CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

We have seen in the foregone pages, that customary laws and administrative system of the village society are the very foundations that sustain the traditional Naga society. These were developed over time as each tribe and village strove to exist as an independent entity.

The tribal communities that coexist in the Patkai hill ranges of India and of the adjoining nation state of Myanmar were the original migrants to these areas. They followed patriarchal and patrilineal system that was biased towards men. They came in various waves of migrations of more or less akin groups and occupied these lands. At a certain period in time, they dispersed from Makhel to various hill ranges of present Nagaland and Manipur. From then began the individual village and tribal societies, each looking after its own security and sovereignty. However, Marams hold that they do not belong to the groups that dispersed from Makhel as they did not stay at Makhel but just passed through the place on their way to Maram Khullen.

Their community life has made them develop similar dialects and practices. Most of the traditional practices and customs have much similarity justifying the common nomenclature ‘Naga’ to all these tribes. It is here that they acquired the egalitarian and democratic character of their society. These played a dynamic role in the formation of the village states. I tend to believe that head-hunting practice at this stage would have been between the different waves of migratory groups. It would have been also possible that at one time the head-hunting practice would have become intra-group, that it demanded a clear cut territorial boundary for the survival of each tribe. This could have led to an agreement among them at Makhel for their dispersal.

After the dispersal each tribe occupied a specific territory in the mountain ranges as sovereign independent tribes. It is at this point of time that the unique elements of each tribe began to evolve, in the forms of folklore and customs.
Gradually these developed into customs and practices of village administration, social and political life, agricultural rites, rituals and religious practices. The language began to be specific to the village and became one of the essential identifying marks of the village. At this time, the Head-hunting would have been in practice among the akin tribes, the sub-tribes and clans as their legitimate means of offence and defence. It became such an important form of defence of the village state that all the customary practices and system of administration began to revolve around it. The Maram tribe was no exception to this.

As the Maram population increased, people began to migrate from the original village for their own survival and economic prosperity. Where the migration from the mother village took place on account of conflicts, be it of leadership or religion, the migration and subsequent relationship with the mother village may not have been a peaceful one. Added to these factors, the hilly terrains, geographical distances from one village to another, formation of self-sufficient village-states and allegiance to the clan for safety and defence, brought about an isolated life style of the village states within the Marams. These brought about individual uniqueness in their administrative system, customary practices, religious expressions and differences in dialects. However, all the Maram villages had at least a thin thread of unity in the Sagong-gongdi who upheld the Maram customary laws and practices, although each village maintained its absolute independence. In some cases, the difference in dialects became more pronounced as we can see in the case of the Tumyon Khullen dialect of Maram, in comparison with the language spoken in Maram Khullen, the original habitat of the Marams.

Each village became a tiny sovereign state, along the lines of patriarchy, developing its own pattern of administration not much different from the mother village. Each village had its own village council headed by a hereditary or elected village chief. The village council comprising of the clan heads and clan representatives played a vital role in the multifarious village affairs. The village chief commanded respect and honour from his people. The culture of head-hunting was ingrained into every aspect of their life which determined the status of an individual
within the clan and the village. Being an agrarian society based on land related rituals and festivals, each village tried to organise itself around the agricultural cycles. Gender based roles were assigned to each individual within the clan and family. The role of a woman was confined mostly to house-hold activities and agriculture. The village council had the authority to take decisions on the issues related to legislative, executive and judicial matters. Each decision became a precedent in the psyche of the village community and gradually the customary laws and administrative system were put in place.

Marams followed their traditional religion and worshipped their ancestors and the world of spirits. Appeasement of the supreme being, Paramhhaba and other spirits was done through the observance of rituals, festivals and genna. Their religious beliefs were based on the principle of uniformity where all the members shared a common faith. When Christianity came in, it created great divisions in the traditional society affecting its very cohesion. Till then there was no place for individualism in the Maram or any other Naga society. It was common faith, common practice and common celebrations that kept the villagers united. From these followed the elaborate rituals and ‘rites of passage’ in which every stage in the life and growth of man was celebrated. The sound systems of marriage, re-marriage, divorce, funeral, religious celebrations at birth and other important events in their social life were based on customs and traditions. The boys and girls could choose their life partners and marriage arrangement took place and where there was less freedom for the girls in choosing life partners as in the case of Marams, divorce was granted on grounds of incompatibility and temperament. There was no dowry system but the groom’s family had to give bride price to the family of the girl. Married couples had the freedom to begin their life separately and independently. According to the economic status of the family, the relatives and neighbours joined the marriage festivities. The body of the dead was buried with honour and regard, and the day was observed as a genna in the village.

Every tribe has got its own ways of creating social distinctions on the basis of talent, influence and wealth. The types of houses within a village show the economic
and social status of the individual and the family. The Marams had elaborate procedures for making a particular type of house. They had as many as seven different types of houses, excluding the house of the Sagong. Construction of a house, and its up-gradation to a higher status, required a customary ritual and festival in the village. In this way an individual’s wealth was evenly shared by everyone, even though the economy remained at subsistence level.

Tensions between the clans, villages and tribes were frequent on account of land disputes, divorce, revelry and petty crimes. It was not rare when a village or clan decided to prove its might by taking a head-hunting expedition to another clan or village. Often a village or inter village feud had to be settled by equalising the number of heads taken; this led to constant warfare between villages.

Marams attached great importance to the Morung. It was the school of the village where every child attaining the age of puberty was enrolled to learn his or her social and cultural responsibilities. Here they learned the advantages of cooperation, individual responsibility and gender based roles in the society. They were the natural labour team for every public work. Here they imbibed the values, customs and mores, folklore and cultural dances. This gave them their identity and the Morung became the pride and centre of every village. Usually the girls worked at home during the day and went to sleep at Raliiki after their evening meal. Girls slept in separate dormitories according to their imminence of their marriage. Those about to be married stayed together in one Raliiki, while others according to their age group stayed in a particular Raliiki. Boys spend most of their time in Rehangki. Even as late as 1982, there were 18 Raliiki and 28 Rehangki in Maram Khullen.\textsuperscript{567} Even today among the Marams, some of the Morungs are preserved by the owners, though the traditional practices associated with them have been abandoned.

Marams had elaborate festivals with a number of days set apart for sacrifices, gennas and feast days. These festivals are powerful means to inculcate in the people a

\textsuperscript{567}n. 25, p. 197.
strong sense of unity. Children get opportunity to learn the Maram ways through festivals. Life according to the Maram custom appears to be a continual celebration of life and this festive mood for life is only impeded by taboos and gennas and the fear of the wrath of gods. One notices also the emphasis on drinking during the festivals.

What helped in the easier acceptance of Christianity were the striking similarity between the folk tales of Marams and biblical stories and the observance of certain festivals and months. In the month of Kanghi kii (December - January), Christians celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ on 25 December and the celebrations end by January 6. The Marams celebrate their biggest festival in the month of Kanghi kii, more or less at the same time. It is a month of competitions and celebrations. Lungrou Kii (February -March) is a time of purification for the Marams which is usually the Lenten season of fasting and prayer for Christians. According to Christian belief, Easter represents new life and newness. For the Marams the month of Fiihui Kii (March-April) is the time for sowing the seeds. This again stands for new life. Christians dedicate the month of November for the memory of the deceased and pray for them. Marams too observe in the month of Rakakii - (November - December), a seven day festival of M’pamra in memory of the living and the dead. On the last day of the feast a genna called Kataimai Rakak is observed. This is the last day of communication between the living and those who died during the year. Thus we can say, Christianity, instead of destroying the traditional religion, has shown that it has many things in common.

One of the reasons why many chose Christianity is that the traditional religion was based on universal fear of evil spirits, deities, gennas and taboos. In their anxiety to know the future, people interpreted every event through dreams and omens. There are neither written precepts of the traditional religion nor any Maram theologians to elaborate the dogmatic principles of the traditional religion. Consequently various festivals and big events remained for the people a time of celebration while rituals were performed by the chief and the priest.
People found the new religion had many elements of their religion and folklore and offered much more to the people. Christianity was a liberating religion that focused on love, not fear. It freed people from the various interpretations of dreams and omens. As a way of life, Christianity insisted on monogamy, checked easy divorce, and introduced organized worship. The Church brought modernity to people through education and healthcare, showing another aspect of Christianity as a caring religion. All these paved the way for a gradual decline of the traditional religion.

Customary laws influenced the social and political behaviour of the Maram Nagas. They managed internal peace and unity, social relations, cultural values and resolved disputes on the basis of their customary laws. Crimes like murder, adultery, and rape were punished severely and quickly, and such punishments acted as deterrents to any future crimes. Thefts, land disputes and looting were also checked. Offenders were brought before the assembly of the council for investigation, in which everyone could participate. When an evil doer could not be identified, oaths and ordeals were made use of to settle the case.

The Marams, although a patriarchal society with its egalitarian and communitarian lifestyle and based on the shifting cultivation, recognised the value of a woman and considered her equal partner in production. She was given the responsibility of managing the household and often was called the 'queen of the house'. Ceremonies and festivals could not be celebrated without the participation of women. Marams may be the only tribe in Manipur that have a traditional woman festival called 'Mangkang', in which men participated only as an audience and admirers. However, they were not treated as equals in the social and political life of the village. Women were saddled with the responsibility of preserving the customs, morality and ritual purity, without any power. They were deprived of the right to make decisions in these spheres and were often punished with greater severity if they failed to keep up to their expected gender roles. If a man committed a crime, he

\[56^8\] n. 25, p. 200.
would be punished with less severity, in comparison with the women guilty of the same crime. This was because of the common belief that if they kept their womenfolk under strict control, the village would have a high level of integrity in social and cultural life.

Until the British came to the scene, the Maram Nagas lived a life that was deeply rooted in customary beliefs, practices and conventions. Their implements for production like weaving, agriculture, construction of house, etc., remained primitive. They confined their political consciousness within their village and clan. When constant warfare disturbed the peace of a village and when life became impossible in the village, the women who were married into the village from the enemy village would play a very important role as mediators for peace. However, during the time of peace their role was minimal or nothing. There was no social institution recognising women as peace makers.

With the British came a spirit of modernity based on reason and not on beliefs. Tribalism and traditionalism stick to the status-quo and are community based. Modernity is dynamic and revolutionary, promoting individualism and urbanisation. Modernisation is also a form of cultural expression. It is a level, ‘at which the institutionalisation of a higher order of culture is possible’. Credit goes to the Roman Catholic and Baptist Churches that brought Christianity and education to the Marams who were considered primitive, and brought them to the threshold of modernity. In the words of B.P. Singh, ‘familiarization of these tribes with new

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569 Women negotiators were normally those women who were married into the clan or village with which the village was in conflict. These women were accepted as impartial negotiators as they had the interest of both the clans and villages.

ideals coupled with the subsequent independence and democratisation of the polity have taken them into the modern world, with all its strengths and dangers.  

With the introduction of the British administration over the tribal people of Northeast, the Naga tribes moved towards a new political order. The British excluded the Nagas from the mainstream administration and accepted their customs and practices, as long as peace was maintained. The Maharaja of Manipur had certain control over the hill areas and saw to the administration of the hill areas of Manipur. The Manipur Hill People’s Regulation Act, 1947, was put into effect with one Minister in the Maharaja’s Council of Ministers solely responsible for the administration of the tribal area. The tribal areas were divided into three sub-divisions and these were further sub-divided into nine circles each of which had one elected circle authority. There were village court, circle bench and hill bench for matters of judicial administration. After the independence this Act was modified and enforced in the hill areas under Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956. The Constitutional Provisions safeguarding the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes, the various developmental schemes, the Five Year Plans, The Manipur Hill Areas District Councils Act, 1971, The Manipur Forest conservation Act, 1980 and other formal agencies of tribal development brought certain changes in the power structure of the society which affected the Nagas and their customary practices. Thus, gradually the customary laws, the social and cultural values began to lose their significance as the power structure changed.

However, there was a marked improvement in all spheres of life. Often, this flurry of quick improvements brought the ugly head of selfishness to the fore. The improvement of transport and communications brought about a quick depletion of

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572 Some of the formal agencies that focus on developing the tribals in the state are: North East Council (NEC), The Directorate for Development of Tribal and Backward Classes (DDTBC) and Manipur Tribal Development Corporation (MTDC).
traditional forests and created wealthy elites; expansion of trade and commerce brought closer interaction with outside communities and the honest tribals learned dubious ways of business; quality educational institutions, while bringing education, created new classes of elites and a bourgeoisie mentality; employment opportunities brought prosperity, but cultivated individualism and high social status; the developmental schemes of the government instead of bringing development to the common man, helped the learned few to amass illegal wealth. All these provided also an ideal condition for the growth of militancy and spirit of violence. Thus, within a span of six decades, enormous changes took place in social, economic, political and cultural aspects of tribals, at a pace that the traditional society could not cope with. This brought about a paradigm shift - from community-centric to individual-centric.

The culture and style that the Nagas have adopted today are neither the product of their traditional values nor a continuation of their ancestors’ style of life. What they have adopted is directly influenced by the westernisation trends. The ancient value system and the institution of Morung that embodied those values have disappeared. The Church has not been able to make its values penetrate into real life. Individualism and consumerism have become the order of the day bringing about rampant corruption in every sphere of life. Drug addiction, petty crimes and alcoholism have become rampant among the youth and Manipur is facing the menace of HIV/AIDS at an epidemic level. These have happened because of the erosion of traditional power structure and the value system inbuilt therein. The village level institutions with their customary laws and traditions remained static while the economic and social dimensions galloped to modernity, causing a rift between the two. The traditional institution of justice still plays a vital role as justice provider as it enjoys the support of governmental institutions.

From our studies we have seen that the equations of development have moved from societal to economic. In a market controlled economy and development, we

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need to consider women not only as an economic power but also as a social and political power. Women are more educated today, occupy positions of equal status at the governmental and industry levels and raise the standard of society through their constructive contributions. Yet, their participation in the village and state level politics has been denied. It is pertinent to note that the 73rd constitutional amendment providing reservation for women has not been extended to the hills of Manipur. Accelerated modernisation has brought with it social problems of alcoholism, drug addiction and social crimes. Women’s associations have taken on themselves the task of addressing these social evils through campaigns and awareness programmes. These should be an indicator to those who resist the inclusion of women at all levels of planning and decision making. Such an inclusion will bring about better prospects for the promotion of traditional institution.

The Church has done its role of education and it continues to support the people to face the newer realities. Christianity has often been accused of destroying culture and traditional practice, which was true to a certain extent in the initial days. But the Church too has learnt from its own mistakes and has been since long promoting culture and the practices that are compatible with its tenets. Much of the tradition and culture of Marams have been continued to the present day. In fact it is the Church that keeps alive the variety of folk dances, folklore, and other traditional art forms through various forums and festivals.

The spiral of change that was initiated with the coming of the British has picked up momentum. The need of the hour is to concentrate on the need to conscientize the people about the richness of their own culture and uphold those elements that are true and relevant for the society of today. Holding on to traditions of yesterdays which uphold gender discrimination and beliefs that cannot stand the test of reasoning will only clog the wheel of progress and development and make the customary laws and practices redundant.