



The Pisai: A study on the Village Administration among the Tiwa

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ABSTRACT

The study of village administration as a part of traditional institutions has attracted the attention of policymakers, researchers and social scientists. It may be difficult to define and categorize traditional institutions into social, cultural, political and economic institutions since tradition in any given society is a composite whole. As a passive process, traditions stand for time-honoured customs and respected beliefs. It is seen as an ideal type construct and a stultifying force that engendered and enforced cultural homogeneity. This paper discussed the traditional Tiwa village administration and looks into the continuity of age-old custom and manners. It gives a brief descriptive account of the village administration and the role played by the pisai or the council of village elders in the management of the affairs of the village. This paper is primarily based on colonial and contemporary writings and field studies carried out during 2017-2018.

Introduction

Before embarking on a discussion of village administration among the Tiwa of North East India, it is necessary to give a brief introduction of the tribe under study. The Tiwa is one of the many tribal groups as well as one of the early settlers in North East India. Ancient scriptures mentioned the earliest inhabitants of Assam as the kirata. In the Puranas, the kirata are dubbed foresters, barbarians, or mountaineers (Baruah 1969:5). The Mahabharata mentioned these early inhabitants of Assam as mlechhas. According to K L. Baruah (1966:34-35), the kirata and mlechhas of ancient Kamarupa are Mongolians belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Indo-Chinese group and their present day representatives are the Kacharis, Koches Rabhas, Lalungs (Tiwa), Garos. Settled in the Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and parts of Eastern Meghalaya, they have long been referred to as 'Lalung' by other neighbouring groups (Khasi-Jaintia, Karbi) and in colonial records. The people in question, however, refer to themselves as Tiwa. They are divided into two cultural and social divisions: those settled in the plains speak Assamese, follow a patrilineal descent system and bear Assamese patronyms, and those residing in the hills speak a Tibeto-Burmese language of the Bodo-Garo group, are primarily matrilineal and divided into clearly identified clans from which they trace their descent. Thus the Tiwa follow a bilinear descent system or more specifically an ambilinear descent. This system recognizes that a person descends from both parents, but allows for a choice in determining which descent group to be more affiliated to and is therefore characterized

by bilocal residence, in which choice is available between living near or with the family of the bride or the groom's. In most cases, the husband goes to live in his wife's family settlement (matrilocal), and their children are included in their mother's clan. However, when the woman goes to live with her husband (patrilocal), the children take the name of their father. B.C. Allan (1906:62) recorded that the rule of inheritance among this tribe is peculiar. He found that a Lalung woman may either enter her husband's clan or the husband may enter the wife's clan, but the right of property and lineage goes to the clan which was adopted at the time of marriage. While the 'Hill Tiwa' profess their 'traditional' religion, the 'Plains Tiwa' are, by and large, Hindu. The Tiwa religion is based on the worship of natural forces. However, since the 1950s there has been a growing number of converts to Christianity. Despite the differences between the hill and plains Tiwa cited above, both groups claim a common ancestry. They both claim a close association with the principality of Gobha which is mentioned in the 'Buranjis' (the Assamese chronicles of 17th century) since the early 17th century, as an important market centre of trade between the Ahom and the Jaintia kingdoms (Bhuyan: 2001). They further claim that the Gobha raja belonged to a Tiwa clan and that his territory covers more or less the Tiwa dominated areas. The attachment of the Tiwa to the legendary Gobha raja depicted as a sacred figure is significant and continues to exert significant socio-religious influence among them.

The Tiwa village

The Tiwa village is among the most closely-knit village set-ups that one can find among the tribes of Northeast India (Karotemprel 1981: 8). A Tiwa village is a centre of socio-religious and economic activities. It closely controls, monitors and determines every act of the individuals. In a traditional Tiwa village, the village elders or the pisai play a very important role. Their support and consent are necessary to undertake anything other than what is laid down by the Tiwa customs, laws and tradition. Without the consent of the pisai, practically nothing can be done in a village.

A traditional Tiwa village consists of several individual clans called khul. Every clan has their clan deity called khule mindai for whom they perform sacrifices on various occasions. According to a legend current among the Hill Tiwa, in the olden days, the Tiwa people consisted of twelve clans who lived together for several centuries at Nukurikhunji, a village of one hundred and eighty families. They say that it was located on a hill near Bormarjong village around 40 kilometers from Jagiroad in the Amri development block of the West Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Each clan had their priests (loro) under whom they would offer different sacrifices at different seasons of the year. Here they often fought among themselves over the right to choose their chiefs and to dominate village administration. Over time, such internecine feuds caused the split of the clans into different groups. Subsequently, these groups moved out of Nukurikhunji and settled at various places. In this process, twelve villages came into existence. These villages were Amsai, Marjong, Amni, Rogkhoi, Makro, Lumphui, Mayong, Amkha, Amri, Sagra, Ligra and Amjong. It is important to note that, when the Tiwa meet their fellow tribesmen, they generally identify themselves by the root village to which they belong. Even in case they form a new village away from their root village, they would identify themselves by their original village. They use the suffix wali to denote their place of descent such as the Amsai-wali, Marjong-wali, Rongkhoi-wali etc. signifying the particular root village. The Tiwa called these twelve villages krai binnung or the root/original village. Out of the twelve root villages, Amri and Ligra are no more in existence. The reason for their disappearance is shrouded in mystery. Many people believe that due to short-distance migrations propelled by epidemics and jhum or shifting cultivation might be some of the reasons. During our fieldwork, we traced a village named Boramri in the Kapili valley near Chapormukh under the Raha revenue circle in Nagaon district. According to an oral tradition mentioned by Phunasing Somsal, a resident of Boramri, the ancestors of their village had come down to the present area from the hills of West Karbi Anglong due to sickness and death caused

by malevolent spirits. From the description, we can assume that the present Boramri is an offshoot of the now-extinct Amri village. Presently the Assam government has created a development block by the name Amri in West Karbi Anglong after the lost village of Amri. As far as Ligra is concerned we could not find any village by this name. However, we could trace an oral tradition shared by the Tiwa people of Bherakuchi, Nibera, Bahtola and Bamfor in the Demoria area of the present Kamrup district that indicates that they are the descendants of the ligrawali people.

Presently four root villages, namely Mayong, Amjong, Makro and Lumphui, are located in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya under the Khyrim chieftainship. Every year the representatives of these villages offer their annual tribute in the form of a he-goat to the Khyrim chief on the occasion of the Nongkrem festival held in November.

The present Tiwa villages in the hills of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, as well as the villages in the plains of Nagaon, Morigaon and Kamrup and Meghalaya, are the branches of the twelve root villages mentioned above. The Tiwa call the branches of the root villages phams. The phams traditionally owe allegiance to the root village and identify themselves as a part of it. The Pham must participate in all the important festivals of the root village and contribute both physically and financially. The following are the root villages and its offshoots enumerated in the course of fieldwork:

Table: showing root village and its offshoots

Root Village(KraiBinnung)	State/ District	Branch Village(Phams)
Amsai	Assam/West Karbi Anglong	Moro, Amsai Pisa, Chukuri Amsai, Mawlen and Punduri Makha
Bormarjong	Do	Sukuri Marjong, Khawra Krai, Silangkhunji, Natral, Hadaw, Umbormon, Uthangkhunji, Murji Khunji, Deosal, Dabarghat, Pumakhunji, Khaplangkhunji, Bhulaguri, Sanisor, Amdoba, Mugaguri, Bhongraguri, Mobai, Singum, Kyabat,
Amkha	Do	Amdoba, Maslaikhunji, Amkhalam, and Kothiyatoli
Amri	Do	Boramri
Borrongkhoi	Do	Balikhunji, Tharakhunji, Rongkhoisa, Gomnasal, Gorkhunji, Andari Krai, Amsikhunji and Ashukhunji
Amni	Do	Amnisa
Ligra	Assam/Kamrup	Bherakusi, Nibera, Bahtola and Bamfor
Magro	Meghalaya/Ri-Bhoi	Phatmagro, Ulukhunji, Tiwa Jungthung, Silaguri, Khromkhunji, Khumrai Khora and Orlongshadali,
Amjong	Do	Amdubighat, Markongduba, Panbari and Tiami-Amjong
Lumphui	Do	Phitrisal, Dapsal, Krombaro and Tiami,
Sagra	Do	Amphreng
Mayong	Do	No branch identified

The *loro* along with eleven members of the council of elders in a village are collectively known as the *pisai*. Other than the *loro*, the members of the *pisai* are selected from among the senior members of the village. Once selected the members of the *pisai* to continue to hold office till they die or get too old to do any work. If any member of the *pisai* dies, his place is not filled until the next *Khelchawa* festival, that takes place once every five or six years. The *Khelchawa* festival marks the demolition of the old youth dormitory and inauguration of a new one. It is the time when the youth body or the *panthai khel* gets its new leaders to manage the *Shamadi* or the youth dormitory of the Tiwa. Being the head of the *pisai*, the *loro* is also known as the *pisai mul*. The following are the twelve members of the *pisai*: *loro*, *toloi*, *phador*, *shangot*, *maji*, *hadari*, *barika baro*, *barika pisa*, *phayak mul kra*, *phayak mul majowa*, and *two phayak mul jokha*. According to the tradition, each of the positions in the *Pisai* system is distributed equally among the clans of a village.

Apart from discharging secular responsibilities such as the settlement of disputes and conferring punishments to offenders, the *pisai* also takes actively part in all the religious functions of the village. They decide the dates of ceremonies and carry forward the process of celebration. During the religious ceremonies, the *toloi* oversees the preparation of the place of sacrifice. The *phador* oversees the preparation of the place of sacrifice along with the *toloi*. The *sangot* is an important member of the *pisai* who prepares the materials required for various religious ceremonies. On the other hand, the *maji* is responsible along with the *sangot* to take care of the animals required for a religious ceremony. The *hadari* is the personal assistant of the *loro*. He assists the *loro* in various religious ceremonies. He has to stay near the *loro* and provide manual help to the *loro* during religious ceremonies. Among the *pisais*, there are four positions of *phayak muls*. They are appointed by the *loro* to act as helpers during the religious ceremonies. According to the tradition, anyone who is offered rice beer in a bronze bowl in the *loro's* house is thereby appointed to the post of *phayak mul* and has to accept the responsibility (Josh 2004:418). They are responsible for cleaning, cooking and serving at religious ceremonies. The *pisai* also includes two *barikas* or messengers. They are responsible for conveying messages and the collection of donations/contributions from the village. It is noted that the members of the *pisai* are well versed in their given responsibilities and perform them according to time-honoured tradition.

Besides the *pisai*, another important official in a Tiwa village is the *sarkari gangbura* or government-appointed village headman. He is not a part of the *pisai* but holds a significant position as he is appointed by the Government. In the hills of Karbi Anglong, he acts as an agent of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. Though he is not allowed to take an active part in any of the religious ceremonies, nevertheless his status is considered to be higher than that of a common villager. The main functions of a *sarkari gangbura* are to assist visiting government officials during the general census, election purposes, implementation of government schemes etc.

In a branch village or *pham* the *pisai* is composed of a *gangbura*, one *tewri*, one *barika* and one *randhuni*. There cannot be a *loro*, *toloi* or *sangot* in a *pham* as it is exclusively reserved for the root village. It is mandatory to inform the *loro* of the root village when someone is appointed as a *pisai* of the *phams*.

The main function of the *pisai* of the root villages is to conduct religious ceremonies. They also act as the overall in-charge of village administration. They not only look after the religious needs of the people but also act as an institution to maintain social harmony and peace. Under the leadership of the *loro*, the *pisai* disposes a majority of disputes according to the customs of the Tiwa society. Punishments for different types of offences are imposed by the *pisai* according to customary law. Fines are imposed in cases of breaking of village social customs and rule. In many occasions, the *pisai* acts as

a jury to resolve petty criminal cases and disputes associated with land and property. The *pisai* is the custodian of Tiwa customary law. While pronouncing judgments on different cases, the *pisai* may ask the advice of the *sarkari gnagbura*.

A society is incomplete without the involvement of the youths. Among the Tiwa the youth group or the *panthai khel* is a moving force behind the governance of a village. They work hand in hand along with the *pisai* to accomplish various socio-religious functions. The *loro*, the *piasai* and the *panthai khel* cannot act independently as it is necessary to get the full cooperation from each of the bodies to accomplish the big religious events such as the *Sogra*, *Yangli*, *Khelchawa*, *Wanchuwa* etc. In a traditional Tiwa village the *pisai* is the highest secular body. The members of the *Pisai* and the three main leaders of the *panthai khel*, namely the *shang dolo*, who is the overall in-charge of the *shamadi*, and his deputy *shang maji* and *huruma*, have a higher social status as they regulate the social and religious rules of the Tiwa society.

The colonial officers were keen to record village administrative arrangements among the tribals in North-East India. In 1882, the Sub-Divisional Officer of Jowai, A.E. Heath (1882: 22) recorded that at Umsawai (Amsai) village there was one '*dolloi*', one '*langdoh*', one '*hatari*', one '*pator*', one '*sangot*', two '*dahulias*' one '*maji*' and two '*barakas*' or '*chutiyas*'. According to his information these village officials were subordinate to the *dolloi* of Nurtiang (Nartiang) who appoints the *dolloi* and *pators* of Umsawai. In his report, he did not mention about the *loro* as a village chief. He must have considered him as the village priest not as the village chief. In his list, the '*langdoh*' appears to be a village priest in a Tiwa village. However, during our field study, we did not find any '*langdoh*' among the Tiwa. The *langdoh* must have been misinterpreted as a village elder in the report. Moreover, the statement regarding the appointment of the *dolloi* of Umsawai by the Nurtiang *dolloi* seems to be incorrect, because among the Tiwa, the *dolloi* or *toloi* is a hereditary post. He is selected from among the designated clan of the village, but not appointed by any external authority.

Like any part of the world, modernity and globalization have also influenced the Tiwa tradition and culture. Christian Influence intruded among the Tiwa during the 1950s, and it has largely affected the Tiwa traditional system. In the Christian village, the *pisai* has been replaced by the church leaders. Nevertheless, the position of the *loro* and the *pisai* in a traditional Tiwa root village is still the same as it was earlier. The traditional leaders, i.e. the *loro*, *toloi*, *maji*, *phador*, *sangot* and *barika* continue to exercise the temporal powers and controls the society in its observation of social rules of kinship, marriage, property inheritance etc. They still guide people while performing religious rituals.

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