CHAPTER - IV

TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS
OF THE ZELIANGRONG VILLAGES OF
MANIPUR
Basis for Establishment of a Village:

Traditionally Zeliangrong tribe performed several ritual ceremonies before they selected or established a new village. Once a Naga village was set up, they settled there permanently and hardly moved out to a new place except for some specific reason.¹ According to the British political agent R. Brown, the Zeliangrong people knowns as “The Kowpois were much attached to their villages as the former homes, the present graves of their ancestors were held in much esteem, and a village was only abandoned with the greatest reluctance.”²

The Reasons for Establishing a New Village were due to some Factors:

1. Over population
2. Frequent conflicts within existing village
3. Desire to settle in a more fertile village
4. Due to some differences in the family, etc.

Looking for a village site was considered very important by the Zeliangrong Nagas. In locating a suitable site for the village some selected members usually accompanied by elders would go to the place and look for suitable location. They would take the following factors into consideration:

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¹ R.R. Shimray, Origin and Culture of Nagas, (Delhi, 1983), p.43
1. A village site was proposed where there was sufficient water source.
2. They located a place which was not foggy and windy. In such a location sun rays were expected to radiate amply;
3. A village site was proposed not only where there was fertility of land but also a site where suitable place was kept for livestock;
4. A place where materials were available for house construction, and
5. The Zeliangrong community preferred hill tops as sites for villages so that they could forecast the weather, have a good view of other villages and defend themselves against outside attack or any intruders.³

The Zeliangrong Nagas had a clear-cut system of founding a new village called “Namsu-Namdimei” or “Namdoomei.” The traditional chanting used in the founding of Zeliangrong village was as follows:

3. Nthei thei Namsu kho tuethei, Bak kasuk pui naini? Sina bonlung pui nai ni? Kakhok kasiakpui nai ni?
   Kakhok kasiakpui nei ethei, He namsu kho nam dim kho tei.⁴
4. Nthei thei Namsu kho tuethei, Tanglum tanglaipui nai cho?
   Tanglum tanglaipui nai ethei, He nam su kho namdim kho tei.

⁴. Interview with Akham Gonmei, Ex-Secretary Union Pei, Zeliangrong Union, on August 31, 2002, Imphal.
The above mentioned passage is translated into English as follows:

1. Yes Long, long ago, it was proposed to find a new village, If there was a water source, If there was availability of water, oh! we could settle down in a village.

2. Long, long ago, it was proposed to find a village, Where there was a cock which crowed, Yes, then we could settle.

3. Long long ago, it was proposed to find a village, If there was a pig? If there was a dog? If there was a blacksmith? Yes, then we could settle.

4. Long, long ago, it was proposed to find a village, If there was a physician, priest, prophet or visioner? Yes, then we could settle down in a village.

The above traditional folksong is precise, which says that there should be a water source, cock, dog, pig, blacksmith, visioner or priest, etc.\(^5\)

Selection of New Site for Settlement:

The Zeliangrong tribe performed certain rites known as Daan-Saanmei or Daan-Madanmei for a selection of new site for settlement. But their way of performing the rites differed from village to village. The Zeliangrong had a

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patriarchal form of society, and hereditary was through the male line. So the youngest son in the family inherited his father's property and had better chance in succession to Chieftainship. That's why the elders in order to maintain their independent status and sovereignty used to leave behind their younger brothers and established themselves in other neighbouring places. They had freedom to choose sites for their own settlement. As a result, a number of villages came into existence in different areas of their settlement.

First, they had to collect paddy seeds to be planted in the selected site of the village. While digging the portion of ground to be planted, the villagers had to seek blessings from the god whom they worshipped. These prayers were performed to seek blessings from god for good production in the proposed site. According to traditional practice, after seven days the villagers would go to the site to locate the sprouting of grains to decide their new shifting place. But, if the grains did not grow or were eaten up by some wild beast the villagers would consider that as a bad omen and would not shift to the new site.

They had to undergo various stages of ceremonies as per customary practice before the inauguration of a new village.

6. Ibid. p. 23.
Omen Reading (Namrin Jaomei):

For predicting future prospects of the village, the villagers had to sacrifice a pig and its spleen was to be placed on a banana leaf for the priest or elders to study the signs and to predict the future. It was presumed that the nature of spleen of a pig (Guak pai) predicted the prospects of the village. Along with this, wine was offered to god by pouring it on the ground with recitals, and the cock was also to be sacrificed. By studying the movements of the legs of the dying cock the priest predicted the future prospect of the village. However, the foundation of the village depended upon the prediction of the priest who could predict the question of fertility of land, prospect of security from enemies and prosperity, etc. People respected the priest’s prediction to determine the settlement of the village.⁸

Once a site was chosen for settlement, village inauguration would take place by observing certain ritual ceremonies because without such ritualistic act of inauguration a village could not be considered a well-founded village. The act of ritual ceremony for village inauguration was called “ntup keimei” or “khun numei.” The inauguration function would start with lighting of fire. This step would be followed by erecting a village gate for their entry into the new site.⁹ The gate called “raengh” would have northern, southern, western and eastern directions.

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⁸ Interview with Akham Gonmei, Ex-Secretary Union Pei on 8 August Imphal, 2003.
Basis of Chieftainship:

Traditionally the Zelianrong people considered the one who first settled in the village as Chief. It was he who performed the ceremony for settlement in the new village. According to the traditional songs, a married man who desired to find his own village would do so by organising helpers under him in tracing new land unoccupied by others. If he could find the land he was considered as Chief (Nampou) by the villager. And if a group of persons went in search of such land for a village, the Chief had to be chosen from among themselves by observing omens.\textsuperscript{10}

But the divine method of choosing the Chief was performed by means of finding whose cock crowed first. Each person would sleep with a cock kept in the cage beside him. If the cock of a particular person started to crow first the owner of the cock was considered as Chief. \textsuperscript{11} The Chief would erect the village gate (Raengh). There would be two gates for the village which the Chief would owned both or one but sometimes another person or headman would also owned another gate if it fell on his own private land.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Interview with Akham Gonmei, Ex-Secretary, Union Pei, Zelionrong Union, September 31, 2002, Imphal.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Interview with C. P. Lungkubon, Inspector, Handloom, 19th October, Imphal, 2002.
\end{itemize}
In order to please the god, the owner of this gate would first dig out pit and offer wine, egg, ginger, etc. to the God. Whether he owned one or both the gates the Chief identified himself before the villagers that he owned the village, as such he was to be taken as the real master of the land. But at community level the emergence of Chieftainship was differently considered. According to V.V. Rao, a scholar of regional studies, the Chieftainship originated in the physical and intellectual power of any person. In other words, any person who had the ability to organise a force could become a Chief. 12

Position and Privileges of the Chief:

Every Zelianrong village was ruled by its own Chief called Nampou (Khullak). The Chief was given a prominent position at all social and religious gatherings and festivals of the village. The words of the Chief were obeyed respectfully and promptly. 13 He was considered as the leader in war, the owner of the village land and protector of the village. 14 He was entitled to a portion of the meat of all animals killed in the village during the festivals. The youths of the village helped him in cultivating his fields, and in the construction of his house. He was always offered the best rice beer (Zou-ngao) during the festivals. 15

15 V. Venkata Rao op. cit., p.118.
Succession of the Chief:

The Zeliangrong tribe recognised a hereditary tradition of Chieftainship. According to R. Brown, "Every village has three hereditary officers, namely, Khul-lakpa, Lup-lakpa and Lambu, any officers besides these are elected. Chieftainship was hereditary in most of the Naga tribes except for some other tribes like Ao and Lotha tribes of Nagaland." L. Gouragopal Singh commented that, "among the Marings there were two hereditary officers: Khulpu (the earliest man of the earliest clan to settle the village) and Khullakpa. The Chiru villages, though were small, usually had three village officers, the Khullakpa, the Khulpu and the Lambu, the first two being hereditary."

Traditionally the son succeeded his father after his death. The one who would succeed the Chief was supposed to be blameless and fit physically and mentally and be a married man. If the legitimate son of the ruling Chief was found to be incapable of holding such responsibilities due to physical or mental disability or if the Chief happened to be without any male issue the succession would pass on to the next nearest male relative.

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18. R.B. Shimray op cit., p. 52.
Powers and Functions of the Chief:

The Zeliangrong Chief enjoyed enormous powers. He was considered as the supreme authority in almost all affairs of the village. He was responsible for administration of his village and for the welfare of his subjects. A village Council composed of the elders of the village assisted the Chief of the village. The administration of justice, enforcement of executive function, maintenance of social practices and customary laws including performing religious rites were the areas under the institution of powerful Chieftainship.

Legal Power:

The Chief executed all legal functions and exercised his power as the highest authority in the village. In traditional society, no written documents were required but his verbal declaration based on customary laws was taken as final and binding. The Chief settled the village disputes, no doubt the village Council of elders assisted him. He settled the disputes according to traditional customary laws. Penalty was imposed according to the gravity of the offences by him.

In some village the Chief had a dual function as the religious and secular head of the village. As the religious head, the Chief was the first man to sow

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21. L.P. Vidyarthi op. cit., p.32.
22. A seminar paper presented by Dr. TS. Gangte, on "Retrospection of land use system under chieftainship among the tribals of Manipur". Organised by Manipur University Tribal Student's Union, Imphal, 27 February 2001, p.1.
23. V.V. Rao op. cit.,p.475.
seeds, the first to plant and the first to harvest. Although the actual religious worships and sacrifices, etc. were performed by the village priest, yet his presence in any religious ceremony was taken as essential. The executive functions of the Chief were greater in number than the religious functions. Some of the important functions were: He was responsible for the effective defence of the village, allotment of lands for cultivation among the villagers, settlement of disputes with other neighbouring villages, etc. The whole village affairs remained under the control and command of the village Chief.

Limitation of his Power:

The overall administration of the Zelianrong villages was run by a hereditary Chief in consultation with Council of elders. Unlike the Kukis who had a strong Chieftainship system, the Zelianrong Chief had relatively limited powers and while exercising his powers the village Chief was checked by the Council of elders.

There was no legal provision for removal of the Chief as there was no tenure in the traditional system. His removal could be of course, mooted and executed on the ground of mental and physical inability.

25. V.V. Rao op. cit., p. 118.
27. Interview with R. Gangmei, President, Rongmei Literature Society on 31st August Imphal, 2002.
The Village Priest (Tinku) and other Officials:

The village priest was given a very important and respectable place in the Zeliangrong society. There were some areas where he was more prominent than the Chief. The office of the priest was not hereditary. He was selected irrespective of his clan but for his knowledge and supernatural ability. He was supposed to be well-versed with all the traditional customary laws or practices. He had to act as a prophet and high priest in the village or region.

There was another junior or assistant priest called “Tinku Kiakja.” He performed the duties of high priest in his absence or at the demise of the high priest. He was to be chosen from any clan. He usually succeeded the high priest. “Banza” was another elderly group of people of the village who represented all the clans of the village. Their responsibility was to maintain orderliness in the religion as well as other aspects of the village community.

Role of the Priest:

The priest played an important role in the Zeliangrong village. He performed rites and rituals in the village and family related to worship and propitiations. All the works done in the name of god were to be done by the

29. Interview with T. Gommei Ex-Secretary Union Pei Z.U on 31st September, Imphal, 2002.
priest. "Genna" was to be declared by him. Sacrificial spot (Sangbam) was used by the priest only. Blessing (Tasuat Kaomei) was to be given by the priest for the rich harvest, good health, multiplication of population, increase in cattle, etc. The sowing of seeds, i.e., in the month of February or March ceremony was done by him every year.

Wherever an epidemic occurred (Rapian-Ripian simei) in the village, the priest would order for sacrifice and prayer to escape from the disease called "Reithakmei." This could be performed by any elderly man at the advice of the priest. 32 The priest was supposed to know which spirit was causing sickness to the person and what sacrifice would appease it.

There were certain rules and regulations to be maintained by the priest especially during offering prayer to god. The priest had to use different words to address different gods to whom he was praying like using the words Ho, he Aow-Wo, Intheithei. Ho-He was used for common god. Aow-Wo was used for greater god and inthei-thei was used for referring to history. 33

32. Interview with Mr. Lunkiang, an elderly man who has a vast knowledge of Zeliangrong customs and traditions, on September 14, Tamenglong, 2002.
33. Ibid.
Village Council:

The village Council of elders carried on the administration of the Zeliangrong village. Each village had their own village Council called "Feiki" in Zeme, "apaiki" in Liangmai and "Peikai" in Rongmei, composed of all the adult male members of the village of which the Chief was the head. All the villagers rich or poor were answerable to the village Council. The people of Zeliangrong Nagas held the village Council (pei) in high esteem.\textsuperscript{34}

Basis of Membership:

For the membership of the village the size of the village was to be taken into consideration. There was proportional representation from all the clans. Women were debarred from the membership of the village Council. The composition of member powers and functions of the Council varied from village to village. But the basic structure remained more or less the same and uniform.\textsuperscript{35}

Powers and Functions:

The village Council possessed administrative powers of the village.

The village Council or pei was a legislative organ of the village. General

\textsuperscript{34} Interview with Akham Gonmei, Ex-secretary Union Pei Z.U. on 31st September, Imphal, 2002.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
administration and formulation of policies were framed by this Council. The Council preserved cultural, customary and conventional laws. It had power to amend customary laws and incorporate new laws. The powers and functions of the village Council could be broadly divided into the following categories: (a) Executive, (b) Legislative, and (c) Judicial.

**Executive Functions:**

The village Council was the most powerful executive body in the village administration. The decision of the Council on all important matters was binding and final. It maintained inter-village relations. The Council members were the sole authority to enforce customary law and amend the unwritten customary laws which they followed. The Council members commanded villagers in their village jurisdiction, executed orders, took action against any village for violation of the order. The Council was responsible for maintaining peace, harmony and unity of the village.

Administration of the village was carried out by the village Council. In case a person failed to abide by the decisions of the Council, the Council had to take necessary actions against the person concerned as there were

innumerable taboos in the Naga society. Customary laws had such far reaching effects aiming the Zeliangrong people that they dare not trespass the sanctions of the customary laws.\textsuperscript{38}

The village Council administered justice, allocated land for cultivation, decided the time for annual festivals, sacrifices and generally, directed all the village activities - social, religious and economic according to their traditional laws and customs.\textsuperscript{39} It had a supreme defence power concerning hunting, fishing, etc. The village Council also dealt with the financial matters (of two individuals who would be responsible for collection) within the village. Rents of a village were to be paid in kinds, by collecting paddy from every household. Paddy in lieu of money or money in lieu of services were to be collected from the villagers. Also, any fine imposed on an individual was to be reserved for the Council’s fund.\textsuperscript{40}

In the religious side, the village Council was not taken as the real authority of religious rites and rituals but it had certain rights in this field too. The religious head of the village was the village priest and elders of the village constituted the Council. The priest always consulted the village Council on matters


\textsuperscript{39} L. Gaurogopal Singh op. cit., p. 43.

\textsuperscript{40} Thenhilung Kamei, op. cit., p. 27.
of religious festivals and performed all the traditional ritual ceremonies. The Council enforced the villagers to maintain strict observation of taboo.\textsuperscript{41}

**Legislative Functions:**

The Council being the general body framed laws and customary rules and regulations from time to time. Such rules and regulations were made when all the villagers attended the Council in full strength. Sometimes, it was observed that the Council could adopt even new laws concerning marriage, theft, property and lands to meet the demand of time and situation. In the legal system of Zeliangrong people, there was no capital punishment as such. The hardest punishment was imposition of fines & banishment of individual from the village. Though there was no written law, the Zeliangrong people strictly adhered to time tested customary laws handed down by their predecessors. These customary laws worked effectively in the minds of the people for these were inherent in their lives and society.

**Judicial Functions:**

The village Council of elders also worked as the Chief judicial court of the village.\textsuperscript{42} The Chief who was the supreme judge in deciding all civil and

\textsuperscript{41} T.H. Baba Chandra op. cit., p. 95.
\textsuperscript{42} Mangthoi, Thaimei op. cit., p. 407.
criminal cases of the village headed the Council. The village Council was the single court of justice and heard cases and disputes and passed verdicts. If the nature of the case was small only few members could settle it. But if the case was serious such as adultery, murder or death involving some perpetrators, the entire household representatives were to be called to attend the meeting.

The Zelangrong society like all other Naga tribes was based on the unwritten customary laws. Imposition of fines, punishment and justification of any case was done on the basis of these Zelangrong customary laws. All kinds of disputes and differences between families of the same clan were as far as possible decided by the clan elders. But if they could not solve the problems, the cases were brought to the village court.

Both criminal and civil cases were tried by the Council, which passed final judgments. These decisions were given by well-experienced elderly representatives of all clans. If the cases were vague and could not be solved peacefully, then the village Council resorted to taking of oath and ordeal. In boundary disputes, theft, etc. witnesses were to be produced.

44. V.V. Rao. op. cit., p. 124.
Oath and Ordeal:

Oath and ordeal were practised by the Zeliangrong people for settling any disputes and cases. The Zeliangrong people believed that any person who took revenge and punished the other fellow being, the guilty person, would be punished by the divine power. In cases where facts were difficult to find and impossible to solve then the last resort was to leave the parties to be tried with the help of supernatural power.46

Practising of Oaths for the Submission of Correct Facts:

The person concerned had to take an oath before the village elders or Chief and then he was supposed to submit the facts. It is believed that whatever the person said was based on truth. If he would tell a lie, the anger of god would destroy and punish the liar.47 An oath was taken in the following form- An accused was brought to swear by holding a fire brand taken out from furnace and said, while dipping the fire brand into a pot filled with water, that he would extinct or die like the fire if he would tell a lie. This form of oath was known as oath with fire and water.

47. L.P. Vidyarthi op. cit., p. 199.
Oath by consuming iron powder was taken by swearing that punishment would be made by the divine power if he was wrong. Oath by holding unnatural objects like thunderbolt or earth were collected from a site of landslide. These two objects were often used by the Zeliangrong people while taking an oath because it was believed that lightning and landslide were caused by divine power and thus the wrong or accused person would be punished by the same power.48

Practising of Ordeal for Correct Evidences:

Both the parties had to take ordeal with Tiger’s tooth. They had to bite the tiger’s tooth and give evidence. 49 They made a pledge and swore that the wrong one would be bitten and eaten up by the tiger. Another ordeal known as immersion was a very common type and was frequently practised by the Zeliangrong people. The two parties had to dive into a deep water simultaneously.50 They had to immerse in the water for a fixed period of time. The one who could not immerse and come out first from the water would be declared wrong, while the other one who remained longest in water without returning to the surface was declared right and won the case.51

49. V. Venkata Rao op. cit., p. 127.
51. Ibid.
It sometimes happened that two villages that were at war with one another agreed to cease hostilities, and maintain a permanent peace.\textsuperscript{52} This served as a means of voluntary submission of the two to law. It was obeyed mainly because of the fear of the anger of the supreme being. The punishments awarded were generally a fine in cash or in kind or both depending upon the seriousness of the crime embodied in the customary laws.\textsuperscript{53}

The functions of village Council were more of executive and judiciary and less of Legislative. There was seldom need of amendment of customary laws and more so in respect of the legislation. Thus the legislative function of the village Council was insignificant and almost unknown to the members of the Council. The village Council was characterized more by the administration of the village, and Council of other villages had no right to interfere with the village administration and against the decision of the concerned village Council.\textsuperscript{54} All disputes were settled at a meeting consisting of village elders and presided over by the Chief. The decision of the meeting was considered to be binding on the parties concerned. There were no appeals against the decision of the village Council.\textsuperscript{55} As for the village Council there was no known limitation of its functions.

\textsuperscript{52} Soppit op. cit., p. 431.
\textsuperscript{53} L.P. Vidyarthi op. cit., p. 199-200.
\textsuperscript{54} Dichamang Pamei op. cit., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{55} V. Venkata Rao op. cit., p. 127.