

## Village administration of the Chakesang Naga Tribe During Pre-Colonial Period

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The Naga tribes of North East India enjoyed independence before the advent of the British. Each village was a kind of little republic of its own. They had their distinct social life, pattern of living, laws, customs and method of governance. Although chieftainship prevailed among some tribes such as the Konyaks, the Semas or the Mao Nagas, chieftainship was modified by democracy among others like, the Chakesang. In such cases, since every village was an independent unit, each village was administered by a council constituted of the elders of the village enjoying seniority, wealth and influence and were selected by the people.

At present the Chakesang Naga tribe is comprised of eighty-two villages in the North-Eastern portion of Nagaland. Bordered by Tuensang District on the Northern side, Manipur on the Southern side, Burma (Myanmar) on the East, and Kohima district on the western side, the Chakesang tribe occupies an area of 202600 sq. k.m.<sup>1</sup> The whole territory is hilly and is without any plain.

The name Chakesang is an acronym for three Naga tribes which has in recent times adopted this name. What this paper seeks to write is the village administration before this development. During the Pre-colonial days, in the matter of village administration, the Chakesang Nagas were administered by a village council also included a chief who was usually the Priest. The Chieftaincy was hereditary but it was not necessary that a son of the chief succeed his father. Any person from the chief clan could become chief by performing a certain ceremony and of fasting for 30 days, which many person could not do.

Some villages had more than one chief, the number might go up to three of just had only one chief who was very powerful. The village chief affiliated in different functions and enjoyed tremendous influence in the village. The chief was present in all function whether it was religious or otherwise since he was considered the head of the village.<sup>2</sup> As a religious head, he was the first man to sow the seeds

in the jhum, the first to plant and the first to harvest. Although the actual religious function and sacrifice etc were performed by the village priest, but the chief presence in any religious ceremony was prominent and necessary. Besides he presided over all religious festival.<sup>3</sup>

As the secular head, his functions were numerous. At the time of head-hunting his primary concern was the defence of the village. As the head of the administration, his duty was to summon and preside over all meetings of the village councils where the representative member of the various clans were present. In day to day administration of the village, the chief was assisted by the councilors. In case of dispute, the chief's house was turned into a court, except when the councillors with his approval, wanted to hold the hearing in open space.<sup>4</sup> The village chief was, therefore, the religious head, the chief judge, the chief administrator and also the chief commander at the time of war and head-hunting<sup>5</sup>.

With all the powers concentrated with the chief, however, the village chief did not seem to have acted as a dictator as he was bound by the various tribal customs and unwritten laws. The chief had no power to over-rule these. In any disputes he hardly had any choice as he had to bow down to the precedent cases, the customs and practices of the society since most of the tribal customs and laws were based on religious practices and faith, the chief had no power to use his discretion except in a few cases where religious customs and traditions were not clear. In fact, the chief was expected to use pleasant sweet words in conversation and public functions.

In some of the villages there were three village chiefs : for example : Thatsumi village<sup>1</sup> War Chief (*Rimawa*). He was the chief commander of war. All the affairs relating to war or head-hunting were to be under the war chief.<sup>6</sup> To become the war chief he had to perform certain ceremonies like the fasting for three days. A person who was good warrior could only be chosen as the chief of the village<sup>7</sup>.

The war chief had little power in the administration of the village except during the war when he had to mobilize the villages. When the village set out for head-hunting, the head of the enemy was brought to the chief's house where it was hung in the corridor of the house<sup>8</sup>.

2) *Paddy chief (Ribeia Mawa)* To become a paddy chief one had to perform certain rites and then sow paddy seed. If the seed did not grow well, the proposed chief had forfeited the claim to chieftainship. If the paddy grow well, he was subjected to a second test, a fast for 30 days. If he achieved this test he become the paddy chief.<sup>9</sup> Among the three chiefs, the paddy chief wielded more power in the village. He had to be the first person to sow, plant and harvest. Besides, he acts as the first person in all the religious rites and festivals of the village so as to ensure the prosperity of the village.

He was also the secular head of the village. As the head of the administration his duty was to summon and preside over all the meetings of the village councils, attended by the representatives of the clan.<sup>11</sup>

3) *Millet chief (Chuba Mawa)*. To become the millet chief, one had to perform certain rites and then sow the millet seed, as done by the paddy chief. The functions of the millet chief were not much in the village. The only function he had to perform was to be the first person to sow, harvest and the first in all the religious rites and festivals of the village where the millet was concerned.<sup>12</sup> However, he also enjoyed the privileges like the other two chiefs.

4) The village council (Lisea). According to prevailing customs all adult male members of each clan in the village took part in the selected were normally the eldest members of the clan.<sup>13</sup>

Each clan was represented by 1 to 3 members depending on the size of the village in the village Council. Since the selection of the representatives was done by the clan, there was bitterness or resentment. The selection was done mostly on the basis of seniority in age and the experience of the village council.<sup>14</sup>

The village council was the real body with whom the highest power and authority rested. It formulated the policy of the village in war and peace of all other serious matters, they would make and amend these unwritten codes which were followed rigidly by the members of the village.<sup>15</sup>

The village council from time to time decided disputes which were of two kinds, namely, private and public. Private disputes were

those in which two or more persons were involved. Public disputes were those in which the whole village was involved. The Village council was not only responsible for the settlement of all disputes, it was also responsible for the effective execution of its decision.<sup>16</sup> In case a person or a party failed to abide by the decision of the Council, it took necessary action against that person or party saw to it that all its decision were carried out effectively.

The administrative functions of the council included the maintenance of the village footpaths, construction of new road and bridges across streams and rivers which were damaged during rainy season. Besides, dates of all village festivals were fixed by the Council in consultation with the village priest and the village chief. Proclamation of religious ceremonies and *genna* observations too was made by the Council.<sup>18</sup>

The most important function of the council was judicial. The chief and the councillors constituted what is known as the village Council Court. It was the highest court of justice of the Chakesang Naga tribe. All disputes and differences between families belonging to the same clan were, as far as possible, decided by the clan elders or at least all such disputes except the once which these elders failed to decide satisfactorily are referred to the village court. The various disputes and cases, eg theft, murder, divorce, to name a few were settled according to the customary law of the tribe.<sup>19</sup>

In character the Chakhesang village administration appears to be midway between the village administration of the Konyak or the Mao on the one hand and that of the Angamis on the other where extreme form of democracy prevailed.

#### References

1. Basic Facts of Nagaland, 1985, p. 4.
2. Based on information collected from Mr Senyi of Chizami Village of Nagaland.
3. N. Venuh, History of the Chakhesang Naga tribe in pre-colonial period, (Unpublished M. Phil thesis)NEHU. 1989, p. 26.
4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* - - 27.
7. This information was given by Thetsumi Village elders during my visit to the village.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid*
10. *Ibid*
11. *Ibid*
12. *Ibid*
13. *Op. Cit*, p. 17.
14. *Ibid*
15. *Ibid*, p. 18.
16. Based on information provided by Chikurie of Phek village of Nagaland.
17. *Lasuh kelhisule* "Short History, Life of Thetsum village," Unpublished manuscript which the author of the manuscript was kind enough to permit me to make use of .
18. *Ibid*