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## **Traditional Village Administrative System of The Tangkhul Naga Tribe in Manipur.**

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### **INTRODUCTION AND ORIGIN OF THE TANGKHUL NAGA:**

The Tangkhul Naga tribe is one of the biggest tribes in Manipur. There are more than 260 Tangkhul villages in Ukhrul District, Manipur. The total population of the Tangkhul in Ukhrul district alone as per 2011 census is 1,83,115. Out of which 94,013 are male and 89,102 are female. The existing literacy rate of the district stands at 81.87%. The name of the community Tangkhul has been pronounced and interpreted in different ways and meanings. In Manipuri dialect, “Tangkhul” can be interpreted as ‘costly village’ for they pronounce as ‘Tangkhun’. Different anthropologists understood the name and meaning of “Tangkhul” and their origins in different ways. Some scholars called them Luhuppa, Luppa, Tagkhul, Thangkhum, Tangkhul etc. as their alternative names. Tangkhuls are no doubt highly cultured people. They belong to the great Mongolian race which has now spread all over the world. The Tangkhul Naga people speak the Sino-Tibeto-Burman languages group. Tangkhul came to the present land from China through Myanmar centuries years back since its first settler. They were also living in Samsok (Thuangdut) in Myanmar. They began spreading and dispersing from Samsok after the invasion of Ko-Lo-Feng in the last part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. When they came to Manipur, for the first time they settled in the valley. However, they could not tolerate the heat and mosquito. Therefore, they again migrated to the hills and settled to the present land Ukhrul District where they mostly live today.<sup>1</sup>

The Tangkhul are the first to settle at their present land since time immemorial. The independent nature of the Tangkhuls had not been disturbed by any external force. History proved that they were a self-sufficient people, lived themselves independently under the governance of their traditional law and administered by themselves. The British annexed the Tangkhul land in 17<sup>th</sup> century during the British rule in India. Unfortunately the present

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boundary of Manipur and Burma now Myanmar was laid down by an agreement signed between the British authorities (East India Company) and the then Burma on 9th January, 1834 on the river bank of Ninghthee, Chindwin. As a result of the boundary demarcation, many Tangkhul villages situated in Somrah hills are include under Burma.

### **TANGKHUL VILLAGE:**

Right from the beginning, Tangkhul village had been a well organised and independent political unit. Within its territory, every village enjoyed both internal as well as external independent of its own. The villages were guided by their customary and traditional laws. Most of the Tangkhul village sites were located near the spring or stream to ensure them dependable supply of drinking water. Another most important factor responsible for determining the location of a village was the security.”<sup>2</sup> The nature of the Tangkhul Naga villages had been in a position of a perfect state in the real sense of the term. They fulfilled all the criteria of a full-fledged state by possessing population, definite territory of their own and sovereignty of both internal as well as external. They were a self sufficient and politically well organised democratic state. In which, villages were generally ruled by the king/Awunga with the support of the village council. As such their administration was indigenous and independent<sup>3</sup>. Every Tangkhul village had its own strong defence system in order to protect themselves from any external forces. Most of the Tangkguls villages were very strong and big in the past. Some of the big villages among the Tangkhul villages are, Tolloi, Teinem Tongou, Chingjario, Phalee Hundung Ukhurul etc. Tangkhuls can be classified into number of clans of both big and small. Mention can be made of some of the big clans among them are Zimik, Luikham, Keishing, Horam, Shaiza, Jajo, Kashung etc. and there is no clan called Awungshi by name.

### **THE VILLAGE CHIEF (AWUNGA) AND HIS POWERS AND FUNCTIONS:**

The Tangkhul called their village chief as “Awunga.” In Tangkhul dialect which is a little equivalent meaning to the English word King. Awunga is an integral component of the Tangkhul village state. Headman (Hau awunga) is the head of the village, head of the village court/council.”<sup>4</sup> No Tangkhul Naga village existed without Awunga. As such, the role of

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Awunga was wide and extensive. The Tangkhul society lived in social life at the village and where there was a village, there was a village Chief 'Awunga'. No village could exist without the existence of a chief 'Awunga'. According to Tangkhul customary law and tradition whether big or small if there were an independence geographical area of their own a village could be formed. In other words, whether big or small, a territory with its defined boundary, having an Awunga and population in the settled area was called a village. The position of Chieftainship/ Awung was very important at Tangkhul village polity. In general, the leaders among the founders of the village became the Chief/Awunga of the village. According to their tradition and custom, a series of religious rites and worship to gods were done to become a chief. Usually, the village Chief required the sanction of gods to his chieftainship. To prove that he has the sanction of gods, the would-be chief/Awunga had to perform certain rites. He sew the paddy seeds.<sup>5</sup> If the seed did not grow well, the proposed chief had no right to claim the coheirship. If the paddy grew well, then he was again subject to another test i.e. the sowing of kidney beans which would not grow so easily. If the kidney beans grew well, he performed the third test by a living animal normally the cock. If the cock crew on time and in full harmony of height and loud sounds, it was believed that the gods have favoured him to become King/Chief of that village. Thus, the one who successfully passed all those tests was selected to be the village Chief.

The village chief had a dual role to play in the village. One was the religious functions and the other one was the secular functions. The religious functions were shared by the chief and the village priests. Although the ceremonial sacrifice, the religious worship etc. were performed by the village priest, yet king/chief presence in any religious ceremony was necessary. He presided over all religious festivals. No one in the village could start any of such work until he ritually opened for the village. He was the first to sow, to plant, to pluck and to harvest and first in all the religious rites and festivals of the village to ensure the prosperity of the village. As a secular head, his house was also used as village court. His functions were numerous he could see every areas to serve for the welfare of the village. At the time of 'head-hunting' his primary concern as a chief was to defence the village. As the head of the administration, his duties were to summon and preside over the meetings of the village. In respect of the day-to-day administration of the village, the chief was assisted by

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the councillors. In case of dispute, the king's house was used as their court except when the councillors with approval wanted to hold the hearings at the open space. The village king was therefore, the religious head, the chief judge, the administrator and also the chief commander at the time of war and head hunting.<sup>6</sup>

#### **POSITION AND STATUS OF CHIEF 'AWUNGA':**

There was no historical account of the Tangkhul society that an Awunga was selfish or corrupted. Therefore, the Tangkhul village king/Awunga, as the head of the village, enjoyed special position, status and privileges. He enjoyed precedence in all events at the village. He was the person to be respected by all the villagers not only because of his hereditary chief ship but also for his integrity. He followed all the regulations as a chief. As a token of respect for his status, he was entitled to a portion of meat of the animals killed during festivals. In the olden days, the villagers offered their free labours to him when his fields were to be cultivated and when his house was to be constructed.

Though, the status and position of the village chief were very high and respectable. However, he could not exercise powers unlimitedly. In the governance of the village, the village chief tried his best to be agreed with his councillors. In every matter of dispute and deliberations, he had to consult the village councillors and accept the consensus of opinion arrived at. He could not ignore the consensus opinion in favour of any other interest. In fact, the real powers of the village administration rested with the village council. Therefore, in spite of his position and vast powers, a Tangkhul village king/chief could not act like a dictator. The village chief/Awunga was expected to be good, compassionate, polite, gentle and caring towards his subjects. An old Tangkhul saying goes "No python ever bites, no wungnao (king/chief) ever chides". It is also said that "no cock hurts the chicken and no king speaks roughly"<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the above points, there are still certain attributes of a village chief as mentioned below;

1. He acted as a priest in different rites and ritual of the village.
2. The chief had a royal code of costume where no ordinary citizen could wear
3. No other people could sit in his chair.

4. The king had a diet restriction. He could not eat Cat, eagle, snake, and animals with blemish.
5. The king should see the orphans and the poor with deeds and justice.
6. He should be humbled.
7. He should be a man of firm principle.
8. Citizen could neither assault the king nor argue the king.
9. Citizen could not competes feast of merit with the king nor call him in for wrestling.
10. He could not be given order for physical work to serve other.
11. When the king dies, citizens should mourn for six days as mandatory.
12. Women should respect by covering their head with a cloth.
13. Citizen should not walk in front of him.
14. King could not commit homicide.
15. He could not commit incest.
16. He could not be cursed.
17. He should not involve in any illegal activities.
18. He should be free from any lying, stealing, dacoit etc.
19. The king did not gossip.
20. The king did not dispense justice based on one- sided of information.

#### **SUCCESSION OF THE CHIEF:**

The kingship/chieftainship was hereditary as per Tangkhul tradition. In which nobody challenged or claimed his position in any case. The post of Awunga was hereditary and permanent. The post of Awunga could be succeeded only by his eldest son according to the principle of primogeniture. Therefore, the system of administration of the Tangkhul village was likened to the monarchical form of state in the past. Election for the post of Awunga was not practiced in Tangkhul polity. Further, no form of leadership in the village other than this type was found or existed. However, now the old system, the monarchy type of chiefship has no longer remained as popular and desirable. People want development, and thus they prefer democratic head in which people select the best person to lead their village.

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### **VILLAGE COUNCIL ‘HANGVA’:**

In every Tangkhul village there had been a village council called ‘Hangva shim’ headed by the chief ‘Awunga’. All the powers of making laws were vested in the council. It framed laws and regulations in conformity with customs and traditions. The Village Authority/ Council, Hangva made law and the same was executed by the Hangva itself. It was the responsibilities of the Village Authority/ Council ‘Hangva’ to declare war and concludes peace. Apart from that the Village Authority/ Council, Hangva had the judicial powers as well. Its sitting was naturally held at the house of the Chief Awunga as their assembly hall and court. The council consisted of the Headman and the selected leaders (pibas) of all the clans of the village. The number of the councillors (Hangva) varied from clan to clan. The larger clans had more numbers of councillors as representatives of the village state council.

In early days, no one contested for the prestigious post of hangva, and hardly any member was elected. Usually they offered the privilege in honour of the other brothers as a token of mutual respect and recognition. However, the clan leaders, judging the ability and efficiency of a person nominated the most capable person to represent the clans. The nominate of members might be changed from time to time depending on the capacity of the representatives in carrying out their administrative works. In short, he continued in office as long as he commanded the confidence of the clan. In sending a representative of the village council, they generally used to send the lineage head at least if otherwise nothing went wrong with him physically and mentally.

It is important to mention that the one who represent at the village council used to share the meat they ate in the village meeting to all the clan members. In fact, whenever they had a council session to settle cases, they used to eat meat and the remaining meat was shared by all the members of the council.

In respect of the clans where there were more than one representative in the village council, the eldest man of the sub-clan or group head of the sub-group known as ‘Meiphung kharar’, would be the represented to the village council/hangva. As the population increased, new members had to be selected from a new family member. In such circumstances the would-be

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new aspirant should provide a pig to the village council. The council killed the pig and a part of the pig was distributed among all the families of the village and the other half eaten by the village councillors. If they cannot finish the meat then they would divide among themselves. In case a vacancy arose due to migration of a member and if there was none to succeed to the office it may pass on to another family worth of new office. A vacancy might also arosed due to a family being extinct of some unfavourable circumstances. Such a vacancy might also be filled up by another family. Here in such a matter the Awunga of the village should inform and declare to the village council and all the members of the village would perform the declaration ceremony. The village councillors were responsible to their respective clan. With this responsibility the councillor protect the interest of the clan as well as the interest of the village-state as a whole.

#### **FUNCTION OF THE VILLAGE COUNCIL:**

The village council was the highest organ of the village government dealing with and different subjects from day to day life to executive, administration and judicial of the village. They formulate programme and policy of the village in war and in peace. There was no separation of judiciary and administration. The represented councillors executed and administered them. They also acted as a judge as there were no courts higher than the village.

The village council was the executive body of the village. The council decided all those disputes at the village and punished the wrong doers according to the custom. It was the duty of the village council to see that all those decisions taken by t he council were carried out accordingly. It was also their duty that all the traditional laws, customs and usage were properly observed by the people and violation of the customary laws were punished accordingly. The village council as the administrative agency had the ultimate responsibility to collect the subscription dues of the villagers. There was no regular tax to constitute a village fund. Hence the village council to collect subscription fixed from time to time according to their need for the management of the village administration. When some families from outside the village cultivated or sued some land for jhumming or for any other purpose, the village council used to collect a kind of tax called Luisham from the concerned persons. It was the duty of the village council to see that no one encroach the land.

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The village council as the only administrative organ of the village, used to organised several works of public utility like construction of public paths, maintenance and repairing of the village water tanks, gates fencing etc. from time to time.

Apart from the promotion of material comforts and well-being of the people, the village council took all those necessary steps to promote the social and cultural progress of the people as well.

Any important matter of public interest like fixation of village feast and festivals, discussions of village problems for the maintenance of peace and security, fixation of general religious rituals in connection with the annual cycles, like selection of jhum cultivation area, clearing and burning of the hill sides for the same sowing and transplantation of paddy and all other agricultural cycle rituals, construction of the village etc, were discussed and fixed by the village The village councillors in consultation with the village priest. Besides all those diversified works the village council worked for the well-being of the village community.

#### **PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE:**

The traditional Naga justice was mostly based on the culture. It was always believed that the ‘The truth shall Win’. Therefore, the just was rewarded and the unjust was punished adequately. There was no history of being biased by a village chief in every action of the village administration. A lot of changes have been found at present at the village in this matter. Today in modern judiciary system, due to corruption, the just was sometimes punished and the unjust was sometimes rewarded and cases drag on for years involving huge expenditure. For the old Nagas, it was very easy and fast to deliver justice. Justice to all was available at the village itself. Judges (Hongva) were their own clan’s men. The legal system was based on the customary laws which had no bias. Thus, villages were united and the village authorities/councillors were respected.

#### **SOURCES OF TANGKHUL CUSTOMARY LAWS:**

It is untraceable that when and where the customary laws of the Tangkhul begin but it is no doubt that, the Tangkhul customary laws grew from different sources covering all aspects of



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life from generation to generation. The Tangkhuls have minute and extensive customary laws that governed them. People still cherish the values traditional laws and practices the same in many ways. Some of the important sources of traditional laws of the Tangkhul are Social life, Public opinion, Order of village chief, Religion etc.

### **1. Important regulations in village administration:**

Some of the important village regulation can be classified under the following ways;

1. **The Village Court:-** Every village had its own village court.
2. **The Village Elders/Councillors:-** The Village elders/councillors were the responsible governing body of the village administration.
3. **Selling of Properties:-** The land properties or other acquired by an individual can be sold by him to anybody, but the inherited properties cannot be sold without consulting first to his close relatives, particularly the one who would inherit him.
4. **Grazing Ground at the Village:-** No one was allowed to cultivate at grazing ground.
5. **House Building:-** The whole village should participate in house building without counting the labour. They build houses turn by turn. In big villages it is done khel or clan-wise.
6. **Feast of Merit:-** If someone throw the feast of merit, no one is allowed to go to other areas and stay away. Even if someone is injured in the dragging of Tarung (Genna post) the donor of the feast is not responsible but the village council.
7. **The Village Gate:-** Every village had a good village gate and maintained it by gate keepers in order to protect enemies.
8. **Ex-communication ‘Khakhangaleng’:-** Ex-communication and expulsion. The one who did not care for the rules and customs of the village was excommunicated with the result that he was not allowed to sit or go with others. Not allowed to take fire from others in the world.
9. **War guard ;** It stands for war zone as well as peace zone.
10. **Housegaurd.** One cannot go out to any other village and punish another person for a crime. It is the responsibility of the concerned village to take appropriate action to the crime he or she committed.

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11. **Sending out women;** Lahom means force divorce. Force divorce was prohibited for it could even lead to a war between two villages.
  12. **LUIYAN:** The above classification of Tangkhul areas further sub-divided into the following ways.
    - i. Boundary. Land boundaries were marked by stones as natural marks. No one can remove those marks.
    - ii. Crossing of the boundary. Crossing of any dhari was the question of life and death.
    - iii. Pass; If the head-hunting party had to cross another village, the permission of that village to cross a particular peace zone must be obtained, otherwise they can be killed.

#### **FOOT NOTES & REFERANCES;**

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