

## **Traditional Village Administration in Manipur: A Case Study of the Kabui Tribe**

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### **Abstract:**

Since ancient times, the Kabui tribe, like other Naga tribes, has maintained a well-organized and efficient system of village administration. Each Kabui village functioned as a self-governing and sovereign entity, independently managing its socio-political, economic, and religious affairs through its own policies and administrative system. In 1859, William McCulloch described the Kabui polity as a “small republic.” However, despite being founded on the collective will of the people, the political system did not fully possess the essential characteristics of a true republic. The traditional village system resembled a gerontocracy, in which the village administration was governed by elders representing different clans and lineages. The Village Council (*Pei*) and Village Chief (*Nampou*) help in maintaining law and order and coordinating the affairs of the village. Thus, this paper is a humble attempt to understand the working of the Kabui administration in their society in ancient times.

**Keywords:** Kabui, Republic, *Nampou*, *Pei*

### **Introduction**

The Kabui tribe is one of the oldest indigenous tribes of Manipur. They are found inhabiting mostly in the Tamenglong and Noney districts of Manipur and they are also spread across Churchandpur, Senapati and in the valley districts of Manipur. A sizeable Kabui population are also found in Cachar, Karimgang and Hailakandi districts of Assam and in Peren district of Nagaland. According to the census of 2011, the population of the Kabui comprises of 103,908 in the state of Manipur,<sup>i</sup> which makes up roughly 11.1% of the state's total Scheduled Tribe population. Each Kabui village existed as a self-governing unit in pursuing independent policies governing socio-political, economic, and religious affairs of the village. A. Nshoga writes that Naga villages were predominantly of autonomous structure as there was no single powerful village which controlled the entire tribal village.<sup>ii</sup> Even the smallest village enjoyed a good autonomy without any external interference in running the administration of the village.

In 1859, William McCulloch, who was the political Agent of Manipur from 1837 till 1862, described the Kabui polity as the “small republic”. However, the political system of the Kabuis lacks the true republican characters even though it is based on the popular will of the people. The traditional village resembles a gerontocracy, according to which the village administration of the village is under the control of the village elders from all clans and lineages. The opinion as expressed by the head of the clans, lineage or their representative is also counted in the decision making of the village. Gangmumei Kamei says: “Gerontocracy with a democratic ethos is the nature of the Kabui polity.”<sup>iii</sup> However, at times, the Kabui polity has a strong element of theocracy.<sup>iv</sup> The priest-administrator occupies a high position, and this ecclesiastical functionary controls the whole administration of the village. He is, at times, regarded as the head of the Village Council, and the social and religious functions are controlled by him.<sup>v</sup>

### **The Village Chief (*Nampou*)**

In the traditional village administration of the Kabuis in Manipur, the most important features are occupied by the two bodies, the Village Chief (*Nampou*) and the Village Council or the *Pei*. The Village Chief is not only the founder of the village but also the head of the Village Council. The post of the *Nampou* is hereditary.<sup>vi</sup> After his death, either his eldest son or an elder of his clan succeeds him, but the successor should be a married man. Some explained hereditary in a strict sense. However, others defined that hereditary system was not strictly observed among the Kabui which indicate that it does necessarily inherit to the father by the son.<sup>vii</sup> In some villages the post of chieftainship is not hereditary but it was inherited by the eldest clan member.<sup>viii</sup>

Each Kabui villages, big or small, was ruled by a Council of elders known as *Pei* under the leadership of the Village Chief known as *Nampou*. He was respected by the villagers as he holds such an important office. However, he could not function his office without the support of the Village Council and the subjects. He rather worked as a trustee of the people for the welfare of the villagers. He played a dominant role in social and religious ceremonies. Though the Chief of a village is considered the highest authority in customary law and tradition, he does not enjoy absolute power in the sense that his decisions can be superseded by the Village Council if the majority of the villagers hold their consent against his order and decisions.

### **Origin and Evolution of Chieftainship**

The origin and evolution of the institution of chieftainship could not be traced clearly due to the absence of the written record and script among the Kabuis. The theory of the origin and evolution of the institution of chieftainship were mainly relied on the oral narration based on myths, folklore, folksongs, etc. It is believed that during the prehistoric migration from Makhel to Ramting Kabin, the Kabuis were organised into several groups headed by an elder who led the migration. When they arrived at Chawang Phungning, the elder who led the people in migration and settlement became the Chief.<sup>ix</sup> At Chawang Phungning, “a rudimentary form”

of chieftainship or “Chawang or Guang” meaning “King or Chief” was developed.<sup>x</sup> The chief was given the best location for settlement and he was also given the responsibility for governing the village. He was called Chawang or Guang Meaning “King or Chief”.

### **Powers and Functions of the Village Chief**

The Village Chief is in-charge of the entire administrative system of the village. He supervised the village’s entire administration in consultation with the members of the Village Council. He was the executive head of the village and the entire administration was conducted in his name. He appoints all village officials and various social and religious organizations’ heads. According to the traditions and customary laws, the Village Chief was regarded as the authority of the village. He served as the chief judge, administrator, and a leader during the war. He was the commanding authority of the village; his word was obeyed promptly.<sup>xi</sup>

He plays critical role in co-ordinating the various activities of the village officials to ensure that the administration ran smoothly. He convenes and adjourns the Village Council meeting and presides over Village Council meetings. He also presides over all executive and judicial committee meetings, and he must approve all the decisions made by the Village Council. The Village Council headed by the Village Chief was responsible for maintaining the village law and order and safeguarding the citizens lives and property. He selected the best land for cultivation.<sup>xii</sup> He allots land to the villagers for settlement, inspects village’s well, ponds, fences, gates, and roads which will fall under his jurisdiction. He was responsible for ensuring the smooth operation of the village administration and to look after the welfare of his subjects.<sup>xiii</sup> He directed the construction of inter-village roads and paths leading to fields, wells, and ponds. He performed certain rites like *Namgutmei* and *Khun Nummeien* when a new village was founded.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Village Chief (*Nampou*) had the power to lead, advise, protect and guide the people. When any serious crime occurred like murder, adultery, dispute at the village, he acted as a judge.<sup>xv</sup> He was also to act as a Chief of army in the defense of the village.<sup>xvi</sup> However, the Chief could not break any traditional code. Suppose, if he happened to break the marriage code, he should step down on moral ground.<sup>xvii</sup> The Chief did not have an absolute power because any decision he had to be supported must be passed by the Village Council based on the customary law and practices. The Chief presided over village court and tried all civil and criminal cases. All cases brought before the Chief are decided by the village court in consultation with the Village Council. The Chief has the authority to punish or pardon the guilty party depending on the nature of the offences committed.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Village Chief had important role to play in religious affairs of the community. He conducted various religious ceremonies in the presence of the village priest. Though the village priest performs all religious rites, the presence of the Village Chief is required. He must participate in various religious ceremonies, festivals,

and rituals. The Village Chief, being the religious head of the village, was the first man to sow seed, the first to plant and the first to harvest.<sup>xix</sup> He also established the dates for all significant religious and cultural celebrations. All religious rites and ceremonies were conducted in the presence of the Village Chief.

The Chief was in charge of defending the village against invading and external forces. He directed the warriors to fortify the village and assigns a young man to watch for potential enemy attacks. The prosperity of the village depends upon the Village Chief's ability, wisdom, and leadership.

### **Limitations of Village Chief's Power**

Although the Village Chief has enormous power and functions, he is bound by traditions and customary laws. Unlike the Kukis who had strong chieftainship system, the Kabui Village Chief had relatively limited powers, the power being checked by the council of elders.<sup>xx</sup> In almost every aspect of village life, the chief had no authority to over-rule the Village Council's decisions. The established conventions and traditions have also exerted limitation to Chief's authority. The Village Council restrained the Chief's arbitrary powers. Further, without the assistance and consultation of the Village Council, the Chief could not carry out his duty. Though there was no law that allowed the Chief to be replaced, he could be replaced or removed if he was mentally or physically ill. The Village Chief did not have absolute powers because any decision he made had to be passed by the Village Council, also known as the *Pei*, based on customary law.<sup>xxi</sup>

### **The Village Council (*Pei*)**

The Village Council, also known as the *Pei*, is not only a council of elders but also the collective supreme body in which all the heads or representatives of the clans, lineage or sub-lineage are represented. The *Pei* is represented by the Chief of the Village, or the founder of the particular village.<sup>xxii</sup> The whole administration of a Kabui village is controlled by a Village Council called the *Pei*. The Village Council serves as the village administrator, a court of justice and commands the socio-religious, economic and political affairs of the village.

The Village Council was headed by the Chief of the village. It was a collective body represented by the elders who are well-versed in customary laws and well-qualified members of all clans and sub-clans of the village.<sup>xxiii</sup> All important matters affecting the village community were subjected to Village Council decision based on customary laws established by tradition and convention. The Village Council headed by the Village Chief had responsibility of signing treaties and agreement with the neighbouring village.

The Village Council or the *Pei* is the highest decision or law- making body, the highest court and the center of administration in all the village affairs. The verdicts and decisions of the Village Council on any issue were final and binding upon the individuals of both the disputing parties. The Village Council enjoys extensive executive, judicial, and legislative powers. It is a collective body whereby the head of different clans and

lineages of the village are represented without discrimination.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, there is no representation of women in the Village Council following the long-protected conventions and customary laws.<sup>xxv</sup>

### **Composition of Village Council (*Pei*)**

In the composition of the Village Council, there was not fixed number of members to represent the Village Council and the number of members varied from village to village, as per the size. A Village Council, formed of the oldest and most respectable men of the village, administers justice; they summon the culprit, hear the charge, adjudge the sentence; and the execution is immediate.<sup>xxvi</sup> People who are honest, have a lot of energy, and have a lot of wisdom are usually chosen to represent their clans on the Village Council. The member of Village Council must be an influential and experienced elderly orator in the village. He must have the knowledge of customary laws and should be well-versed with all matters relating to tradition and customs. The strength of Village Council is highly dependent on the village's population. However, its role and functions and structure remained almost the same in all Kabui villages.

### **Power and Functions of Village Council (*Pei*)**

The Village Council is considered as the most powerful body in the village polity of the Kabuis. The Village Council is the village government, a court of justice, an authority on religious affairs and the supreme command on defense and security of the village.<sup>xxvii</sup> The most important functions of the Village Council are executive, administrative, and judiciary rather than legislative. The legislative function of the Council is less because there are already well set unwritten customary laws, which seldom need amendment. Though there is no written laws, the Kabui strictly adhere to the customary laws handed down by their ancestors. These customary laws have much effect in the mind of the people that they dare not violate the sanctions of the customary laws. The decisions given by the Village Council, which is the highest body of the village administration, is final. No member of the village, even the Village Chief *Nampou*, could go against the decision of the Village Council.<sup>xxviii</sup> No other village also has the right to interfere in the internal affairs and decision of the Village Council.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Administrative Function of the Village Council (*Pei*)**

The administration of the village was carried out by the Village Chief with the assistance of the Village Council. All the administrative functions as well as the executive and judiciary fall within the ambit of the Village Council. The Village Council had the power to frame and implement new laws for the village without undermining the basic structure of the customary laws. The Village Council served as the local self-government. It is responsible for the construction of footpath, village roads and maintain of the village gates for the security and welfare of the villagers. The maintenance of community granary, graveyard, and ponds was looked after by the Village Council. The village administration looked after the entire system of the boy's

dormitory or girl's dormitory. The arrangement for deployment of the *Morung* boys for the protection and guarding the village from external attacks was also done by the Village Council.<sup>xxx</sup>

The Village Council is often recognized as the community's most powerful executive body. Its tasks are to carry out the society's customary rules and to guarantee that residents adhere to traditions and customary rules. The members of the Village Council exercised authority over residents within their village jurisdiction, carried out commands, and punished anyone who violates the order.<sup>xxxii</sup> The Village Council was assigned with the responsibility of preserving peace, harmony, and cordial relation in the village.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The administration of justice, allocation of land for cultivation, fixing the time for annual festivals and sacrifices as well as social, religious and economic activities of the village were directed by the Village Council based on the traditional laws and customs.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The date for commencement of annual festivals, construction and repairing of the village gate, observance of various religious rituals from time to time, question of settlement of any new-comer, punishment of any wrong doer, etc., that concern the village are discussed in the Village Council.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **Legislative Function of the Village Council (*Pei*)**

As mentioned earlier, the legislative function of the Village Council is less because there are already well set of unwritten customary laws, which seldom need amendment. The Kabui people strictly adhere to the customary laws handed down by their ancestors. The legislative powers of the Village Council are not absolute in real sense. The framing and regulation of laws by the Village Council were subjected to customary laws. Although the Village Council can frame and regulate new laws concerning the use of land, marriage, theft, property, etc., the new laws framed by the Village Council should not undermine the basic structure of the customary laws and traditions. The legislative function of the Village Council is to execute the traditional laws in day-to-day affairs of the village and to ensure that the customary laws are not violated by the villagers.<sup>xxxv</sup> Any breach to the customary laws was dealt seriously by the Village Council.

### **Judicial Function of the Village Council (*Pei*)**

The Village Council is the highest court in the village judicial set-up.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It acts as a court of justice to decide on dispute, criminal and civil cases based on the customary laws.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Cases of both civil and criminal such as marriage, killing, rape, fighting, injury, dismantling of houses, destruction of property, killing animals, theft, etc., were brought before the *Pei* for justice.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Disputes such as transgression of taboos, land disputes, and disregard of customs that arise in the village are resolved by the Village Council. In conjunction with the Village Council, the Village Chief is the protector and custodian of the village's laws and traditions. The Village Council settled both the civil and criminal cases. All disputes arising in the village is adjudicated by the Council according to the procedures of the customary laws and practices. The verdicts and decisions of the Village Council on any issue were final and binding upon the disputing parties. The decision of the Village

Council was the final and no appeal against that decision was entertained. There was no bias in the judgement of the *Pei*. There was no room for discrimination on the ground of the person's position.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In the legal system of the Kabuis, capital punishment is not known.<sup>xl</sup> The most common punishments were the imposition of fine. The amount of fine varied from a small thing to confiscation of the whole properties of the accused. Any offender might be punished regardless of sex, age, and position. The severest punishment is banishment and ex-communication.<sup>xli</sup> If the punishment of banishment is inflicted upon a culprit, his close relatives are also banished according to the severity of the crime. When such punishment is awarded, it is known as "Kapiu pukmei" i.e., to uproot the clump.<sup>xlii</sup>

Some of the other functions of the Village Council of the Kabui include the following:<sup>xliii</sup> Maintaining of a supreme command over the fighting forces known as the *Riphen* (*Ri* means war, *phen* means fighting), control over the youth of the dormitories, appointment of owners of the institutions like the dormitory of the boys and the girls, guarding and regulating religious customs and practices jealously by the Village Council, Village Council entrusting the priest and the elders to perform religious rites for the welfare of the people, Village Council regulating the transfer of land within the village, Village Council not giving permission the transfer of land to a person outside the village, Village Council encouraging horticultural plantation and wet-rice cultivation.

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