

THE BLU INSTITUTION: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE AND CUSTOMARY JUSTICE AMONG THE SHERDUKPENS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i08.035 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i08.035>

Received: 6 July 2026 / Accepted: 19 August 2026 / Published: 30 August 2026

ABSTRACT

The indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh have historically evolved distinctive systems of governance that regulate their socio-political, economic, judicial, and cultural life through customary institutions. Among the Sherdukpens of West Kameng district, the Blu represents one such enduring institution that has served as the principal mechanism of village administration, customary justice, and collective decision-making for centuries. Although modern statutory institutions introduced after Independence have transformed the administrative landscape of the region, the Blu continues to command considerable social legitimacy owing to its reliance on customary law, consensual decision-making, and community participation. This article examines the historical evolution, organizational structure, administrative functions, judicial procedures, and contemporary significance of the Blu institution. Drawing upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork, oral traditions, and historical sources, the study analyses how the Blu has adapted to changing political circumstances while preserving its fundamental role as the custodian of Sherdukpen customary law and social order. The article argues that the resilience of the Blu lies in its ability to integrate traditional authority with changing administrative realities without losing its cultural legitimacy. Rather than viewing indigenous governance as a relic of the past, the study demonstrates that institutions such as the Blu continue to constitute vibrant mechanisms of local governance and dispute resolution that complement formal state institutions in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Sherdukpen, Blu, Indigenous Governance, Customary Law, Traditional Village Council, Community Administration, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

Across the Himalayan frontier of Northeast India, indigenous societies have historically developed sophisticated systems of governance that evolved independently of centralized state structures. These institutions emerged through the collective experiences of communities and were shaped by ecological conditions, customary practices, kinship organization, religious beliefs, and the practical necessities of maintaining social harmony. Long before the extension of colonial administration and the subsequent establishment of modern democratic institutions, tribal communities in the region possessed elaborate political organizations that effectively regulated social conduct, administered justice, managed common resources, and coordinated collective activities. Their authority rested not upon written constitutions or statutory enactments but upon customary laws that had acquired legitimacy through continuous social acceptance and intergenerational transmission.

Arunachal Pradesh presents one of the richest examples of indigenous political institutions in South Asia. Almost every tribal community of the state possesses a distinct traditional institution that regulates community affairs according to customary norms and values. While these institutions differ in nomenclature and organizational structure, they share certain common characteristics, including collective decision-making, consensus-based administration, restorative justice, community participation, and the predominance of customary law. These traditional councils have historically served as the principal agencies of governance, exercising authority over civil administration, judicial proceedings, resource management, religious activities, and community welfare.

Among the Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Sherdukpens have evolved a unique indigenous institution known as the Blu, which has historically functioned as the highest traditional authority in matters concerning village administration and customary justice. The Blu is far more than a village council in the conventional sense. It constitutes an integrated socio-political institution that regulates almost every sphere of community life, ranging from dispute settlement and maintenance of law and order to organization of festivals, allocation of communal responsibilities, protection of customary norms, and promotion of collective welfare. For generations, the institution has remained the principal guardian of Sherdukpen customary law and has played a decisive role in preserving the cultural identity of the community.

The Sherdukpens inhabit the Rupa and Shergaon valleys of present-day West Kameng district in Arunachal Pradesh. Their geographical isolation, coupled with long-standing cultural interactions with Tibet and neighbouring Himalayan communities, has contributed to the evolution of a distinctive socio-political organization deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy as well as indigenous customary traditions. Although Buddhism has shaped many aspects of

Sherdukpen religious and ethical life, the functioning of the Blu demonstrates that indigenous political institutions continued to evolve through local historical experiences rather than merely through religious influences. Consequently, the Blu represents a unique synthesis of customary authority, communal participation, and moral values that reflects the historical evolution of Sherdukpen society.

The importance of traditional governance institutions in Arunachal Pradesh has been acknowledged by several scholars. Verrier Elwin (1960, 1965) emphasized that tribal societies in the erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency possessed democratic traditions rooted in consensus and community participation. Similarly, Pandey, Duarah and Sarkar (1991) observed that traditional village councils constituted the backbone of indigenous administration across the state long before the introduction of statutory local self-government. Das (1995), Modi (2003), Lego (2008), and Pertin (2008) have further demonstrated that these customary institutions continue to remain relevant despite the growing influence of modern administrative structures. Nevertheless, while considerable attention has been devoted to traditional governance among major tribes such as the Adis, Nyishis, Apatanis, and Monpas, scholarly studies focusing exclusively on the Sherdukpen Blu remain comparatively limited. Existing works have largely described Sherdukpen culture, religion, and folklore, whereas detailed analyses of the Blu as an indigenous institution of governance and customary justice remain insufficient.

The introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions, statutory village administration, and the formal judicial system has undoubtedly transformed the operational environment of indigenous institutions throughout Arunachal Pradesh. Many administrative responsibilities formerly exercised by traditional councils have gradually been assumed by government agencies. Despite these institutional transformations, however, the Blu continues to perform significant judicial, socio-cultural, and advisory functions within Sherdukpen society. Community members continue to approach the Blu for the settlement of disputes, interpretation of customary law, organization of communal activities, and preservation of traditional values. Its continued relevance demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of indigenous governance systems in responding to changing political and administrative circumstances.

The present study seeks to examine the Blu institution from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It analyses its evolution, organizational structure, customary judicial procedures, administrative functions, and developmental role within Sherdukpen society. Particular attention is devoted to understanding how customary governance has negotiated the challenges posed by modernization, legal pluralism, and state intervention without losing its traditional legitimacy. By situating the Blu within the broader discourse of indigenous governance in Arunachal Pradesh, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between customary institutions and modern democratic administration.

Unlike many studies that treat traditional institutions merely as remnants of pre-modern political organization, this article argues that the Blu should be understood as a dynamic and adaptive institution that continues to perform important governance functions in contemporary Sherdukpen society. Its emphasis on consensus, mediation, restorative justice, and community participation offers valuable insights into indigenous models of governance that remain relevant in an era characterized by increasing demands for participatory democracy, local autonomy, and culturally sensitive systems of justice.

Review of Literature

The study of indigenous governance in Arunachal Pradesh has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the last several decades. Much of the available literature has focused on the evolution of tribal political institutions, customary laws, village administration, and the impact of modernization on traditional systems of governance. These studies collectively demonstrate that tribal societies of the Eastern Himalayas evolved sophisticated mechanisms of self-governance long before the introduction of formal administrative institutions. Nevertheless, despite this growing body of scholarship, systematic studies devoted exclusively to the Sherdukpen **Blu** institution remain limited. Existing literature either examines traditional governance in Arunachal Pradesh in a general context or discusses the Sherdukpens primarily from ethnographic and cultural perspectives. A critical review of the available literature, therefore, reveals both the strengths of previous scholarship and the need for a comprehensive study of the Blu as an institution of indigenous governance and customary justice.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to the understanding of tribal governance in the erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency was made by **Verrier Elwin (1960)** in *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Writing in the context of post-Independence tribal policy, Elwin argued that tribal societies possessed well-established systems of self-government rooted in their customs, traditions, and collective values. He emphasized that these institutions functioned through consensus rather than coercion and cautioned against the indiscriminate replacement of indigenous institutions by externally imposed administrative structures. Elwin's subsequent work, *Democracy in NEFA* (1965), further developed this argument by demonstrating that democratic practices among tribal communities were not imported concepts but had long existed in the form of village councils, collective deliberations, and customary decision-making. His observations remain fundamental to understanding indigenous political institutions in Arunachal Pradesh, although his works discuss tribal governance in general and do not provide a detailed account of the Sherdukpen Blu.

The historical development of political administration in Arunachal Pradesh has been extensively examined by **M. L. Bose (1979)** in *Historical and Constitutional Documents of North-East India*

and **P. N. Luthra (1993)** in *Constitutional and Administrative Growth of Arunachal Pradesh*. These works trace the transition from indigenous systems of governance to colonial frontier administration and subsequently to the modern democratic framework. They explain how British frontier policies recognized the authority of traditional village leaders through the institution of the Gaonbura while simultaneously introducing new administrative mechanisms. Their analyses are valuable for understanding the historical context within which traditional institutions such as the Blu adapted to changing political circumstances. However, these studies are primarily administrative histories and do not investigate the internal organization or functioning of indigenous village councils.

The evolution of traditional political institutions has been examined in greater detail by **B. B. Pandey, D. K. Duarah, and N. Sarkar (1991)** in their edited volume *Traditional Village Councils of Arunachal Pradesh*. This pioneering work remains one of the most comprehensive studies on customary governance in the state. The contributors document the structure, composition, jurisdiction, and functions of village councils among various tribal communities and demonstrate that these institutions constituted the principal agencies of local administration before the introduction of statutory Panchayati Raj institutions. The volume highlights the diversity of indigenous political systems while identifying common features such as consensus-based decision-making, community participation, and customary justice. Although it provides an overview of Sherdukpen institutions, its treatment of the Blu is necessarily brief because of its comparative scope. Consequently, many aspects of the Sherdukpen village council remain unexplored.

Political transformation and administrative change in Arunachal Pradesh have been further analysed by **B. B. Pandey (1996)** in *Arunachal Pradesh: Village State to Statehood*. Pandey demonstrates that indigenous political institutions underwent significant changes following the expansion of state administration, democratic decentralization, and constitutional governance. Nevertheless, he argues that traditional authorities retained considerable influence because of their social legitimacy and intimate relationship with customary law. Earlier, **Pandey (1991)** in *Leadership Patterns in a Tribal Society* had examined indigenous leadership within tribal communities and emphasized that leadership was traditionally based upon experience, integrity, wisdom, and public confidence rather than hereditary privilege alone. His work provides useful conceptual insights for understanding the authority exercised by the **Thik-Akhao**, the head of the Blu institution. However, these studies discuss tribal leadership at a broader level and do not specifically analyse the institutional dynamics of Sherdukpen governance.

The functioning of indigenous governance systems has been comprehensively discussed by **M. Modi (2003)** in *Indigenous System of Governance in the Tribal Society of Arunachal Pradesh*. Modi argues that traditional village councils represent highly organized indigenous political

institutions that regulate judicial, administrative, economic and social affairs through customary law. The study demonstrates that although these institutions differ from tribe to tribe, they share certain common characteristics, including collective decision-making, public participation, and restorative approaches to justice. The work provides a valuable comparative framework for understanding the Blu institution but offers only limited discussion of Sherdukpen customary administration.

Similarly, **N. Lego (2008)**, in *Local Self Government in Arunachal Pradesh: Early Times to 2008*, traces the evolution of local governance from indigenous institutions to constitutional Panchayati Raj. Lego emphasizes that traditional councils continue to coexist with modern democratic institutions and frequently complement statutory governance in village administration. His work illustrates the continuity of indigenous governance despite institutional changes. However, the analysis remains largely administrative and provides only passing references to the Sherdukpen Blu.

The changing nature of tribal institutions has also been examined by **O. Pertin (2008)** in *Rethinking Tribal Institutions*. Pertin argues that indigenous political institutions should not be viewed merely as historical relics but as dynamic organizations capable of adapting to changing socio-political environments. According to him, the resilience of customary institutions lies in their flexibility, community participation, and ability to resolve disputes through consensus. His observations provide an important interpretative framework for analysing the continuing relevance of the Blu under contemporary administrative conditions.

Questions relating to social change and institutional transformation have received considerable attention in **G. Das's (1995) Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in Transition**. Das analyses the impact of modernization, education, administrative reforms, and economic development upon traditional tribal societies. He argues that while modernization has reduced the formal authority of customary institutions, it has not diminished their cultural legitimacy. Instead, many traditional institutions have adapted to changing circumstances by redefining their functions. This interpretation is particularly relevant to understanding the contemporary position of the Blu within Sherdukpen society.

A similar perspective is reflected in **T. Mibang and M. C. Behera's (2004)** edited volume *Dynamics of Tribal Villages in Arunachal Pradesh: Emerging Realities*. The contributors examine the changing social, political, and economic conditions of tribal villages under the influence of modernization and globalization. The volume emphasizes that indigenous institutions continue to perform important functions in conflict resolution, social regulation, and community mobilization even as formal governmental agencies expand their jurisdiction. The

discussion strengthens the argument that traditional institutions remain integral components of grassroots governance in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethnographic studies devoted specifically to the Sherdukpens provide important insights into the social and cultural background within which the Blu functions. **R. R. P. Sharma (1988)**, in *The Sherdukpens*, presents one of the earliest systematic accounts of Sherdukpen society. His work documents the community's social organization, religious beliefs, customary practices, and political life, while briefly describing the traditional village council and its judicial role. Later, **A. Sharma (2013)**, in *The Sherthukpens of Arunachal Pradesh: A Narrative of Cultural Heritage and Folklore*, further explores Sherdukpen oral traditions, cultural practices, and community institutions. Although both works provide valuable ethnographic information, their principal concern lies with cultural heritage rather than an analytical study of the Blu as an indigenous governance institution.

Likewise, **J. Nath (2005)** in *Cultural History of the Sherdukpens of Arunachal Pradesh* examines the historical evolution of Sherdukpen society, its cultural traditions, and religious life. Nath demonstrates how Buddhist philosophy and indigenous beliefs together shaped Sherdukpen social institutions. However, his discussion of political organization remains descriptive and does not examine the administrative or judicial dimensions of the Blu in detail. **P. Dollfus and F. Jacquesson (2013)**, through their study *Khiksabha: A Festival in Sherdukpen Country*, also contribute significantly to understanding Sherdukpen social organization by illustrating the close relationship between customary institutions and ritual life. Their work indirectly highlights the role of the village council in organizing community festivals and maintaining social cohesion.

The interaction between religion and indigenous governance has been discussed by **N. Sarkar (1981)** in *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpens*. Sarkar demonstrates that while Buddhism profoundly influenced the ethical and cultural values of the Sherdukpens, customary institutions continued to regulate secular administration and judicial affairs. This distinction is particularly important in understanding the dual foundations of Sherdukpen society, where religious authority and customary governance coexist without undermining one another.

The importance of customary law has been examined in **P. C. Dutta and D. K. Duarah's (1997)** edited volume *Aspects of Customary Laws of Arunachal Pradesh*. The contributors analyse the legal traditions of various tribes and demonstrate that customary law constitutes the principal basis of indigenous governance. The volume explains how customary institutions regulate marriage, inheritance, land rights, dispute settlement, and social obligations. Although it offers useful comparative perspectives, detailed treatment of Sherdukpen customary justice remains limited.

Finally, **Megejee (2011)**, in his doctoral thesis *Stratification and Change among the Sherdukpens*, examines the processes of social transformation within Sherdukpen society. He argues that modernization, education and state intervention have altered patterns of leadership, authority and social stratification, yet customary institutions continue to enjoy considerable public confidence. His work is particularly valuable because it reflects recent developments within the community, although governance itself is not the central focus of the study.

A review of the foregoing literature clearly indicates that considerable attention has been devoted to indigenous governance, customary law, and village administration in Arunachal Pradesh. Existing scholarship has significantly enhanced our understanding of tribal political organization, customary institutions, and processes of social change. Nevertheless, a noticeable gap remains regarding a comprehensive analysis of the **Blu** institution as an integrated system of indigenous governance among the Sherdukpens. Most studies either discuss the institution only briefly within broader ethnographic accounts or examine tribal governance from a comparative perspective without analyzing the historical evolution, organizational structure, judicial procedures, developmental functions, and contemporary transformation of the Blu in a systematic manner. The present study seeks to address this gap by offering a focused examination of the Blu as an enduring institution of indigenous governance and customary justice, drawing upon historical sources, ethnographic fieldwork, and oral traditions to understand its continuing significance in Sherdukpen society.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine the indigenous institution of governance known as the Blu among the Sherdukpens of Arunachal Pradesh. Since the Blu is a traditional socio-political institution deeply embedded in the cultural life of the community, the study employs ethnographic methods supplemented by historical and documentary analysis. The objective is not merely to describe the institutional structure of the Blu but to understand its historical evolution, administrative organization, customary judicial processes, and continuing relevance in the context of socio-political transformation.

The research is primarily based on *fieldwork conducted in the Sherdukpen inhabited villages of Rupa and adjoining settlements in the present West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh*, where the institution of the Blu continues to function as an important customary authority. These villages constitute the traditional homeland of the Sherdukpens and provide an appropriate setting for examining the operation of indigenous governance within its socio-cultural context.

Primary data were collected through intensive field investigations employing participant observation, personal interviews, group discussions, and informal interactions with members of

the community. Interviews were conducted with Gaonburas (*Thik-Akhao*), Village Elders (*Obo Usu*), Members of the Blu, *Barse* (mediators), *Kachins*, Buddhist monks, educated youth, women and other knowledgeable persons who possess first-hand knowledge of Sherdukpen customary laws and traditional administration. Particular emphasis was placed on recording oral traditions relating to the origin of the Blu, procedures of dispute settlement, customary practices, and the changing role of the institution under modern administrative conditions.

Participant observation constituted an important component of the field methodology. The researcher attended meetings of the village council whenever circumstances permitted and observed community deliberations, customary dispute settlement procedures, and socio-cultural activities organized under the supervision of the Blu. Such observations provided valuable insights into the functioning of the institution beyond what could be gathered through interviews alone. Informal discussions with senior members of the community further facilitated an understanding of the unwritten customary laws, conventions, and ethical principles governing the institution.

Oral traditions have been used as an important source of historical reconstruction. Since the Sherdukpens possess a rich oral heritage but relatively limited written documentation concerning the evolution of their political institutions, narratives preserved by village elders and traditional leaders constitute valuable historical evidence. These oral accounts were carefully cross-checked with information obtained from multiple respondents to ensure consistency and reliability.

The study also relies extensively on secondary sources, including books, government publications, ethnographic reports, monographs, census records and scholarly articles relating to the Sherdukpens, indigenous governance, customary law and the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh. Classical works by Verrier Elwin, B. B. Pandey, G. Das, Modi, Lego, Sharma, Nath, Sarkar, Mibang and Behera, Duarah, and other scholars have been critically examined to understand the broader historical and intellectual context of indigenous governance in the state. Documentary sources published by the Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, have been particularly useful in reconstructing the historical development of traditional village councils.

The collected data have been analysed using a historical-analytical approach. Historical information relating to the emergence and evolution of the Blu has been interpreted in conjunction with ethnographic evidence obtained during fieldwork. Rather than presenting the institution merely as a static customary organization, the analysis examines its changing functions, adaptive mechanisms, and relationship with modern administrative institutions. The study therefore combines descriptive ethnography with institutional analysis in order to explain both continuity and transformation within Sherdukpen customary governance.

As customary laws among the Sherdukpens are transmitted largely through oral traditions and community practices, special care has been taken to preserve indigenous terminology and local interpretations while analysing the institution. Wherever multiple versions of oral narratives were encountered, they have been interpreted in the light of historical evidence and prevailing customary practices without undermining the perspectives of the community itself.

The scope of the present study is confined to the Blu institution among the Sherdukpens of West Kameng district, with particular emphasis on its historical evolution, organizational structure, judicial functions, administrative responsibilities and socio-cultural significance. Although reference has occasionally been made to other indigenous institutions of Arunachal Pradesh for contextual understanding, the primary concern of the study remains the Sherdukpen system of governance.

By combining ethnographic fieldwork with historical documentation and institutional analysis, the study seeks to present a comprehensive understanding of the Blu as a living institution of indigenous governance that continues to shape community life despite the expansion of modern democratic administration.

Historical Evolution of the Blu Institution

The evolution of indigenous political institutions among tribal societies is closely associated with the historical experiences, ecological conditions, social organization, and cultural development of individual communities. Like many tribal societies inhabiting the Eastern Himalayas, the Sherdukpens gradually developed their own mechanisms of governance in response to the collective needs of the community. The Blu, the traditional village council of the Sherdukpens, emerged as an institution for maintaining social order, administering justice, regulating community affairs, and preserving customary laws. Although its present organizational structure reflects centuries of institutional development, its exact origin remains embedded in oral traditions rather than written historical records.

Unlike the political institutions of many plains societies, the origin of the Blu cannot be traced through documentary evidence. Instead, its historical evolution is preserved in the collective memory of the Sherdukpen people and transmitted orally from one generation to another. These oral traditions provide important clues regarding the circumstances that led to the establishment of the institution, even though they differ in certain details. Consequently, reconstructing the history of the Blu requires a careful examination of oral narratives alongside available historical and ethnographic sources.

One of the most widely accepted traditions associates the political history of the Sherdukpens with *Asu Japtang Bura*, who is regarded as the common ancestor and the first ruler of the

community. According to Sherdukpen tradition, Japtang Bura exercised supreme political authority over the people and functioned as their principal leader. Some village elders maintain that the earliest form of the Blu existed during his period of leadership, with Japtang himself presiding over community affairs as the head of the institution. This interpretation considers the Blu as an extension of his political authority.

However, field investigations reveal another equally significant interpretation among knowledgeable elders. According to this view, the institution of the Blu did not exist during the lifetime of Japtang Bura. Since he exercised undisputed authority over a relatively small and homogeneous population, there was little necessity for a collective political institution to regulate community affairs. Administrative decisions, settlement of disputes, and maintenance of social order were performed directly under his leadership. The emergence of the Blu is therefore considered a later historical development rather than a feature of the earliest Sherdukpen political organization.

Another oral tradition attributes the evolution of the Blu to the period following the death of Japtang Bura. His demise created a political vacuum within Sherdukpen society, resulting in the emergence of several influential clan leaders who exercised authority within their respective localities. As these autonomous leadership groups gradually developed, competition and occasional conflicts arose among them. The absence of a central coordinating authority created difficulties in maintaining peace, regulating inter-clan relations, and ensuring collective security. It was under these circumstances that the principal clans recognized the necessity of establishing a representative institution capable of protecting common interests and resolving disputes through collective deliberation. According to this tradition, the Blu emerged as an institutional response to these socio-political challenges and gradually evolved into the supreme customary authority of the Sherdukpens.

This narrative corresponds with the broader anthropological understanding that political institutions evolve in response to changing social needs. As Sherdukpen society expanded in population and became more socially differentiated, a centralized yet participatory mechanism became essential for coordinating collective activities, regulating customary practices, and maintaining internal cohesion. The Blu thus represented the institutionalization of community authority rather than the concentration of power in a single individual. Unlike hereditary chieftainship, its legitimacy increasingly rested upon collective acceptance and customary consensus.

Some respondents also associate the evolution of the Blu with the gradual spread of Buddhism among the Sherdukpens. According to this interpretation, Buddhist ethical principles such as compassion, mediation, consensus, and communal harmony influenced the development of

village administration and dispute settlement. While there is little historical evidence to suggest that Buddhism directly established the Blu, it undoubtedly contributed to shaping the moral and ethical framework within which the institution subsequently functioned. The close association between the village council and the Gonpa (monastery) in community affairs illustrates the complementary relationship that gradually developed between religious authority and customary governance.

Structure and Composition of the Blu Institution

The effectiveness and longevity of any indigenous political institution depend not merely upon its historical evolution but also upon its organizational framework and the manner in which authority is distributed among its functionaries. Among the Sherdukpens, the Blu developed a well-defined organizational structure that combined collective leadership with customary authority. Its composition reflects the democratic ethos of the community, wherein governance is exercised through consultation, consensus, and shared responsibility rather than through autocratic rule. Although certain offices traditionally enjoyed greater prestige because of their association with influential clans, the functioning of the institution was fundamentally based on collective deliberation and public confidence.

Unlike centralized political systems where authority is concentrated in a single ruler, the Blu represents a corporate body comprising village elders, experienced leaders, mediators, and community representatives who collectively administer village affairs according to customary law. The institution embodies the Sherdukpen philosophy that governance should be exercised for the welfare of the entire community and that important decisions affecting public life should emerge from collective wisdom rather than individual authority. Consequently, every office within the Blu carries clearly defined responsibilities that together ensure the smooth functioning of village administration.

Historically, the Sherdukpens maintained two principal traditional councils. The *Thongji Blu*, located at Rupa (Tukpen), functioned as the supreme customary authority for the Sherdukpen community, while the *Senji Blu* at Shergaon gradually evolved as an independent council to administer the affairs of Shergaon and its neighbouring villages. Oral traditions indicate that Shergaon was originally under the jurisdiction of the Thongji Blu. However, with the growth of population, increasing settlement expansion and administrative convenience, Shergaon gradually established its own village council. Although both councils exercised authority within their respective jurisdictions, they were founded upon similar customary principles and organizational arrangements.

At the apex of the Blu stands the Thik-Akhao, who functions as the traditional head of the village council. The office of the Thik-Akhao occupies a position of considerable prestige within Sherdukpen society because it symbolizes both customary authority and moral leadership. Contrary to the common perception that tribal leadership is hereditary, the office of the Thik-Akhao was traditionally associated with personal qualities rather than merely lineage. Although members of the Thong clans were generally preferred because of their historical association with political leadership, the community recognized that effective administration required wisdom, impartiality, integrity, knowledge of customary law, and the ability to command public confidence. Consequently, the selection of the Thik-Akhao reflected both customary preference and community approval.

The transformation of the traditional political system under modern administration has significantly altered the status of the Thik-Akhao. With the introduction of the Gaonbura system during the colonial period and its continuation under the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, the traditional village head increasingly came to be recognized officially as the Gaonbura. Nevertheless, within Sherdukpen society the indigenous designation Thik-Akhao continues to carry greater cultural significance than the administrative title of Gaonbura. The coexistence of these two designations illustrates the interaction between customary institutions and statutory administration rather than the replacement of one by the other.

Assisting the Thik-Akhao are the Obo Usu, who constitute the council of village elders. Their authority derives not from executive power but from age, experience, and profound knowledge of customary practices. The elders serve as custodians of oral traditions and customary laws and play a decisive role during judicial deliberations. In matters involving disputes, interpretation of customary rules, or questions affecting community welfare, the opinions of the Obo Usu command considerable respect. Their participation ensures continuity in the transmission of indigenous legal knowledge across generations and reinforces the legitimacy of decisions taken by the Blu.

Another important component of the institution consists of the Jungme Barse, who functions as active members of the council. The Jungme Barse occupy an intermediate position between the village elders and the ordinary members of the community. Their principal responsibility is to assist the Thik-Akhao in the administration of village affairs and to participate actively in council deliberations. Traditionally, they were selected from among respected members of the community who possessed sound judgment, knowledge of customary law, and the confidence of the villagers. Unlike temporary committees constituted for specific purposes, membership in the Jungme Barse generally continued throughout an individual's active public life, subject to continued confidence and good conduct.

Among the various functionaries of the Blu, the Barse occupy a particularly significant position because of their role in customary dispute settlement. Sherdukpen customary justice places great emphasis upon reconciliation rather than confrontation and the Barse serve as mediators who attempt to resolve disputes before they reach the formal stage of adjudication by the council. They visit both parties separately, collect statements, ascertain the facts, and endeavour to negotiate an amicable settlement. Their role extends beyond the mere collection of evidence; they function as impartial intermediaries whose objective is to restore social harmony within the community. In many instances, disputes are resolved through their efforts without requiring formal judicial proceedings before the Blu. This institution of mediation reflects the restorative character of Sherdukpen customary law and distinguishes it from adversarial systems of justice.

The Khomi constitute the broader body of primary members within the traditional political organization. Membership of the Khomi is generally acquired upon attaining adulthood and assuming family responsibilities. Traditionally, adult males who established independent households became eligible for inclusion in this category and thereby acquired the right to participate in community affairs. The induction of new Khomi members traditionally took place during the Chhatpu Nsey, the triennial session of the Thongji Blu, where they formally accepted the responsibilities associated with community membership. Besides conferring social recognition, this process symbolized the integration of individuals into the collective political life of the village. Members were expected to contribute to community welfare, participate in collective labour, observe customary laws, and support the decisions of the village council.

An equally indispensable office within the organizational framework of the Blu is that of the Kachin. Although the Kachin are not decision-making members of the council, they perform essential administrative functions that ensure the effective implementation of council decisions. Serving primarily as messengers, they communicate notices of meetings, festivals, community labour, and other public activities to the villagers. They also monitor observance of customary regulations, maintain village discipline, and report violations of customary norms to the Thik-Akhao. Unlike the permanent offices of the council, the responsibility of serving as Kachin is rotational. Families belonging to different clans perform this duty in turn, thereby ensuring equitable participation in community administration and preventing the concentration of administrative responsibilities within a limited section of society.

The composition of the Blu also reveals important features of Sherdukpen social organization. Membership was historically confined to adult males, while women did not participate directly in the formal proceedings of the village council. This exclusion reflected the prevailing customary norms governing political participation rather than a lack of social importance accorded to women within the family and community. The traditional belief that public administration should remain the responsibility of male elders shaped the composition of the institution for generations.

Nevertheless, the changing educational and socio-political environment of contemporary Arunachal Pradesh has stimulated broader discussions regarding the role of women in community decision-making, although the traditional organizational framework of the Blu largely continues to follow established customary practices.

Another notable characteristic of the Sherdukpen village council is the absence of financial remuneration for its office-bearers. Service in the Blu has traditionally been regarded as a public duty performed for the collective welfare of the community rather than as a source of personal gain. Fines imposed upon offenders are deposited with the council and utilized for community purposes, including socio-religious ceremonies, public works, and collective welfare activities. This practice reinforces the principle that customary governance exists to safeguard communal interests rather than individual benefit.

The organizational structure of the Blu thus demonstrates a carefully evolved system of indigenous governance founded upon collective leadership, moral authority, customary legitimacy, and public participation. Each office within the institution performs a distinct yet complementary function, ensuring that administrative, judicial, and social responsibilities are distributed across different segments of the community. The enduring stability of the Blu owes much to this institutional balance, which has enabled it to preserve social cohesion while adapting to changing political circumstances. Rather than functioning as a rigid hierarchical organization, the Blu represents a flexible and participatory system of governance in which authority is exercised through consultation, consensus, and collective responsibility. This organizational resilience has enabled the institution to retain its significance even amidst the expansion of modern administrative structures.

Qualification, Selection, and Election of the Thik-Akhao and Council Members

The legitimacy and effectiveness of indigenous political institutions depend largely upon the procedures through which leadership is selected and authority is exercised. Unlike modern democratic systems that rely upon codified electoral laws and periodic elections, the Sherdukpen Blu developed its own customary procedures for identifying and appointing individuals capable of administering community affairs. These procedures evolved over generations and reflected the community's perception that leadership should be founded upon integrity, wisdom, experience, and public confidence rather than personal ambition or political competition. Consequently, the selection of the Thik-Akhao and other members of the Blu has traditionally been regarded as both a social responsibility and a moral obligation.

Historically, the office of the Thik-Akhao was closely associated with the Thong clans, which occupied a position of prestige in Sherdukpen society owing to their traditional role in political

leadership. This association has occasionally led to the assumption that the office was hereditary. Field evidence, however, indicates that hereditary succession was neither automatic nor absolute. Although preference was generally accorded to qualified members of the Thong clans, appointment to the office depended upon the confidence of the community and the approval of the village council. In villages where no suitable candidate from the Thong clans was available, respected members belonging to the **Chao** clans were also considered eligible. Thus, while customary precedence influenced the selection process, it did not exclude merit or community acceptance.

The Sherdukpens traditionally expected the Thik-Akhao to possess qualities that inspired public confidence and ensured impartial administration. Personal character was regarded as more important than social status or economic prosperity. During field investigations, village elders consistently emphasized that a prospective village head should be known for honesty, fairness, patience, and sound judgment. Equally important was an extensive knowledge of customary laws, social conventions, ritual obligations, and traditional procedures of dispute settlement. Since the Thik-Akhao presided over judicial proceedings and represented the moral authority of the community, he was expected to remain above factional interests and personal disputes. Eloquence in public deliberations, the ability to persuade conflicting parties towards reconciliation, and a reputation for selfless service were also considered essential qualifications.

Unlike modern electoral campaigns, the selection of the Thik-Akhao traditionally emerged through prolonged consultation among the senior members of the community. Oral accounts indicate that when a vacancy occurred owing to death, old age, or resignation, village elders initiated informal discussions regarding suitable candidates. Existing council members, respected elders, and influential household heads participated in these consultations with the objective of identifying an individual capable of commanding universal respect. Once a broad consensus was achieved, the candidate's name was placed before the community during a public gathering, often held in the premises of the Gonpa or another customary meeting place. The public declaration of the new Thik-Akhao symbolized not merely the assumption of office but the collective endorsement of his authority by the community.

The appointment of the Thik-Akhao was therefore based on consensus rather than contest. The absence of electoral rivalry reflected the Sherdukpen belief that leadership should unite the community instead of dividing it. Public confidence constituted the principal source of political legitimacy and the selected individual assumed office only after receiving the collective approval of the villagers. This consensual method of selection significantly contributed to the authority enjoyed by the Thik-Akhao and minimized factionalism within the community.

The process of selecting other office-bearers of the Blu followed similar principles. The Obo Usu, representing the senior council of elders, was generally recognized on account of their age, experience, and profound knowledge of customary practices. Their position was not attained through formal election but through gradual social recognition earned over many years of public service and personal conduct. Since they functioned as custodians of customary law, their advice carried considerable weight during council deliberations, particularly in matters involving interpretation of traditions or settlement of complex disputes.

Membership of the Jungme Barse, the active members of the village council, likewise depended upon personal merit and community confidence. Traditionally, these members were selected from among respected individuals possessing sound judgment, familiarity with customary law, and an established record of public service. Initially, the office was largely confined to members of the Thong clans. However, social changes over time gradually broadened eligibility, allowing competent members of other clans to participate in the administration of the village. This gradual expansion reflects the adaptive character of the Blu and its willingness to accommodate changing social realities without undermining its customary foundations.

An important characteristic of the Sherdukpen political system is that membership in the Blu was generally regarded as a lifelong responsibility rather than a fixed-term appointment. Once selected, council members continued to serve as long as they retained the confidence of the community and remained physically capable of performing their duties. Removal from office was extremely uncommon and occurred only in exceptional circumstances involving serious misconduct, dishonesty, or behaviour that violated established customary norms. This arrangement provided institutional continuity while simultaneously ensuring that experienced individuals remained available for the guidance of the community.

The induction of Khomi, who constitute the broader body of primary members, followed a different procedure. Every adult male who established an independent household became eligible for inclusion as a Khomi, thereby acquiring both rights and responsibilities within the customary political organization. Admission into this category was traditionally formalized during the Chhatpu Nsey, the triennial assembly of the Thongji Blu. During this ceremony, newly admitted members accepted the obligations associated with community participation, including adherence to customary law, contribution to communal activities, and support for the decisions of the village council. Membership thus represented both a social recognition of adulthood and an acknowledgment of civic responsibility.

The office of Kachin differed fundamentally from the other positions within the Blu. Since the Kachin primarily performed administrative and messenger duties, the responsibility rotated among families belonging to different clans. This rotational system ensured equitable distribution

of public responsibilities and prevented any single lineage from monopolizing routine administrative functions. The tenure of the Kachin was generally fixed for three years, after which the responsibility passed to another eligible family. Such rotation strengthened collective participation in village administration and reinforced the principle that governance was a shared community obligation.

An examination of the selection process reveals that the Sherdukpen system of leadership was guided by principles of *merit, customary legitimacy, consensus and public accountability*. Authority did not derive solely from hereditary privilege or political competition but from the recognition of moral character, administrative competence, and knowledge of customary traditions. The absence of electoral contest and the emphasis upon collective consultation contributed significantly to the stability of the Blu and enabled it to command widespread public confidence.

The gradual incorporation of the official Gaonbura system under the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has introduced certain procedural changes in the appointment of village heads. Today, while the Gaonbura receives formal recognition from the civil administration, the individual's effectiveness within the community continues to depend largely upon customary acceptance and the confidence of the Blu. Thus, rather than replacing indigenous leadership, the modern administrative framework has created a situation in which statutory recognition and customary legitimacy coexist.

The Sherdukpen method of selecting leaders illustrates an indigenous understanding of democratic governance that differs markedly from electoral democracy but nevertheless embodies the principles of participation, consultation, accountability, and collective responsibility. Leadership is viewed not as an instrument of political authority but as a social trust exercised for the welfare of the entire community. This philosophy has enabled the Blu to preserve its legitimacy across generations despite the profound political transformations experienced by the region.

Powers and Functions of the Blu Institution

The Blu occupies a central position in the traditional socio-political organization of the Sherdukpens. Unlike modern local government institutions that perform specialized administrative functions under statutory provisions, the Blu historically exercised comprehensive authority over almost every aspect of community life. It functioned simultaneously as the executive authority, judicial body, social regulator, developmental agency, and custodian of customary laws. The integration of these diverse responsibilities within a single institution

reflects the holistic character of indigenous governance, where political administration, social regulation, religious observances, and community welfare are closely interconnected.

Although the expansion of state administration and the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions have gradually reduced some of its formal administrative responsibilities, the Blu continues to occupy a position of considerable influence within Sherdukpen society. Its authority today derives less from statutory recognition than from the collective confidence of the community and the enduring legitimacy of customary law. The institution continues to function as an important mechanism for maintaining social harmony, preserving cultural identity, and resolving disputes through indigenous procedures.

The powers and functions of the Blu may broadly be classified into five interrelated categories: ***administrative, judicial, developmental, socio-cultural, and regulatory functions.***

Administrative Functions

Historically, the Blu constituted the supreme administrative authority of the Sherdukpen community. Before the extension of modern governmental administration into the region, the institution was responsible for regulating the internal affairs of the village and ensuring the orderly conduct of community life. Every important matter affecting the welfare of the village was deliberated collectively under the leadership of the **Thik-Akhao**, whose authority was exercised with the advice and consent of the council members.

The administrative jurisdiction of the Blu extended over a wide range of community affairs. It coordinated village administration, supervised the implementation of customary laws, maintained discipline among the inhabitants, and ensured that every household fulfilled its obligations towards the community. The institution acted as the principal coordinating agency through which collective decisions were translated into practical action. In the absence of written rules or bureaucratic procedures, the smooth functioning of the community depended largely upon the authority and organizational capacity of the village council.

One of the principal administrative responsibilities of the Blu was the mobilization of **collective labour** for community works. The Sherdukpen society traditionally emphasized cooperation and mutual assistance as essential principles of social organization. Whenever roads, footpaths, irrigation channels, temporary bridges, village fences, or public buildings required construction or repair, the Blu organized communal labour and assigned responsibilities to different households. Participation in such activities was regarded not merely as voluntary service but as a customary obligation binding upon every member of the community. Failure to participate without valid reasons invited social criticism and, in certain cases, customary penalties imposed by the village council.

The Blu also exercised authority over the management and utilization of common village resources. Community lands, forests, grazing grounds, and water sources were regulated according to customary norms established by the council. Decisions concerning the allocation of land for cultivation, protection of forests, and regulation of communal resources were taken collectively with due regard to the interests of the entire village. Such practices reflected the indigenous understanding that natural resources constituted collective property to be managed for the welfare of present and future generations rather than for individual exploitation.

Maintenance of public order formed another important aspect of village administration. The Blu was responsible for ensuring that community members observed customary norms relating to social conduct, mutual cooperation, and public discipline. Through the assistance of the **Kachins**, the council communicated decisions, convened public meetings, disseminated information regarding community activities, and monitored compliance with customary regulations. Cases involving breaches of customary obligations were promptly brought before the council for appropriate action, thereby preventing the emergence of prolonged social tensions.

The administrative functions of the Blu also included the organization of village meetings for discussing matters of public importance. Depending upon the nature and urgency of the issue, meetings were convened either to address immediate problems or to deliberate upon questions affecting the long-term welfare of the community. Such meetings were generally held in open public spaces or within the premises of the **Gonpa**, symbolizing the transparency and collective nature of indigenous governance. Decisions were normally arrived at through extensive discussion and unanimous agreement rather than by majority voting, thereby reinforcing the principle of consensus that characterizes Sherdukpen political culture.

An important feature of Sherdukpen administration was the existence of two significant assemblies known as **Damchik** and **Chhatpu Nsey**. The **Damchik** represented a general meeting in which members of all clans participated to deliberate upon issues affecting the community as a whole. It served as an important forum for reaffirming customary norms, reviewing matters of collective concern, and strengthening social solidarity.

The **Chhatpu Nsey**, on the other hand, occupied a special position within the administrative structure of the Blu. Held traditionally at intervals of five years and, in recent decades, every three years, this assembly brought together representatives from all villages under the jurisdiction of the **Thongji Blu**. Apart from inducting new members into the customary political organization, the meeting reviewed unresolved disputes, assessed community affairs, reaffirmed customary regulations, and discussed matters concerning the future welfare of the Sherdukpen society. The proceedings of the Chhatpu Nsey were inaugurated through the customary

invocation known as **Phok-Chot**, symbolizing the sacred and collective nature of the institution. The assembly concluded with a community feast at the sacred site of **Manthingbao**, further reinforcing social unity and communal identity.

The Blu also maintained close interaction with emerging governmental institutions. Following the establishment of modern civil administration, Panchayati Raj bodies, and development agencies, the village council increasingly assumed the role of a coordinating institution. Government officials visiting the villages frequently consulted the Thik-Akhao and village elders regarding developmental programmes, implementation of welfare schemes, and matters requiring community participation. Although statutory institutions gradually assumed responsibility for many developmental functions, the cooperation of the Blu remained indispensable because of its intimate relationship with the local population.

Another important administrative responsibility concerned the preservation of customary law itself. Since Sherdukpen customary laws were traditionally transmitted orally, the Blu functioned as the principal repository of legal knowledge. The Thik-Akhao and village elders interpreted customary principles, resolved ambiguities, and ensured that judicial decisions remained consistent with established traditions. Through this process, the institution preserved continuity in indigenous legal practices while allowing gradual adaptation to changing social circumstances.

The administrative authority of the Blu thus rested not upon coercive power but upon social legitimacy, collective participation, and moral responsibility. Compliance with its decisions was secured primarily through public confidence and the shared belief that the institution acted in the collective interest of the community. This feature distinguishes indigenous governance from formal bureaucratic administration, where authority is generally derived from statutory provisions and institutional hierarchy.

In contemporary Sherdukpen society, several administrative functions formerly performed by the Blu have been transferred to elected Panchayati Raj Institutions and government departments. Nevertheless, the village council continues to play an advisory and coordinating role, particularly in matters involving customary practices, community participation, conflict prevention, and preservation of traditional institutions. Its continued relevance demonstrates the resilience of indigenous governance in adapting to modern administrative structures without losing its customary legitimacy.

Judicial Functions of the Blu Institution

The administration of justice has historically constituted the most significant and enduring function of the Blu institution among the Sherdukpens. More than an administrative body, the Blu has traditionally served as the supreme customary court responsible for preserving social

harmony, maintaining public order, and enforcing the customary laws of the community. Unlike the formal judicial system, which emphasizes statutory provisions, procedural technicalities, and adversarial litigation, the Sherdukpen system of justice is fundamentally community-oriented and restorative in character. Its principal objective is not merely to determine guilt or innocence but to restore peace, repair damaged social relationships, and re-establish communal equilibrium.

The judicial authority of the Blu evolved from the practical necessities of regulating life in a closely-knit tribal society where social cohesion and collective survival depended upon mutual trust and cooperation. In such a society, prolonged hostility between individuals or families threatened the stability of the entire community. Consequently, the customary judicial process was designed to prevent the escalation of disputes through negotiation, mediation, and collective deliberation rather than through punitive confrontation. Justice was therefore viewed as a social process aimed at reconciliation rather than punishment alone.

Historically, the jurisdiction of the Blu extended over almost all civil and criminal matters arising within the village. These included disputes relating to land boundaries, inheritance, marriage, divorce, theft, robbery, assault, property damage, breach of customary obligations, violations of community regulations, and conflicts between individuals or families. The council also exercised authority over offences involving disrespect towards village elders, neglect of communal duties, and actions considered detrimental to the collective interests of the community. Only offences considered exceptionally grave or falling outside the customary jurisdiction were eventually referred to the civil administration after the introduction of the modern judicial system.

One of the most distinctive features of the Sherdukpen judicial system is its emphasis on *conciliation before adjudication*. Customary law regards litigation as the final stage rather than the starting point of dispute settlement. Whenever disagreement arises between individuals or families, every effort is first made to resolve the conflict informally through negotiation. Family elders, relatives, neighbours, and respected members of the community often intervene voluntarily to prevent disputes from reaching the village council. Such informal intervention reflects the Sherdukpen belief that disputes should, wherever possible, be settled within the social fabric of the community without causing lasting bitterness.

When private negotiation fails to produce an acceptable settlement, the matter is entrusted to the **Barse**, who occupy a central position within the customary judicial process. The institution of the Barse represents one of the most remarkable features of Sherdukpen indigenous jurisprudence. Rather than functioning merely as messengers or witnesses, the Barse serve as impartial mediators entrusted with the responsibility of restoring harmony between the disputing

parties. Their appointment reflects the community's conviction that disputes are best resolved through dialogue and mutual understanding rather than coercion.

Following the receipt of a complaint by the Thik-Akhao, one or more Barse are appointed to investigate the matter. Instead of summoning both parties before the council immediately, the Barse visit each party separately and patiently listen to their respective versions of the dispute. They carefully collect statements, clarify misunderstandings, examine the circumstances surrounding the incident, and assess the possibility of achieving reconciliation through mutual compromise. During this stage, they frequently travel repeatedly between the disputing parties, conveying proposals, counter-proposals, explanations, and assurances in an attempt to eliminate misunderstanding and reduce hostility.

This process of shuttle mediation serves several important purposes. First, it enables the Barse to gather factual information before formal judicial proceedings commence. Secondly, it reduces emotional tension by allowing both parties to express their grievances privately rather than in a confrontational public setting. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it provides an opportunity for reconciliation without the necessity of formal adjudication. In many cases, disputes are successfully resolved during this preliminary stage, thereby avoiding unnecessary litigation and preserving cordial social relations within the village.

Only when mediation fails to produce a mutually acceptable settlement does the matter proceed before the Blu for formal adjudication. The authority to convene the village council rests with the Thik-Akhao, who determines whether the complaint warrants judicial consideration. Since the convening of the council requires the participation of numerous elders and community members, meetings are not held indiscriminately. The Thik-Akhao exercises careful discretion in fixing the date and venue of the proceedings, taking into consideration both the seriousness of the dispute and the convenience of the villagers, whose daily livelihood depends largely upon agriculture and pastoral activities.

Once the date of hearing has been fixed, the Kachin communicates the information to the concerned parties as well as to members of the council. Traditionally, meetings are held in a public place, often within or near the premises of the Gonpa, thereby emphasizing both the transparency of the proceedings and the moral responsibility associated with the administration of justice. Public participation in the hearing also serves to reinforce confidence in the impartiality of the council and discourages false accusations or fabricated evidence.

The judicial proceedings commence with the formal presentation of the complaint by the plaintiff before the Thik-Akhao and the council. According to customary practice, the complainant approaches the council bearing *a bamboo vessel containing locally brewed liquor*

together with ceremonial Khadas. These offerings do not constitute gifts or inducements but symbolize respect towards the institution of justice and acknowledge the moral authority of the village council. After presenting the complaint, the plaintiff withdraws with the permission of the elders while the council begins its deliberative process.

Subsequently, the Barse present before the council the statements they have collected from both parties during the mediation process. Since they have personally interacted with the disputants, the Barse are often able to explain not merely the factual aspects of the dispute but also the underlying causes of misunderstanding. Their observations carry considerable weight because they are expected to remain impartial and objective throughout the proceedings. Nevertheless, the council does not rely exclusively upon their opinion but proceeds to examine the available evidence independently.

Whenever eye-witnesses are available, they are invited to present their testimony before the council. Their statements are carefully scrutinized through questioning by the Thik-Akhao and the village elders. The credibility of each witness is assessed not merely on the basis of factual consistency but also with reference to personal reputation and social standing within the community. Since Sherdukpen society is relatively small and closely interconnected, the character and integrity of individuals are generally well known to the members of the village council, thereby facilitating a more informed assessment of testimony.

Historically, when reliable witnesses were unavailable and material evidence proved insufficient, the Sherdukpens occasionally resorted to *oath and ordeal*, invoking supernatural agencies to establish the truth. The accused was required to swear before local deities, declaring that divine punishment would befall him should he be guilty of the alleged offence. It was believed that false oaths would inevitably invite supernatural retribution, thereby deterring perjury and false accusations. This practice reflected the intimate relationship between customary law and indigenous religious belief. However, field investigations indicate that such methods have virtually disappeared in contemporary Sherdukpen society and are no longer employed in judicial proceedings. The growing influence of education, Buddhism, and modern legal consciousness has replaced supernatural ordeals with greater reliance upon factual inquiry, witness testimony, and collective deliberation.

The actual decision-making process within the Blu is characterized by extensive consultation among the Thik-Akhao, Obo Usu, and other senior members of the council. Unlike adversarial courts where judicial authority rests with a single judge, decisions of the Blu emerge through collective discussion. Every member is encouraged to express his opinion regarding the evidence, customary provisions, and appropriate course of action. The deliberations continue until a broad consensus is achieved. Majority voting is traditionally avoided because it may

create divisions within the council itself. Instead, unanimous agreement is regarded as essential for maintaining the moral authority and legitimacy of the institution.

The judgments pronounced by the Blu derive their authority not from written legislation but from the accumulated wisdom of customary law preserved through generations. Consequently, every decision simultaneously resolves the immediate dispute and reaffirms the customary norms governing Sherdukpen society. Compliance with the judgment is generally voluntary because the parties recognize the moral legitimacy of the council and understand that continued social participation depends upon adherence to community decisions. The effectiveness of the institution therefore rests primarily upon public confidence rather than coercive enforcement.

A striking feature of Sherdukpen customary jurisprudence is the limited role accorded to punitive justice. Although offenders are held accountable for their actions, the principal concern of the Blu is the restoration of social harmony. Compensation to the injured party, public apology, reconciliation between families, and reaffirmation of community solidarity are regarded as more desirable outcomes than severe punishment. Even where fines are imposed, they frequently serve not only as penalties but also as symbolic acts acknowledging responsibility and facilitating reconciliation.

This restorative orientation distinguishes the Blu from the formal legal system and explains its continued popularity among the Sherdukpens. Community members often perceive customary justice as more accessible, less expensive, culturally appropriate, and more conducive to preserving long-term social relationships than prolonged litigation before statutory courts. Consequently, despite the availability of modern judicial institutions, many disputes continue to be settled through the customary processes of the Blu.

The judicial functions of the Blu therefore represent far more than the administration of customary law. They embody an indigenous philosophy of justice rooted in collective responsibility, mediation, consensus, and social reconciliation. Through these principles, the institution has succeeded for generations in preserving peace and maintaining social cohesion within Sherdukpen society while adapting gradually to the changing legal and administrative environment of contemporary Arunachal Pradesh.

Crime and Punishment under the Blu: Principles of Sherdukpen Customary Justice

The customary legal system of the Sherdukpens is founded upon the principle that every member of the community bears collective responsibility for preserving peace, social harmony, and mutual respect. Consequently, offences are not viewed merely as violations against an individual but as acts that disturb the moral and social equilibrium of the entire village. The primary objective of punishment under the **Blu** is therefore corrective and restorative rather than

retributive. Justice seeks to restore relationships, compensate the injured party, reaffirm customary norms, and prevent future conflicts rather than inflict severe physical or custodial punishment.

Unlike statutory criminal law, which classifies offences according to codified legal provisions, Sherdukpen customary law evolved through long-standing traditions and oral precedents. The nature of punishment depended upon the seriousness of the offence, the intention of the offender, the extent of damage caused, and the possibility of reconciliation between the disputing parties. Since customary law was transmitted orally, considerable flexibility existed in its interpretation, allowing the Blu to consider the unique circumstances of each case while remaining guided by established traditions.

Classification of Offences

The Blu traditionally exercised jurisdiction over a wide variety of civil and criminal disputes affecting the social life of the village. These may broadly be classified into the following categories:

1. Property and Land Disputes

Land has always constituted one of the most valuable economic resources among the Sherdukpens. Although the community traditionally recognized individual rights over cultivated land, forests, grazing grounds, and water sources were often managed collectively according to customary norms. Consequently, disputes relating to land boundaries, encroachment upon agricultural fields, ownership of orchards, irrigation channels, and grazing rights frequently came before the Blu.

Boundary disputes generally arose because cultivated fields were demarcated by natural landmarks rather than permanent survey records. The village elders relied upon oral testimony, historical knowledge, and traditional boundary markers while adjudicating such disputes. Whenever necessary, members of the council personally inspected the disputed site before delivering their verdict. The emphasis remained upon restoring harmony between neighbouring families rather than determining absolute ownership through rigid legal procedures.

2. Theft and Misappropriation of Property

Theft constituted a serious offence because it violated the mutual trust upon which village life depended. Agricultural produce, livestock, household implements, and valuable traditional ornaments were the most common objects involved in theft cases. Since Sherdukpen villages were relatively small and socially cohesive, theft was comparatively uncommon. Nevertheless,

when such incidents occurred, the offender was required to restore the stolen property, compensate the victim where necessary, and pay an additional customary fine imposed by the Blu.

Repeated offences invited more severe social sanctions. Habitual offenders suffered loss of public confidence and social prestige, which often proved more effective than formal punishment. In extreme cases, persistent disregard for customary norms could result in temporary social boycott until reconciliation was achieved.

3. Assault and Physical Injury

Cases involving assault, physical injury, and bodily harm were also brought before the village council. The Blu carefully distinguished between accidental injury, acts committed in self-defence, and deliberate violence. During the hearing, considerable attention was paid to the circumstances under which the incident occurred, the seriousness of the injury, and the possibility of reconciliation.

Instead of imposing imprisonment, the customary judicial system emphasized **compensation**. The offender was generally required to compensate the injured party according to the gravity of the injury and to publicly acknowledge responsibility before the council. The objective was not only to repair material loss but also to restore mutual trust between the concerned families.

4. Marriage and Family Disputes

Family disputes formed another important area of customary jurisdiction. Matters relating to marriage, divorce, bride wealth, inheritance, adoption, and family obligations were traditionally regulated according to Sherdukpen customary law. Whenever disagreements arose between families regarding matrimonial arrangements or inheritance, the Blu acted as the highest customary authority for interpreting established traditions.

The council also attempted to reconcile estranged spouses before recognizing separation. Divorce was therefore regarded as the last resort after all efforts at mediation had failed. This conciliatory approach reflected the broader philosophy of Sherdukpen customary justice, which sought to preserve social stability and family unity.

5. Violations of Community Obligations

Participation in community activities constituted an important civic responsibility. Every household was expected to contribute labour for the construction of village roads, bridges, irrigation channels, monasteries, and other public works. Similarly, attendance at village meetings, religious ceremonies, and collective festivals was regarded as a customary obligation.

Failure to perform these duties without reasonable justification invited disciplinary action by the Blu. Such cases were not viewed merely as personal negligence but as disregard for the collective welfare of the community. Offenders were generally warned initially; repeated neglect resulted in customary fines or temporary exclusion from certain communal privileges.

6. Offences against Public Morality

The Blu also exercised authority over conduct considered detrimental to the moral fabric of Sherdukpen society. Acts involving deliberate insult to respected elders, disruption of religious ceremonies, public disorder, malicious rumours, or behaviour threatening communal harmony were treated as offences against the community itself.

The council generally dealt with such matters through public admonition, apology, and reconciliation rather than severe punishment. The underlying objective remained the restoration of dignity and respect within the community.

Nature of Punishments

The Sherdukpen customary legal system did not recognize imprisonment as a regular form of punishment. Instead, punishments were designed to restore justice while maintaining social cohesion. The principal forms of punishment included:

Customary Fine

The most common punishment was the imposition of fines. These were generally paid in the form of mithuns, cattle, livestock, grain, locally brewed liquor, or, in contemporary times, money. The amount depended upon the seriousness of the offence and the economic circumstances of the offender.

Unlike statutory fines collected by the State, customary fines frequently served both symbolic and practical purposes. A portion might be utilized during reconciliation ceremonies or community feasts, while compensation was awarded directly to the aggrieved party whenever material loss had occurred.

Compensation

Compensation formed the cornerstone of Sherdukpen customary justice. Rather than punishing the offender solely for violating community norms, the Blu sought to restore the victim's losses. Property had to be returned, damaged crops compensated, livestock replaced, or medical expenses reimbursed according to customary practices.

This emphasis upon restitution distinguishes customary justice from many formal legal systems where punishment and victim compensation remain separate processes.

Public Apology

In many disputes involving personal insult or minor misconduct, a sincere public apology before the village council constituted an important component of reconciliation. Acceptance of responsibility restored the offender's moral standing while allowing the aggrieved party to forgive the offence in the presence of the community.

Public apology therefore functioned not as humiliation but as a ceremonial reaffirmation of social harmony.

Community Feast

Certain customary settlements concluded with a communal feast jointly organized by the disputing parties. The sharing of food and drink symbolized the complete restoration of friendly relations and publicly demonstrated that the conflict had been resolved permanently. Such ceremonies reinforced collective solidarity and prevented future hostility.

Social Sanctions

Where individuals repeatedly disregarded customary decisions, the Blu occasionally resorted to social sanctions. These included temporary exclusion from community functions, denial of collective assistance, or withdrawal of social cooperation until the offender complied with the council's decision.

Because Sherdukpen society depended heavily upon mutual cooperation, such sanctions proved remarkably effective despite the absence of physical coercion.

Evolution of Customary Punishment

Field evidence indicates that the nature of customary punishment has undergone significant transformation during the last few decades. Earlier practices involving ritual oaths, symbolic ordeals, or compensation exclusively through livestock have gradually given way to monetary fines, written agreements, and negotiated settlements consistent with modern legal consciousness.

Similarly, cases involving serious criminal offences such as homicide, rape, trafficking, or offences under national criminal law are no longer adjudicated exclusively by the Blu. Such matters are now reported to the civil police and regular courts in accordance with Indian law. Nevertheless, even where statutory proceedings are initiated, the Blu often continues to facilitate

reconciliation between families and assist in restoring community harmony after the completion of legal proceedings.

This coexistence of customary justice and formal law illustrates the emergence of **legal pluralism** in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh. Rather than competing with one another, the two systems increasingly perform complementary functions. The State exercises jurisdiction over serious criminal matters, while the Blu continues to regulate disputes rooted in customary law and community relationships.

Restorative Justice: An Indigenous Jurisprudential Perspective

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary jurisprudence, the Sherdukpen system administered through the Blu closely resembles what modern legal scholars describe as **restorative justice**. Long before this concept became prominent in international legal discourse, the Sherdukpens had evolved mechanisms that emphasized dialogue, mediation, restitution, community participation, and reconciliation.

The success of the Blu lies in its ability to transform conflict into consensus rather than deepen social divisions. The offender is encouraged to acknowledge responsibility, compensate the victim, and re-enter the community as a respected member rather than remain permanently stigmatized. Equally important, victims receive immediate recognition, compensation, and moral satisfaction through the active involvement of the community.

The emphasis upon consensus, collective deliberation, and reconciliation demonstrates that indigenous legal traditions possess sophisticated principles of justice capable of contributing meaningfully to contemporary debates on community-based conflict resolution and alternative dispute settlement mechanisms. In this respect, the Blu represents not merely a traditional institution preserved from the past but a living example of indigenous jurisprudence whose underlying principles continue to remain relevant in modern democratic societies.

The Blu in Transition: Interface between Indigenous Governance and Modern Democratic Institutions

The indigenous institutions of governance in Arunachal Pradesh have never remained static. Like all social institutions, they have continuously evolved in response to changing political, economic, and cultural circumstances. The Sherdukpen Blu is no exception. Over the last seven decades, the institution has experienced profound transformations owing to the expansion of state administration, the introduction of democratic decentralization, the spread of education, improved communication, market integration, and increasing interaction with the modern legal system. Despite these changes, however, the Blu has neither disappeared nor become obsolete.

Instead, it has adapted to the changing socio-political environment while continuing to preserve its essential role as the custodian of Sherdukpen customary law and cultural identity.

The transformation of the Blu must be understood within the broader historical process through which the tribal areas of the erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) were gradually integrated into the administrative and constitutional framework of independent India. Before Independence, village administration among the Sherdukpens was regulated almost entirely through customary institutions. The Blu exercised comprehensive authority over judicial, administrative, economic, and socio-cultural affairs without the existence of parallel governmental agencies. Community life revolved around customary law, oral traditions, and collective decision-making under the leadership of the Thik-Akhao and the village elders.

The situation began to change after the establishment of regular civil administration in the region. Government officers gradually assumed responsibility for revenue administration, maintenance of law and order, developmental planning, education, public health, and infrastructure. Traditional institutions, which had previously exercised unrestricted authority within their communities, increasingly found themselves operating alongside statutory administrative agencies. Nevertheless, unlike many indigenous institutions elsewhere that declined rapidly under state intervention, the Blu adapted by redefining its functions rather than resisting administrative change.

One of the most significant developments affecting the traditional political system was the formal recognition of the Gaonbura by the Government. The office of the Gaonbura became the principal link between the village community and the district administration. Since the individual appointed as Gaonbura was frequently drawn from among the traditional leadership, particularly the Thik-Akhao, the introduction of the system did not create a direct conflict between customary authority and governmental administration. Instead, the same individual often performed dual responsibilities-representing the State in administrative matters while simultaneously functioning as the customary leader within the Blu. This dual role facilitated institutional continuity and reduced the possibility of administrative rivalry.

The introduction of the *Panchayati Raj System* represented another major turning point in the evolution of indigenous governance. Statutory Panchayats assumed responsibility for developmental planning, implementation of government schemes, management of public funds, and democratic representation through elected institutions. Functions that had traditionally been performed by the Blu, such as organizing developmental activities, supervising village infrastructure, and coordinating public welfare programmes, increasingly came under the jurisdiction of elected Panchayati bodies.

At first glance, the emergence of Panchayati Raj appeared to diminish the relevance of the traditional institution. However, field observations indicate that the relationship between the Blu and the Panchayat has generally been characterized by *cooperation rather than competition*. The Panchayat derives its authority from constitutional provisions and electoral legitimacy, whereas the Blu continues to derive its authority from customary law and community acceptance. Consequently, both institutions perform complementary rather than identical functions.

Developmental programmes initiated by the Government frequently require the cooperation of the Blu for successful implementation. Village elders assist government agencies in mobilizing public participation, resolving local disagreements, identifying beneficiaries, protecting community resources, and ensuring the smooth execution of developmental projects. In many villages, important decisions relating to community welfare continue to be discussed informally within the Blu before being placed before the statutory Panchayat. Such practices illustrate the continuing influence of customary authority within contemporary village administration.

The judicial functions of the Blu have likewise undergone substantial modification. Under the Constitution of India and the Indian Penal Code, serious criminal offences now fall exclusively within the jurisdiction of the regular courts and law enforcement agencies. Cases involving homicide, rape, trafficking, narcotics, grievous assault, offences against children, and crimes affecting public security are immediately referred to the civil administration and police authorities. The Blu no longer claims exclusive authority over such matters.

Nevertheless, the institution continues to exercise considerable jurisdiction over disputes governed by customary law. Minor civil disputes relating to family matters, inheritance, marriage, agricultural land, village boundaries, customary obligations, compensation, and community discipline continue to be resolved through the village council. Many members of the Sherdukpen community prefer the customary judicial process because it is inexpensive, expeditious, culturally familiar, and directed towards reconciliation rather than prolonged litigation. Consequently, the Blu remains an important mechanism of alternative dispute resolution within the framework of legal pluralism.

Education has introduced another significant dimension to institutional transformation. Younger generations exposed to modern education, constitutional values, and statutory legal principles increasingly question certain customary practices that may appear inconsistent with contemporary democratic ideals. Issues concerning women's participation, youth representation, transparency in decision-making, and procedural accountability have become subjects of discussion within the community. While the basic organizational structure of the Blu continues to reflect traditional norms, gradual changes in public attitudes have encouraged greater inclusiveness and broader consultation in community affairs.

The status of women provides one of the most visible examples of institutional change. Traditionally, women did not participate directly in the formal deliberations of the Blu, although they exercised considerable influence within the household and community. Contemporary educational advancement, economic participation, and constitutional awareness have stimulated discussions regarding women's representation in indigenous institutions. Although the traditional composition of the Blu has not fundamentally changed, women increasingly participate in community meetings, developmental activities, self-help groups, educational committees, and village-level consultations. Their indirect influence on customary decision-making has therefore expanded considerably, indicating the gradual adaptation of the institution to changing social realities.

Economic transformation has also influenced the functioning of the Blu. Earlier, the Sherdukpens depended primarily upon subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and limited barter exchange. Contemporary economic life, however, is characterized by market participation, salaried employment, entrepreneurship, tourism, and improved transportation. Many disputes that once concerned agricultural production or customary exchange now involve commercial transactions, contractual obligations, government compensation, and modern property relations. These new forms of social interaction have required the Blu to interpret customary principles in the context of changing economic realities.

Migration and occupational diversification have further altered patterns of community participation. A considerable number of educated Sherdukpen youth now pursue higher education or employment outside their native villages. As a result, the availability of younger generations for participation in customary institutions has declined compared to earlier periods. The responsibility of preserving customary knowledge therefore increasingly rests upon senior members of the community. Recognizing this challenge, many elders have emphasized the importance of documenting customary laws and institutional practices for future generations.

Another significant factor contributing to institutional resilience is the continued importance of the Blu in preserving Sherdukpen cultural identity. In an era of rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, the institution serves not merely as an administrative organization but also as a symbol of historical continuity and ethnic identity. The organization of festivals, regulation of customary ceremonies, preservation of oral traditions, protection of sacred sites, and transmission of indigenous values continue to be coordinated through the village council. Thus, even where administrative functions have diminished, the cultural significance of the institution has become increasingly prominent.

The interaction between customary governance and the modern State has therefore produced neither complete continuity nor complete rupture. Instead, the Blu has undergone a process of

institutional adaptation, selectively retaining those functions that remain socially relevant while relinquishing responsibilities now performed more effectively by statutory institutions. Such adaptation illustrates the dynamic nature of indigenous governance and challenges the assumption that traditional political institutions inevitably disappear under modernization.

From a broader perspective, the contemporary experience of the Blu demonstrates the practical significance of *legal and administrative pluralism*. Indigenous governance and constitutional democracy need not be viewed as mutually exclusive systems. Rather, they can coexist within a complementary framework in which customary institutions regulate community relationships and preserve cultural values, while statutory institutions administer constitutional governance and public administration. Such coexistence reflects the plural character of Indian democracy, particularly within the tribal regions of the Northeast.

The continuing relevance of the Blu ultimately lies not in the extent of its formal powers but in the confidence that the Sherdukpen community continues to repose in it. The institution remains an effective forum for dialogue, mediation, customary justice, and community consensus precisely because it derives legitimacy from the lived experiences, historical traditions, and collective values of the people themselves. Its resilience illustrates that indigenous governance is not merely a historical inheritance but an evolving institution capable of responding creatively to the demands of a changing society.

Conclusion

The indigenous institutions of governance that evolved among the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh constitute one of the most significant expressions of community-based political organization in the Eastern Himalayas. Among the Sherdukpens, the **Blu** represents a remarkable example of such an institution, having successfully regulated political, judicial, administrative, economic, and socio-cultural life through customary laws and collective decision-making for centuries. Far from being an informal village association, the Blu emerged as a comprehensive system of indigenous governance founded upon consensus, customary legitimacy, moral authority, and community participation. Its historical continuity demonstrates the capacity of tribal societies to evolve sophisticated institutions capable of maintaining social order without dependence upon centralized state authority.

The study reveals that the Blu developed gradually in response to the administrative and social requirements of the Sherdukpen community. Although its precise historical origin remains embedded in oral traditions, available evidence indicates that the institution evolved as a representative mechanism for maintaining peace, regulating community affairs, and preserving customary laws after the consolidation of Sherdukpen society. Over time, the Blu acquired

clearly defined organizational features comprising the **Thik-Akhao**, **Obo Usu**, **Jungme Barse**, **Khomi** and **Kachin**, each performing distinct but complementary responsibilities within the broader framework of indigenous administration. The distribution of authority among these functionaries reflects an institutional arrangement based upon cooperation rather than centralized control, thereby reinforcing the participatory character of Sherdukpen political culture.

One of the most significant findings of the present study concerns the democratic character of the Blu. Although leadership traditionally enjoyed certain customary associations with specific clans, authority ultimately depended upon personal integrity, knowledge of customary law, administrative competence, and public confidence. Decisions of the council were reached through collective deliberation and consensus rather than majority voting, ensuring that governance remained participatory and socially legitimate. Such procedures illustrate that democratic principles such as consultation, accountability, and collective responsibility existed within indigenous institutions long before the formal introduction of constitutional democracy.

The study further demonstrates that the **judicial function** constitutes the most enduring and influential aspect of the Blu institution. Sherdukpen customary jurisprudence emphasizes mediation, reconciliation, restitution, and restoration of social harmony rather than adversarial litigation or punitive sanctions. The institution of the **Barse**, functioning as impartial mediators, exemplifies a highly evolved indigenous mechanism for conflict resolution that seeks to prevent disputes from escalating into prolonged social antagonism. Even where formal adjudication becomes necessary, the objective remains the restoration of community relationships through compensation, public reconciliation, and mutual understanding. Such principles closely resemble contemporary theories of restorative justice, highlighting the sophistication of indigenous legal traditions.

The administrative and developmental functions of the Blu likewise reveal its importance as the principal coordinating agency of village life. Historically, the institution supervised collective labour, regulated the management of common resources, organized community festivals, maintained public discipline, and safeguarded customary norms governing social conduct. Through periodic assemblies such as the **Damchik** and **Chhatpu Nsey**, the community collectively reviewed public affairs, reaffirmed customary obligations, and strengthened social solidarity. These functions illustrate that indigenous governance extended far beyond judicial administration to encompass the entire spectrum of community life.

The interaction between the Blu and modern democratic institutions represents another important dimension of the study. The establishment of civil administration, Panchayati Raj Institutions, the Gaonbura system, and the formal judiciary has undoubtedly transformed the operational environment of customary governance. Several responsibilities formerly exercised by the Blu

have gradually been assumed by statutory institutions. Nevertheless, rather than disappearing under administrative modernization, the Blu has adapted by redefining its functions. It continues to exercise considerable influence in matters concerning customary law, dispute settlement, cultural preservation, and community mobilization while cooperating with governmental agencies in developmental activities. This process of institutional adaptation demonstrates that indigenous governance and constitutional democracy are not necessarily antagonistic but may coexist within a framework of legal and administrative pluralism.

The continuing relevance of the Blu lies primarily in the confidence that the Sherdukpen community continues to repose in its customary institutions. Community members frequently prefer customary mechanisms because they are culturally familiar, economically accessible, expeditious, and directed towards reconciliation rather than confrontation. The moral authority enjoyed by the Blu cannot be measured merely in terms of statutory jurisdiction; rather, it derives from its deep roots within the historical experiences, social values, and collective identity of the Sherdukpen people.

At the same time, the study recognizes that indigenous institutions face new challenges in the contemporary era. Rapid socio-economic transformation, expansion of formal education, migration, increasing interaction with statutory legal systems, and changing aspirations among younger generations have altered the traditional context within which the Blu functions. Questions concerning women's participation, youth representation, documentation of customary laws, and the harmonization of customary practices with constitutional principles have become increasingly relevant. These developments require indigenous institutions to evolve continuously while preserving their fundamental cultural values.

The preservation of institutions such as the Blu is therefore not merely an issue of protecting cultural heritage but also of recognizing the practical contribution that indigenous governance can make to contemporary democratic administration. The principles of consensus-building, community participation, restorative justice, environmental stewardship, and collective responsibility embodied within the Blu offer valuable insights for strengthening local governance in multicultural societies. In an age where judicial systems frequently struggle with delays, adversarial litigation, and declining public confidence, indigenous mechanisms of mediation and reconciliation deserve greater scholarly attention and policy recognition.

From a broader academic perspective, the present study contributes to the growing discourse on indigenous governance in Northeast India by providing a focused analysis of the Sherdukpen Blu, an institution that has received relatively limited scholarly attention despite its historical importance. By integrating ethnographic fieldwork, oral traditions, historical evidence, and institutional analysis, the study demonstrates that customary governance should not be

understood merely as a relic of the past but as a dynamic and adaptive institution capable of responding to changing political and social realities.

Finally, the study argues that the future of indigenous governance in Arunachal Pradesh depends not upon preserving traditional institutions in isolation but upon fostering constructive engagement between customary law and constitutional democracy. Recognition of customary institutions as partners in grassroots governance, systematic documentation of indigenous legal traditions, capacity-building for traditional leaders, and greater academic research on tribal governance can contribute significantly to the preservation of both cultural diversity and democratic participation. The Blu, therefore, should be viewed not only as an important institution in the history of the Sherdukpen community but also as a living example of indigenous governance whose principles continue to hold relevance for contemporary debates on participatory democracy, customary justice, and sustainable local governance.

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