

# Tradition and Modernity: The Interface of Clan Structures and Electoral Politics in Naga Society

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## Abstract:

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between clan structures and electoral politics within Naga society, focusing on the interface between tradition and modernity. Challenging the perception of traditional institutions as static entities, the study highlights how clan structures are not timeless but rather modern constructs, subject to reinvention and adaptation. Drawing on the works of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the research explores how clan members navigate power dynamics and political influences, particularly in the context of emerging political elites. By employing a social construction approach, the author investigates how traditional clan systems influence modern electoral contestation and vice versa. Through fieldwork conducted in Phaibung Khullen village, the author, an insider researcher, examines the interplay between traditional practices and contemporary electoral processes. The findings underscore the mutual reconfiguration of clan structures and electoral politics, emphasizing the enduring influence of tradition on modern political mobilization. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how traditional institutions shape and are shaped by the evolving landscape of electoral contestation in Naga society, highlighting the complex interface between tradition and modernity in clan-based communities.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Modernity, Tribes, Clan Structures, Electoral Politics.

## Introduction

Hutton (1921), in his study on Angami Nagas, remarked that the traditional institutions were dying out owing to contact with colonisers who introduced Christianity and education. The diminishing of the traditional system is measured on a negative note, as the general Naga society began to aspire to modern systems like electoral politics, education, and development.<sup>1</sup> Naga society is narrated as undergoing changes in its customs and traditions. Subsequently, traditional institutions and modernity have been important themes among Naga researchers. For example, Venuh (2004) argues that the power of the village king and village elders is now “demolished” in Naga society. Similarly, Nshoga (2009) writes that “the present Naga elders have a few traditions, myths, legends, folklores, and customs with them, but most of the traditional system has become extinct or is in a state of ablation and dotage.”

Does that mean that practices considered traditional in Naga society are losing their significance? In a recent study, Wouters (2014) suggested that the traditional institution still carries influence in Naga society and that the clanship systems continue to have significant impacts on electoral politics. This

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Naga’ are a conglomeration of tribes residing in Indian State of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar.

paper argues that framing colonisation to understand change is one-sided research because it does not account for the ways the chiefs and clans made use of the new arrangements imposed by British India and later within independent India to establish their power and further their importance in electoral politics. For example, one hardly sees any comment on how clan elders and educated clan members gained access to welfare services provided by the political dispensation. In this sense, the impact should not be seen as one-sided, nor should it be seen as having diminished the power of the so-called traditional institutions. It is important to understand how traditional institutions are arranged to become a powerful political force.

These studies tend to frame analysis in terms of tradition and modernity. It raises an interesting question: what form of electoral politics takes place in clan-based communities (without hinting that the clan is pre-modern)? The focus of the paper is then to examine how electoral politics is performed in clan-based villages, and how electoral politics makes use of clan structures vis-à-vis how clan structures make use of electoral politics. The paper argues that electoral politics not only make use of the existing clan structures but also reinvents social occasions as important tools for political mobilisation. This paper, more specifically focuses on the conflicts which emerge from these interactions. This is being done by examining Phaibung Khullen, a Poumai Naga village in Manipur. Phaibung Khullen village is a Poumai Naga village located 70 km away from the district head-quarter Senapati, Manipur State, India. The village has a population of 4664, according to the 2017 government reports. Phaibung village has 2752 electoral votes. Therefore, the paper discusses the contestations of electoral votes by 16 clans during the 2010 and 2015 Manipur District Council (MDC) elections at the Phaibung Village.

### **Locating Clan within Tradition-modernity Debate**

Clanship is defined as a customary association of familial bloodlines. A clan consists of a number of families. The primary social grouping of individuals rests on the family, and their clan organisation extends its reach to the families (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1958, p. 174). Thus, clans play important roles in the functioning of families. Clan relations and structures differ from village to village. In some villages, especially among the Naga society, there will be a clan chief. In the case of the Poumai Nagas, which is the subject of my study, they have a Veo.<sup>2</sup> The power of the Veo varies from village to village. In some Poumai villages, the Veo has more power. In others, the Veo is just a nominal head. In such villages, the village council holds more power. The decisions of the village council are implemented with the consent of the Veo. However, the relationship of clans is important in all villages. In Phaibung village, where my study is located, the village council is formed with representatives from all clans, and decisions are made with the assistance of the village Veo. However, after the introduction of electoral politics, the power and authority of the Veo seem to have lost their relevance, especially in politics. The Veo does not make any decisions related to electoral politics. But clan relationships and structures are important bases for electoral politics.

Multiple factors become important for clans to secure in politics. These include the assurance of jobs, government contracts, and opportunities through government schemes. Vote control within the clan and forming alliances with multiple clans are played out during elections. Clanship is based on hierarchy and obedience to clan elders, and support from other clan members is easily secured. Voting against rival

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Veo' is translated as 'King' in the Poumai Naga dialect and it refers to the king of the village.

parties creates conflicts among the clans. To reminisce about what it was like before elections were introduced into their lives, they discuss how there were very few fights before the advent of elections. Within the village, conflicts between clans for land were solved much more easily. In recent times, after the advent of the electoral party system, people fight over party affiliations. However, there is no discussion around party manifestos, political ideologies, or government policies; instead, they revolve around bonds of kinship, historical narratives, and village, and clan loyalties.

### **Framework of the Study**

This study takes clan and its institutions as changing phenomena; they are not static. Undoubtedly, the clan is an inherited category, but in this case, the clan and its structures are viewed as a modern phenomenon. It is not that they have disappeared and then reappeared in electoral politics. Additionally, this study does not consider a village to be a homogeneous entity, living in idyllic innocence, clinging onto age-old social and political institutions against the onslaught of modernity. Modernity is not something that comes from outside and is imposed externally; communities create their modernity. Therefore, the social reality under study is not something produced through interactions between modernity and tradition, but rather a by-product of their modernity.

The significance of this study lies in attempting to engage with the much-debated notion of tradition and modernity. This study does not focus on understanding tradition and modernity as two opposite poles but rather aims to see even those practices called traditional as modern creations. They are, in the words of Hobsbawm (1983), invented as traditional. Of course, this does not in any way mean that they are created out of thin air; rather, existing structures and practices are reinvented. The clan structures, which are a central theme in my study, are then something that did not exist since time immemorial but are considered modern phenomena. In this, I follow Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), who observed that the tradition that appears or claims to be old is often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. This is the conceptual tool that is used in the study of the interface between clan structures and electoral politics.

### **Methodological Considerations**

This paper aims to unravel the creation of clan structures in electoral politics, which are designed to serve certain forms of power, particularly the new political elites, a process that also empowers traditional structures. As such, for this paper, I adopted the social construction approach. This approach is useful because it allows us to see clan members not merely as lacking agency and autonomy, but as obeying the dictates of clan elders. It also enables us to study clan institutions not as entities that exercise enormous influence on the lives of clan members solely by virtue of their traditionality. I argue that traditional powers are now tied to the electoral process. Given this view of social reality, I adopted a very eclectic approach to methods and data.

Fieldwork for the study was conducted at Phaibung Khullen village. It is worth mentioning that I belong to Phaibung Khullen village; thus, it is imperative to state my epistemological location as a researcher. As a researcher from Phaibung Khullen village, I am an insider. While this may lead to methodological questions, I am also aware of the methodological debate surrounding conducting fieldwork as an insider and have been careful in all processes of the study. According to Smith (1999), a researcher as an insider problematises the model to see both from an outsider's and insider's perspective. Such capacities support researchers in conducting fieldwork in their place with multiple approaches. Similarly, Srinivas

(2009) argues that insider research need not always be a source of error; it might even be a source of insight.

I conducted my fieldwork for eight months, from May to December 2016, conducting in-depth interviews for data collection. Respondents in this study include political candidates, clan leaders, and village members. The primary focus was on the 2010 and 2015 Manipur District Elections. Political parties in the study include the Naga People's Front (NPF), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Indian National Congress (INC).

### **Clan Structures as Political and Conflict**

In 2007, a controversy around kinship emerged in Phaibung Khullen. Usually, in the clan system, the son of the Veo is the first successor, and a member of the clan is the second successor in case of the absence of the first. In the absence of successors, the kingship title would pass on to other clans. The controversy began when a person in the village printed his wedding invitation card using the surname VEMAI, which is interpreted as people belonging to the King's clan. Using the VEMAI surname denotes a person from Veo's Clan. However, this usage of the surname VEMAI was opposed by the other clans of the village, who claimed that there is no clan called VEMAI in the village. Three opposing clans declared that they would not participate in the wedding function unless the name on the invitation card was corrected. The issue was resolved after the surname was deleted. However, the conflict over the use of the VEMAI surname resurfaced in January 2008 as the youth were preparing to celebrate the Church Fellowship program. In this situation, a name with the title VEMAI was printed in the program schedule. This led to a conflict between the youth of clans who already had past political rivalries over the VEMAI title. Elders of the clans got involved by supporting rival sides. Youth from the clan opposing the VEMAI declared that they would not participate in the function if VEMAI was not removed from the program schedule. A series of discussions and meetings between clan elders and youth could not resolve the program. The issue was further politicised as both parties failed to arrive at an amicable solution. The celebrations took place at different locations. Interestingly, in 2010, during the Manipur District Council election, two of the clans who were contesting for the Veo clan title were also divided along political party lines: Indian National Congress and Naga People's Front. This is one example of how political rivalries can translate into clan rivalries during elections. In 2013, one of the clans that had claimed the Veo Clan title refused to participate in two marriage functions (of the opposing clan) due to past political rivalries. This rivalry between clans claiming to be the Veo clan also affects activities deemed as cultural. To cite an example, in January 2014, the stage for the 22nd Biennial Conference Cum Sports meet was burned down by unknown people at midnight before the day of the conference. Though the case is still unsolved, the general opinion in the village is that clan political rivalry was the reason behind the incident. In May 2015, the village voted for the Manipur District Council (MDC) Elections. Clan rivalry was ongoing, with the clan claiming the Veo Clan title allying with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whereas the opposing clan supported the Naga People's Front (NPF). All the clans supporting the INC party in the 2010 elections refused to ally with the clans supporting the NPF party. Each party mobilised votes based on clan composition. In December 2016, a clan refused and boycotted to participate in the marriage ceremony of the opposing clan.

What does this contest over the Veo Clan by various clans in Phaibung Khullen say about the interface between clan structure and electoral politics? This is an important question, especially in the context of the dominant scholarship, which tends to understand change in Naga society by overemphasising the

diminishing power of traditional institutions. The incidents discussed above suggest a complex story of the interaction between clan structures and electoral politics. It is not a simple, linear story of how electoral politics shape clan structures or how clan structures adopt electoral politics to suit their context. This paper argues that both institutions are transformed in the process of interactions; neither is the power of the so-called traditional institutions diminished, nor are the traditional institutions able to adapt elections to suit their context. Such an easy, neat reading is impossible.

There is a phenomenon that the political leadership, those who become elected political leaders, hold enormous power and prestige in society. But curiously, the emergence of this category of leaders as important figures in society can only happen by the emergence of clan elders as powerful individuals in society. Both categories of leaders require each other to retain their power. I am reminded here of Tronvoll and Hagmann (2012), who argued that “traditional authorities are intrinsically contemporary actors whose acts and roles are seen to be linked to the past.” Clan structures are not a leftover from the past but are modern institutions through which power is exercised, and on which the power of clan elders and elected politicians depends.

What follows from my above analysis is that the clan becomes an arena in which politicians not only seek to control but also an arena that creates political leaders. As such, it is unhelpful to view the two categories, clan, and elections, as two opposing institutions. Those who control the clan control the elections. In the 2015 MDC elections, clan members fought over multiple voting: some wanted to end multiple voting by a single person, while others insisted that a person should be allowed to cast multiple votes and as well be allowed to vote on someone’s behalf. Earlier such conflicts did not seem to take place. This is a new phenomenon emerging post the introduction of electoral politics in a village.

### **Election and Conflicts**

Elections become occasions for building alliances among various clan members and also for re-marking clan animosities. Sometimes this is done by invoking memories of conflicts and alliances over land ownership. But solidarity along clan lines depends on support for political parties – their ability to promise the fruits of electoral victory, such as government jobs. In the case of the 2015 Manipur District Council (MDC) election, clans in the village were divided into two political parties – Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Nagaland People’s Front (NPF). This division along political party lines established firm connections among the clans and often strengthened the vote against their rival clans. Clan solidarity and alliances, then, not only depend on memories of past conflicts and alliances but also on which political party a clan chooses to support.

In the 2010 MDC election, clans were divided along political lines as Indian National Congress (INC) and Nagaland People’s Front (NPF), resulting in a series of violent clashes between clans. Even after the election, the village witnessed fractured relationships between clans. Several clans refused to participate in village activities initiated by clans who had supported rival political parties. Among the villagers, it is clear that conflicts will emerge between clans in the 2015 election.

The argument here is that conflicts or solidarity between clans are neither old nor new, but are products of recent electoral alliances, which are chosen to be narrated as ‘traditional’. In most cases, what matters is which political party a clan member chooses to contest the election from, which is invariably tied to desires for material benefits promised by respective candidates such as government jobs, schemes, and projects, among others.

If clan conflicts, solidarity and the power of clan elders are products of the electoral process, it becomes difficult to understand them as traditional institutions. By this, I do not mean that clans did not exist prior to the introduction of electoral politics, but to point out that the clans we are studying are very modern phenomena, and that their claim to being traditional is tied to modernity. Most recently, Wouter (2014) tried to understand electoral politics in Naga villages through the frame of models. First, the angh (king or chieftainship) model, which he describes as an ‘aristocratic system’. The traditional aristocrats influence the commoners’ voting pattern. The decision of the Veo is most influential in this model and this model is most practiced among the Konyak Naga tribe. Second, there exists a village consensus model. In this model, the village conducts several meetings and decides which political candidates to support. To do so, the village council follows two important aspects. One, the village council takes the consensus of each clan to declare support for a particular candidate. Two, once the village council declares its support to a candidate, they frame punishable rules for any clan or individual who has voted for candidates other than the one the village council had initially declared support for. As pointed out by Wouters, once the village resolves to support a candidate, the village also declares not to support another candidate. The decision of the village is key in this model and most prominent among the Ao Naga tribe. Third, is the clan model, where decisions are taken at the clan level. Inter-clan rivalry is played out in this model. Leaders of each clan play an important role in this model. According to Wouters, this model is most prominent among the Lotha Nagas. Fourth, is the household model, where decisions are made at the household level. Respective families can decide which political party the family wants to vote for. This model is more prominent among the Angami and Chakhesang Naga tribes. Fifth, the “Range model”, where a group of villages comes together and decides which candidates to vote for.

According to Wouters, the above five models are prominently practiced by Naga villages but they are not permanent. What is significant for my purpose, in the context of Phaibung village, is that in all the five models, clan structure is deeply enmeshed in them. In a village, a family is already affiliated with a clan; therefore, the decision in the household model is influenced by clan elders. Often, families wait and follow the decision of the clan leaders because a clan does not want to ally with a rival clan. Therefore, they ask each family to wait until the clan leader decides which candidates to support. In the village consensus model, the clan holds several meetings among themselves, and with confirmation from clans, decisions are taken by the village council. In the village, the decision to vote is arrived at in two ways: first is the bottom-to-top approach. In this approach, the decision is taken from the lower level to the top (family to clan, clan to the village level).

The second model is the top-down approach; where the decision comes from the village council to clan and then down to the familial and individual level. Both approaches are practiced among the various clan-based villages in each election. One of the common assumptions among the villagers is that if the village comes together to vote for a single candidate, it means the village is united. In each election village, the priority of the village is to support a candidate as a whole but due to differences among the clans, such voting rarely happens. The household or clan model is adopted when the village cannot arrive at a decision to vote as one unit.

Models are useful for analysis and these are definitely helpful for understanding the electoral process in clan-based society. But the lens is very one-sided: how an election is carried out in Naga society? It does not capture the question, what happens to these structures in the process of electoral politics? Surely, models are not prior to electoral politics; they did not preexist elections. They are a byproduct of electoral politics. They reconfigure clan structures, and institutions, and engender conflicts. Electoral

activities at Phaibung Khullen village suggest that clan-based villages consider traditional institutions more important to the electoral system. Elections reconfigure these clan structures and institutions as important modern institutions.

Wouters had called for a “culturally embedded understanding of the electoral process”, arguing that instead of asking how democracy is changing traditional institutions, one should ask how the Nagas have adjusted democracy to themselves. Such a frame, according to him, confers the Nagas a certain form of agency. But such a position is still constrained by the premise that democracy is something outside of the Naga tradition. Moreover, it seems to reduce democracy to mere elections. This eulogisation of tradition is not new. The traditional institutions of the Nagas have been narrated in terms of ‘self-rule’, ‘independent’, and ‘autonomy’, before the introduction of electoral politics (Venuh, 2004 & Hutton, 1921). The clanship system is described as being ‘representative’, of each clan, which then forms a ‘village governing body’, and which then acts as a ‘decision-making body’. The village king is assisted by the representatives of clans in administration. This system is studied as undergoing changes after the Nagas' contact with the colonisers and continues to encounter changes with the introduction of the electoral system. This existing literature usually argues that changes began in 1882, after the Nagas came in contact with British colonisers, who established the Village Administration Act and Village General Body (GBM) System.

This study goes beyond trying to design models to understand electoral politics in clan-based societies and argues that the enormous influence of these traditional institutions is derived from the power attached to electoral politics. What this means is that the power, authority, and prestige attributed to these traditional institutions flow from the power bestowed on electoral politics. They feed into each other and are in turn shaped by each other. Clan members participate in elections not merely because they are influenced by clan elders, who are seen as powerful, but because controlling the election is what gives their clan power.

Therefore, any attempt to understand electoral politics cannot begin from the premise of one person one vote, which necessarily would mean using the framework of a dichotomy between traditional and modern institutions. Such an analysis is limited but attempts to understand the traditional as powerful, and forever influencing electoral outcomes. Not as institutions that derive their power from the power attributed to elections. There is an inherent difference in the manner in which the nation-state and the people choose to define political participation (Kikon, 2005). It is these differences where the desire for power is played out, leading to conflicts and solidarity, which in turn reconfigure clan structures.

No doubt, clanship is inherited, but they take a new form, and it is the new form that we are looking at when we try to understand them, and not the old form. It is in this sense they are modern, while their traditionality is a modern invention. Of course, this is not a new point to make about traditional institutions and practices. But an insistence that one moves away from trying to understand electoral politics in clan-based societies as unsuitable. A Z Phizo, the erstwhile president of the Naga National Council (NNC), and leader of the Naga movement for independence, had argued that Nagas do not need to adopt electoral politics. And most recently, it was former Nagaland Chief Minister, Mr. Neiphiu Rio, who remarked that “election” is not suited for Nagas” (as cited in Wouters, 2014, p. 59). The belief is that in the clan-based society, electoral politics lead to an increase in conflicts, creating social classes, segregation of groups, and triggering hatred for other clans.

As discussed above, there is a close relationship between clan structures and electoral politics in Naga villages. The clan is a well-organised institution at the village level. This is what prompts many scholars

to view it as an ancient institution that continues to be a force during elections. Election time is a good time to observe clan relationships. Of course, we can also observe clan relationships during festivals and annual sports meets, which are usually accompanied by healthy competition and rivalry. Election time is when clans supporting rival candidates do not see eye to eye. In most elections, their rivalry can turn into violent conflict. What is it about elections that transform healthy clan rivalry into conflict? Has elections produced more conflicts in clan-based communities? These were some of the initial, rudimentary questions with which I began this research.

The assumption that the election leads to more conflict is hard to ignore. But this is not a fact of clan-based societies alone. More importantly, to blame electoral politics for creating more conflict is a vague conclusion. This study, in no way, seeks to suggest that elections have generated conflicts in clan-based Naga society. I am primarily interested in looking at how clan structures and electoral politics are configured by each other, which of course involves focusing on conflicts that emerge from this interface. But I do not take them to be a byproduct of elections; rather, I see electoral politics as a site where societal conflicts are played out. These conflicts can be along tribe, caste, religious, and clan lines.

## Conclusion

The central argument of this study is that traditional clan structure and electoral politics transform each other in electoral contestation. This study does not argue for the disappearance and reappearance of tradition, but rather that clan structure is reinvented as an important tool for electoral contestation. This paper also argues that communities create their modernity. In doing so, the paper looks at how clan structure, which is considered traditional, is invented for political mobilisation.

The relationship between clan structures and electoral politics is a complex story. This study argues that they both reconfigure each other. Traditional clanship structure continues to influence modern electoral contestation. Clans are divided along political party lines, clan members fight over vote contestation and also invent past rivalries during elections. Electoral politics tends to take on a new meaning when it is executed within clan-based villages. This paper argues that one needs to understand traditions as associated with modernity, entangled with attendant conflicts associated with mobilisation for political purposes.

This study argues that the traditional clan structure has implications for performing modern electoral politics and mobilising votes. The paper illustrates how traditional title practices were transformed into tools for modern electoral politics. Among the villagers, the notion of a traditional institution is not only associated with the 'past' but is adopted as an approach to negotiating modern electoral politics. This study argues that not only traditional clanship, but there are other implications such as jobs which are now closely tied to mobilisation for political purposes.

This study shows that electoral politics and the clanship system coexist in village politics. It is important to note that it is not about how electoral politics shape clan structures, or how clan structures adopt electoral politics to suit their context, but how institutions are transformed in the process of interactions. In the process, the traditional clanship structure finds its scope to influence electoral contestation. This also leads the clan system to transform its structure.

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