the chief failed to discharge of his administrative duties then he would dismiss from the chieftainship. In times of war, the

chief also played the role of commander-in-chief.¹¹ Thus he was bound to carry out his duties according to wishes of the people.

Since the *Āwunga* was the administrative head of the village, he enjoyed and exercised enormous powers within the ambit of the village administration. He summoned and presided over the meetings of the village council, and gave the final decision on all matters of the village. The headman parcels out cultivable lands to the villagers in consultation with his councillors. He used his discretionary power in consultation to the village councillors in matter of financial assistant to the needy persons or due to crops failure.¹²

As a token of love and respect for his high position and status, the headman was given a share of meat of the animal slaughtered during the season's festivals and other social and cultural occasions. But the quantity of meats which was usually given to the *Āwunga* and village councillors was not similar in quantity. It differed from village to village. However, generally the head of the animal was given to the *Āwunga* of a village, and the rest of animals parts like neck, leg, upper leg, tail etc. were given to the *pibas*. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century the villagers rendered free services to "*Āwunga*" whenever he required their services. Thus, his paddy fields were cultivated by the villagers and even his house was constructed by the villagers as a sign of co-operation and helped to ensure his protection.¹³

The village chief was responsible for the effective defence of the village. In the ancient times, constant animosity was

prevailed among Tangkhul Nagas villages and the practiced of head-hunting was one of the important cultures. The question of village defence was a matter of great concern and importance to ensure protection of their life. As such the village fence and the village gate were efficiently maintained and made impenetrable.¹⁴ But when one village community was constantly at war with another village community then the chief had emergency powers to declare war against the counterpart. Thus, the chief was not only priest, judge but also the leader of a village.¹⁵

He was also a leader for amusement activities like get together in sports, dance, song and any sort of festivals. His presence at all ceremonies held in the village was necessary. He was also expected to make the initial sacrifices and offered the first prayer to ward off an ill fate which might otherwise befall over the village.¹⁵ In consultation with the council of elders the headman fixed the date of all celebration of ceremonies and festivals. The *Āwunga* was the first man in the village who inaugurated and presided over all village festivals. He was the first to sow seeds, first to plant and first to pluck and first to harvest, first in all the religious rites and festivals of the village to ensure peace and prosperity of the village. The succession to the headman ship of Tangkhul village was hereditary, and based on primogeniture.

However, the village *Āwunga*/Chief had certain limitation of powers. In the governance of his village, he tried his best to adjust his position with those of his village councillors. In all matters of disputes and deliberations, he had to consult the village

councillors and could not ignore the opinions of the village councillors. In fact, the real powers of the village administration rested with the village council. Therefore, in spite of his high position and great powers, the *Āwunga* could not act like a dictator and an autocrat unlike the Kuki chief. He was a benevolent ruler. Every citizen of his village was looked upon like his own child. And the *Āwunga* was expected to be polite and gentle. An old Tangkhuls saying goes thus: “No python bites, no *Āwungnao** ** speaks harshly.” The power of the headman was in most of the villages was under the control of the village council.”¹⁶

In conclusion, *Āwunga* was a good protector of the village. As the head of the administration, his duty was to summon and preside over the meetings of the village councillors who were by custom the representatives of the various clans. In the day-to-day administration of the village, the chief was assisted by the village elders. In case of disputes, the chief house served as the court except when the councillors with his approval wanted to hold the hearings in the open space. The village chief was therefore, the religious head, the chief judge, the chief administrator and also the commander-in-chief at the time of war and head hunting. The dates of the village

festivals, religious ceremonies, and various activities connected with shifting cultivation were fixed and announced by the chief, on the advice of the council members.

He was the first man in all the agricultural practices. It was also important to note down that the chief wife (*Philavā*) played a significant role along with her husband in the agricultural practices. Without her participation any agricultural activity was incomplete. Usually the village farmers served free labour to the chief as a sign of respect and co-operation towards its village administration. Unfortunately, there was no written record for the given society. However, his words were laws of the village based on the customs. But he always acted as defender for the peace and prosperity of the village. Thus, he always deeply concerned for the welfare of the people at large.

However, the village chief could not be a dictator as he was bound by the various Tangkhuls customs and unwritten laws which were rigidly followed. The *Āwunga* had no power to overrule them. Indeed, the *Āwunga* was expected to use pleasant and sweet words in conversation and in any public functions. Thus gentleness was a great quality of the village chief.

Notes and References:

1. Joshi, S.C. *Manipur The Jewel of India*, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing House, 2002, p. 4
2. Pemberton, R.B. *The Eastern Frontier Of India*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2010, p 20
3. Gupta's R. *Manipur General Knowledge*, New Delhi, Ramesh Publishing house, 2014, p. 35

4. Kabui, Gangmumei. *History of Manipur Vol. I Pre-Colonial Period*, New Delhi, National Publishing House, 2011, pp. 7-8
*. *Lampu* meant an agent or staff of government appointed by the British
5. R. Brown. *Statistical Account of Manipur*, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2001, p. 25
**. *Leikeis* means villages mainly used in the Imphal Valley.
6. N. Ibohi Singh. *The Manipur Administration (1709 – 1907)*, Friends & Co. Singjamei Imphal (India), 1976, pp. 96-97
7. R.R. Shimray, *Origin and Culture of Nagas*, Aruna Printing Press, B- 78, Naraina Industrial Area, New Delhi, 1985, p. 52
8. Ibid. p. 52.
9. Sachchidananda, *Shifting Cultivation In India*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1989, p. 116
10. Ibid., pp. 116-117
11. KSH. *Bimola Devi, Administrative Changes in the Hill Areas of Manipur*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2009, p. 170
12. M. Horam, *Naga Polity*, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1992, p. 81.
13. H.S. Kahaosang, Interviewed on 2nd August 2012 from 10. A.M to 11. A.M. He is from Lunghar village Ukhrul district Manipur. He highlighted about the village community of the Tangkhul Society.
14. M. Horam, op.cit., p. 81
15. Ibid., p. 82
***. *Awungnao* means son of headman/headman of a village.
16. Ibid., p. 83
17. Ng. Mataisang, “*The Tangkhul Society & Religious: A Historical Study*”. M. Phil. Unpublished Dissertation, Department of History, Manipur University Canchipur, Imphal, 1994, p. 24.