

“The Changing Nature of Village Administration Under Hereditary Chieftainship of Vaiphei Tribe in Manipur”

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ABSTRACT:

The Vaiphei village has historically functioned as the basic unit of social, political, economic, and customary life. At the center of this village structure stands the Chief, also known as Hausa, Hausapu, or Khawpa, whose authority is traditionally hereditary and closely connected with land, lineage, and customary Law. This article examines the Vaiphei village power structure with special reference to chieftainship, the council of elders, customary Law, village functionaries, landholding, Christianity, the statutory Village Authority, and contemporary changes in land rights and succession. Patta may give villagers more confidence to build permanent houses and spend on improving their land. At the same time, once land is held individually, the Chief may have less control over its transfer. This can create problems if the land is later sold outside the village. The concern is how to provide villagers with greater security without weakening the village's customary hold over its land. The article also argues that land remains central to the Chief's power. Customary chief-owned land still maintains village identity and continuity, but can also be a source of insecurity for ordinary villagers if the Chief abuses his authority. Patta grants villagers a firmer claim to the land they occupy, often making them more willing to build permanent houses and invest in the village. Yet it also reduces the Chief's control over village land and may make transfer to outsiders easier. The question, therefore, is how to retain the customary system without leaving ordinary villagers insecure.

Keywords: Vaiphei; Hausapu; Chieftainship; Customary Law; Village Authority; Landholding; Patta; Manipur; Indigenous Governance; Christianity

INTRODUCTION

The Vaiphei tribe is one of the tribes of Manipur and also a component of the wider Chin-Kuki-Mizo group within the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe and are found mainly in Churachandpur and Kangpokpi districts of Manipur.

The village has historically been the basic unit of Vaiphei social, political, and economic life. Land, kinship, customary Law, and authority were closely connected, with the Chief occupying the central position in village administration. The existing studies describe Vaiphei governance as a system based on hereditary chieftainship and customary Law. According to Pauchungnung Vaiphei, the Chief of Hausapu was the center of village administration, although chiefly authority remained subject to unwritten customary rules. Duhlian and Gangte similarly describe Vaiphei governance as an indigenous system rooted in traditional values and community-based customary Law. This article examines chieftainship, succession, the council of elders, customary Law, landholding, Christianity, statutory Village Authority, and recent changes relating to land security and individual rights. It argues that Vaiphei village administration is a hybrid customary system: hereditary and chief-centered,

yet restrained by custom and increasingly shaped by Christianity, education, statutory Law, and changing social expectations.

METHODOLOGY:

This article employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach. It draws on available secondary literature on Vaiphei society, including journal articles on Vaiphei origin and migration, traditional village administration, chieftainship, customary Law, social life, and the impact of Christianity. It also draws on the author's field-based understanding of Vaiphei village life, local customary practices, and observations on landholding, the Village Authority, and contemporary village administration. The study does not treat customary Law as merely a historical subject. Rather, it approaches Vaiphei customary institutions as living practices that continue to shape village life, though in a modified form. Where certain claims are based on local knowledge, field observation, or community practice but require documentary confirmation, they are indicated in the notes as requiring verification. This is particularly necessary for recent changes relating to women's succession, local village data, patta practices, and customary fines.

To supplement the secondary sources with field-based evidence, descriptive interviews were also conducted with selected Vaiphei Village Chiefs representing different landholding systems. The Chief of Kangvai Village was interviewed as an example of a village where substantial land is held individually through pattas and other land documents. The Chiefs of Haokhongching and Saram Patong were interviewed as representatives of villages where the traditional chief-owned landholding system continues to operate. The interviews focused on the changing role of the Chief, land ownership and transfer, village administration, participation of women and youth, and the interaction between customary authority and statutory institutions. The study also draws on field observations and data collected during the author's doctoral fieldwork among Vaiphei villages, particularly in relation to village administration, customary practices and landholding.

Historical background of the Vaiphei Tribe: The Vaiphei tribe share the cultural, linguistic, and social ties with the wider Chin-Kuki-Mizo group and they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, and noted that the largest concentration of the Vaiphei population is found in the Churachandpur district. Vaiphei traditions trace their origin to Khul and to later migrations into the hills of Manipur. These movements were influenced by inter-village conflict, pressure from larger communities, and the search for better land. As a result, the village became an important center of security, livelihood, and collective identity.

Traditional Vaiphei society was organized around clans, families, hereditary chieftainship, and customary Law. Before the introduction of modern administrative institutions, the village already had a recognized system of governance consisting of the Chief, elders, customary rules, and other village functionaries.

The Chief or Hausapu as the Center of Village Administration: The Chief occupies the central position in matters relating to land, village administration, customary regulation, development, and relations with neighboring villages. His authority is not merely symbolic but also territorial, political, and economic. According to Pauchungnung Vaiphei, the traditional Vaiphei village administration was centered on the Chief or Hausapu. The Chief had legislative, executive, and judicial powers and was assisted by a council of elders, according to another text. This implies that the Chief was the highest in the traditional system. He also explains that the word Hausa, or Hausapu, means "Chief" and is related to land, livestock, gongs, and other forms of wealth. This means that the Chief was powerful because of the bloodline, community land, and resources. Chief power was not designed to be arbitrary. The Chief is expected to follow customary Law. He also argues that while the Chief held power, he had to obey an unwritten code of conduct. Thus, the Vaiphei chieftainship was strong but restrained.

Chieftainship and Succession of Vaiphei Chief: The office of Chief is hereditary, not elective. Chieftainship is based on lineage, bloodline, and descent from the primary family. Normally, upon the death of a Chief, his son is left in charge. The eldest son is usually preferred—the Vaiphei chief follows primogeniture, meaning that the eldest son is the successor.

This system ensures the continuity of the chieftainship. The chief position, therefore, cannot be switched to an outsider or an unrelated person lightly. It is attached to ancestral land, customary legality, and local continuity. If the eldest son is unable to assume the office of Chief because of serious illness, disability, or any other compelling reason, a younger son or another male relative may take up the responsibility in accordance with custom. Such an arrangement, however, does not ordinarily end the claim of the eldest son's line. If he has a son, succession generally continues through that son. Where the lawful heir is still a minor, a close relative or trusted person may administer the village until he is old enough to take over. This practice shows that succession to chieftainship is closely connected with family lineage, inheritance, and the continuity of the chiefly house.

Inheritance and Succession of Women: Traditionally, inheritance in the Vaiphei society passed through the male line. For this reason, the position of the Chief normally passes to a son rather than a daughter. A daughter, however, could receive some land or a house from her father, depending on his decision and the family's willingness. In which the eldest son traditionally inherits the position of the father. The eldest son is generally responsible for looking after elderly parents and unmarried siblings. After marriage, daughters usually maintain ties with their natal family and may receive gifts on festivals and other important occasions. The older male succession requirement caused problems for Chiefs with only daughters and no sons. Even if the daughters were the Chief's direct descendants, the nearest male relative might become chieftain.

A distant male relative sometimes inherited the Chief's land and title. Male children were considered important for perpetuating the family line and were preferred. However, the earlier system favored male succession and did not adequately protect the interests of female descendants of the chiefly family. This position has changed recently. The highest civil body of the Vaiphei people is the People's Council, formerly known as the National Organization. As awareness of women's rights has grown within the community, a Vaiphei woman may now succeed as Chief where there is no male heir. This crucial development protects girls' birthrights from distant male relatives and preserves the Chief's direct bloodline.

Village Assembly and Council of Elders: Although the Chief was the head of the village, he did not govern alone. The village council assisted him in every action, including the settlement of disputes and the interpretation of customary Law. Pauchungnung Vaiphei describes the Chief and the council as a local assembly exercising legislative, executive, and judicial functions, without the strict separation found in modern government. The council consisted of elders with a good knowledge of customs, clan relations, village history, and public affairs. They helped and advised the Chief on customary culture and about his authority. Duhlian and Gangte similarly note that the Hausa-Upa and Phungpi-Upate helped mediate disputes, decide family matters, and organize community affairs. Thus, while the Chief occupied the leading position, village administration remained consultative and guided by custom and collective wisdom.

Customary Law as the Unwritten Constitution: The Vaiphei Customary Law governed political authority, family relations, marriage, inheritance, land, offense, punishment, dispute resolution, rituals, and community conduct. It was not codified like statutory Law. Oral tradition and practice among the elders became the Law of the village. Pauchungnung Vaiphei notes that customary Law regulated the political, social, economic, and religious life of the community and provided the basis for village administration. He also mentions that customary Law was kept and passed down by the elders through oral tradition and practice.

As Duhlian and Gangte point out, the governance of Vaiphei is founded on custom and tradition, and not on legislation. They also noted that the Vaiphei legal system governed conduct, relationships, marriage, inheritance, property practices, crime, punishment, enslavement, and dispute settlement. They say Vaiphei justice was community-based and restorative, fostering peace, moral authority, and social stability rather than punishment.

Thus, customary Law serves two purposes. It legitimized the Chief's power during his term in office. If he broke custom, the Chief lost moral power. Thus, custom both gave and limited authority.

Functionaries of Traditional Village: These functionaries together formed an organised customary system for administering the political, social, religious, and economic life of the village. The Chief worked with elders and

other local officials. Pauchungnung Vaiphei identifies the Siamang as the official in charge of general village affairs. He acted as the main link between the Chief and the villagers, received grievances, and informed the Chief about village problems. The Pachawng was responsible for revenue and customary taxes or tributes such as Busun, Saliang, Khuaisia, and Chikhuksia. The Tangsam, or village crier, communicated the Chief's orders, announced important information, and carried messages. Other important functionaries included the Tunpu, the traditional priest or Thiampu, and the Thiksek, or village blacksmith. These officials performed different administrative, communicative, religious, economic, and social duties.

The village's pre-Christian religious life revolved around the Thiampu, or traditional priest. He performed rituals relating to village welfare, harvests, and protection from harmful spirits, and also practised traditional healing. The office was hereditary and permanent, and even the Chief recognised the Thiampu's authority in religious matters. The Thiksek, or village blacksmith, produced and repaired agricultural and hunting implements essential to village life.

Chieftainship and Customary Landholding: Land has always been closely associated with chieftainship. Under the traditional system, village land was considered to belong to the Chief. The Chief allotted land to villagers for cultivation and house construction. Under the traditional understanding, he was regarded as the owner of the village land, and the inhabitants had to pay a certain amount of paddy as land tax at the end of the harvest. This gave the Chief considerable social, economic, and political power within the village. The control over land enabled the Chief to regulate settlement, maintain village boundaries, distribute agricultural land, and preserve the territorial basis of the chiefly line. The customary system served to uphold the authority of the Chief and the village's territorial identity by ensuring that village land remained in the chiefly line. Without a geographical and landed basis, the office of the Chief may become entirely notional. Thus, in Vaiphei village, land is not simply an economic issue but a matter of identity and power.

The strengths and weaknesses of the land holding of the traditional Village Chief: Under the customary system, the Chief controls the use of the village land and may refuse settlement or transfer of land to outsiders. This helps to keep the land use within the village. It protects the village and its inhabitants. If the Chief is fair, educated, benevolent, and committed to village development, this system can ensure unity and order. The Chief of the village serves as the father figure, as he is responsible for the people's well-being¹⁵. In such cases, locals work with the Chief to help develop the village. The traditional system, however, should not be regarded as inherently oppressive. It often preserves identity, social coherence, and territorial continuity. Several villages under the traditional chief-owned system have developed well where the Chief has exercised his authority fairly and responsibly.

Field interviews with the Chiefs of Haokhongching and Saram Patong provide examples of the continuing traditional landholding system. Both Chiefs described village land as remaining under the customary authority of the Chief, with villagers being allotted land for residence and cultivation according to village practice. In this arrangement, the Chief retains an important role in regulating settlement, protecting village boundaries and preventing the uncontrolled transfer of land outside the village. From their perspective, chiefly control over land is not merely a question of private ownership but is connected with the preservation of the territorial identity and continuity of the village.

The traditional land system can also cause hardship when a Chief abuses his authority. Villagers may face eviction, fines, or other forms of pressure for opposing him or breaking village rules. In practice, the happiness of the village depends on the kindness of the Chief. In some villages, if someone did wrong, as a customary punishment, the person would give a pig or another animal to be slaughtered for a feast when forgiveness or reconciliation was sought. Such penalties may also be used against villagers who raise genuine concerns. The problem becomes more serious when a complaint against the Chief has to be dealt with within the same customary system over which he presides. In such cases, villagers may find it difficult to seek help from government authorities, particularly when the matter is treated as an internal village dispute. This creates tension between customary authority and the security of ordinary villagers.

Individual Landholding and Village Development: Alongside the traditional system, Vaiphei villages have increasingly issued written land allotment or ownership documents to villagers, some of which may later serve as the basis for individual pattas or formal land records. In such communities, the Chief and Village Authority run the village, but the inhabitants have greater security over their land and houses. According to Pauchungnung Vaiphei, landholding among the Vaiphei people has shifted from community-based socio-economic and political institutions to an individual-based, formal system grounded in written documents (16). This suggests that customary land arrangements increasingly coexist with written documents, individual claims, and formal land records. This system introduces an additional check on the chief authority. For instance, where individuals possess recognized land, it can be more difficult for a Chief to remove them from the village in the event of disagreement. A villager may still be proceeded against for violating village rules, but the risk of losing his home is reduced. Education enables people to participate more readily in village debates and contribute ideas concerning village administration and development.

The experience of Kangvai Village provides a practical example of this changing relationship between chiefly authority and individual ownership. In an interview, the Chief of Kangvai stated that a substantial portion of village land is now held individually through pattas, land records and other documents. According to him, this has reduced the Chief's direct control over privately held land, while at the same time providing villagers with greater security over their house sites and holdings. He observed that such security has encouraged villagers to construct permanent houses, improve their land and participate more confidently in village development. The Chief, however, continues to supervise matters affecting the village collectively, including village boundaries, public land, roads, development and community welfare.

Challenges of Individual Land Ownership: Individual ownership can also create problems. A Chief may be concerned when village land is sold to someone from outside, especially if the sale is made without considering its effect on the village. Disputes may arise if the new owner refuses to comply with local rules. There are also cases where the Chief has to buy the land back at a higher price to prevent it from being permanently removed from the village. Repeated transfers of this kind can slowly reduce the land area under the Chief's control. Since chiefly authority is closely connected with village land, this may weaken his position over time. Chieftainship may then remain only in name. The traditional system may protect the village and its territorial identity, but it can leave villagers unsure of their land rights. Patta gives greater security to individuals, though it also makes the transfer of village land easier. The real issue is how to protect the village without compromising its residents' security.

The experience of Kangvai Village illustrates these challenges in practice. The Chief recalled instances where landowners attempted to sell their holdings to persons from outside the village community. In order to prevent the alienation of such land and preserve the territorial integrity of the village, he stated that he had personally purchased some of the land at a comparatively high price. He further referred to a dispute concerning the Kangvai market area. According to him, his late father had donated land for the establishment of the market, but subsequently an adjoining landholder allegedly encroached upon a portion of the donated land, creating difficulties when efforts were made to develop a proper market complex. These experiences illustrate how individual ownership may provide security to villagers while simultaneously creating new challenges for customary village authority and collective land interests.

The interviews therefore reveal two different contemporary experiences of Vaiphei land administration. Kangvai represents a system in which individual ownership has strengthened the security of landholders but has also reduced the Chief's direct control over the transfer of village land. Haokhongching and Saram Patong represent the continuing chief-owned model, where customary control provides the Chief with greater capacity to regulate settlement and preserve village territory. Neither arrangement is without difficulty. The former may weaken the Chief's control over village land, while the second may create insecurity for villagers if chiefly authority is misused. The field evidence thus supports the need for a balanced model that protects individual security without severing land from the customary and territorial identity of the village.

The Manipur Village Authority System and Statutory Change: The Chief continues to hold an important place in the administration of the Vaiphei village. Matters relating to developmental works, government schemes, and other official affairs are usually taken up with his approval. The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956, recognized this existing village arrangement and brought it within a formal administrative framework. Pauchungnung Vaiphei reports that the village Chief's role remained unchanged after the State government introduced contemporary village management. The Chief remains responsible for the overall administration of the village, while the elected members of the Village Authority take part in development work and other public matters. Their participation has introduced a more representative element into village governance. The Chief is usually the Village Authority's ex-officio chairman. The members of the Village Authority may be elected or selected, depending on the practice followed in the village. Once appointed, they assist with development, work administration, and other public matters. However, the Chief is usually the top authority, and major decisions must be approved or signed by him. Where the Chief is unable to perform his duties, another person could act on his behalf with his approval. The 1956 Act did not remove the traditional system. It added the Village Authority to the existing form of village administration, so both now function side by side.

An interview with the Kangvai Village Chief further shows that participation in village administration has widened beyond the formal Village Authority. The Chief stated that women and youth are not ordinarily direct members of the Village Authority, but they maintain their own women's and youth organisations and increasingly participate in matters relating to education, development, welfare, church activities and community programmes. Their views may therefore enter village decision-making through these organisations, public meetings, churches and other civil bodies, even though the formal customary authority of the Chief and senior Village Authority members remains distinct.

Christianity, Education, and Civil Organizations: Christianity brought major changes to Vaiphei's religion, education, and social life. Khaute Lamneithang Vaiphei, Thanglunlal Gangte, and Hae Young Kim note that the Vaiphei traditionally followed animistic beliefs before their conversion to Christianity. The spread of Christianity introduced literacy, formal education, church organization, and new forms of leadership. Although it did not abolish chieftainship, it created additional centers of authority through pastors, church elders, deacons, and educated members of the community.

Christianity also broadened the Vaiphei's outlook beyond the traditional village order and encouraged ideas of public service, reform, equality, and community development¹⁸. At the same time, civil organizations such as the Vaiphei People's Council have sought to preserve, codify, and adapt customary laws, festivals, and traditional practices. These bodies also provide a forum for discussing wider community issues, resolving inter-village disputes, and considering reforms beyond the authority of an individual Chief. Contemporary Vaiphei society is therefore shaped by the interaction among hereditary Chiefs, churches, educated leaders, statutory institutions, and civil organizations.

Village Land Use System: According to field data collected, Vaiphei villages follow the chief-owned land system, while a few larger communities have adopted patta or more secure landholding. This indicates that land security benefits community prosperity, particularly when citizens and the Chief work together. Villagers without secure rights over their holdings may be reluctant to construct permanent houses. Villagers may continue with semi-pucca or kucha houses, as they are unsure about the long-term sustainability of such investments. Some villages under the traditional chief-owned system have also developed well where the Chief is capable, fair, and development-oriented. S. Molnom in Kangpokpi district is one such example and is generally regarded as a cleaner, better-organized village. It may be shown that traditional chief-owned property does not preclude development.

Power Structure of the Vaiphei Village: The Vaiphei village power structure cannot be understood simply as either autocratic or democratic. It is a customary system centered on hereditary chieftainship. Still, its actual functioning depends on the relationship among the Chief, the Council of Elders, customary Law, land rights, the Village Authority, church influence, civil organizations, and the villagers themselves. The Chief remains central because he represents lineage, land, customary authority, and village identity. However, his power is not purely

individual. Customary Law, council advice, kinship relations, public opinion, church influence, and statutory requirements shape it. The council of elders, Hausa-Upa, Phungpi-Upate, and other village functionaries provide a consultative and customary dimension to governance. Land remains the most sensitive and powerful element in the system. Traditional chief-owned land protects village continuity but may make ordinary villagers insecure. Patta or individual landholding gives security but may weaken customary control and expose village land to alienation. Therefore, the future of Vaiphei administration depends largely on how this land question is handled. The present Vaiphei village is neither purely traditional nor fully modern. It is a hybrid institution. Hereditary chieftainship continues, but it now operates alongside Christianity, education, Village Authority, civil organizations, written records, government schemes, and modern ideas of rights and participation. This mix of traditional and modern methods has enabled the village system to survive, but has created new conflicts as people demand greater participation, fairness, and security.

CONCLUSION:

Hereditary chieftainship, customary Law, landholding, and kinship remain central to the Vaiphei administration and village power structure. The Chief or Hausapu stands at the center of this system, but he is supported and restrained by the council of elders, customary Law, village functionaries, and community expectations. The village itself functions as the basic unit of Vaiphei life, combining political, social, religious, and economic functions. The coming of Christianity, the spread of education, the emergence of civil organizations, and the introduction of the Manipur Village Authority system have all brought changes to the traditional structure. Yet, these changes have not destroyed the institution of chieftainship. Instead, they have modified the way power is exercised and negotiated within the village, which is the most important issue. In contemporary times, the Vaiphei village administration is responsible for land. The chief-owned system keeps village land under customary control and helps prevent it from being broken up or transferred outside the community. However, villagers may remain uncertain about their homes and holdings because their right to occupy the land often depends on the Chief. Patta-based records and individual landholding provide security and can stimulate growth, but can also weaken customary controls and create risks of alienation. The future of Vaiphei village administration, therefore, depends on maintaining a balance between customary authority and villagers' security. The challenge is not to throw out the conventional system, nor to keep it as it is. The task is to preserve the good aspects of Vaiphei traditional chieftainship, guard against abuse of authority, and ensure dignity, security, and involvement for the ordinary villagers. A reformed Vaiphei village government should be able to protect the collective identity of the village and the rights of its residents.

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