

TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MONPA MANGMA AND SHERDUKPEN BLU IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Traditional institutions of governance have played an important role in regulating social life among the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Monpas, the traditional village council is known as the Mangma, while among the Sherdukpen it is called the Blu. These institutions historically performed a wide range of judicial, administrative, developmental, economic, and socio-cultural functions. They maintained village discipline, settled disputes, organized collective labour, managed common resources, supervised religious activities, and preserved customary values.

This article examines the changing role of the Monpa Mangma and Sherdukpen Blu in the context of modern administration. It focuses on the transformation of traditional leadership, the emergence of the Gaonbura system, the expansion of Panchayati Raj institutions, the influence of party politics, and the growing interaction between customary and formal legal systems. The study finds that the traditional councils have lost several of their earlier administrative and developmental powers, but they continue to possess social legitimacy and cultural importance. Their future relevance depends on proper documentation of customary laws, protection from political interference, greater participation of women and disadvantaged groups, procedural fairness, and constructive coordination with statutory institutions.

Keywords: Monpa, Sherdukpen, Mangma, Blu, traditional governance, customary law, village council, Gaonbura, Panchayati Raj, indigenous justice, Arunachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Change is an essential characteristic of human society. Social institutions develop, transform, and sometimes decline in response to changing political, economic, technological, and cultural

conditions. Governance institutions are particularly affected by such changes because they are closely connected with the distribution of authority, the administration of justice, and the management of community resources.

In many parts of Asia and Africa, traditional systems of local governance attracted considerable attention after independence. This interest was linked to the growth of democratic decentralization and the recognition that indigenous institutions often provided effective mechanisms for regulating community life. Traditional governance was generally based on the village as the primary unit of administration, collective responsibility, customary law, and direct participation of community members.

Arunachal Pradesh provides an important example of the coexistence of indigenous and modern institutions. The different tribes of the state historically developed their own village councils to maintain peace, regulate social conduct, organize community work, settle disputes, and preserve cultural practices. These councils were not merely informal gatherings of elders. They were institutions of local self-government with judicial, administrative, developmental, religious, and welfare responsibilities.

The Monpa and Sherdukpen communities developed two significant forms of traditional village governance. Among the Monpas, the village council is known as the *Mangma* and is headed by the *Tsorgan*. Among the Sherdukpens, the corresponding institution is known as the *Blu* and is headed by the *Thik-akhao*. Both communities are followers of Buddhism, although their social life also retains elements of older indigenous religious traditions.

The *Mangma* and *Blu* historically enjoyed considerable influence over village affairs. They regulated disputes relating to land, property, marriage, inheritance, theft, adultery, and customary obligations. They also organized community labour, supervised festivals and rituals, maintained public facilities, and managed common resources. Their decisions were generally reached through discussion, mediation, and consensus.

However, the introduction of modern administration brought significant changes. The appointment of Gaonburas, the establishment of Panchayati Raj institutions, the expansion of formal courts, the influence of political parties, and the increasing role of government departments have weakened the independent authority of traditional village councils. At the same time, the traditional leaders continue to enjoy respect because their legitimacy is rooted in community acceptance and cultural tradition.

This article analyses the changing role of the *Mangma* and *Blu* and examines how these institutions are adapting to the modern political and legal environment.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

- To examine the traditional structure and functions of the Monpa *Mangma* and Sherdukpen *Blu*.
- To understand the role of the *Tsorgan* and *Thik-akhao* in village administration.
- To analyse the influence of social status, economic position, and customary practice on village leadership.
- To examine the impact of Gaonbura appointments and Panchayati Raj institutions.
- To assess the effect of party politics and modern administration on customary governance.
- To examine the continuing relevance of customary law and traditional justice.
- To suggest measures for preserving and strengthening these institutions.

3. Methodology

The study follows a qualitative and comparative approach. It is based on documentary materials, published works on traditional governance in Arunachal Pradesh, customary practices, oral traditions, and information collected through field study and informal interviews.

The research focuses on the Monpa and Sherdukpen areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Information concerning traditional titles, customary offices, dispute settlement, community labour, leadership practices, and the changing role of village authorities was collected from available literature and field-based interactions.

The study recognizes that customary practices are not completely uniform. They may differ according to village, region, dialect, historical experience, and the influence of neighbouring communities. Therefore, the discussion presents broad institutional patterns while acknowledging local variations.

4. Traditional Governance in Arunachal Pradesh

Traditional village councils in Arunachal Pradesh derived their authority from ancient customs, collective recognition, religious beliefs, and the moral authority of elders. Their legitimacy was

not based on written constitutions or statutory elections. It was based primarily on the acceptance of the community and the ability of the council to protect social harmony.

The traditional councils generally performed three major categories of functions.

4.1 Judicial functions

The councils settled disputes within the village and, in some circumstances, matters involving neighbouring villages. Their jurisdiction commonly included:

- Land and boundary disputes.
- Property and inheritance matters.
- Marriage and divorce.
- Debt and compensation.
- Theft and burglary.
- Adultery and family disputes.
- House trespass.
- Violation of customary restrictions.
- Breach of social and religious obligations.

The councils generally dealt with petty civil and criminal matters. Serious offences were increasingly transferred to the formal administration and courts.

4.2 Administrative functions

The councils supervised the everyday administration of the village. They coordinated the repair and construction of paths, bridges, water facilities, and community buildings. They also regulated the use of common resources and fixed the timing of certain agricultural, hunting, and fishing activities.

4.3 Developmental and welfare functions

Before the expansion of government departments, the councils organized collective labour for public works. They mobilized villagers for agricultural assistance, house construction, repair of roads and bridges, and the maintenance of religious institutions. They also assisted poor households and coordinated relief during natural disasters.

Thus, traditional councils were comprehensive institutions of community governance rather than courts in the narrow sense.

5. The Monpa Mangma

The *Mangma* is the traditional village council of the Monpas. The Monpa village is commonly referred to as a *dung* or *yui*, and the village headman is known as the *Tsorgan*.

The term *Mangma* signifies the collective nature of the village community. It represented the organized body through which the Monpas regulated their internal affairs. The *Tsorgan* was the principal authority, but decisions were generally taken in consultation with elders and members of the village assembly.

5.1 Structure and officials

The *Tsorgan* was assisted by several officials, including:

- *Gomi*.
- *Thumi*.
- *Chupon*.
- *Gomdung*.

These functionaries performed practical and administrative duties. They conveyed the date, time, and place of council meetings, served notices, summoned parties and witnesses, collected fines and compensation, and communicated the decisions of the council.

The *Chupon* was generally appointed on a rotational basis among the households. This system ensured that the responsibility of serving the council was shared among different families.

5.2 Membership

The adult male householders traditionally formed the principal membership of the *Mangma*. The general assembly was known as the *Tsopa*. A man was generally considered eligible for participation after reaching social maturity, establishing an independent household, and becoming capable of contributing to community affairs.

Members were also expected to contribute to the village fund, known as *dulang*. Contributions could be made in cash or kind. Failure to fulfil this obligation could result in temporary exclusion from council proceedings.

Unlike the traditional Sherdukpen system, Monpa custom did not establish an absolute prohibition against women's participation. In principle, women could participate in village affairs and could even occupy the position of *Tsorgan*, although women rarely held the office in practice.

5.3 Selection of the Tsorgan

The office of *Tsorgan* was not strictly hereditary. The person selected was expected to possess:

- Knowledge of customary law.
- Integrity and good character.
- Intelligence and sound judgment.
- Oratorical ability.
- Popularity and social acceptance.
- Leadership qualities.
- Knowledge of traditions and rituals.

Selection was generally based on consensus. The elders discussed the qualifications of suitable persons and placed the decision before the general assembly.

Among the Monpas, preference was traditionally given to the *Khreimi*, or those who owned taxable land. Thus, economic status and access to productive resources played an important role in leadership selection.

The normal tenure of the *Tsorgan* was associated with a period of three years, although an effective headman could continue in office if the community was satisfied with his or her performance. In certain circumstances, selection by lot, known as *gyan* or *jan*, was also reported.

5.4 Judicial functions

The *Mangma* settled petty civil and criminal cases according to Monpa customary law. A complainant was traditionally required to pay a customary fee, which could include a ceremonial scarf, silver coins, beer, grain, and other provisions. These customary payments were later increasingly replaced by Indian currency.

Mediation was preferred before formal council proceedings. A mediator known as the *Barmin* attempted to bring the parties to an amicable settlement. If the dispute was resolved, the mediator could be honoured through a thanksgiving practice known as *Drothang*.

Important Monpa judgments were sometimes recorded in writing through *Gamja*. These records were prepared in Bhoti script and authenticated by the headman, members of the council, parties, and witnesses. The written record helped preserve the terms of settlement and could be referred to if one party later violated the decision.

5.5 Administrative and cultural functions

The *Mangma* supervised:

- Construction and repair of village paths.
- Maintenance of bridges and porter tracks.
- Community labour.
- Agricultural cooperation.
- Maintenance and renovation of *Gonpas*.
- Village cleanliness and sanitation.
- Organization of festivals, rituals, dances, and feasts.
- Regulation of hunting and fishing.
- Management of village funds.
- Relief during natural disasters.

The council also regulated community activities on sacred days known as *duchin*. On these days, fishing, hunting, and agricultural work were traditionally prohibited. Violation of these restrictions could attract a fine.

6. The Sherdukpen Blu

The *Blu* is the traditional village council of the Sherdukpens. A Sherdukpen village is known as a *thik*, and its headman is called the *Thik-akhao*.

The *Blu* regulated village affairs through customary law and collective decision-making. It exercised judicial, administrative, developmental, and socio-cultural responsibilities. Its

institutional structure was strongly influenced by the hierarchical organization of Sherdukpen society.

6.1 Structure and officials

The *Thik-akhao* was assisted by officials such as:

- *Obo-usu*.
- *Donmiepo*.
- *Jungme-barse*.
- *Kachin*.

The *Kachin* had responsibilities similar to those of the Monpa *Chupon*. This office was commonly assigned by rotation and involved communicating decisions, summoning individuals, and assisting with the practical functioning of the council.

6.2 Membership and hierarchy

The general assembly of the Sherdukpen village was known as the *Nahatdi Blu*. Traditionally, adult male members formed the main body of participants.

Sherdukpen society was historically divided into the *thong* and *chao* groups. The *thongs* were regarded as the descendants of *Asu Japtang* and occupied a socially privileged position. The *chaos* were associated with the retainers who accompanied *Asu Japtang*.

This social hierarchy influenced participation in the *Blu*. The *thongs* traditionally enjoyed greater political authority and were generally preferred for the office of *Thik-akhao*. The *chaos* could attend council meetings but historically had limited participation in deliberations.

Women were traditionally excluded from membership and proceedings of the *Blu*. This remains one of the most important differences between the Sherdukpen and Monpa systems.

6.3 Selection of the Thik-akhao

The *Thik-akhao* was expected to possess qualities similar to those required of the Monpa *Tsorgan*. These included good character, integrity, knowledge of customary law, judgment, public reputation, and leadership ability.

In practice, however, social status played a major role. Preference was generally given to members of the *Thong* group. The office was not clearly hereditary, but members of privileged families often had better opportunities to occupy it.

Unlike the Monpa system, no clear evidence has been established regarding the regular use of election or selection by lot for the office of *Thik-akhao*. The decision appears to have been primarily based on community consensus and customary practice.

6.4 Judicial functions

The *Blu* settled disputes relating to land, property, inheritance, marriage, divorce, theft, trespass, adultery, and other breaches of custom. The council preferred mediation and compensation to severe punishment.

The mediator, known as the *Barse* or *Jungme-barse*, attempted to reconcile the parties before the matter was formally placed before the *Blu*. The proceedings traditionally began with *phokchot*, a ritual invocation of gods and goddesses performed by the *khikzizi*. This ritual was intended to encourage impartial discussion and remind participants of their responsibility towards the community.

6.5 Tukpen Village Council

The Sherdukpen system also includes the Tukpen Village Council, a centralized body associated with Rupa and neighbouring villages. It acts as an inter-village institution and considers matters that remain unresolved at the village level.

The centralization of the Sherdukpen system has helped preserve a common institutional identity and has contributed to the development of written customary rules known as the Tukpen Penal Laws. However, the Tukpen Village Council traditionally meets at fixed intervals. Consequently, parties may sometimes have to wait for a considerable period before an unresolved dispute is heard.

6.6 Chhakak System

The Tukpen area is divided into functional segments known as *Chhakaks*. These segments are responsible not only for administrative convenience but also for developmental and socio-cultural activities.

The traditional *Chhakaks* include:

- Thik Chhakak.

- Thik-khong Chhakak.
- Yusher Chhakak.
- Thongon Chhakak.
- Gonpa Chhakak.
- Azilamu Chhakak.
- Wangsher Chhakak.

This arrangement demonstrates the organized and corporate character of Sherdukpen community life.

7. Similarities between Mangma and Blu

The *Mangma* and *Blu* share several important characteristics.

First, both are traditional village-level institutions of self-government. Their authority is based on customary law, community recognition, ancestral tradition, and religious values.

Second, both councils perform several functions simultaneously. They are concerned not only with dispute settlement but also with village administration, public works, welfare, cultural activities, and religious practices.

Third, both emphasize mediation and reconciliation. The use of mediators such as the *Barmin* and *Barse* reflects the belief that a dispute should be resolved without permanently damaging social relationships.

Fourth, both councils impose fines and compensation. The purpose of punishment is to discourage violations, compensate the aggrieved party, and restore social harmony.

Fifth, both rely on collective labour. Villagers contribute labour and resources for the construction of paths, bridges, houses, religious buildings, and other community facilities.

Sixth, both councils regulate the observance of festivals, rituals, agricultural activities, hunting, fishing, and other collective practices.

Finally, both institutions have been affected by the expansion of modern administration and the introduction of Panchayati Raj institutions.

8. Differences between Mangma and Blu

Although the two institutions share common features, important differences exist.

Aspect	Monpa Mangma	Sherdukpen Blu
Village headman	Tsorgan	Thik-akhao
General assembly	Tsopa	Nahatdi Blu
Basis of leadership	Traditionally linked with landholding and economic status	Traditionally linked with descent and social status
Privileged group	Khreimi	Thong
Position of lower-status group	Surmi or naamtong had fewer opportunities	Chaos had limited political participation
Women's participation	No absolute customary prohibition in principle	Traditionally excluded from the Blu
Regional institution	Tsopa, generally meeting when required	Tukpen Village Council, a more centralized body
Customary law	Mainly oral, with Gamja records	Oral law later partly codified through Tukpen Penal Laws
Ritual opening	No equivalent formal invocation is identified	Proceedings traditionally begin with phokchot
Leadership selection	Consensus, with occasional election or selection by lot	Primarily consensus; election or lot not clearly established
Tenure	Traditionally reviewed after approximately three years	No clearly fixed tenure
Internal divisions	Mainly for administrative convenience	Chhakak divisions also perform developmental and cultural functions

These differences reveal the influence of the distinct social histories and internal organization of the two communities.

9. The Impact of Modern Governance

The traditional authority of the *Mangma* and *Blu* has been transformed by modern political and legal institutions. The most important change has been the introduction of the Gaonbura system.

9.1 The Gaonbura system

The Gaonbura acts as the administrative representative of the government in the village. Unlike the traditional *Tsorgan* and *Thik-akhao*, the Gaonbura is appointed by the administration rather than selected through village consensus.

The Gaonbura receives formal recognition, an official letter, insignia, and an honorarium. Government instructions and development schemes are generally communicated through the Gaonbura. As a result, the Gaonbura possesses greater formal authority than the traditional headman in matters involving the state.

However, administrative authority does not necessarily create social legitimacy. Villagers continue to respect the traditional *Tsorgan* and *Thik-akhao* because of their association with customary institutions and community values.

9.2 Panchayati Raj institutions

The introduction of statutory Panchayats created another centre of power at the village level. Panchayat representatives participate in development planning and implementation. They may also be consulted by government agencies in relation to public works and welfare programmes.

The result is the coexistence of three institutional structures:

- Traditional councils headed by the *Tsorgan* or *Thik-akhao*.
- Gaonburas appointed by the administration.
- Elected Panchayat representatives.

The coexistence of these institutions can promote cooperation, but it can also create confusion and rivalry.

9.3 Formal courts and customary courts

The Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945 brought customary village authorities within a statutory framework and restricted the punishments that could be imposed. Severe physical punishments and practices such as burial, drowning, or other extreme sanctions disappeared from customary practice.

The Arunachal Pradesh Civil Courts Act, 2021 recognizes customary courts as traditional councils or authorities of indigenous villages. This provides a statutory basis for the continued operation of customary justice, while also placing it within a broader legal framework.

The challenge is to clarify the jurisdiction of customary councils and ensure that their decisions are consistent with fairness, constitutional rights, and the requirements of natural justice.

10. Politicization and Decline of Traditional Authority

The increasing influence of party politics has affected village governance. Traditional institutions were expected to function through consensus and impartiality. However, the appointment of Gaonburas and the distribution of local authority may be influenced by political considerations.

Politicization may lead to:

- Frequent changes in village leadership.
- Rivalry between different groups.
- Weakening of traditional authority.
- Bias in local dispute settlement.
- Loss of public confidence.
- Greater dependence on formal courts.

When people believe that village decisions are politically influenced, they may prefer to approach government courts and administrative authorities. This gradually reduces the practical relevance of customary institutions.

The traditional councils have also lost many of their developmental functions. Activities such as road construction, sanitation, welfare, and infrastructure development are increasingly handled by government agencies and Panchayati Raj institutions. The result is a gradual separation between traditional cultural authority and modern administrative power.

11. Continuing Relevance of Traditional Councils

Despite the decline in formal authority, the *Mangma* and *Blu* continue to play important roles.

They remain significant because:

- They are familiar and accessible to villagers.
- They are connected with local language and culture.
- They understand community relationships.
- They encourage reconciliation rather than prolonged litigation.
- They preserve customary identity.

- They provide advice during social and cultural events.
- They retain moral authority among the people.

Even when villagers approach formal courts, traditional leaders may continue to advise the parties or assist in informal settlement. In cultural and religious matters, the authority of the traditional councils remains particularly strong.

Their survival therefore depends not on competing directly with the modern state, but on adapting to changing conditions and finding a constructive place within the legal and democratic system.

12. Suggestions for Strengthening Traditional Institutions

The following measures may help preserve and strengthen the traditional councils:

12.1 Documentation of customary law

The customary laws of the Monpas and Sherdukpens should be properly documented. This process should involve elders, customary leaders, scholars, women, youth, and other members of the community.

Documentation should preserve local variations rather than impose one uniform code on all villages.

12.2 Community participation in leadership

The village community should have a meaningful role in the selection or appointment of local authorities. Even where government appointment is legally required, consultation with the traditional council and villagers may improve legitimacy.

12.3 Protection from political interference

Customary dispute settlement should remain impartial and independent. Political parties should not interfere in local disputes or use village institutions for partisan purposes.

12.4 Greater participation of women

Women should be provided opportunities to participate in village councils, mediation committees, welfare activities, and development planning. This is especially important in the Sherdukpen context, where women were traditionally excluded from the *Blu*.

12.5 Proper recording of proceedings

Every important proceeding should be recorded in an accessible form. Written records, audio documentation, and digital archives may help preserve customary decisions and reduce future disputes.

12.6 Training and legal awareness

Traditional leaders and mediators should receive training in:

- Customary law.
- Constitutional rights.
- Mediation and negotiation.
- Gender sensitivity.
- Child protection.
- Documentation.
- The jurisdiction of formal courts.

12.7 Clear division of authority

The roles of the traditional headman, Gaonbura, Panchayat representatives, police, administrative officers, and customary courts should be clearly defined. Cooperation should replace institutional competition.

12.8 Timely customary justice

The Sherdukpen system should consider mechanisms to prevent delays in matters referred to the Tukpen Village Council. Emergency sittings, delegated panels, and village-level mediation committees may help resolve urgent cases.

13. Conclusion

The Monpa *Mangma* and Sherdukpen *Blu* are valuable institutions of indigenous governance. They historically regulated social life, settled disputes, organized community labour, managed common resources, preserved cultural traditions, and maintained peace within the village.

The two councils share a common foundation in customary law, mediation, compensation, consensus, and collective responsibility. At the same time, they differ in their social structure, leadership practices, degree of centralization, participation of women, and methods of preserving

customary law. The Monpa *Mangma* appears comparatively flexible and accommodative, while the Sherdukpen *Blu* developed a stronger centralized and corporate character through the Tukpen Village Council.

Modern administration has substantially changed these institutions. The appointment of Gaonburas, the growth of Panchayati Raj, the expansion of formal courts, and the influence of political parties have reduced the administrative and developmental authority of the traditional councils. Their role in dispute settlement has also been affected by political interference and the growing preference for formal legal institutions.

Nevertheless, the *Mangma* and *Blu* have not become irrelevant. They continue to possess moral authority and cultural significance. The people still respect the *Tsorgan* and *Thik-akhao* and seek their advice in disputes, rituals, festivals, and community matters.

The present condition of these councils may therefore be described as a process of transition rather than complete decline. Their future depends on balancing tradition with reform. Their cultural identity and community-based character should be preserved, but their functioning should also become more inclusive, transparent, impartial, and accountable.

If properly documented and supported, the *Mangma* and *Blu* can continue to contribute to indigenous justice, democratic decentralization, cultural preservation, and community governance in Arunachal Pradesh.

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