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## Research Paper

## GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS OF THE AO NAGAS: A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

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### ABSTRACT

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**O**ver the last century Nagas have witness tremendous social changes in all walks of life. The arrival of Christianity and modern education in the hills station of Nagaland during the 1872 mark a new beginning. The long stay of British administration and subsequently inclusion in the India union has impacted the Naga's way of life in many respects. More change has been witnessed when Nagaland got statehood under the Indian union on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1963. A mushrooming of development activities and educational institutions began to take place. This led to tremendous changes starting from food habit to dress, attitude and manners, profession etc. interestingly, however, despite of many forces onslaught upon the Naga culture and tradition the time tested and age old practice of traditional Ao Naga governing institution still survived. This draws the attention of many scholars and intellectual for investigation thereby coming with their reasons and justification. This paper attempts to draw some light on the governing institution vis-à-vis some of sociological observation on the implicit and intrinsic nature and characteristic of the governing institutions called Putu Menden of the Ao Nagas.

**KEY WORDS:** Governing, Institution, Putu Menden, Social change, Chongli, Mongsen, Ao Naga

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### INTRODUCTION

The general definition of governance provided by Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1986:982) is of significant important while understanding the subject matter of governance in the present context. It indicates that governance is a synonym for government, or the act or process of governing, specifically authoritative direction and control <sup>1</sup>. This interpretation specifically focuses on the effectiveness of the executive branch of government. The working definition used by the British Council, however, emphasises that "governance" is a broader notion than government (and for that matter also related concepts like the state, good government and regime), and goes on to state: "Governance involves interaction between the formal institutions and those in civil society.

Governance refers to a process whereby elements in society wield power, authority and influence and enact policies and decisions concerning public life and social upliftment.

Governance, therefore, not only encompasses but transcends the collective meaning of related concepts like the state, government, regime and good government. Many of the elements and principles underlying "good government" have become an integral part of the meaning of "governance". Thus governance implies a high level of organisational effectiveness in relation to policy-formulation and the policies actually pursued, especially in the conduct of economic policy and its contribution to growth, stability and popular welfare. Good government also implies accountability, transparency, participation, openness and the rule of law. While attempting to clarify the concept in the present



study it would not be irrelevant to bring here the definition of governance provided by the World Bank Experience, as it has special relevance for the developing world. Good governance is epitomized by predictable, open and enlightened policy-making, a bureaucracy imbued with professional ethos acting in furtherance of the public good, the rule of law, transparent processes, and a strong civil society participating in public affairs. Poor governance (on the other hand) is characterized by arbitrary policy making, unaccountable bureaucracies, unenforced or unjust legal systems, the abuse of executive power, a civil society unengaged in public life, and widespread corruption. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its 1997 policy paper, defined governance as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences <sup>2</sup>.

Given the theoretical and conceptual clarity on the governance as discussed above the present paper aims to discuss the core political institution of the Ao Naga tribe and how it delivers good governance to its people on the one hand and on the other hand by way of conclusion would try to highlight some sociological understanding therein. But who are AOs? The AOs are one among the 16 major tribes in the state of Nagaland. They are composed of three phratry system i.e. Chungli, Mongsen, and Changki where there are certain innate differences in the customary practices though they belong to same community. They are mongoloid race and speak Tibeto-Burman language. They are the dominant group in Mokokchung district of Nagaland.

### **RATIONALE OF THE PAPER**

Although the Ao are being exposed to the outside world since the Ahom king in Assam, The British rule in the Naga Hills and the coming of American Baptist Missionary into the Ao territory during 1872 that has left a major impact to these people. The attainment of India's independent in 1947, coupled with its attainment of statehood under the union of India; all these factors have had fast and rapid changes in socio-economic and religion of the Ao Nagas. The introduction of Nagaland village and Area council Act 1979 paved a wider horizon and more assignment to such grass root political institution. Added to this is the introduction of the institution of Dobashi (customary law keeper) and Gaongpuras in the village (government agent) by the

British administration which adds more complication to the traditional system of governance. On the other hand, the constitution of India referring Article 371(A) has given a wide protection on the governing institutions among the Nagas <sup>3</sup>. These all remained extremely cherished. However the traditional institutions of governance have survived from such onslaught and remain unchanged. This led the attention to undertake this study. Throughout this paper the word '*Putu Menden*' is sufficiently used. Meaning the institution of governance is all about *putu menden* in local vernacular. The word *putu menden* in its literal meaning is 'generation seat' which means a generation of people or an age group of people are chosen to be the representatives in the institution of governance for a specific period of time i.e. 30 years. The popular understanding of *putu menden* in modern times is better known as village council or village government. It may be stated that in every Ao village a certain age group of people are selected for the village governance for a period of thirty years.

### **THE STRUCTURE AO PUTU MENDEEN (governing institutions)**

Every Ao village has that governing body which is constituted by a group of people in a given generation. The selected representatives of each clan form the *putu menden*. Its tenure generally last for 30 years and is being replaced by a new generation especially in the case of *Chongli phratry*. The *Mongsen phratry* has no limited tenure system therefore a person continues to hold the office till he enjoys the pleasure of his clan's man. However, for all practical purpose each village decided by the generation themselves. Members of the *putu menden* once they obtain the mandate of the villager, they act as legislative, judge and executive. It may be stated that the modern concept of the theory of separation of power is not applied. The principle of democracy governs the village *putu menden*. This is so evident from the fact that representatives are first selected from their respective clan on consensus decision. At the higher level i.e. *putu menden* the members are equally represented from all the clans. It is for which reason Elwin remarks that each village amongst the AOs is a small republic and each man is as good as his neighbour; indeed it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities. The headsman call *tatar* does exist, but their authority is very small. The source of potency and survival of this small democracy is that their decisions are binding and cannot be ignored <sup>4</sup>. Thus, every Nagas

knows that all discussion should lead to some conclusion, and once the decision is arrived at everyone is expected to obey it. There is a great respect for his village elders and tribal chieftains<sup>5</sup>. The Ao village is a village republic. It is more akin to an independent state like the ancient Greek city-state. Further, it may also be stated that the selected representatives are known as Tatar. The concept of tatar in Ao Putu Menden is centred on the principle of meat sharing i.e the structural organization of putu menden, its stratification and nomenclature is maintained from the structure of an animal for instance a cow is divided into following portion as head, neck, ribs, and intestine and so on. Corresponding to the following portion of group of few selected representative from each clan are appointed to each of the portion and are called Tazungpur, Tekungpur, Lashupur, Jamej<sup>6</sup>. These four strata form the putu menden in the concept of Ao governing institution.

A titular head within the structure of the putu menden exist who is called the Unger. The Unger by the name is the priesthood of the village government therefore his office is maintained in great respect and sanity. This post is occupied only by the Imsong Pongen clan or the descendent of the tongpok clan. It may be noted any decision made in the office of the Unger cannot be changed under any circumstances even during the assembly session at the Unger's court no outsider is allowed to enter the office.

In the council of Tatars the first rank in terms of status is occupied by the *Tazungpur* literally the trunk, they are normally the cabinet in the putu menden. However, unlike the modern government, these tatars are without portfolios yet all legislative, executive and judiciary functions are carried out by them. The second rank is the *Tekungpur* who collectively act as a messenger i.e any important decision of the cabinet in the village putu menden when required to be send to any individuals or organization can be delivered only by them. Indeed these are people in action for they implement the decision of the cabinet. The following stratum is occupied by the *Lashpur* who literally is the messenger who spread information whenever a meeting of the village councillor is convened. The bottom rank is the *Jameja* whose main function is to assist the councillor when required and act as tea server in the meeting hall.

## MAJOR DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In the whole process of this study, it was observed that the Ao governing institution popularly known as Putu Menden is based on the principle of

“shea achiba” (meat sharing/eating). The Ao Putu Menden is formed on the representative of the clans. Indeed there is an element of hierarchy in the organization structure of putu menden so the among representative of the clans, some occupy the post of the chief /leader where as other occupy the post of assistant. A social division of labour is clearly maintained that each one of the representatives perform his role dutifully, given due respect an honour to his co-member in the organization. The village government is the ultimate authority in the administration of the village. Thus, any decision pertaining to village is decided by the chosen representative and is final and binding to the member of the village. The Ao village is a village republic where people chose the leaders. Each village authority is capable of making diplomatic and friendly relation to other village in the manner of *Ak SU* (literally killing pigs). The practice of *Ak Su* is better understood as treaty alliance in the modern context, as it is being carried out between two or more villages. I may be noted here that Nagas were once head hunters, therefore in order to cease such practices agreement were made between two or more villages in the form of bilateral or multi-lateral agreement where they kill a pig. The significant meaning of killing pigs in this accord is that instead we killing ourselves we kill this pig and draw a feast and cease such culture of hunting once and for all'. In studying the formation of Ao governing institution the clan system is crucial. Unlike the Indian society there is no caste system; class system is neither a practice. The Aos instead have a clan system which in fact is the foundation of the whole Ao community including the village government where each clan is equally represented in the formation of the government.

The Aos have been totally swept off by the wind of change ever since the coming of British administration and the America missionaries in all aspect, ranging from religion to education, food habits, dresses and the daily life routine. For instance from the animist practice of sacrifices and worships of the spirit to the Christian style of worship in the church, tradition institution of learning (*Aruju*) life to modern formal school, raw agriculture produce food to machine processed food. From a state of almost bare skin to the world of fashion that have access to finest production of cloths. Moreover, the life of Aos has changed from the only option of shifting cultivator to office going life and has the opportunity to access to modern world of business. This indeed is a good sign of economic development. Other notable changes in the social life of

the Aos that can be mentioned are burial of dead bodies which start in 1897, marriage in Christian style in the church had its humble beginning in 1878<sup>7</sup>. In spite of all changes in the socio-religion and education, governing institution remains stable and unchanged. Sufficient to mention here that the *putu menden* remains the same as it use to be. The tenure of *Ao putu menden* lasts for thirty years in respect of the *Chungli* phratry and lifelong service in the respect of *Mongsen* phratry. The hierarchical structure and its uniqueness of democratic representation whereby there is an equal representative of all the clan in the various strata of the structure of *putu menden* is appreciable. It is for this reason that *putu menden* has survived the onslaught of modern process of social change. Moreover, the identity of every Aos has its roots in the village that every married Ao man subscribes membership annually or else he is excommunicated from the community, such cultural tradition have led the people to have close attachment to their village. Other instances that may supplement to our point of contention with regard to factors of social change are introduction of British administration on Nagas hills and subsequently the introduction of *Gaongpura* and *Dobashi* institutions. It was found out that such introduction was to act as a liaison between the British government and the Ao villages in case of the former and an interpreter assisting the British government official on duty in case of later, therefore it has not hamper the structure of the traditional governing system. Moreover, the new introduction of village council Act has necessitated to certain functional adjustment of the village government. Indeed it was created to act as a nodal agency that would help and support to carry out the Nagaland state government in its functioning at the grass root level. This may be term as decentralization of power in the modern world. Indeed the introduction of such an act has become convenient means for the government and other non-governmental agency in today's world to interact with the villagers. Needless to mentioned, the act allows to elect or select a chairman from amongst the member, therefore, interestingly in most cases the leader of the *putu menden* gets the privilege of becoming the chairman of the village council.

The migration from rural village to the urban centers in modern times is another phenomenon that has resulted in the process of social alienation. The ties of clan and family which held together the fabric of naga social life and governed modes of conduct and interaction are to a great extent, gradually loosening if

not actually severed. The Nagas have been essentially the son of soils, working and living in rhythm with nature. Their history has been handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition, songs, festival and legends. Migration to urban centers has terribly affected the sense of identity and the importance of customary practices and traditions. Educated Nagas exposed to various culture and legal knowledge make unceasing efforts to analyze and examine the customary laws and practices from the legal point of views especially from the Indian penal code and Indian Criminal law. This brought to limelight the need for codification of naga customary laws among the educated section of nagas<sup>8</sup>. It is also pertinent to mention here that works on the tribal customary laws and practices in the north-east have been initiated by law Research institute of Guwahati High Court<sup>9</sup>. There upon work pertaining to Ao Nagas have been taken up. However, it must be noted that customary laws, at the analytical level are indeed vague and technically unsound. Since there is no written record the defaulters are injudiciously rewarded.

It hardly needs mentioning here that the *putu menden* is an institution since time immemorial where as institution of *Dobashi* or the customary law court is of recent introduction. In this regard a uniform law is essential so as to avoid irregularities and ambiguous interpretation among the various customary laws enforcing agencies. On the other hand, if the customary laws are codified the law enforcing agencies. On the other hand, if the customary laws are codified the law enforcing agencies need to be educated. Such difficulties have stood in the way as some kind of hindrance in furthering moves for codification of the customary laws among the Aos.

The Aos have undergone a long process of social change right from the introduction of foreign missionaries. More change has been initiated since the attainment of statehood. Age-old traditional practices that have survived for many centuries are almost replacing by new ones. The tempo of change has increased manifold through the efforts of both the central and state government, through successive plan and other departmental programme and politics in order to bring about change in the social structure, attitude and behaviour of the Nagas.

As mentioned earlier, the *Putu Mendén* also handles the judicial aspect/matters of the village. The present study have shown that with the introduction of *Dobashi* court the quantum of cases put up before it,



has been decreased-though it is by no means, an indicative of its decreasing popularity/efficiency.

A significant finding of the present study also show that the Aos are indissolubly attached to their respective clan thus hold sacred. This is the most important indicator of his identity, this identity, being safeguarded by virtue of his/her clan is being represented in the putu menden. It is for this reason that has proved the continuance/success of putu menden in the face of the onslaught of modern education, Christianity and socio-economic changes. Further it has also been seen that the introduction of the village council act has in no way diminished the importance or limited the functioning of the putu menden. This is borne out of the fact that putu menden is simply referred to as "Village Council" for administrative convenience with regards to dealing with the state government. Finally, when the putu menden of the phratry i.e *Chungli* and *Mongsen* were compared, it has been found out in the case of *Chungli* phratry the tenure of putu menden is thirty years. When as in case of *Mongsen* phratry there is no specific term a member can hold office until his death he resign because of ill health or other pressing matters. However, in any case, only a member of his clan can replace him. Apart from this, it has been seen that putu menden of all Ao village exhibit the same characteristic in composition an functioning. This study substantiates our contention made earlier that among the Aos, the putu menden is supreme/ultimate decision making body. The putu menden is constituted of clans of the village, with clear-cut hierarchal set up and duration. The function of the putu menden encompasses all executive, legislative and judicial aspects of the village.

### THE AO PUTU MENDEN: SOME SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

The organization structure of putu menden on the basis of phratry system has been systematically examined/studied in the above discussion. Some sociological observation vis-à-vis the intrinsic, implicit nature and the characteristic of putu menden is offered here. The placement of the village councillor/members in the organizational structure of putu menden at a various ranks and strata is a clear indication of the hierarchical division of labour. The village political power is not vested upon a single person. Thus, putu menden is constitute with some as leader/chief while some are accommodate as the assistant. Even though the role of a chiefs and assistant are equally important in the survival of the governing institution, what needs to be pointed out is the fact that in the Ao Naga system of

governing institution it is always the first settler in the village who enjoy the privilege of headship or leadership. The late comers/settlers are given only the post of assistants. This points leads to equally interesting observation, in that the late settler of the village to not command much respect and therefore their word are not always binding to the people. More often than not the first settler of the village maintain superiority complex, and therefore attitude such as "This is my village and you are my guest in my village" could be discerned. Unlike the modern bureaucratic organization, the member of the putu menden do not get pecuniary benefits. However, they get due respect and honour in the village and social life. One of the most common general notions of the village community life is that all are equal. That this is not so, is borne out of the hierarchal arrangement within the organization structure of the putu menden. Social inequality in terms of status and privilege, prerogatives and prerequisites is very much evident amongst the Aos. There is always this air of "ethnocentric" feeling among the first settler vis-à-vis the latter settle. Late settlers are constantly reminded though covertly, of their low social status by assigning them the post of assistantship. All are equal but some are more than equal than the others. That this is so is amply shown by our study of the Ao Naga governing institutions.

### END NOTES

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