



The Institution of *Movuo*: A Study from the Past

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Abstract

The present paper shall discuss the importance of 'Movuo' – traditional political institution of the Mao Naga of Manipur. *Movuo* is the village chief. Since time immemorial the Mao Naga has been practicing the institution of *Movuo*. Like most tribal societies, every Mao village is an independent unit. It is a 'sovereign village-state', administered by a *Movuo* and assisted by a council of clan elders. Its position is hereditary and the system of primogeniture is followed. The eldest son succeeds his father. He was the patriarch of a village and holds supreme authority in a village. In the past, he controls all the social, religious and political life in a village.

Keywords: Traditional political institution, *Movuo*, Mao Naga, primogeniture, patriarch, supreme, authority, social, religious, political.

Introduction

Traditional institutions refer to all those forms of social and political authority which have their historical origin in the pre-colonial states and societies¹. According to Syiemlieh², for institution to be considered as traditional, a past that is somewhat long in time is required. Traditional institutions are varied. It may be difficult to define and categorize traditional institutions into social, cultural, political and economic institutions since tradition in any given society is a composite whole³. However, the concept of traditional institutions is generally used to denote the age-old socio-political institutions among the tribal communities maintaining law and order in the society, settling disputes and administering the village community⁴. Traditional institutions are usually made up of the village chief and a council of elders. The village chief is tasked with the overall administration of the village. He/she presides over community meetings and hearings and ensures that customary laws and rituals are followed. The role of other council members is to advise the village Chief in all the important matters concerning the administration of the village. They take co-responsibility in the administration of the village, and help in other matters such as social relations and settlement of conflicts⁵. The present paper shall discuss the importance of 'Movuo' – traditional political institution of the Mao Naga of Manipur.

Methodology

Mao Naga is one of the major ethnic groups of Manipur, situated in the North-Eastern part of India. It is a recognised Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) order of 1950. The traditional territory where the majority of the Mao Naga inhabits is also known as 'Mao'. Geographically, Mao area is a strategically important location connecting the

two North-Eastern states of Manipur and Nagaland. They speak Mao dialect which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language.

Since time immemorial the Mao Naga has been practicing the institution of *Movuo*. *Movuo* is the patriarch of a village. Like most tribal societies, every Mao village is an independent unit. It is a 'sovereign village-state, administered by a *Movuo* and assisted by a council of clan elders. *Movuo* hold the supreme authority in a village. In the past, he controls all the social, religious and political life in a village. However only a couple of literature has mention about it as a passing reference like Shimray⁶ and Saleo⁷ highlighted the privileges and taboos of *Movuo*: Singh and Maheo⁸ and Poji⁹ discussed the power of *Movuo* and highlighted some of its roles as political head in a village. Yet the importance of *Movuo* as a socio-religious institution has never being discussed. The socio-religious roles of *Movuo* supersede its administrative duties.

The present paper shall make a holistic study of the institution of *Movuo* and discussed its importance in everyday activities of the people in the past. The data were collected through fieldwork. First, the author identified some key informants and then both interview and group discussion were carried out and information were compiled. Secondary sources were also incorporated in the paper.

Results and Discussion

Village Formation and its *Movuo*: The Mao people were hunter and gatherers in the past, when they came across beautiful landscape and want to settle, they first looks for signs and dreams. If anybody want to settle at a new place, he or she should first claim the place by saying 'I want to make this place as my place and my land' and shall keep a '*Prodzii*', a grass-like ball and go home and see their dreams⁷. If dreams are not good

and the grass-like ball too die away then they will take this signs as the place is not good for settlement and they will leave the place and move on searching for new place. When a place is finally decided to settle, on the first day, shall carry a shield, a spear, a cock and materials needed to make fire which is known as 'Milasii Milarei' in Mao dialect. In the olden days the Mao does not use match stick but they practiced indigenous techniques known as 'Milasii' to make fire. Even today during traditional cultural festivals; the Mao organized competition on how to make fire through 'Milasii' technique. When they reach the particular place which is decided to make settlement; first they shall claim the place by saying 'I want to make this as my place and my land' and then they shall keep the cock with both wings spread out and start making fire i.e 'Milasii' and will let the fire and the smoke reach the sky. If the smoke goes straight to the sky, it is taken as a good sign of prosperous life in the days to come⁷.

Once a new place was chosen for settlement, it is mandatory to have a *Movuo*. If a single person forms a new village he becomes the *Movuo*. However when a group of people together form a village, before they move out for the settlement, one person from among the group will be selected to be the *Movuo*. The person is selected based on the qualities of his bravery, skill in diplomacy and a good orator and above all he should be someone who is well verse with the customary law of the people. Since through signs and dreams, a place is chosen for settlement and consequently it's *Movuo*, Lokho¹⁰ writes 'the power of the chief (*Movuo*) is a delegated power from god and as such laws and rules promulgated by the Chief/*Movuo* are all-pervasive and binding'¹². Even today when a new village is established, it is mandatory to have a *Movuo*, though the people do not follow their traditional religion or its command.

Once a *Movuo* is selected, the position becomes hereditary and the system of primogeniture is followed. The eldest son succeeds his father. After the death of the incumbent *Movuo* sometimes his wife continue to serve the duties with assistance by one of her sons or by one of her deceased husband brothers. If the *Movuo* has no son, his younger brothers' son who has greater quality and ability become the *Movuo*. Again, if his brother too has no sons or if the sons of his younger brothers are not capable to be a *Movuo*, then a new *Movuo* shall be selected from the royal clan of the village.

Privileges and Taboos of *Movuo*: *Movuo* is the patriarch of a village. Being the supreme authority in the village, he enjoyed certain privileges and at the same time endures many restrictions (taboos) for the well being of the people. *Movuo* gets a house, built by the villagers and usually located at the centre of the village. He gets a terraced field and a forestland while he is in office. During feast of merit and wedding, he gets a foreleg of any animal slaughtered for the feast. In the past, he has a runner known as 'Kru-o' to assist him in his duties. Like a shaman, *Movuo* observe taboos and restrictions in order to perform his duty efficiently. Some important taboos are he eats

only ginger and drink only rice beer on the days of *gennas* (days when working in the field is prohibited); he will not sleep with his wife on the day of *genna*; should not climb on the roof of the house; he should not make any swearing nor accept any oath and forbidden to eat chicken and some wild vegetables. It is said that if a *Movuo* did not observe the taboos especially the food, he use to becomes abnormal. He fast and meditate and communicate with his God called 'Oramei' seeking His blessing to carry out his duties successfully. In a year, *Movuo* fast the following dates – 26th of *Chüthuni*, the 1st month, 11th to 14th of *Chosiilopra*, the 2nd month, 12th to 15th of *Orolopra*, the 3rd month, 28th of *Sale*, the 7th month and 25th to 29th of *Belu*, the 11th month of the Mao lunar calendar⁷.

Function of *Movuo*: *Movuo* was the overall head in a village. He exercises a great deal of authority in the administration of the village. The house of *Movuo* is the head-quarter for the village administration, located at the centre of the village. Generally any sort of meeting takes place at his courtyard or 'Tokhu', a public gathering place. Stones comprising big and small are kept in circular or square arrangement at *Tokhu* as seat where village male elders spend their leisure time. He presides all important meeting in the village. His decisions were final and binding in all matters. Settlement of disputes constitutes an important responsibility of *Movuo*. He along with his councillors settled the disputes according to the customary law of the people. Usually through oath taking, disputes are settled.

During head-hunting period when there was great animosity between villages; constant feud and strong thirst for new heads; it was the responsibility of the Chief (*Movuo*) to give protection to the people and so village fence and village gates were erected under the patronage and supervision of the Chief/*Movuo*⁸. 'Village gates were erected at strategic places so that enemies could not sneak inside easily. The gates of the *Mao Naga* were gigantic in size and were hewn out of a single solid wood'⁶. Every Mao village has a main gate and secondary gates numbering according to the number of clans in the village. *Movuo* was always vigilant against any external threat to prevent unwanted blood-sheds and fighting. In the past when an outsider wants to visit any village, he or she has to first seek permission from the Chief/*Movuo* and it was his responsibility to see for the security of the visitor during his stay in the village.

The socio-religious duty of *Movuo* comprises another very important function. It was obligatory in nature. He was the village priest and astrologer of the people. He initiates and does all the religious activities in the village. He performs rituals to their God for the well being of the people and for good harvest in a year. He fixed the yearly calendar for the people i.e. the dates for *gennas*, feasts of merit, festivals and agricultural season and accordingly the people follow his dates and announcement. Every activity in the village directly revolves around the agricultural cycles. The Mao follows the cycle of the Moon and their calendar is known as Mao Lunar calendar.

In the past the Mao people strictly follows the rituals, taboos and *gennas*. *Movuo* appoints the 19th of *Khrana*, the 5th month as the day of village purification day to conduct village purification ceremony. The day is actually a cursing day for the village people. It is a very important ritual which is still practiced by the people with lesser weight. Lokho¹¹ writes, “On an appointed day, the chief/*Movuo* will declare a *genna* and call for the purification ritual. An appointed person prepares a human figure with straw and old cloths outside the village. An announcement is made that families examine themselves and find out all people, spirits that caused them harm during the year. Each family prepares a list of theft committed against them, evil spirit that caused them sickness etc. and prepares one lance (made of stick) for each of the culprits. On the appointed day, one person from the family goes near the scarecrow, hurling the lance at it and cursing the spirits of all those who caused harm to the family. From the number of participants and the number of sticks thrown, the people will judge whether their village is progressing, disciplined and living in harmony. Accordingly, the chief will promulgate laws to live better lives, work hard, fear God, promote harmony amongst people etc”.

Movuo announced different kinds of *genna* according to the needs and requirement of the people. Loli writes *gennas* are specific days kept aside for relating themselves with God every month and they observe these days as sacred like Sabbath/Sunday by the Christians¹². On this day the normal functioning of the community is suspended for the purpose of conducting rituals, purification of self and the whole community. The *Movuo* of the village goes to a pinnacle known as ‘*Thene Kasha Bu*’ and announce *gennas* on the eve of the particular day of *genna*. In the past, once *Movuo* has declared a day as *genna*, the whole villagers abide by his announcement and observed the day as *genna*. The Mao Naga strongly believes that the blessing of their God known as ‘*Oramai*’ is showered upon the people if *gennas* are strictly observed but violation of *genna* would provoke *Oramai*’s wrath and bring curse either to the whole community or to the individual¹². The parents and elders used to inform the younger generation clearly about the *genna* and the consequences of violating the taboos of *genna* which prompted the *Mao Naga* in observing the *genna* in a faithful way¹³.

Gennas are of different types – monthly *genna*, seasonal *genna* and occasional/unseen *genna*. Monthly *genna* were observed every month. There are three monthly *genna* and observe for different purpose. They are *Oramani/khrobvoh Orathole* – this *genna* is observed on the third day of every month. The people pray to God for life, good health and safety of both man and the animals (domestic animals); *Tokhomani/Ora Tokhoh Khole* – observed on the fifth day of every month, pray to God to let their foodgrains last longer; and the third *genna* varies from village to village. According to Saleo, it is called *Pforeshümani* – this *genna* is observed to curb gluttony nature of the people and not to cause diarrhoea⁷ while according to N. Salew, the present *Movuo* of Makhel, called the third *genna* as *Ora phrehre*

mane le – seeking God to purify any unclean things found in the physical body of both men and women in the village¹⁴.

Seasonal *gennas* were observed only during certain season. From village to village this seasonal *gennas* differ due to the need and requirement of the people. Generally in the beginning of a year, most villages observed certain seasonal *genna* seeking God protection from untoward incident in the coming year. For example, *Omikazhümani* – this *genna* is observed not to let fire destroy their house and life in the coming year; *Khehrukashümani* – seeking God not to cause destruction to their house by storm, etc. Some seasonal *gennas* were observed seeking God to protect the crops from natural calamities, for example, *Pirümani* – seeking God not to let hail storm destroy their paddy; *Okheshümani* – seeking God not to let pests, birds and animal destroy their crops, etc. Lastly the occasional or unseen *gennas* were observed when something which happens unknowingly like dead of a person, natural calamities like earthquake, solar eclipse, lunar eclipse, etc.

According to his counting, *Movuo* announced the date of the festivals and feast of merit. There are four very important festivals of the Mao people. They are- *Chüthuni*, *Chijini*, *Saleni* and *Onuni*. Out of these four, the first three festivals are celebrated directly in relation with the agricultural activities of the people. *Chüthuni* is celebrated as thanksgiving for the bountiful harvest, *Chijini* celebrated before the transplantation of paddy, and *Saleni* is celebrated after the completion of the paddy transplantation season. *Movuo* initiates the celebrations of the festivals.

As per his calculations, he announces the date when a festival would fall and the people are told to start preparing particularly rice beer which is the most important food item for any kind of celebration. He performs the different rituals, the performance of which is mandatory before the actual festival. He is the first to taste the rice beer prepared for the celebration.

Movuo plays a very significant role in the agricultural life of the community. Being an agrarian society, the season and dates for the seed sowing, plantation and harvesting of crops was very important in the past. The people wait for the announcement of the *Movuo* before planting and harvesting of the crops. He is the first to sow and first to harvest the paddy crop. He performs two seed sowing ritual. One ritual is for sowing millet seed; perform on the 12th of the 2nd month, ie *Choshiilopra* month. Another one is for paddy seed sowing ritual, performs on the 12th of the 3rd month, i.e. *Orolopra* month. Only after *Movuo* has done the ritual, the villagers can start sowing the seeds on the next day or the following days. Before which no one can sow the seeds. During transplantation season, sometimes when the weather did not favour a good monsoon rain, *Movuo* shall extend the 7th month, *Sale* month and name the month as ‘*Sale kanghei*’. This month was added so that the paddy transplantation season can be extended and the people can continue with the paddy transplantation. The people strictly followed the dates and

gennas announced by the *Movuo* and once the *Saleni*, the completion of transplantation festival is announced, the people are forbidden to continue with paddy transplantation. It is said that the *Mao* follows specific date for paddy plantation so that even lazy people can plant the crops in time and will not face shortage of food in the future. In the past once it happened that 'Ma-a', the then *Movuo* of Makhel village was driven away to a distant village in the far eastern part of the present Mao country as the people considered that the rituals and *gennas* announced by the Chief (*Movuo*) was superfluous. As a result, the people forgot the planting seasons of crops and there was famine for seven consecutive years¹⁵.

Discussion: Changes and Continuity: In 1891, Manipur came under British rule and the hill territories were kept under their indirect rule. The British colonial system of indirect rule formally recognised the institution of Chieftainship and his councillors and used it as an instrument of colonial establishment¹⁶. At the same time, the British Government introduced the position of 'Goanbura' who in collaboration with *Movuo* and his councillors were responsible for maintaining peace and order in the village according to the customs and traditions of the people as well as to collect house tax for the British Government and also to inform any matter of the village to the British officials. He was paid by the British Government for his service a red shawl. With the introduction of this new functionary 'Goanbura', the position of the 'Kru-o' (*Movuo* helper) disappeared.

With the passing of the Indian Independence Act in 1947, The Manipur (Village Authority in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 were passed regarding the improvement of the administration in the hill areas²⁶. With the introduction of the above Acts, there was change of power and authority from the *Movuo* to his Councillors. According to the Acts, the Councillors were renamed as Village Authority and had overtaken the supreme authority of *Movuo* in village administration. According to the Act of 1956, the village Chief or *Movuo* is recognized as the ex-officio Chairman of a village and become a nominal head in the village. However as in the past, *Movuo* continues to perform socio-religious duties, count the days and the people follows his proclamations, prohibitions, restrictions, *gennas*, taboos, etc. and abide his commands as supreme.

Another factor is the coming of Christianity during the twentieth century. The monopoly of *Movuo* in the matter of socio-religious affairs was affected. The introduction of a new belief system which has come along with the establishment of church; has a huge impact on the institution of *Movuo*. The people believed and accepted the new religion over their traditional belief system and become actively involved in the activities of the church. They slowly started to disregard the *gennas* and taboos announced by the *Movuo*. Nonetheless he continues to count the days, announce the *gennas*, the traditional festivals, feast and perform its rituals even though people ignored its importance. Even after embracing new religion, the people still

continues to observe important *gennas* relating to paddy plantation. However most of the monthly, seasonal and occasional *gennas* are ignored. And as for the traditional festivals, the people still do observe all the 'niji' i.e. the most important day of the festival.

Conclusion

Movuo, once much respected and a very important institution of the people has become a myth of the past. The power and authority exercise by the *Movuo* in the administration of village was obliterated with the coming of colonialism, India's Independence and Christianity. Slowly the people begin to ignore its importance and significance. At present *Movuo* has lost all its power and authority. However by virtue of its position, he continues to enjoy some of the privileges which he was entitled in the past. Every *Movuo* gets a house built by the villagers, gets a terraced field and during any kind of celebration like wedding, he gets a foreleg of any animal slaughtered for the occasion. Even today people follow the dates of transplantation of paddy, which still form the most important agricultural activity of the people.

People still looked upon *Movuo* as the original leader and revered its institution. He is seen as guardian of the customary law of the people and remains as a symbol of integrity and identity of the people.

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