

Past and Present: Analysis of The Social-Political Changes of Bujuur Naga

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Abstract

Bujuur Naga, also known as Moyon Naga, is a small ethnic community belonging to the Naga group inhabiting the hills of Manipur, India and Sagaing Division of Myanmar. The everyday lives and affairs of the Bujuur are village centric with a base on customs and traditions. In the phase of modernisation impact on smaller ethnic communities, the social-political-economic lives of the Bujuur have been evolving for the last hundred years. To comprehend the process of this evolution, the paper focuses on the political system of the Bujuur Naga by exploring it from the period of oral history to the present with the objectives to understand the factors and natures of the changes. Also, the interpretations of the past and contemporary everyday lives are discussed as a means to understand the social-political challenges and issues the community is facing including the contemporary political state of political ambiguity that arose in the process of adaptive changes.

Keywords: Moyon Naga; Customs; Identity; Social-Political; Village

Introduction

Bujuur¹ or Bujuur Naga is a distinct ethnic community belonging to the Naga with its own history of origin, language, culture, and customs, social and political life that is different from the other Nagas. Like the rest of Nagas, Bujuur also underwent series of social-political changes. The change which for centuries long was slow and accommodative was suddenly accelerated with the British colonisation, followed soon by decolonisation and post-colonial state intervention, leading to structural confusion in the political philosophy, customs, and practices. Despite the heavy influence of external cultures and enforcements, Bujuur manages to retain the basic institutional customs, including the village as a republic unit, customary administrative roles, and functioning, rights, and practices. The colonial and post-colonial changes are a contemporary headache as it alienates the society from their self, and thus, these changes are now challenged by the younger generations who are showing interests in the past and heritage to protect the identity, as well bring about an inclusive development.

In the event of this interest of the past with a vision for inclusive space, the paper explores and examines the social-political space of the Bujuur Naga from the historical periods from accounts to the contemporary modern period, and discusses the change and dynamics within the political system and institution.

The Method

The paper follows explorative path for an analysis-descriptive presentation with frameworks on technical subjectivity. It is an outcome of ethnographic study encompassing observations and participation, discussions, and in-depth interviews on themes relating to social-politics of the Bujuur people. The exploration focussed on saturation and grounding of information by taking into consideration the existence of heterogeneity through the incorporation of multiple narrations on the same subject at the same time maintain wholesome objectivity; as such, the nature of paper accommodates the subjective means for the objective end.

The explorative study was put in two questions

- i) What are political customs and institutions of Bujuur Naga,
- ii) Have there been any changes in the structure of social and political institutions?

These two forms the frames for the objectives of the study that is

- i) To explore the customs and institutions
- ii) To identify and comprehend the changes and continuity.

The questions and objectives created space for an open study and analysis to interpret the multiple observable and non-observable narrations and then construct the themes for presentation, the body of the paper. Accordingly, the following thematic descriptions are layouts of the Bujuur Political systems.

Primary data play important role in the paper which is collected from the field. The accounts on the history, migration, and social customs were based on oral narrations from multiple sources. Observations and discussions formed an integral portion for the structural and systematic issues for the core themes on village administration, political changes, and contemporary political issues.

Origin and History of Bujuur Administration

The customary Bujuur social, political, and economic lives are interconnected and overlapped spaces of village and ethnicity, that is, the village as the micro and ethnicity as the macro. Every Bujuur resides and is a member of a village, a village which is independent and functioning like a *micro* ‘republican unit’ (Wouters 2017 [10]). Presently, there are eighteen Bujuur villages scattered in the hills and valleys of Chandel and Tengenupal Districts of Manipur and Sagaing Division of Myanmar. The villages are Kapaam/Komlathabi, Nungthar (Penaching), Tungphae (Heigrutampak), Khukhthar, Khurfhuwdaam (New Khongjon), Sinadaam, Khuwringkhuw, Ringkum, Kuurkam, Laarfhuw, Rashankhor, Matung (Mittong), Thangkin (Khongjon Khunthak), Chumthar, Khungjuur (Khongjon), Bujuur Khuwfhuw (Moyon Khullen), Mengkang (Mangkang) and Napulun (see Figure 1²). Every village has its history, some few decades while others dated back to centuries. The common feature of all the villages is the identity ‘Bujuur’ as a social expression through kinship and blood ties. Otherwise, the villages maintain autonomous existence save for the occasional territorial disputes.

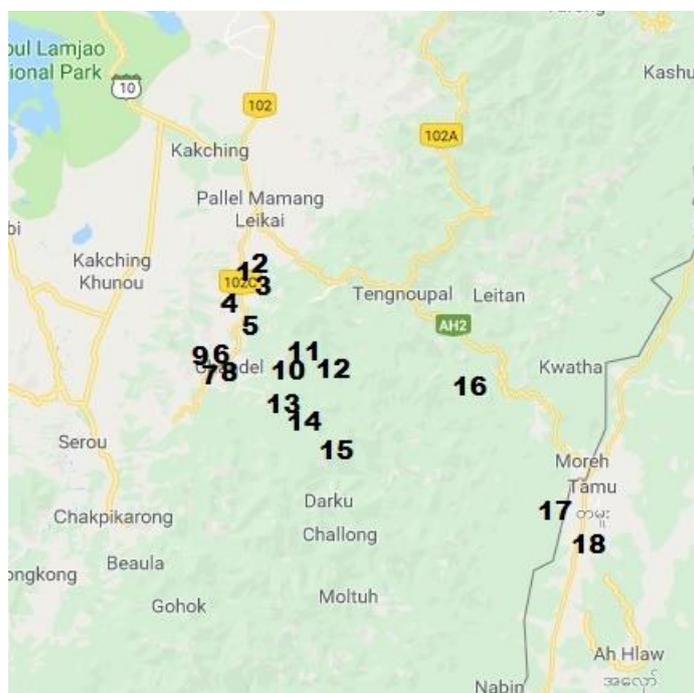


Figure 1: Map [6] showing location of Bujuur villages

Delving into the Bujuur village will be incomplete without introduction on origin and migration of the people, as the series of events shaped and re-shaped the social-political institutions and systems. The customs and traditions of Bujuur are as old as the history of the origin of identity.

According to Bujuur oral narrations, the people traced their origin from a legendary place known as *Kuurdong*, widely believed to be located somewhere in ancient Mongolia (Conference 1987 [3], Chonglawar and Shangkhram 2012 [4]). The people at *Kuurdong* identified with two primary clans -*Shimphuw* and *Züingven/Züingven*, which constitute the primary clans of Bujuur till date: all the institutional structures and roles at social-political spaces are framed on these two clans. From *Kuurdong*, the people migrated reaching a *metaphorical* place known as '*Khur*' interpreted to be a tunnel or a cave or an opening, where a *mythical* man eating tiger attacked them. Following the attack, the people devised a strategy to overpower the man-eating tiger. Eight brave-skilled men from the two clans were selected for the mission, and accordingly, the man-eating tiger was killed, but not after decisive bloodshed and loss of lives. The nature of the bloodshed and killing was so brutal, it was said that the place was overflowing with blood resembling a flowing stream, earning the place a nomenclature '*Süjuur/Sijjuur*'- *sü/sü* means 'blood' and '*juur*' being onomatopoeia of flowing stream, in this case, the flowing blood. '*Süjuur*' heralded a new beginning for the people; accordingly, as a mark of remembrance, the people henceforth call themselves as 'Bujuur'- '*bu*' means '*imprint*' and '*juur*' from '*Süjuur*.'

The people moved from *Süjuur* to settle at a place known as *Tungfhuwjuur*. It was at this place that the customs were institutionalised, including the establishment of the formal political institution, the legacy that continues to date as village council (*Khuwpuh Chüpuh*). The eight brave men who defeated the man eating tiger were appointed as the first leaders; based on their kills; the political structure was designed. Accordingly, the institution of '*Iruwng*' roughly translated as *king*, was established with Thompuung, the leader of the eight men, as the first *Iruwng*. The other positions established in the political structure included blacksmith, *khurfhuw* (priest), *lthüüm* (learned/wise) and *Nongzüh* or composer-recorder (of songs and events).

Thus, the first Bujuur administrative system consisted of the following positions: *Iruwng*, *Khurfhuw*, *lthüüm*, *Laareng-Nongzüh* (Composer-recorder) and *Sürsheem* (Blacksmith).

In the course of later migration, the people crossed Ningthü (Chindwin River) and then entered the southern Naga Hills. After two unsuccessful wars which are remembered in the oral history as Leenpa *Laar* and Shakaang *Laar*, the people crossed the Imphal River to migrate to the foothills in the western side of the present Manipur valley. After living there for a few hundred years, the people once again crossed the Imphal River, moving back again to the eastern side. Some of them settled at the foothills near the valley establishing a village by the name Sambum, while others moved to the hills to establish a village by the name Khungjuur.

While living at Sambum, political chaos hit the village council. The incumbent *Iruwng* of the village was challenged by an enthusiastic young man by the name Kuurkam (see Figure 2). According to oral narrations, Daarkung was the *Iruwng* of the *Sambum* upon whom Kuurkam staged a challenge. The rising charismatic ambitions of the young Kuurkam with his physical and combating endowments were noticed and well received by the people. It is said that public debate and other symposium activities took place between the *Iruwng* Daarkung and the young Kuurkam, with Kuurkam emerging as the victor. The defeated Daarkung was immediately stripped of his *Iruwngship* as per the customary terms of the contest, and Kuurkam was appointed as *Iruwng* of the village. This illustrated that *Iruwng* among Bujuur was a position which can be contested, challenged, and evaluated by any individual, with the people as the ultimate deciding body.



Figure 2: Portrait of Kuurkam³

The ambitious Kuurkam went on to subdue other Bujuur villages, managing to establish a political hegemony in contradiction to the customary practice of *one village-one iruwng*. His advance was less resisted by other Bujuur villages considering the prevailing tensions and 'warfare with the neighbouring communities, specially the Moirang and Khuman principalities of the Meiteis. Kuurkam's period was historic for the Bujuur as it was the first and last time that there was a central *Iruwng* figure uniting all the villages under a single administration. Kuurkam shifted his base village, *colloquially known as headquarter/capital*, from Sambum to a new village by the name *Peengna*⁴, and ultimately he shifted to Khungjuur, a village located on mountain ridge for better climatic conditions and other political and defense purposes' (Angnong 1986 [1]).

The *Iruwngship* of Kuurkam ended with his sudden defeat and death during a battle⁵ against the *Khuman-Moirang* alliance. His death generated panic and hysteria among the Bujuur, coupled with the ruthless advances of Moirang armies brutally destroying Bujuur villages and killing scores. The surviving people fled to the east. They established a new village at *Chüngkheer*, which later came to be known as Bujuur Khuwfhuw. Kuurkam's death also heralded a dormancy, taboo, of *Iruwng* position, as the surviving Bujuur considered the position of *Iruwng* a bad political omen which could attract another political assault from the Moirang and Meitei. 'The continuing administrative institution (*Khuwpuh Chüpuh*) put aside the position of *Iruwng*, which remained a ceremonial yet vacant seat. Instead of the vacant *Iruwng* post, a new position '*Khurah*' was established. In theory, *Khurah* was a position next to *Iruwng* however, in practice, *Khurah* was the administrative head of the people; the system of *khurah* as the head continued for hundreds of years. It finally ended in the year 1915 with the restoration of *Iruwng* post after assurance from the then Meitei king of no interference' (Shangkham 1995 [8]); in addition to restoration of *Iruwng*, a new position known as *Ruwngchaang* was created, along with several smaller posts. The purpose of introducing *Ruwngchang* was said to maintain the balance of power-relation between the two clans, as such, if *Iruwng* is from *Shimphu*, *Ruwngchang* should be from *Züingven*.

The restoration of *Iruwng* position in 1915 was soon followed by the interference of the state (i.e., annexation by British India, Independence of India and statehood of Manipur) whereby Bujuur were absorbed into the state system and institutions echoing an end to centuries of village independence. The state mandated the roles and functions of a village council through legislations including 'the Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 (MVAHA)' [9] which unsuccessfully resulted in a paradigm shift of the traditional village council (*Khuwpuh Chüpuh*) to a state controlled institution by the name village authority (*Khuw Aanchungpuh*) where the system's structures, functions as well as responsibilities were sanctioned by the state. The number of positions in Village Authority was accordingly as mandated by the state legislation, that is, depending on the number of tax-paying houses: the number of positions is directly proportional to the number of tax-paying houses (Shangkham 1995 [8]).

The village authority replaced the village council as the customary form of administration; additionally, the sovereignty of Bujuur villages became a questioning space as villages are no longer sovereign as it customarily used to be. This contemporary village authority is characterised by an autonomous institution established and regulated within a framework of a larger state apparatus although it continues to retain the customary positions, practices, and responsibilities, with *Iruwng* as the 'Chairman' of village authority.

The Bujuur political system has undergone multiple changes, as described above, through the history; thus, it is incorrect to make a 'general romantic assumption that *the systems have not changed since time immemorial*' (as argued by Fabian [5] in 'Time and the...'), or modernisation as the factor for institutional changes. Otherwise, the evolution of Bujuur political system can thus be categorised into the following:

1. Clan Association (Pre-Süjuur to Tungphuwojuur)

The two clans *Shimphuwo* and *Züingven* had free association based on shared interests and needs. There was no formal institution beyond the clan; leaderships were skill-based, situational, and voluntary with the clan members as the ultimate deciding body.

2. Khuwpuh-Chüpuh/village council (Tungphuwojuur to the year 1956)

A formal institution with multiple positions: *Iruwng*, *Khurfhuwo*, *Ithüüm*, *Laareng-Nongzüh*, and *Sürsheem*, along with latter additions of *Khurah* and *Ruwngchaang*, including additional minor positions. Institutional positions are distributed among the clans for equal representation. This system can be further divided into two:

a) General Participation (*Khorom Meekong*)

This system can be considered a form of direct democracy; leaders appointed based on skills and general approval. Any institutional position can be challenged, and accordingly, any individual can be removed if the people are not satisfied. The village council do not have veto power in matters of decision making, nor can it function as per its whims. The people's voice and choice are the basic principles.

b) Gerontocracy (*Uupa*)

As the institution become more formal, village council came to be dominated by the elder people, resulting in general nomenclatures like '*Itar ae* (old people) or *Uupa* (older people)' to be associated with the village council. The council members though nominated from the clans are exclusively reserved for the elderly population, along with more veto and decision making power to the village council. People's participation is limited and regulated. The village council (or village authority) handles all matters of the village.

3. Khuw-Aanchungpuh/village authority (Post 1956)

This is a continuation of the *khupuh-chüpuh's gerontocracy*; but differs from it based on positional existence and structure, i.e., established and regulated by state legislation. It blends customs and traditions with state

legislations: for instance, positions/posts are customary, while the numbers are dependent on the size of the village. People's participation and customary powers are regulated and limited, while the elected leaders enjoy *de jure* legitimacy.

It can be observed from the above that the participatory system is the primary feature of Bujuur politics. This feature has undergone a paradigm shift from the consensual association of clans to a form of institutional democracy and ultimately to a contemporary's legislated gerontocracy. In addition to that, people's participation in political matters also made a drastic shift, with most of the contemporary population on the notion that the affairs of the village are exclusive for the elderly population. With regards to the change of village council to village authority, the roles and responsibilities of the council members also expanded from the cultural-customary spaces to additional roles as mandated by the state legislation that includes collecting taxes and implementation of government schemes and programmes.

A general misnomer is observed among the general Bujuur population over the nature of village authority, which is often *interutilised* with the village council. In theory, village council and village authority are different institutions; however, in reality, the village council system is no longer in practice, as being replaced and absorbed into village authority. For this matter, it remains a challenge and confusion for one to comprehend the exact nature of Bujuur political system since the past and contemporary systems are intermixed to a point that if not analysed in-depth, they appear to be similar. In addition to that, the normative narrations are often confused over the differences between village council and village authority, which somehow makes the study on village council limited as the majority of the narrations and observations are of the contemporary village authority. The customary structures of a village council and a village authority are similar as the later is the contemporary continuation and reformed institution of the first. The differences are on the nature of existential legitimacy and decision making process.

1. Whereas village council derives its legitimacy from the historical events, village authority derives legitimacy from the 'MVAHA 1956' [9]
2. The positions in the village council are defined by social customs and needs, whereas the number of positions in village authority is preset by the state
3. The head of the village council is *Iruwng*, while 'the head of village authority is chief/*khullakpa*' [9]
4. Decision making process in village council always involves the participation of people with a system of a simple majority, whereas final deciding power in village authority is with the elected leaders.
5. Hierarchy is customary yet not rigid in the village council, while it is strictly enforced and followed in the village authority.

From the above, it is clear that the village council and village authority are different bodies. In an ideal sense, the village council is still practiced by the Bujuur, but in reality village authority overshadows the village council. Not only the village authority managed to replace the village council, but it also appropriated the village council's customs and traditions into it. It could be observed from everyday affairs of the village authority that - even though it tried hard to present itself as a legitimate customary institution following the systematic legacies of *Tungfhuwjuur*, it refused to call itself a village council. The village authority also tried to appropriate the pre-1956 village administrative institutions as village authority in such a way that any presentation of the political practice of the past is interpreted as affairs of village authority.

So, what is this village authority? It is a blend of past and present, a highly evolved form of the political institution which is considered by general Bujuur population as *modern*⁶. A detailed structure of the village authority is described in the following section.

Structure of Village Authority

The village authority (*Khuw Aanchngpuh*) is the present contemporary political institution of the Bujuur Naga. Every village has a village authority as the apex political unit. The village authority consists of members indirectly nominated as clan representatives. The size of village authority depends on the village size; bigger villages have number of seats whereas smaller villages have fewer seats. The members of the village authority are assigned customary posts, which are in the hierarchical order based on seniority: new members are allotted lower posts, and are subsequently promoted to higher posts with time. Ideally, there is no fixed term for the members; they are expected to serve for life unless unavoidable circumstances compel them to resign or vacate the seat.

The customary posts in village authority, in hierarchical descending order, are- '*Iruwng, Ruwngchaang, Khurah, Lukrah, Lukuum, Paarcheer, Veentang, Luza, Chünglam, Zupaar, Duungkhuwm, Zuwrkhuwm, Khaangsheer, Shirung, Shakrung, Khurfhuw, Meechaar, Ruwrah and Phamzü*' (Chinir 2016 [2]).

Every village authority is ideally expected to have the mentioned nineteen posts, although it is not mandatory. Among these, the first five posts (*Iruwng, Ruwngchaang, Khurah, Lukrah, and Lukuum*) are known as *Phamruung*, meaning higher posts, are a must for every village authority while the remaining lower posts are optional. *Phamzü* is the lowest entry post and is usually not considered as legitimate member of village authority. All the posts are non-hereditary except for the *Khurfhuw* post which is traditionally reserved for *Ruwen* clan of *Züingven*. Out of the eighteen Bujuur villages, only three (Kapaam, Tungphae, and Nungthar) have village authority consisting of the nineteen posts. However, as per the Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act of 1956, only Kapaam (with 200+ households) is eligible to have village authority with nineteen posts/members. On the other hand, the lone Bujuur village in Myanmar, Napulun, does not have a functional village authority; the administration follows a system of the symbiotic association on situational-needs based centered within the institution of church because of small population.

The members of the village authority are elected indirectly via clan endorsement and approval from the existing authority members. *Iruwng* is the head of the village. It is non-hereditary and highest post in the village authority. *Iruwng* is elected amongst the members of village authority based on seniority and clan representation, such that no two consecutive *Iruwng* posts are held by the same clan.

Representation to village authority is based on the existing clan system. There are two primary clans and twelve secondary clans, or lineages. They are as follows:

1. 'Shimphu: Nguruw, Laanglom, Charrü, Bungjeer, Serbum, and Suwnglip

2. Züingven: Chineer, Nungchim, Ruwen, Khaartu, Vaanglar, and Hungam/Beengpih'

(Nungchim 2015 [7], Shangkham 1995 [8])

Earlier representation system in village council took into consideration only two primary clans, viz, *Shimphu* and *Züingven*; that is, half the members are from *Shimphu*, and half the members are from *Züingven*. However, due to fluctuations in population, change in social relationships, and subsequent migrations, the representation system also goes with social change. Accordingly, for contemporary social-political purposes, the clans are sub divided into the following:

1. Shimphu (divided in 1950)

i) Nguruw, Laanglom

ii) Charrü, Bungjeer, Serbum, Suwnglip

2.Züingven (divided in 1978)

i)Chineer, Nungchim

ii)Ruwen, Khaartu, Vaanglar, Hungam/Beengpih

(Bungjeer, Suwnglip, and Hungam/Beengpeh are presently extinct)

Based on these four structures, village authority members are represented. This four clan representative system is, however, not practiced in all the villages, except Kapaam that contains all the living clans.

To be a member of the village authority, the entry post is *Phamzü*. It is a post in association with *Iruwng*. During the *Phamzü* period, an individual is expected to be acquainted with the social-political customs, and accordingly, if he satisfies the confidence of the *Iruwng* and other authority members, *Phamzü* is promoted to become a legitimate member. Otherwise, the actual entry post to the village authority is *Ruwrah*. However, it is not mandatory for a person to be necessarily a *Phamzü* to become a member of village authority. In many cases, any deserving individual is directly inducted into the village authority when the situation demands that includes mass vacancy due to death or resignation of the authority members. Of such case is encountered in Kapaam village whereby about ten individuals were inducted into village authority in the year 2016-17 by passing the *Phamzü* post.

By the customs, no consecutive post can be held by the same clan: that is, if the *Iruwng* is a *Shimphuw*, *Ruwngchang* should be from *Züingven*. This alternate clan arrangement is repeated till lowest post. The idea was to encourage equal clan representation and interaction. Similarly, the position of *Iruwng* also alternate between the clans: if present *Iruwng* belongs to *Shimphuw* clan, the next *Iruwng* should be from *Züingven* clan. This alternate clan representation is also noticed within the constituent clans: for instance, if the *Shimphuw Iruwng* belongs to *Nguruw-Laanglom* group, the next *Iruwng* candidate from *Shimphuw* should be from *Charü-Serbum* group, so that there is also equal post distribution and representation within the same clan.

Where there is a vacancy in the village authority, the existing members form a search committee to identify potential individuals. The vacancies are of two types:

- 1.Clan vacancy: Only individuals belonging to the required clan can be inducted
2. Open vacancy: Any qualified individuals can be inducted.

The customary criteria for induction are:

- 1.Should be a Bujuur
- 2.Should be a member of a clan
3. Has knowledge of customs and practices
- 4.No immediate family members (father, brothers and patrilineal first cousins) are existing authority members
- 5.Should be above forty years of age

The identification and selection process used to be entirely the responsibility of the clan. Previously in the village council system, the clan members would hold a meeting on such an agenda, and the selected candidate is then recommended to the village authority. However, this system of clan recommendation is no longer in practice in the village authority. All the identification and selection responsibility is with the search committee; the identified individuals are informed of the vacancy and invited to be a member of the village authority. But this does not limit the role of the clan members, as they can challenge the decision of the search committee if the choice does

not satisfy the clan family. After reciprocal approval, the individual candidate performs the required customary ceremony of induction along with a grand feast for the entire village and well-wishers.

Positions in village authority are not temporary. The members are expected to serve their entire life, with further subsequent promotion to higher posts. Despite the lifetime expectation, members are allowed to tender resignation on valid grounds through the proper customary channel. Apart from death and resignation, the authority members could be earlier vetoed, challenged, and impeached by the general body (villages/clan members). This practice is no longer practiced ever since the role of the public (villagers and clan members) in decision making was limited with the introduction of the village authority system. Instead of that, a challenge application can be initiated through the *Iruwng*, which is then, tabled in the village authority meetings for further procedures.

Whereas the role of the public had shrunk and decision making power lies with the village authority, the tradition of general body meeting is still in continuation. The village authority would call a general public meeting at least once a year to discuss the periodic affairs within the village. This can be half-yearly or annual. In such call of meetings, the general public takes advantage to review the functions of the village authority. Social-political-economic agendas are presented on such meeting events. It is the only surviving democratic space where everybody can participate in reviewing and deciding the long term affairs of the village.

The Question of Appropriation and Modernity

Social development among the Bujuur Naga casually follows two principles- i) modernity, ii) protection of identity. It is no denying fact that Bujuur is embracing modernity. However, the form of modernity which the people looked into is problematic as it threatens the sustainability of culture and identity. The concept of modernity is linear towards westernisation, in a sense, for the Bujuur, modernity means appropriation of alien (non-Bujuur) culture and practices into the Bujuur. The evolution of village council to village authority and the rise of Bujuur Aanchung Puh are few noteworthy and visible examples of external influences for development.

Like many of the disillusioned and confused developing communities, Bujuur is also caught in xenophile hegemony. Firstly, the present Bujuur tend to divide the historical chronology into two stages: ancient and modern. The separating benchmark of these two stages is 1922, the year when Christianity began to enter the Bujuur ecology. The period before 1922 is regarded as ancient, while post-1922 is considered as modern; a somehow legacy of Christianity's social millenarianism theme on darkness and light. The pre-1922 culture is regarded as tribal and uncivilised, a period of darkness, while the post-1922 is considered as a period of enlightenment and modernity. This could be true to a certain extent, considering the positive changes in the social-economic lives of the people after 1922. However, this positive development is also associated with extreme xenophile, whereby the people are not only attracted to Christianity, but to other external systems like the concept of the parliamentary system in the Bujuur Aanchung Puh and village authority. The simple reasons for such xenophile tendencies are the need to adapt to modernity, state's intervention and sanctions, peer pressure and small population, whereas the complicated reason is the psychological sanction against the self on the false belief that indigenous/archaic is incompatible with modernity.

It was, perhaps, on the interests of the state to protect the *tribal* political system that it passed the MVAHA in 1956. It did ensure the protection and continuation of the traditional political system, but the terms were dictated by the state. For instance, Bujuur were forced to change the village council to village authority. Generally, it might seem just a shift in nomenclature, but careful examination does reveal the motive of the state for using 'authority' rather than 'council.' The village councils were previously autonomous and subjected to customs and traditions, making it difficult for the state to exercise its authority and control. By altering the 'council' to 'authority,' the state managed to dilute the autonomous nature of a village's political position, making it possible to exercise its authority and thereby control the people.

For the naive leaders of the period, the authoritative image was promising as it i) reduced the lengthy process of decision making, ii) ensured the social elites to be in power. In other words, while the people's presence in

Bujuur village politics was diminishing, the administrative unit of the village became more authoritative, which in turn also make the state more authoritative. The council members used to be the voice of the clan members; but, the authority members of the present do not represent the actual voice of the clan members. If not for the tradition of compulsory clan representation, the authority members do not reflect the needs or wishes of the clans. Instead, they represent a medium of communication from the state.

Take for instance, during the period of village council, the state (*as an external entity*) could not venture into the village's space without prior consent, but at present the village authority is completely under the control of the state apparatus that the state directs the village authority what to do and what not to do. Whereas in the traditional space, village council was the highest political body, the village authority is subordinate; it is also to be noted that Bujuur villages were previously independently existing villages not under the hegemony of any external force. To adopt village authority means that the village is no longer independent and remain subject to an external political force (in this case, Manipur state and India).

In addition to the change in the administrative system, the structure also deviated. The number of posts in village authority is preset by the state regardless of the prevailing traditions. Previously, *Iruwng* was the head of the village council; with the devolution, *Iruwng* adopted a new title known as Chairman of village authority. It is obvious that the village authority appropriated the post of *Iruwng* from the village council to chairman/chief without any customary context. In the Bujuur social-political tradition, *Iruwng* is the *head/king* of the village. To appropriate *Iruwng* as Chief contradicts the position of *Iruwng*, as the Bujuur political terminology differentiates between King and Chief: King is *Iruwng*, while Chief is *Aaruung*. In other words, to the Bujuur, a chief is a lower position and is comparable to the position of *Khurah* in the traditional village council. However, in the village authority system, *Iruwng* is appropriated as Chief, *Ruwngchaang* is appropriated as Assistant-Chief, while *Khurah* is translated as *Khullakpa*. The whole structure of village authority is interpreted as - the chief as chairman and authority members as ministers. This form of interpretation is often applied by laymen when describing the village council, even though the village council and village authority are very different spaces.

For this reason, it becomes problematic for a researcher, or anyone, to study the traditional political system unless the 'tradition' in the traditional is defined. If one has to study the village council, the village authority should not be taken as the subject of study; but, it happened quite often anyways. The main reason for mistaking authority as council is the intricate appropriation of the village council into the village authority in such a fashion that the village authority managed to establish its authority over the village council, trapping it within the rigid political prison to ensure the authority's authoritative survival. The other reason is the often misconception of *tribal* society as unchanging since time immemorial. This *stuck in time* theory chose to ignore the changes by focusing solely on the present systems to describe a larger objective political space consisting of the past and present. An example will be: anyone wanting to research the traditional political system of Bujuur is by default studying the village authority, while the people will be by default narrating the village authority claiming that the practice (village authority) has been continuing since time immemorial.

The village authority's dependence on the state affects the political relationship among clans and individuals, which can sometimes lead to a splintering of a village or establishment of new villages. The craze for the position of chief/chairman of village authority often leads to social tensions when there are too many individuals aspiring for power and leadership.

Before 1922, there were only four Bujuur villages, and by 2019, there are eighteen villages. Some of the villages like Kapaam, Tungphae, Nungthar, and Khukhthar were established as a process of migration for social-economic reasons post 1945, while villages like Kuurkam, Khurfhuwdaam and Thangkin were established as an indirect consequences from series of migrations from Khungjuur village as a result of the Indo-Naga conflict during the 1960s-70s. There are also villages like Chumthar, Sinadam, Khuwringkhaw, and Laarfhuw and Rashankhur established on petty social-political disagreements and power-politics within the community. Considering the small population of Bujuur, most of the villages consisting of only a few tens of households do not qualify to be considered as a village. In the pre-1922, all these small villages will be considered as hamlets

or satellite villages, but today, all these small villages, irrespective of sizes, are considered as recognised by the government for purposes of developmental schemes. Villages such as Ringkum, Sinadam, and Khuringkhuw are more or less like small residential colonies inside Chandel District headquarters, as such, they are not entitled as per Bujuur custom to be considered a village or allowed to have village council; but, since these villages are recognised by the Bujuur Aanchung Puh, they have village authority, and they also enjoy government services and schemes like the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme* (MGNREGS). This government recognition is considered necessary as the logic of the state is on the blanket assumption that *tribals* reside in villages and so forth. However, as per Bujuur custom, many of the present villages other than the traditional four villages could not be considered villages as they were not established following customary rites and rituals for establishing new villages.

Anyways, since the conversion to Christianity has halted the practice of such traditional rituals, the people could not care less about cultural significance; for the majority, the legitimacy of a village and the administrative unit is wholly dependent on government recognition, to the extent that villages like Chumthar, Ringkum, Khungringkhuw, Laarfhuw, Rashankhur, and Sinadam felt that they also need separate government recognition to access development related programmes and schemes. The logic of such government recognition is that, it will strengthen the positional existence of the village within the community: once the village gets recognition, it has the default right to represent itself in cultural platforms and to some extent it ensured protection against attacks from parent villages like in the case of Chumthar which needed a legitimate state recognition as a village to detach from Thangkin and Khungjuur, against the customary norms, to pursue its own interests. The interesting part was that, instead of streamlining the mushrooming of hamlets, the Bujuur Aanchung Puh was indirectly supporting establishment of such new villages on the idea that 'more number of villages will strengthen the geo-politics of the Bujuur community' and it also facilitates the process of the hamlets to be recognised by the state, which ultimately undermines their continues stand of Bujuur village as traditional republic unit.

The problem with colony like villages and hamlets having village authority is that the very existence of village authority is self contradictory. The state assumed for the best interests of *tribal* villages is to have a village authority, but it does not take into consideration the definition of village and territory as per the existing customs. Taking advantage of the state's intervention, colony/hamlet leaders seek their colonies/hamlets to be recognised as villages. This indicates that many of the Bujuur villages are mere puppets of the state waiting for official recognition.

On the nature of this state of 'recognition,' there are two forms of government recognition,

- i) Recognised for access of development schemes/programmes
- ii) Recognised as census villages, and eligible to have government mandated Village Authority

Out of the seventeen Bujuur villages in India, only 6 villages are legitimately recognised by the government as census villages: they are, Kapaam (Komlathabi), Nungthar (Penaching), Khongjuur (Khongjon), Matung (Mittong), Bujuur Khuwfhuw (Moyon Khullen) and Kuurkam, on the other hand, Mengkang's status as recognised village is in a dispute as the villagers are currently in a state of refugee following the Naga-Kuki ethnic conflicts of the 1990s. The other ten villages are recognised for the sole purpose of government's development schemes and programmes; nevertheless, the general idea of the people is that they are official recognised, or at worse, most villagers are unaware if their village is a recognised census village or not.

Also, interestingly, autonomous village republics do not exist based on being recognised by an external force, which makes most Bujuur villages a mere republic for a namesake. Only the four villages, viz, Khungjuur, Matung, Bujuur Khuwfhuw, and Mengkang could be said to exist autonomously like village republics as their existence did not depend on some de jure state legislation and purposes. However, even these villages' autonomy had been jeopardised following the British colonisation which introduced land documentation system as a means to control and extract resources from the region. Presently, these once autonomous village republics are now

engaged in conflicts and contestations among themselves and with other villages over the colonial introduced and state enhanced 'land documents, also known as *patta*' as though their existential space is wholly dependent on a piece of paper rather than the aged old customs and traditions.

Concluding Discussions

The Bujuur political system has undergone significant changes, began as a free association of clans to the adoption of the formal institution and finally to the contemporary government assigned village authority. A change is observed in the declining voice of the people in decision making and more power to the leaders. The changes are dynamic, non-linear, and selectively purposive to continue the customary administrative system. Although the administrative space is saved, the politics of administration and representation remains an ever challenging space in terms of inclusivity.

The space of the village as a customary republic unit has changed since the arrival of the colonial British Empire and deteriorated after Independence of India and Myanmar. Since Bujuur lands and villages were incorporated to the newly independent India and Myanmar, the legislations of respective countries drastically affected the status and functioning of the traditional politics, including administration.

'The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act of 1956' [9] is one such legislation where the state directly intervened to change the already existing administrative customs. Village councils were changed to village authorities to safeguard the tribal customs and traditions along with democratic decentralisation. This would have been fruitful if Bujuur never had a formal political institution. The already existing village council was diluted to accommodate the provisions of the village authority, thereby creating confusion over certain customary posts and positions, especially that of the *Iruwng*. In addition to that, the continuous usage of village authority as an implementing channel of government schemes and programmes also diluted, altered and crippled the traditional political system, reducing the ideal customary republic space to an implementing agency of the government. Whereas the village council functioned independently within its social-political-economic boundary, the village authority is heavily dependent on the government for any assistance, such that its function is no longer about protecting the customary republic space of the village as its mandated responsibility as per the customs; it is now a namesake political body deriving its legitimacy from government recognition thereby diluting the republic space.

Some concluding issues observed from the field are:

1. **Confusion over village council and village authority**

The majority of the Bujuur, including the leaders, are unable to distinguish the village council from village authority. The two political units are interchangeably used and often considered to be a single political body with two different names. This effectively impacts the customary position of *Iruwng*, when the *Iruwng* in village authority also assumes the position of Chief as well as the *ex officio* Chairman. To be precise, the translation of '*Iruwng*' to 'Chief' in English is rejected by a large group of culturally vocal Bujuur who are on the opinion that *Iruwng* and Chief are different positions. As *Iruwng* is considered to be a democratic position within a formal political institute (Village Council/*Khuwpuh Chüpuh*), to equate with the position of 'Chief' which is considered as a kinship based anthropological leadership does not go well with the educated Bujuurs who are on the side that it is a deliberate attempt from *mainstream* academicians and government to discriminate the Naga, in this case, the Bujuur, republic politics by interpreting it as informal tribal political system. The *Iruwng* acting as Chief in Village Authority becomes problematic because 'the Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 Chapter II, No. 3 specifies that the 'Chief *Khullakpa*' to be the *ex officio* Chairman of the Village Authority' [9], whereas, in the Bujuur village political institute, there already exists a post by the name *Khurah* (which is the Bujuur equivalent of Chief *Khullakpa*). As such, Chief *Khullakpa* is a lower position, which, according to the Bujuur, is *Khurah*. Thus, the *Iruwng* cannot be the *ex officio* Chairman and Chief of any village authority at the same. According to the custom, the *Iruwng* is expected not to be subjected under any external-political hegemony, and the village authority being subjected to the government legislation, the position of *Iruwng* in

village authority remains a space of conflict, contestation, and disagreement among the Bujuur. This ambiguity of *Iruwng* is because of the inability of the leaders and elders to comprehend the difference between the village council and village authority as they idealistically believe that village council and village authority are the same.

2. Women participation

One of the recurring issue in the village council/village authority since time immemorial is participation and representation of women in politics and decision making. Bujuur society has always been patriarchal: social, political, and economic affairs are dominated by men, especially the elderly male population. There have been many attempts to induct women to the village administration, but the patriarchal customs are not ready to accept women into politics citing customary taboos and other whimsy excuses. One of the customary taboos is the prohibition of women in politics because women are believed to be *clanless*. The saying '*Lupuwnuw Arae Umah (Women has no lineage)*' is often misinterpreted and invoked by the leaders to discourage women from entering politics. The traditional consideration of women as not belonging to any lineage is because of the customary practice that prohibits women from taking the husband's clan after marriage. A woman retains and is considered as part of her father's clan even after marriage. Thus, women are considered as belonging to two clans (fathers' and husbands') as such they are deemed unfit to enter politics which is strictly clan based representation. By custom, the woman still belongs to the clan she was born into, but in practice, she is considered to be part of the husband's clan after marriage. This complexity over the belongingness of women is often misinterpreted as women deemed to be politically unfaithful and not eligible to represent either the father's or husband's clan. Despite the strong objection on customary grounds, the younger generations along with liberal thinking elders are on the opinion that politics should be inclusive and women should be nominated or inducted to the village council/authority independent of the clan system. The basic qualification criteria to enter village politics cannot be men exclusive as it has been observed that the contemporary Bujuur women are becoming more progressive and advanced as compared to their men counterparts in the field of education and career.

3. Gerontocracy dominance

Another issue observed in the administrative system is the dominance of elders, colloquially known as *Uupa*. Despite the general customary statement of political inclusivity, women and unmarried men are prohibited to participate in village politics and decision making. It should be noted that the customs never mention of marriage as the criteria for men to enter politics, nor did it mandate age as the criteria to become member of village council/authority. Apart from women participation, this is also another domain of conflict and contestation, to the extent that the general population considers Village Council/Village Authority as assembly of elders rendering the younger generations to be apathetic to the village's social and political affairs. Although the clan based structure is interpreted as democratic, gerontocracy is inherently strong and rigid; the rigidity becomes binding even more due to the custom of respecting the elders. Such is that, to contest the order of gerontocracy is considered an offence, disrespect and an act of social deviance. Since the custom favors the elder male in a family to join politics, the younger ones are always at the receiving end with limited chances of entering village politics, unless the elder brother(s) declined to join or die early. Elders know best and are acquainted with customs traditions, but the system needs to explore the space of inclusivity so that the young minds can contribute their knowledge and opinions since they are going to the leaders in the future. The continuous gerontocracy even earns the village authority a stereotype as *an old age home* and retirement place for pensioners and elders. Otherwise, in the Bujuur oral history, the legendary Kuurkam was a young man when he was appointed *Iruwng* after he won the symposium battle against the then *Iruwng*, Daarkung. That process was the ideal Bujuur democracy where the people gathered to decide the fate of Daarkung and *Iruwng*, which is so unlike the present village authority where it is the authority members that become the sole decision making body for appointment of new members or of any village matters.

In conclusion, the Bujuur social-political system is currently in a state of existential chaos due to its interpretation of the past, attempts of positive integration, and the increasing interference of external elements. Development

and evolution are necessary. However, the nature of changes among the Bujuur is selective and opportunistic catering to the ambitious *needs of the few*. How traditions and customs are interpreted critically rather than as a sociological fad for the sake of it, that is, for instance, whereas customs are often invoked to exclude women and children from politics, the very individuals who invoked the customs are at large unaware of many basic customs. If any custom has to benefit the few, it will be invoked; at the same time, if the state's intervention is necessary, the leaders will be inclined towards the state. A perfect illustration is the adoption of village authority as state's political arrangements benefit the political class, while at the same time denying women from joining politics citing customary prohibition even though constitution (of India) mandates the participation of women in politics. It is such a situation that neither is the custom evolving progressively nor is the political development allowing custom to progress positively, that ultimately leads to a situation of social disillusionment and cultural confusion. The overall system is like a human social stampede whereby the haste of escaping *antiquity/ancient* has diluted the cultural ecology into a state of 'it is, but it is not.'

Notes

- a. Bujuur is the indigenous name of the community, while in official, they are recorded as Moyon. The paper emphasises on the term Bujuur as an acknowledgement of the indigenous usage of names.
- b. The villages are assigned numeric in order of the sequence 1-18, starting from Kapaam as 1 to Napulun as 18.
- c. Photo courtesy: (Late) Ng. Ringhow personal collections.
- d. The valley where Kapaam, Nungthar, and Tungphae (See Figure 1) are presently located is said to be the site of ancient Peengna.
- e. The site of the battle is the present day Zaphou Bazar, Chandel District headquarters. The year of the battle is not known; however, cross cultural exploration by Bujuur elders calculated the year of the battle as 739 AD (See Figure 2).
- f. The notion of modernity among Bujuur is determined by Western/Eurocentric/Christian standards. It doesn't follow the linearity of historical epochs; rather, anything that is to do with pre-colonial, pre-Christian ways of life and expression is considered as 'ancient.' In other words, it is self-discrimination in a zealous effort to present itself as the contemporary.

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