# PAPER PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PUBLIC POLICY AND GOVERNANCE 2012, INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE, BANGALORE 4-6 SEPTEMBER 2012

## TITLE

# DEMOCRATIZATION OF KUKI TRIBAL POLITY IN CONTEMPORARY MANIPUR

**Ngamjahao Kipgen**
**Department of Humanities & Social Sciences**
**NIT Rourkela**

# STRUCTURE

- ✓ Background of the Paper
- ✓ Theoretical Premise
- ✓ Central Themes
- ✓ Ethnographic Context
- ✓ Research Methodology
- ✓ Introducing the Kukis
- ✓ Customary Law and System of Governance
- ✓ New Administrative Mechanism
- ✓ Findings & Conclusion

# BACKGROUND OF THE PAPER

- Many of the social scientists, scholars have ignored the fact that most of the communities inhabiting the Northeast states of India are new to the system of governance introduced by the constitution of India, adopted in 1950.
- Many regional tribal organisations have been publicly taking positions that contradict some of the basic principles of liberal democracy. The effects of the introduction of the constitutional government on traditional semi-tribal, semi-feudal societies of the northeast region, remains unexamined even today.
- The Kukis of Northeast India have traditionally lived in village settlements under lineage chiefs and been politically governed by chiefs who belong to certain chiefly lineages. Some of these political changes occurred during colonial rule, however implementation of universal suffrage, democratic representation and elections does not seem to have altered political legitimacy and position of chiefs among the Kukis.
- Political legitimacy in traditional Kuki society was based on what Weber conceptualized as traditional authority has unwittingly interpolated with modern political values.

# THEORETICAL PREMISE

- Striving for legitimacy has become an imperative for every institutionalize authority. In political sociology, legitimacy provides a moral propriety to power by transforming power into authority.
- A society is said to be legitimate as long as its institutional order remains justified to its members. In other words, it is the concern for legitimacy and the perception that authority is legitimate among those who are subject to it (Morrison, 1995).
- Weber's first type of political legitimacy is that based on tradition and inheritance. Traditional legitimacy is the legitimacy enjoyed by tribal chiefs, princes and kings. In this kind of regime the essential factor that ensures compliance with the orders and laws of government is personal loyalty to the chief or king or ruling family (Birch, 1993).
- Traditional authority which is legitimated by the sanctity of tradition and custom, that is to say upon the piety for what actually, allegedly or presumably has always existed is most relevant among the Kukis.
- Traditional authority is legitimised in terms of certain beliefs and symbols.

# CENTRAL THEMES

- Impact of liberal democratic values on the institution of chieftainship. To understand the continuing role of traditional political institutions and power wielders in Kuki society in contemporary development contexts.
- It is worth questioning whether traditional organisations fail to recognise democratic principles because they adhere to traditional political values.
- It is important to examine whether such conflicts are generated by a clash of values, inherent in traditional political practices, but manifested in a modern context.
- This question becomes particularly relevant when considering that, in most of the tribal societies in Northeast, institutional arrangements of the pre-constitutional and, therefore, pre-liberal democratic era, continue to function alongside the government of the democratic republic, established in 1950.

# ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

- **Manipur located in the North-eastern region of India shares border with the Indian states of Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram in the north, west, south, and neighboring nation of Burma (Myanmar) in the east.**
- **Manipur merged with the Indian Union on 15 October 1949 and was given statehood in 1972.**
- **Population of Manipur is 23,88,634 of which the tribal population is 7,41,141; the Meiteis and other non-tribal groups constitute about 66 per cent of the total population of the state. (2001 census). The Scheduled Caste population constituted 2.80 per cent of Manipur - they are counted among the Meiteis in the Census categories. The Scheduled Tribes constituted 34.20 per cent.**
- **Economy: Agriculture (57.37 per cent of the state's working population comprised cultivators and agricultural labourers); In the plains/valleys 'settled or permanent' cultivation is practiced while in the hills 'shifting' cultivation is practiced. Crops grown - cereals, pulses and food grains.**
- **Ethnic Categories: Meitei (including Pangan), and the Naga and Kuki tribes who are sub-divided into 33 recognised Scheduled Tribes.**
- **All three linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages.**

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Our ethnographic study follows a socio-historical approach drawing upon fieldwork where we collected information through interviews, documentation of oral history and relate these to some relevant archival data and secondary literature.
- This study is based on an ethnographic study conducted in the hill areas of Manipur during the period July 2008 to June 2009 using multiple data-collection methods, participant observation, and in-depth interviews.
- I have relate the primary data collected with relevant theories on political economy of land; traditional authority and democracy.

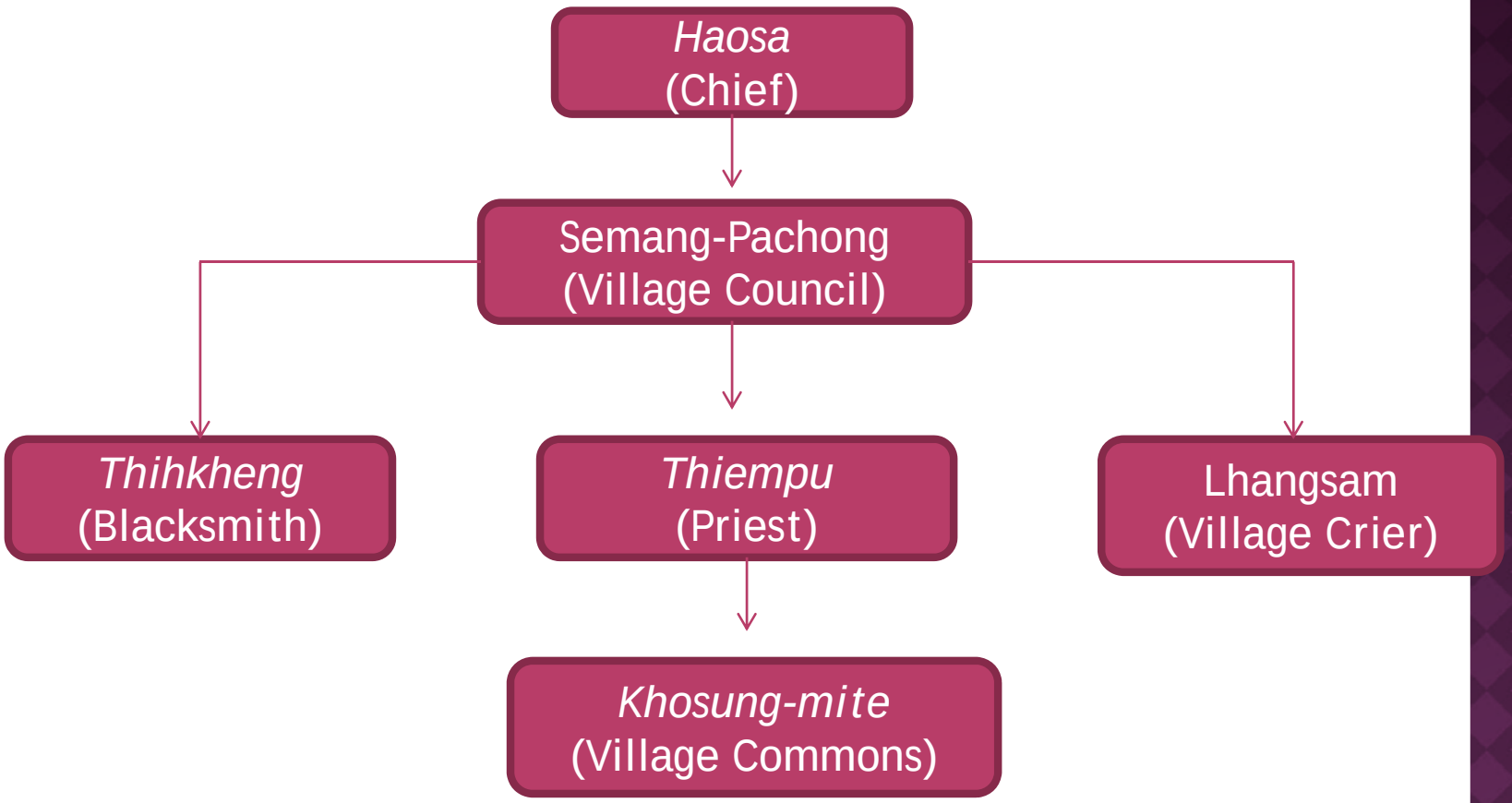
# WHO ARE THE KUKIS?

- The recognized Kuki-affiliated tribes include Thadou, Zou, Vaiphei, Simte, Paite, Aimol, Gangte, and Ralte. Some groups like the Simte, Suhte, Kom and the Hmar – each have their own dialect but identitcal; they can converse by speaking their own dialect.
- Every  Kuki clan follows a patrilineal lineage system (genealogy is trace through the eldest male member)
- The laws of inheritance of the Kukis from father to eldest son exclusively irrespective of the number of sons born to the family persists.
- Social institution among the Kuki clans is based on kinship relation
- Political organisation: Each clan have their own separate village – having one clan chief and many village chiefs.
- Customarily, Mother's Brother's Daughter marriage or Cross-Cousin marriage or Preferential marriage is the most accepted marriage system. Marriage by payment or bride-price or marriage price is the most important factor in Kuki marriage.
- Religion – majority of the Kukis have converted to Christianity beginning from the early twentieth century

# VILLAGE AND THE KUKI PEOPLE

- Traditionally, Kuki people live in a well-defined demarcated village unit having their own land and territory.
- Village is the smallest unit of settlement, usually of the same clans having a definite territory by tangible social, cultural, political and economic bonds.
- The village is the highest political unit among the Kukis
- The inhabitants of the village have intimate social, economic, ritual and political relationship which is regulated by age old traditions and institutions. Each villages function as compact and well-knit societies where the customary laws are enforced and followed.
- The Kuki tribes like the African Nuer society maintains a close relation between territorial segment and lineage segments habitually express social obligations in a kinship idiom (Evans-Pritchard, 1974: 143)

# VILLAGE STRUCTURE



# KUKI CHIEFS

- The Kuki society is a chief-centered society where the chief is accorded an exalted position.
- Chieftainship is a very powerful secular institution based on “patriarchalism” (authority is exercised by a particular individual who is designated to be a chief following patrilineal inheritance).
- The rule of primogeniture is strictly followed - position and the line of succession goes on to the eldest male descendants.
- The Chief control the land – distribute and decides the *jhum* land
- Functions: The Chief settle all disputes, decided where the village was to be located, where to cultivate and when and where it had to be moved
- In the post-independent India, the chiefs play a major role in the electoral politics of the state by influencing voting patterns

# CUSTOMARY LAW AND SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE

- The village court locally known as *khosung-inpi thutanna* is the highest body of law in any Kuki villages.
- The village court or customary court that is the law enforcing body comprises of the chief or *Haosa* and his *Semang Pachong* (Village Council).
- The traditional customary laws are unwritten and retained orally (unwritten traditional laws of the indigenous people); Customary laws have sanction of the society.
- The trial of cases like disputes over land, theft, assault, adultery, and even murder comes under the village court.
- The Kukis also resorted to various forms of trials and oaths for settling a variety of disputes - "the Kukis attached great important to 'oath-taking' (*Kihah'sel*) the common forms of oath were the '*Aitui-don*' (drinking the juice of *Ai*-plant).

# NEW ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISM UNDER THE CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

- The Manipur Village Authorities in the Hill Areas Act, 1956 was an attempt to consolidate the law relating to the constitution and function of the village authorities of the hill areas of Manipur.
- The Village Authority Act, 1956 had also many erosive effects upon the authority structure of the traditional chieftainship system of the Kukis. With the introduction of the Act of 1956, it has posed a deep challenge to the customary functioning of the Kuki village political organization.
- The Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights Act, 1966, was another Act passed by the Union Territorial Council of Manipur, which intended to abolish the right of the Chiefs over land.
- The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960, despite all its efforts to implement the Act could hardly make any impact in the hill areas.
- The Kuki chiefs have interpreted the government policy on tribal land protection as a threat to the inalienable rights of the chiefs over land.

# TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY AND POWER IN THE HILL POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY MANIPUR

- The neo-educated 'elite class' has made a paradigm shift and come up from the clutches of the traditional organisation by forming a new institutional base in the form of Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in 1946.
- The KNA continued to be dominated by the Kuki Chiefs. The KNA strongly advocated the preservation of the traditional rights and privileges of the chiefs.
- The issue of territorial demand by the KNA (beginning from 1960) was conditioned by two necessities: to protect their land and preserve their cultural identity.
- Cohen - "If symbols are live and significant, it is because they are adopted by a group of people for whom they are "collective representations". If the interests of such a group are significant, then the group will have some basic organizational mechanism to coordinate the members' activities to promote those interests. In this way the group will be defined in terms of two dimensions: culture and power" (1979: 18).
- Of late, many Kuki chiefs expressed their loyalty to various political parties. The Kuki chiefs being the owner of the village land are in a position to influence the electorate in his village.

## CONTEXTUAL DEBATES - THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC LAWS AND CONFRONTATION WITH TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- The dialectical discourse over the institution of Chieftainship within the Kuki society has of late been raging on for some time now.
- Pu Jammang maintains that "it is also true that chieftainship as an institution is a part of our tradition is a repository of our age-old knowledge [indigenous knowledge] that guides our [Kuki] ways of life …source of identity that makes us unique or distinct from others."
- While, Pu Lunsei (name changed) hold the views that "the present manifestation of chieftainship, the whole system as it functions today is entirely "outmoded", "flawed"; I am no longer convinced by those who maintain that our society/villages cannot survive without chieftainship."
- Here it is noteworthy to reproduce David Held's contention that "some traditional societies have grossly outrageous practices and customs which obviously need to be changed, preferably by internal and, when necessary, by a judiciously applied external pressure (1993: 169-70).

# FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

- Based on the analysis I argue that traditional governance mechanisms such as chieftainship are being perceived as instruments of oppression and regressive in contexts of social mobility, women's empowerment, and economic development. However, the institution has regained political relevance and salience for affirming ethnic identity and negotiating for preferential entitlements as indigenes.
- The Kuki chiefs continue to profoundly influence democratic politics in Manipur. This is primarily because they continue to exercise authority in the village land and persist as the fountainhead of identity and honour among the Kukis.
- This study fills a significant gap in understanding Kuki traditional governance systems and explains the foundation of their identity and correlates ethnographic data with current debates on politicization of identity and ethno-nationalist movements arising in Northeast India today.
- This kind of study may, on the one hand, provide us with a clearer picture of the nature of traditional institutions of the tribal people under a modern system of governance and, on the other hand, may also help us to understand how values and practices inherent in these institutions affect governance under Indian democracy.

# REFERENCES


- *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis (*Gangte, T.S. 1993)
- *Kuki life and Lore (*Goswami, Tarun. 1985)
- *Note on the Thadou Kukis (*Shaw, William. 1929)
- *Authority and Legitimacy: A Case Study of the Thadou-Kukis in Manipur (*Ray, A. K. 1990)
- *The Lushei Kuki Clans (Shakespeare,* J Lt Col. 1912)
- *Political System of Highland Burma* (Leach, E.R. 1954)
- *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy (*Birch, H. Anthony. 1993)
- *Political Sociology (*Bottomore, Tom. 1979)
- *Models of Democracy* (Held, David. 1987)
- *Prospects for Democracy* (Held, David. 1993)