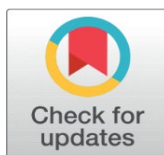


TRADITION, LEADERSHIP, AND JUSTICE IN PUROIK VILLAGE COUNCILS: AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

Arunachal Pradesh, a culturally diverse state in northeastern India, is home to numerous tribes with unique traditional village councils. This paper explores the traditional village council system among the Puroik people, who historically served as bonded laborers. The study explores the structure, functions, and changes in the Puroik traditional council, known as Jokom, within the broader context of tribal governance. It examines factors such as historical influences, modern institutions like Panchayati Raj, and the impact of religious conversion on cultural practices and dispute resolution. The research provides insights into the dynamic nature of the Puroik village council, its role in social and judicial matters, and its adaptation to evolving societal contexts and external influences.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Puroik, Traditional Village Council, Jokom, Tribal Governance, Cultural Change, Religious Conversion, Indigenous Practices, Modern Institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh, situated in northeastern India, is characterized by its rich amalgamation of cultures, comprising around 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes. Within this ethnically diverse terrain, the institution of traditional village councils plays a pivotal role in governance, reflecting the unique socio-cultural fabric and exigencies of each tribe. The origins of these councils, shrouded in antiquity, suggest their existence since time immemorial, a testament to their enduring significance in the region's social and political dynamics (Das, 2017). In every society's evolutionary journey, challenges arise, necessitating the development of internal mechanisms and institutions to navigate these complexities. Arunachal Pradesh's tribal societies are no exception. While some tribal institutions adeptly tackle issues as they emerge, others may falter under certain circumstances. The resilience and adaptability of these societies hinge on the

vitality and nature of the institutions within their fold (Hage, 2010). Institutions, functioning as the conduits for societal needs and aspirations, evolve in response to shifting demands, constraints, and evolving requirements.

At a particular juncture in their development, these societies conceived the traditional village council as the cornerstone of their village-level governance. Consequently, a diverse array of village councils has emerged across Arunachal Pradesh, mirroring the tapestry of tribes residing there. The distinctive character of each council reflects the unique social, political, and psychological traits of its respective tribe, yielding variances in organizational structures and governance styles (Dutta, 2009). While some villages exhibit well-organized councils, others operate with a more ad-hoc and less structured approach. The composition of tribal councils typically includes the village chief, religious leaders, affluent elders, and other relevant community members. However, the level of inclusivity during deliberations varies. For instance, certain tribes, like the Adi, historically excluded women from council deliberations, while others prohibited young or adult participation due to superstitions. In contemporary times, many of these taboos have receded, permitting broader participation. Yet, the persistence of these restrictions often hinges on cultural and customary norms within the tribe or village (Ningombam et al., 2014). These norms are deeply rooted in religious faith, cultural practices, and societal beliefs, shaping the ethos of the village council and its role in maintaining peace and harmony (Hassan, 2016).

The functions of these traditional village councils are intrinsically tied to the welfare of the community. They encompass a wide spectrum of responsibilities, spanning judicial matters, administration, development initiatives, social concerns, and the maintenance of law and order. Deliberations are conducted transparently, typically in the presence of representatives from both parties, ensuring a fair and democratic decision-making process. Equally, both parties enjoy equal opportunities to present their arguments, facilitating judgments based on careful consideration of diverse opinions and adherence to customary laws (Lemtur & Ngullie, 2015). One of the hallmarks of these tribal village councils is their simplicity and accessibility in delivering justice. Free from the shackles of legal formalities and bureaucratic procedures, the traditional village councils of Arunachal Pradesh provide a cost-effective and expedited means of justice delivery for the local populace (Dey, 2013).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was employed to comprehensively investigate the Puroik community's traditional village council system. Firstly, a qualitative research method was used to delve into the historical evolution and contemporary functioning of the Puroik village council. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including elders, council members, and community leaders, to gather in-depth narratives and insights. Participant observation complemented this by providing first-hand observations of council meetings and dispute resolution processes within the Puroik community. Archival research was utilized to access historical records and government documents pertaining to the community's governance and regulatory changes over time. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the collected data, identifying recurring themes, patterns, and historical shifts related to the village council system. Ethical considerations were upheld, ensuring informed consent, respect for cultural sensitivities, and data confidentiality.

2.1. TYPOLOGIES OF TRADITIONAL VILLAGE COUNCILS

P.D. Gogoi's classification, elucidated in his thesis on NEFA Local Polity, delineates four distinct types of traditional village councils prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh:

- 1) **Chieftaincy Forms of Village Council:** Characterized as authoritarian, these councils are presided over by a village chief or head who wields substantial authority. Noteworthy tribes adhering to this model include the Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa, Singphos, and Khamti. Here, the village chief assumes the mantle of the village's spokesperson and paramount leader, and his directives are sacrosanct. This position is typically hereditary but may undergo electoral transitions when no suitable heir is apparent (Yamamori, 2008).
- 2) **Gerontocracy Forms of Village Council:** This system bestows authority upon village elders based on age and seniority, rather than individual merit. Functioning akin to a republican form of governance, the ultimate authority rests with the villagers themselves, differentiating this model from the authoritarian chieftaincy system. Tribes like the Aka and Monpa exemplify this village council paradigm.
- 3) **Democratic Forms of Village Council:** Tribes characterized by neither extreme individualism nor social stratification have embraced the democratic village council model. Illustrative examples include the Kebangs of Adis and Mely of Akas. In this context, the selection process prioritizes competence, experience, and impartiality. Elected members diligently serve their smaller communities, eschewing demagogic influences, thus emphasizing that wealth or property does not exclusively determine eligibility for positions of honor within the tribal community (Raj et al., 2016).
- 4) **Arbiter Forms of Village Council:** Tribes manifesting individualistic tendencies, coupled with the absence of a developed traditional village council system, resort to an arbiter system. In this scenario, disputes are mediated through negotiation and reconciliation by individuals skilled in conflict resolution. Membership in this system remains impermanent and lacks representation as an authoritative body within the village. The arbiter system primarily serves as a conflict-resolution mechanism, determining culpability and prescribing fines and compensation for transgressors. Nevertheless, it suffers from inherent limitations, including favoritism towards influential individuals, vulnerability of the weaker and poorer members, non-binding decisions, a deficiency in comprehensive justice delivery, and reliance on the arbiter system for all forms of settlements (Raj et al., 2016).

Despite their disadvantages, the arbiter system holds considerable importance for tribes like the Nyshis, Mismis, and Adi in Arunachal Pradesh, where regular village councils are absent. In this system, arbiters adjudicate disputes among individuals and villagers, guided by the customary ethics embedded in their community's laws. This unique system of dispute resolution has long-standing significance for these communities (Chakravarty, 2017). Scholars have categorized Arunachal Pradesh's village councils into three major types based on their framework: democratic, theocratic, and chieftaincy (Karna, 2019). K.A.A. Raja, the former Chief Commissioner of the region, identified five traditional village council

types, namely republican, autocratic, individualistic, theocratic, and Apatanii (Ning, 2015).

Structurally, village councils among the Adis (Kebang), Apataniis (Buliang), Monpas (Tsorgen), Nyishis (Nyele), Noctes (Ngothun), Tangsas (Nockthung), Sherdukpens (Jung), and Idu Mismis (Abala) exhibit a higher level of organization, making them the primary community entities for governance (Chakravarty, 2017). This organizational superiority is especially evident when compared to other tribes (Ning, 2015). Arunachal Pradesh is home to a diverse array of tribes, each with its distinct village council system, varying in nomenclature, power structure, composition, and functions. Some tribes, like the Nocte and Wancho, have similar functional and compositional aspects in their village councils, despite differing local names. Gerontocracy is a common feature, with village elders being revered for their experience and skills, often occupying leadership positions. Even in chieftaincy systems like those of the Nocte and Wancho, the village chiefs seek counsel from elders when faced with complex matters (Chakravarty, 2017).

3. POST-INTRODUCTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ

Before the advent of the Panchayati Raj system in Arunachal Pradesh, traditional village councils played a pivotal role in tribal societies. Prior to 1969, there were no representative institutions in these communities apart from the village council, which enjoyed a relatively interference-free domain (Bhattacharjee, 2021). However, the introduction of modern political structures like Panchayati Raj significantly altered their functioning and representation methods. The impact of Panchayati Raj varies among different tribes, with some tribes experiencing a strengthening of their traditional village councils' role (Ning, 2015). To this day, most village councils continue to operate much as they did before, handling both criminal and civil cases, except for murder and other heinous crimes (Chakravarty, 2017). Both traditional village councils and the Panchayati Raj system aim to decentralize power among villagers, but they differ in their formal and informal nature. Panchayati Raj is a formal institution with members elected through voting, while traditional village councils consist of elders who join without elections. While modern village councils predominantly focus on development issues, traditional councils handle both developmental and social matters within the community (Bhattacharjee, 2021). Members of traditional village councils and Panchayati Raj can interchange roles and participate in each other's proceedings. However, their roles and functions remain mostly independent. The introduction of Panchayati Raj has not drastically impacted the traditional village council's functions, which have endured for generations (Ning, 2015).

The emergence of Panchayati Raj did bring some changes to the status of traditional village councils. However, it also fostered cooperation between modern Panchayati Raj structures and village councils in various areas, making them interdependent to some extent (Chakravarty, 2017). Although the authority of the village council has eroded to some extent, this change cannot be attributed solely to Panchayati Raj; other factors have also contributed (Bhattacharjee, 2021). In certain cases, political parties indirectly influence the functioning of village councils, leading to more serious disputes and party-based groupism, potentially resulting in partiality (Karna, 2019). Before 1992, Panchayat member elections were conducted through customary methods, such as raising hands, with no involvement of political parties. However, this practice has since evolved, with direct political party participation in Panchayat elections becoming common (Bhattacharjee, 2021). In contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, traditional village leaders receive less respect

and authority than they once did. Their powers are now primarily confined to judiciary matters and minor developmental tasks, with Panchayat leaders handling more significant development issues. Until the 1990s, village council leaders held more comprehensive authority, covering nearly all village affairs. However, villagers now have the option to seek help from Gao Bura and Panchayat members for specific problems (Chakravarty, 2017).

At present, all judicial matters in a village are handled by its Gao Bura, with assistance from Panchayat members. Nevertheless, traditional village council leaders still play a crucial role in common village cases, such as dowry disputes, child marriages, crop damage, divorce, land boundary disputes, quarrels, adultery, elopement, loan repayment, house trespass, and attempted murder (Bhattacharjee, 2021). The functioning of traditional village councils is evolving at the village level. Minor cases or disputes within a village are often resolved directly between the involved parties, with the mediation of influential individuals from the community, bypassing the village council (Ning, 2015). The introduction of Panchayati Raj and its intervention has not made a significant impact on the traditional self-governing institutions in Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, the authority of village councils has undergone certain changes. A notable change is the increased participation of women in the decision-making process, which was traditionally limited in some tribes' village councils under the traditional governance system at the village level (Karna, 2019).

4. PUROIKS: ARUNACHAL'S ENSLAVED INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

The Puroik tribe, an indigenous community residing in the Northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, has remained historically obscured due to their marginalized and enslaved status. Referred to as the "Puroiks" since January 26, 1976, they inhabit 106 villages dispersed throughout the state, with a significant cluster of 56 villages in East Kameng District, 35 in Kurung Kumey, 5 in Papumpare, 6 in Upper Subansiri (cohabiting with other tribal communities), and 2 villages in West Kameng. It is noteworthy that some villages have been excluded from official records due to depopulation caused by outmigration or other factors. The Puroiks have traditionally subsisted on Rangbang, a staple food derived from the starch of the wild sago palm tree, and relied on forest resources for sustenance. However, in recent times, the availability of rice in local markets has prompted a shift in their dietary practices. Linguistically, they are believed to have affiliations with the Tibeto-Mongoloid language family, and they have developed a distinct local dialect, setting them apart from other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

Historical records serve as invaluable sources shedding light on the enslavement endured by the Puroik community in Arunachal Pradesh. Eminent scholars such as C.R. Stonor (1972), Verrier Elwin (2006), Col. Grewal (1997), and R.K. Deori (1982) have diligently documented the servile conditions that the Puroiks endured. Neighboring tribes like the Aka, Mijis, and Nyishis often labelled them as "Sulung" or "slaves." These indigenous tribes, wielding economic advantages and dominance, exploited the vulnerabilities of the Puroiks, effectively subjecting them to prolonged enslavement. C.R. Stonor's work, in particular, furnishes significant historical context, suggesting that the Puroiks and Buguns (also known as Kowas) were originally a single tribe that migrated from the north. This theory implies that the Sulung tribe, to which the Puroiks belonged, had a deep-rooted presence in Arunachal Pradesh, pre-dating the arrival of other tribal groups in the region. The book "Singpho-Puroik Relations: A Century of Conflict and Conciliation" authored

by Amrit Saikia (2010) further delves into the historical interactions between the Singpho tribe and the Puroiks, illuminating the power dynamics and the Puroiks' servitude within the broader context of regional relations (Saikia, 2010).

The historical narrative surrounding the relationship between the Puroik people and their erstwhile masters has garnered scholarly attention since Dr. C. Von Furer Haimendorf first brought it to the forefront in 1944-1945 (Haimendorf, 1944-1945). Subsequent insights into this complex dynamic were acquired through the visits of C.R. Stonor from 1945 to 1948, and an expedition in 1966 and 1968, during which R.K. Deory played a significant role (Stonor, 1945-1948; Deory, 1968). Deory's field report emphasized the lack of freedom experienced by the Puroiks within their indigenous territories (Deory, 1968). Particularly, in the northern and remote areas, the Puroiks cohabited with the Daflas, now known as Nyishis, who had, over time, subjected them to a state of virtual servitude, a phenomenon corroborated by Savitri G. Burman (Burman, Year). This assertion aligns with the accounts provided by Jha, S.D., in his book titled "Arunachal Pradesh: Rich Land and Poor People," where the Puroiks are described as the oldest inhabitants of the region, dwelling in the remote high hills of the East Kameng District. Over the course of history, they had become subjugated by the Bangnis, later recognized as the Nyishis, a dominant tribal group in the area (Jha, 1988). The Puroiks were systematically compelled to toil as forced laborers in the fields, devoid of any entitlement to wages, thus fostering a master-serf relationship akin to that of an Atto and Darlo (Jha, 1988).

The responsibilities shouldered by the Puroiks on behalf of their masters encompassed a broad spectrum of tasks. They were coerced into labor during jungle clearing, field burning, and harvesting seasons in the domains of their former masters, without remuneration. Moreover, they were enlisted to transport harvested paddy to the storehouses of their overlords and tasked with constructing protective fences around cultivated fields to shield them from domestic animals such as pigs, goats, cows, and mithuns (Brosfrontales). Additionally, they were frequently mobilized to gather forest resources for the construction of dwellings and were frequently engaged in hunting and fishing expeditions on their masters' behalf. Failure to relinquish a wild animal, if killed by a Puroik, often led to the confiscation of domestic animals and corporal penalties. The Puroiks were also deployed as porters during their masters' extensive trading expeditions, which traversed various regions in search of essential commodities like salt and iron, relying on a barter system (Jha, 1988). During inter-village and village-to-village conflicts, the Puroiks were often thrust into frontline positions, confronting their adversaries. They were participants in raiding missions, which involved looting, pillaging, and marauding (Jha, 1988). Furthermore, the Puroiks found themselves pressed into the role of messengers or couriers, tasked with conveying verbal messages from one location to another as per their masters' instructions. In addition to these duties, they were responsible for a wide array of household tasks and miscellaneous jobs as demanded by their former masters. This master-slave relationship was not unique to the Puroiks but extended to other tribes such as the Nyishis, Mijis, and Akas in the Se-La Sub Agency and Kameng Frontier Division, now known as East Kameng. Each of these tribes had its own set of customs and practices pertaining to the institution of slavery (Jha, 1988).

Among the Nyishis in the East Kameng area, two categories of slaves were recognized: Puroik Slaves, known as Puroik Darlo, and Nyishi Slaves, referred to as Bangni Nyera. Male slaves were designated as Nyera, while female slaves were known as Pagney. In the Miji community, male slaves were termed Nalu, and female

slaves were referred to as Khrangln. The Aka community also had a dual system of slavery, distinguishing between Klowes, who were purchased, and Spachhes, who were captured during raids. Captives taken during raids were often assimilated into the slave population. Additionally, individuals who committed certain offenses and were overpowered by aggrieved persons could be reduced to slavery. In cases of debt, if one person owed another and could not repay, the creditor had the prerogative to seize them and subject them to servitude. The offspring of slaves inherited their slave status, perpetuating the institution in these communities (Jha, 1988). In the Aka areas, Klowes were typically procured from the Nyishis, whereas Spachhes were individuals captured during raids. In Miji regions, the Puroik Abors, a marginalized group with less power, often fell victim to Miji attacks, resulting in their enslavement. Additionally, individuals who owed debts to affluent Mijis and were unable to meet their obligations could also be enslaved by their creditors (Jha, 1988). Indeed, the Puroiks constitute a unique community with their distinct dialect, predominantly inhabiting remote jungles. Initially, they were not subject to Nyishi domination; however, a longstanding practice gradually evolved, leading to the enslavement of a considerable portion of the Puroik population under Nyishi masters. This phenomenon prompts critical questions concerning their social status and treatment within their respective communities. In regions predominantly dominated by the Nyishis, while there may not be specific slave clans, Puroiks in servitude are generally treated amicably by their masters and are often considered part of their masters' families. Nevertheless, in broader social contexts, Puroik slaves occupy a lower social stratum than their masters. Slaves do have the opportunity to secure their freedom by repaying their dues to their masters, subject to mutual agreement. Captives taken in warfare, raids, or those enslaved due to crimes or debts may negotiate their release through ransom, compensation, or debt repayment, facilitated by their relatives (Jha, 1988).

As discussed in Taba's study, "Emancipation and Identity Formation: The Puroik Experience in Arunachal Pradesh" (2023), individuals in the master-slave dynamic are bound by cultural taboos that forbid masters from engaging in sexual relations with a slave's wife or daughters. The primary role of slaves revolves around agricultural labor, which serves to support both their own livelihoods and those of their masters' households. In addition to their agricultural duties, slaves are tasked with various domestic chores. They are essentially considered the property of their masters, obliged to undertake any assigned tasks. In return, masters bear the responsibility of providing food and shelter not only for the slaves but also for their families. Typically, slaves do not adopt distinct clothing or hairstyles that set them apart from free individuals. However, they may often exhibit a lack of cheerfulness and manifest an inferiority complex, which contributes to their reserved behavior in social interactions. Slaves do have the permission to possess movable property, and with the consent of their masters, they can even acquire plots of land. Nevertheless, cultivation of such land is contingent upon the completion of assigned tasks for their masters. Historically, when slaves worked in the plains, a significant portion of their earnings was yielded to their masters. When living separately from their masters' households, slaves would present tokens such as cloth and salt as a sign of courtesy (Taba, 2023).

Except for Puroik slaves residing in disparate regions, slaves generally do not have separate residences. Masters, in the case of slave grooms, cover the bride price for their wives, while the masters of slave daughters receive the bride price. In the event of a slave's attempted escape, the master endeavours to recapture them. In successful recaptures, runaway slaves may face mistreatment or be sold to other individuals. In cases where a runaway slave seeks refuge in another village and

eludes recapture, the master may procure another individual from that village as a replacement slave. Disputes arising from runaway slaves could escalate into inter-village raids if not resolved amicably. In the event of a slave's death at the hands of the master, no obligation exists for the master to provide an explanation or compensation, although, in rare instances, the slave's relatives may seek compensation for the death. In the instance of a dispute, the aggrieved party may seek retribution against the master. Similarly, if a free individual kills another person's slave, they must either provide compensation or offer one of their own slaves as restitution. Failure to fulfill these conditions may result in the aggrieved party exacting retribution on a slave from the offending village. When a slave commits an offense, it is the master's responsibility to provide compensation for the wrongdoing (Taba, 2023).

Puroik villages typically lack a headman, and each individual maintains a close association with either the Bangni (Nyishis) or the Miji community. Their interaction with the Bangnis is intertwined with the narrative of the Mithun, a critical element in the context of bride price. According to Nyishis, their esteemed ancestor bestowed Mithuns upon both Nyishis and Puroiks. However, Puroiks consumed all the Mithuns they received and consequently found themselves indebted to the Nyishis. This indebtedness effectively rendered the Puroiks subservient to the Bangnis, who became their masters. Puroiks, in contrast, dispute this account, asserting that they once existed independently, with Nyishis gaining access to their lands only at a later stage. Over time, they established a relationship grounded in trade, bartering goods such as salt, beads, clothing, tools, Mithuns, and local alcohol. Puroiks often had to offset these goods through labor, as they lacked the financial resources for cash payments. The borrowing of Mithuns for bride price ceremonies further solidified their indebtedness to the Nyishis. The Puroiks argue that not all Nyishis hold the right to assert mastery over them, but only those from whom they borrowed Mithuns (Taba, 2023).

As a consequence of their inability to settle their debts, certain Puroiks continued to exist in a state of servitude, albeit under a distinctive arrangement. Unlike other Nyishi slaves referred to as Nyera and Pagney, they did not dwell within their masters' residences but maintained their own villages, distant from Nyishi settlements. In contrast to Nyera and Pagney, Puroiks were not entirely reliant on their masters for daily necessities such as sustenance, shelter, and clothing. They provided labor for their masters only when their services were requisitioned, predominantly aiding in Jhum cultivations, land clearance, crop harvesting, and the preparation of wild sago (Tasha) for the Nyishis. In the late 1960s, C.R. Stonor conducted research within Puroik-inhabited regions of the Kameng Frontiers, shedding light on the intricate partnership between Puroiks and the Bangnis (Nyishis). This relationship was shaped by historical indebtedness, labor exchange, and the intricate dynamics of master-slave interactions (Stonor, 1960s).

5. PUROIKS AND THEIR VILLAGE COUNCIL

For centuries, the Puroiks have existed as bonded laborers under the Nyishis and Mijis tribes in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They were historically referred to as "slaves," although this term should be understood in a context different from the Western notion of slavery. Their existence was characterized by constrained living spaces, restricted work opportunities, and the need to operate under the authority and direction of their tribal owners. In the cultural context of the Puroiks, the term "Sulung" does not carry derogatory or disparaging connotations; rather, it represents their recognized identity as a community that coexisted alongside

neighboring groups. The Puroiks themselves also referred to their community as "Sulung." However, in 1976, the term "Sulung" was officially replaced with "Puroik" as it was considered more appropriate and less derogatory. Simultaneously, the Puroiks were officially declared liberated from the control of their former masters under the Bounded Labour Abolition Act, 1976. Nevertheless, when the researcher consulted the elderly members of the community, it became evident that the term "Sulung" was not perceived as derogatory within their community. Instead, it was viewed positively and was never synonymous with "slave." The stigma associated with this community stemmed from their historical subjugation and domination by neighboring tribes, namely the Bangnis (now Nyishis) and Bangros (now Mijis) of East Kameng, as well as the Nyishis of Papumpare, lower Subansiri, and Kurung Kumey districts. It is worth noting that scholars such as Haimendorf and R.K. Deory have previously defined the term "Sulung" as 'slave.' However, these definitions primarily reflect the perception and status of the Puroiks in the eyes of other sections of society. Although they lived as bonded laborers under the aforementioned tribes, the term "Sulung" does not inherently imply 'slave' within the cultural context of the Puroik community.

6. THE JOKOM: THE PUROIK VILLAGE COUNCIL

Similar to other tribes in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Puroik community possesses its traditional village council. This council serves as a platform for addressing social matters and adjudicating cases that arise at the village level, in accordance with customary laws upheld by the inhabitants. This informal traditional village council is known as 'Jokom,' which translates to 'gathering or get-together of people.' Some scholars have previously referred to it as 'Kabua-Atok,' the village council of Puroiks. However, my field survey findings reveal a different interpretation. The term 'Kubua-Atok' can be dissected to understand its meaning more accurately. 'Kubua' refers to 'village,' and 'Atok' denotes 'master' or 'owner.' It is important to note that the Puroiks did not have village chiefs apart from their former masters belonging to the Nyshi and Miji tribes. These masters were in control of certain families or even a single family within the Puroik community. Consequently, neither a Miji nor a Nyishi held the position of the chief of an entire Puroik village. Therefore, it is inappropriate to refer to 'Kubua-Atok' as the traditional village council of Puroiks. In essence, 'Kubua-Atok' signifies the head of a household or family rather than the leader of the entire village. The confusion surrounding this matter may have arisen due to misunderstandings between researchers and the respondents during interviews. When previous scholars inquired about the village council and village head, the Puroiks might have mistakenly assumed that they were being asked about the head of a household, leading them to respond with 'kubua-atok.' This discrepancy highlights the need for precise communication during research interviews.

In this context, R.K. Deori correctly pointed out that the Puroiks did not possess either a council of elders or a well-organized village council to address disputes and related matters. However, in matters pertaining to the maintenance of law and order within the villages, their former masters assumed responsibility, and their decisions held binding authority over the concerned parties, ultimately being treated as final judgments. It is important to note that the masters did not actively participate in such decision-making processes, especially in cases exclusively involving the Puroik community. These matters were typically resolved through informal village gatherings known as 'Mololure.' The origins of the Puroik village council remain somewhat elusive, but it is believed to have been influenced by their erstwhile

masters, the Nyshis and Mijis, through cultural interactions that evolved within the master-slave relationship. This has resulted in the functioning and deliberative nature of their village council bearing striking similarities to that of the Nyshi masters.

7. THE JOKOM SYSTEM COMPARED TO VILLAGE COUNCILS

The Jokom system within the Puroik tribe bears distinctions from the conventional village councils exemplified by Apatanil's Buliang and Kebang of Adis. Unlike the village councils, the Jokom lacks a codified set of rules governing membership. In this framework, male villagers are afforded preferential treatment in gaining membership in the council, whereas females are only considered for exceptional cases where the council deems their involvement relevant for decision-making. Eligibility for participation extends to the heads of families and elderly members within the village. The selection of a 'Miriopangbo,' responsible for interpreting cases and serving as the head of the council during gatherings, is a pivotal aspect of the Jokom. The chosen individual must possess eloquence, an in-depth understanding of customary laws within the community, and the ability to interpret matters with active engagement from the involved parties. The decisions rendered by the Miriopangbo carry binding and final authority. Notably, there is no defined tenure for the Miriopangbo; their role continues as long as they maintain impartiality in adjudicating cases and demonstrate the courage to make decisions on societal issues within the village. In contrast to the well-structured village councils in Apa Taniis of Buliang and Kebang of Adis, where representatives from each clan and every adult male in the village become council members, the Puroik society organizes the Jokom at two distinct levels. The village-level Jokom is convened to address social issues affecting the entire village or developmental concerns. However, when conflicts arise between two parties involving individual matters, the relatives of both the complainant and the defendant participate in the Jokom. In such individual cases, each party selects its Miriopangbo, individuals who are typically affluent and possess a profound knowledge of tradition and oratory skills.

8. LEADERSHIP, RITUALS, AND JUSTICE IN THE PUROIK JOKOM

The leadership system within the Jokom is not based on hereditary privileges; rather, it hinges on the wealth of individuals within the village. Typically, the wealthiest person is favored for leadership roles. Here, any individual with talent, oratory prowess, and a deep understanding of customary laws has a fair chance of assuming leadership responsibilities. Those individuals who possess the ability to speak persuasively and convincingly are often bestowed the special status of Miriopangbo within the council. It is important to note that Miriopangbo does not receive compensation or a share of any fines imposed on culprits. However, fines collected, usually in the form of meat from cows, pigs, goats, etc., are distributed among the council members present during the proceedings. The leader of the council, the Miriopangbo, may receive a separate cash amount or other forms of compensation from either of the involved parties. The specific amount or type of compensation is not fixed but depends on the circumstances of the case and the preferences of the complainant or party involved.

Traditionally, the honor of leadership within the council is bestowed upon individuals of affluent backgrounds who possess the skill to articulate oral

arguments in cases and social matters in accordance with customary laws. These individuals are entrusted with the responsibility when a culprit is found guilty and unable to pay the imposed compensation or fine during the Jokom proceedings. The Miriopangbo, or middleman in the case, may assume two types of responsibilities: (a) collecting cash or kind on behalf of the culprit or victim, as dictated by the case's outcome, and (b) providing an assurance for the payment of fines and other obligations on behalf of the culprit or victim when the culprit is unable to fulfill them on the day of the verdict. However, if the fine or compensation is not repaid by the culprit on behalf of the Miriopangbo, it becomes the primary duty of the culprit to reimburse the cash amount or exchange materials through any available means. Failure to do so results in the loss of social status and societal esteem in the eyes of the community.

The primary functions of the Jokom are to resolve disputes and deliberate upon societal matters within the village. The scope of powers and functions vested in the Jokom is not restricted; rather, it encompasses a wide range of social subjects and cases, ranging from minor to major issues, falling under the jurisdiction of the traditional village council. The Jokom's areas of operation extend across socio-economic, socio-judicial, socio-religious, and socio-cultural dimensions of society. In essence, it fulfills two broad functions: judicial and social. Its principal objective is to uphold peace and social harmony within the village. Remarkably, the Jokom relies solely on oral traditions for its functioning, lacking a formal written legal code, with knowledge transmitted verbally from generation to generation. The composition of the Jokom includes Gao Buras, elderly individuals, influential relatives of both parties involved in disputes, and Miriopangbo. However, it should be noted that non-invited villagers may also participate in the council if they express a willingness to do so. A distinctive feature of the Jokom within the Puroik community is the participation of former masters, specifically the Nyishis and Mijis, in the council's proceedings. These erstwhile masters bear responsibility for maintaining law and order within the village, and their decisions hold significant authority and are binding on the concerned parties, often serving as the final verdict. However, the decisions rendered by the masters in the council tend to be more lenient and biased in nature. In many instances, minor cases are resolved directly by the villagers themselves through informal village gatherings known as Mololure, without the involvement of the former masters.

Nevertheless, the role and presence of these former masters in the council become mandatory and obligatory in cases of significant offenses, such as murder, rape, substantial debts, or loans. In such instances, independent decisions cannot be made without the involvement of the former masters. Deori has pointed out that in major disputes or criminal cases, which may involve either the Puroik community members or disputes with the Nyishis, the presence of their respective masters is imperative, as decisions cannot be reached without their knowledge. Any decision reached independently by the Puroik community members, without the prior consent or involvement of their former masters, incurs punishment. In fact, for the resolution of any dispute or criminal case, the plaintiff must invite not only their masters but also the defendant's master, in addition to all the elders of the concerned village or villages, for a hearing before the Jokom. Furthermore, it is worth noting that historically, the Puroik community members have been virtual subjects of the Nyishis and Mijis. Consequently, major disputes have been traditionally resolved by their masters, following consultations with the elders of their respective villages. However, in recent times, following their emancipation from bonded labor under the Nyishis and Mijis, the Puroik community has taken the initiative to settle disputes and address issues through the Miriopangbo without

prior notification to their former masters. They seek the presence of their former masters in the council only when they deem it necessary. Importantly, the participation of Nyishi individuals in the trial is no longer perceived as a superior or masterly presence but rather as that of relatives or members of the same community. Furthermore, no remuneration or compensation is provided to Nyishis for their attendance at the proceedings involving the Puroik community.

The Puroik people employ oaths and ordeals as alternative and subsidiary methods for dispensing justice within their community. Central to this process are the Pehe, who play a significant role in the administration of oaths and ordeals. These practices are exclusively reserved for situations where an individual is suspected of committing a crime but refuses to admit guilt before the council. The act of taking an oath is referred to as Toatrena. Interestingly, the oaths and ordeal practices in Puroik society bear a striking resemblance to those of the Nyishi society. This similarity is attributed to the influence of Nyishi practices, as the Nyishi people believe that the highest form of justice can be attained through the intervention of supernatural powers. Similarly, the Puroik people employ oaths and ordeals as an alternative method of justice administration within their society. These measures are reserved for extreme cases where parties are unwilling to confess their guilt in front of the jokam (a gathering of people) and Mirio pangbo (case settler). In such instances, villagers and complainants prefer to seek justice through a supernatural court with the assistance of the Pehe, who act as priests. This traditional court employs ritual chanting by the Pehe to identify culprits.

The traditional administration of justice occurs in the presence of most villagers, as well as the relatives of the complainant and the accused. One of the commonly practiced trials in the Puroik community is the Toid or Toatrena (oath-taking). Various objects are tied together on a stick and handed over to the village Pehe. The priest then chants the names of supernatural gods, invoking them to bestow justice upon both parties and punish the guilty party. The accused individual is required to bite each object on the stick one by one, declaring, "If I am involved in this crime, you must kill or eat me anytime, anywhere, but if I'm not, I shall be ever protected and blessed with good health and wealth." These objects include Nopoang Toang (Tiger's teeth), Jaje Toang (Snake's head), Koa (water), Stup Toang (wild Bear's teeth), Stup Akhu (skin), as well as stones, teeth of large fish, and parts from elephants and crocodiles. In modern times, they also incorporate wheel tires as part of the oath objects.

Another method of administering justice is through the ordeal known as Sadung Dawa (boiling water trial). During this trial, the water is initially heated in a bamboo tube, and the accused is instructed to place their naked hand into the boiling water. It is believed that if the accused emerges from the ordeal without injury, they are deemed innocent and released. Samoi Jalak, a form of black magic, is employed as a revenge ordeal against an accused individual or thief who refuses to confess their crime before the community and the complainant. This practice is conducted solely by the Pehe, without the need for an assistant priest. During Samoi Jalak, the priest invokes various malevolent spirits and convinces them to bring harm to the person accused of the illegal act. According to Puroik belief, this ordeal results in the spiritual demise of the accused. It is important to note that there are no written records pertaining to the collection of evidence or the procedural aspects of arbitration within the Puroik community. Instead, these practices are passed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next. In the Sulung society, examinations involving omens, such as Tudua Dupet (chicken liver examination), Duped Jang (pig liver examination), and Meri Jang (boiled egg examination), are also

conducted as methods of delivering justice. These examinations are carried out by the Pehe while sacrificing the mentioned domestic animals. The severity of punishment varies depending on the specific case and the nature of the crime committed. Punishments for offenses such as sexual involvement and theft tend to be more severe and can involve physical torture, fines, and compensation for lost property to the victims.

9. FUNCTIONING OF THE JOKOM COUNCIL

Within the operational framework of the Puroik Village Council, a distinct protocol governs the conduct of its participants. Notably, during council sessions, not all members are permitted to address the assembly. Only esteemed elders from the village are granted the privilege to speak, primarily concerning social matters. However, if the assembly pertains to judicial proceedings, only Miriopangbo, in conjunction with the concerned parties, is authorized to engage in deliberations. In contrast to certain other tribal village councils in Arunachal Pradesh, Puroik's council does not impose strict restrictions on female participation in the Jokom, and at times, women are accorded the right to express their opinions if deemed necessary by the council.

Nonetheless, the council remains inactive until it is solicited to intervene in disputes or incidents occurring within the village. Typically, before a dispute or case is brought before the Jokam, it is initially mediated by influential individuals from both the complainant and defendant sides without involving the public. On numerous occasions, resolutions have been reached amicably with the assistance of elderly representatives from both parties. However, in cases where disputes persist despite the involvement of the parties' extended families, the matter is referred to the Jokom for further adjudication. When a case is brought before the Jokom, on a scheduled date and time, the involved parties and the Miriopangbo (leader of the Jokom) convene either at the residence of one of the parties, their relatives, or an open location within the village to proceed with the case. After a comprehensive presentation and defense of the case by both parties, the Miriopangho impartially delivers a verdict.

Throughout the proceedings of the council, council members and participants are provided with Pouuh, a locally prepared rice or millet beer, as a gesture of hospitality by the party on whose behalf the case is being conducted. Additionally, during the proceedings, Gao Bura (village chief) and village elders are permitted to offer brief remarks on the case in accordance with community customs. Nevertheless, the council's proceedings are not documented in writing, primarily due to the prevalent illiteracy among council members and the absence of a formal recording system. This oral tradition has been passed down through generations. While references to past cases are utilized during proceedings, they are conveyed solely through oral accounts in adherence to customary land laws.

10. CHANGING DYNAMICS: PUROIK VILLAGE GOVERNANCE IN MODERN TIMES

The enduring roles and functions within the traditional village council of the Puroik community have persisted throughout the annals of time. However, significant changes have transpired, particularly concerning the powers and functions vested in the Jokom, the head of the council. These alterations can be primarily attributed to the implementation of the Asam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945. This regulation introduced a fundamental framework

for the appointment of Gaoburas as the sole village authorities, thereby designating Gaoburas as the administrative representatives of the village under Section 5 of the aforementioned regulation. Consequently, the regulation assumed control over the village authority's powers, establishing the Gaoburas as the principal figures in modern village leadership.

In contemporary times, the Gao Buras play a pivotal role within the council, often resolving disputes without formal reference to the traditional village council. Nonetheless, this regulation does acknowledge the importance and authority of the village council, bestowing it with some official power. However, it also erodes certain traditional powers previously held by the village council, particularly in matters of law enforcement and criminal justice, wherein the village councils are now required to operate within the framework of the Asam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945. Consequently, the role and position of the Gao Bura are now legally established, while the village council retains its customary character. As a result, the Gao Bura carries out duties at the village level in three capacities: first, as a representative of village administration responsible for maintaining law and order; second, as the headman overseeing communication between villagers and the administration, and managing the welfare and internal administration of the village; and third, as the Chairman of the village council, where it exists, presiding over council meetings or gatherings. While the council makes decisions by majority vote, the ultimate verdict rests with the Gao Bura, who typically respects the consensus of public opinion. In cases where more than one Gao Bura is appointed, the senior-most Gao Bura assumes ultimate responsibility.

Despite the evolving landscape, the institution of Gao Buras continues to function actively at the village level, albeit with declining prominence. In the 1940s, it served as the cornerstone of the NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency) administration and wielded the power to levy fines of up to Rs 50. Presently, both institutions, Gaoburas and village councils, coexist separately without major confrontations, each with its own jurisdiction and limitations in addressing village issues or cases. Depending on the nature of the cases or crimes, they may seek the assistance of either side, and sometimes, both parties approach both the Gaoburas and the village council for resolution. In the past, the village council was the sole entity responsible for settling cases within the village. Proceedings within the council did not involve written records; instead, verdicts were orally transmitted from person to person. However, in contemporary times, council members, such as the Jokom, maintain written records of cases in the form of agreements and affidavits for future reference. In cases where council members lack literacy skills, they invite educated individuals, often relatives of council members or the involved parties, to draft these written agreements.

Furthermore, the introduction of the modern political institution known as Panchayati Raj has ushered in notable changes in the functioning of the Jokom system within Puroik society. Up until the 1960s, village-level administration was relatively straightforward and non-competitive, with government nominations determining village leaders, including MPs, administrators, and village heads. Elections and selections were not customary for choosing leaders. However, the introduction of Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh brought significant changes to the landscape, with educated youths emerging as the new leaders of Panchayats. Consequently, they replaced the Jokom as the village leaders. This transformation gave rise to a different form of politics, as these traditional leaders were not well-versed in modern administrative methods. Consequently, they ceded much of their

authority and former prestige to the new leadership. The new leaders ushered in a novel era of political dynamics that extended beyond the village and tribe.

In discussing the changes in the functioning of traditional village councils in Arunachal Pradesh, two types of leaders have emerged within the village: traditional and modern leaders. Traditional leadership is inherently rooted in social structures such as clans, tribes, families, property, inheritance, and similar factors. These leaders wielded substantial influence in the past and continue to play a vital role in village politics today. This form of leadership is often referred to as "Non-active leadership of grassroots" in the modern operational context, as well as "Imposed leadership," due to its recruitment through non-elective means. In this model, leadership qualifications are rooted in knowledge of customs, heritage, and tribal traditions, granting traditional leaders control over various aspects of village life. In contrast, modern leadership is democratically elected, competitive, and more enlightened. This form of leadership, often referred to as "developmental leadership," emphasizes individual qualities and capabilities as key criteria for leadership. The introduction of this modern leadership has transformed traditional non-competitive leadership into a modern, competitive leadership model.

One of the significant factors that has brought about changes in the functioning of the Jokom system within the Puroik society is the process of religious conversion. A considerable portion of the population has embraced Christianity, which has led to a transformation in their cultural practices, customs, beliefs, and traditions. These elements are intricately interconnected in terms of their application and significance. Typically, individuals who have converted to Christianity tend to forgo various rituals associated with their indigenous beliefs, traditional cultural practices, and social life. This decision is often rooted in the belief that such rituals entail substantial expenses, including provisions for food, accommodation, financial contributions, animal sacrifices, and adherence to taboos post-ritual. For some members of the community, these financial commitments become unsustainable, particularly in the context of the village's economic circumstances. Consequently, following their conversion, the Puroik people of Rawa village have abandoned many aspects of their indigenous belief system and certain customary laws in favor of their newfound religious faith. They have adopted alternative approaches to dispute resolution, choosing to settle cases through religious channels, invoking the name of Jesus Christ, and avoiding recourse to customary laws.

In instances where the disputants are both Christian, a leader or pastor from the church assumes the role of an arbitrator. This shift in the decision-making process has resulted in a significant loss of Puroik religious beliefs and rituals. Presently, they largely adhere to the same rituals and beliefs as the Nyishis, reflecting the transformative influence of Christianity on their cultural and spiritual practices. Despite these changes, the Jokom system continues to perform its socio-judicial functions, albeit with slight modifications in the deliberative process. Indeed, owing to its social, religious, administrative, and judicial significance, the Jokom system is expected to endure within Puroik society. However, the extent of its continuity with previous modes of deliberation and functionality will be contingent on the roles and responsibilities assumed by the new leadership within the community.

11. CONCLUSION

The traditional village council, known as the Jokom, among the Puroik people of Arunachal Pradesh, stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of tribal institutions in the face of changing societal dynamics. Embedded within the intricate fabric of Puroik society, the Jokom has evolved over time, responding to external influences, modern governance structures, and religious conversions. The Jokom, originally a council for social matters and dispute resolution, has undergone transformations in response to the Asam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945, the introduction of Panchayati Raj, and the spread of Christianity. These external factors have influenced the roles and functions of the Jokom, with the traditional leadership ceding some authority to modern leaders, elected under the Panchayati Raj system. Additionally, the adoption of Christianity has led to changes in cultural practices and dispute resolution methods, as some members of the community now turn to Christian leaders for arbitration. Despite these changes, the Jokom continues to hold significance in Puroik society. It serves as a historical and cultural anchor, maintaining its role as a platform for resolving disputes, fostering peace, and preserving traditional customs and values. The adaptability of the Jokom is evident in its incorporation of written records, the involvement of women in certain cases, and its ability to coexist with modern governance structures. The Puroik people, like many other indigenous communities, are navigating a delicate balance between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to the evolving demands of the modern world. The Jokom remains a vital institution in this process, offering a bridge between tradition and change. As the Puroik community continues to grapple with these dynamics, the future of the Jokom system will likely be shaped by the interplay of tradition, modernity, and the enduring spirit of the Puroik people.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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