

Traditional Governance System of the Olo Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This study explores the traditional governance system of the Olo community, an indigenous tribe residing in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Rooted in centuries-old customs and traditions, the Olo community's governance is anchored in a chieftaincy system, led by the Lowang (chief) and a council known as the Losavang, comprising village elders and respected figures. These traditional institutions have long served as mechanisms for decision-making, dispute resolution, and community leadership, operating within an unwritten but widely respected framework of customary laws. The research method adopted is qualitative and ethnographic, drawing primarily from historical analysis, community narratives, and structural-functional interpretations of traditional institutions. The study focuses on the roles and hierarchies within the governance system—namely, the Lowang, Ngongpa (deputy chief), and other sub-heads of clans—and the way power and responsibilities are distributed and inherited. The research also discusses rituals like Benshong, which serve as community-based justice delivery systems, and the nature of punishments for crimes under customary law. Key findings reveal that the Olo governance system is not only hierarchical and hereditary but also participatory, emphasising consensus-building and collective responsibility. Despite modernisation, Christianity, and state-imposed structures such as the Panchayati Raj and Gaon Bura systems, the Olo traditional system continues to play a significant role in community cohesion and identity. The conclusion emphasises the resilience, adaptability, and cultural integrity of the Olo governance model. It argues for the recognition and integration of such indigenous systems into formal governance frameworks. The study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive policy-making that acknowledges and preserves indigenous knowledge and authority structures while accommodating modern administrative norms. Through

this lens, the Ollo community's experience offers valuable insights into balancing tradition and modernity in tribal governance systems.

Keywords: Tribal Polity, Ollo, Arunachal Pradesh, Political Structure, Culture

Introduction

⁷ An institution is a relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and changing external circumstances. (March & Olsen, 2005) ⁶ There are structures of meaning, embedded in identities and belongings, common purposes and accounts that give direction and meaning to behaviour, and explain, justify, and legitimate behavioural codes. There are structures of resources that create capabilities for acting. Institutions empower and constrain actors differently and make them more or less capable of acting according to prescriptive rules of appropriateness. Institutions are also reinforced by third parties in enforcing rules and sanctioning non-compliance. (Rhodes, Binder, & Rockman, 2008) ⁸ Institutions give order to social relations, reduce flexibility and variability in behaviour, and restrict the possibilities of a one-sided pursuit of self-interest or drives. ⁵ The basic logic of action is rule-following: prescriptions based on a logic of appropriateness and a sense of rights and obligations derived from identity and membership in a political community and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions. Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Members of an institution are expected to obey and be the guardians of its constitutive principles and standards. (March & Olsen, 2005)

⁴ Institutionalism, as used here, connotes a general approach to the study of political institutions, a set of theoretical ideas and hypotheses concerning the relations between institutional characteristics and political agency, performance, and change. Institutionalism emphasises the endogenous nature and social construction of political institutions. Institutions are not simply equilibrium contracts among self-seeking, calculating individual actors or arenas for contending social forces. They are collections of structures, rules, and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life. (Rhodes, Binder, & Rockman, 2008) ² With the growth of human society, there grows a kind of institution for regulating social life. The basic need of a society is to maintain some order for peaceful living so that development as a unit might take place. But human nature, at the individual level, is such that it tends to violate that order for some personal gain. At this stage, perhaps, the norms of staying together are codified for the smooth conduct of society. All the members of the society are supposed to abide by the codified custom. In the absence of

administration, whether imposed or inherent, the society became chaotic, and such a society does not last long. So, it can be observed that every society has a system of administration. (Nath, 2014)

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have a highly ordered and organised system of functioning in their villages. Each tribe, clan, or village has its head styled as Gam or Gaon Bura. All matters relating to the community as a whole are decided at the village level. However, the management of the internal affairs of the village or clan and its neighbours is vested in the village council, all members have equal powers, and each such council is independent of all influence. (Osik, 1996) These councils are composed of village elders, and they traditionally enjoy a good deal of autonomy in judicial, administrative, and developmental matters. All of these councils work under the provision of the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation of 1945 (Regulation 1 of 1945), which confers on them such powers as are necessary to function as autonomous bodies. The Gaon Bura or the village elder, who is also normally in his position as the head of the village council, act as the representative of administration at the village level. (Choudhury, 1980) In harmony with the democratic self-governing traditions of the tribal people as manifested in the village and the inter-village councils, a 'panchayat' system of local self-government has been introduced in the district under the Provisions of the North-East Frontier Agency Panchayat Raj Regulation, 1967 (Regulation 3 of 1967) as amended by Regulation, 1971. Regulation 3 of 1967 envisages for the districts a three-tier structure of self-governing bodies. (Choudhury, 1980) In Arunachal Pradesh, traditional self-governing political institutions are considered to be an important factor playing a significant role in the form of institutions, and so is the internal organisation of individual villages. Before the central uniform of the administrative system, the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh had their type of self-government system, the indigenous political institution worked effectively by means of the customary law of that particular society's traditional self-governing institution.

Objectives of the study

The objective of the research work is to explore, document, and analyze the traditional governance structure of the Olo community in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, focusing particularly on its indigenous institutions such as the chieftain system (Lowang) and the Losavang council, the application of customary laws, and the system's adaptability and relevance in the face of modern administrative frameworks and socio-cultural changes like Christianity and state governance. Further, the research is done with the following objectives:

1. To understand the structural and functional aspects of the traditional governance system of the Olo tribe.
2. To trace the roles and hierarchies within the traditional leadership (e.g., Lowang, Ngongpa, Losavang).

3. To examine how customary law and rituals (e.g., Benshong) maintain order and resolve disputes.
4. To assess the impact of modernisation, administrative integration, and religious transformation on the traditional governance system.
5. To highlight the continuity, resilience, and adaptability of indigenous institutions in contemporary times.

These objectives collectively aim to show that the Ollo traditional governance system is not a relic of the past but a living institution with enduring relevance.

Methodology

The methodology of the research can be identified as primarily qualitative and ethnographic, though not explicitly labelled as such. The study offers a detailed, descriptive account of the Ollo community's governance, customs, and social structure, suggesting prolonged observation and cultural immersion. The research work traces the historical development of governance in the Ollo community, pre- and post-Indian independence, and the impact of colonialism and modernisation. It provides a timeline of administrative changes, such as the implementation of the Panchayati Raj and changes in district governance from the 1950s onwards, indicating the use of archival and historical records. The research work further describes each tier of the traditional governance system (Losavang, Lowang, sub-heads, customary laws, etc.) systematically and analytically. It identifies hierarchical structures, decision-making processes, and types of punishment—illustrating a structural-functional analysis of the community's political organisation. The Ollo community is treated as a single case, allowing an in-depth examination of its unique governance system. The study focuses intensively on this one community to draw broader insights into indigenous governance in Arunachal Pradesh. The research relies on indigenous sources of knowledge, likely obtained through oral interviews, community interaction, or local traditions, though not explicitly cited.

Discussion

Traditional Governance System of The Ollo Community

The Ollo community's traditional Governance system is a unique and intricate framework that has guided the community's decision-making and dispute-resolution process for centuries. In the picturesque Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, nestled in the eastern Himalayas, the Ollo

community has thrived for centuries. This indigenous tribe, with its rich cultural heritage and traditions, has maintained a unique identity shaped by its history, geography, and social practices.

At the heart of the Ollo society lies the chieftain system, a time-honoured institution that has guided the community through the ages. The Ollo chief, Lowang, is a revered figure, embodying the wisdom, courage, and leadership that have defined the community since time immemorial. The chieftain system is a remarkable example of indigenous self-determination, a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Ollo people. Despite external influence and modernisation, the Lowang continue to wield significant influence, their authority rooted in the love and respect of their people. As we explore the world of the Ollo community, we find ourselves immersed in a realm of ancient customs, intricate social hierarchies, and deep-seated traditions. The chieftain system is intricately woven into Ollo society, influencing every aspect of community life, from dispute resolution to cultural practices. At the heart of this system lies the chief or Lowang, who plays a vital role in maintaining social harmony, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural heritage. But where did this chief system originate? Unlike other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Ollo chief system has a unique history.

The Ollo people's traditional village, where each village managed its affairs, shaped their leadership structure. The autonomy allowed them to develop a distinct system, separate from external influences. In Ollo society, clans and families play a significant role in governance and leadership. Leaders emerge from prominent families, and their authority is rooted in there in their ability to navigate complex social relationships. This is in contrast to other communities, where leadership may be based on military prowess or spiritual influence. The Chief system also differs in its emphasis on consensus building and collective decision-making. While other communities may have more autocratic leadership styles, the Ollo Lowang or the King works to build consensus among community members. This approach has helped maintain social harmony and resolve disputes effectively. Historical events and external factors have influenced the Ollo chief system, leading to adaptations and changes. However, the Ollo people have maintained their unique leadership structure, ensuring its continued relevance. Today, the Ollo chief ¹¹continues to play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting community development. The Lowang's leadership is a testament to the community's resilience and ability to thrive in a changing world. (Lowang, 2023)

Chief Council: Losavang

In the Ollo community, the Losavang is the traditional governance institution that has been the cornerstone of village life for centuries. Every Ollo village has its own Losavang, comprising the respected chief and the elders of the Ollo villages, who make decisions for the collective well-being

of the Ollo community. The Losavang is not just a council, but a symbol of Ollo's unity and solidarity. The Losavang operates on the principles of consensus-building and collective responsibility, ensuring that every decision benefits the community as a whole. (Rangsong, 2024) The Losavang is more than just an institution; it is a collective of respected individuals who embody the wisdom, experience, and values of the Ollo community. The Losavang leadership is traditionally inherited by the son from his father, following a patriarchal system that has been practised for generations, originating from the old Ollo traditions. (Mophuk, 2024)

Members of Losavang

Lowang, Or the Chief of Ollo Community

At the helm of the Losavang stands the Lowang, a revered title bestowed upon the chief of the Ollo community. The Lowang is considered the kingpin of the community, shouldering immense responsibility as the leader and representative of the Ollo people. This esteemed position is not merely a title but a hereditary right passed through generations. Every Ollo village has its own Lowang. The Lowang system is built on a hereditary framework, where the eldest son of the incumbent Lowang inherits the title upon his demise. This ensures continuity and stability in leadership, as the successor is groomed from a young age to assume the responsibilities of the revered position. The Lowang's role is not only a privilege but also a sacred duty, requiring unwavering dedication to the community's well-being. Being the Lowang is a formidable task, demanding exceptional leadership qualities, wisdom, and vision. The Lowang must navigate complex community dynamics, mediate disputes, and make informed decisions for the collective good. The position ¹⁰requires a deep understanding of Ollo customs, traditions, and values, as well as the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. While the Lowang holds the highest position, the Losavang membership operates as a cohesive unit, providing support and counsel to the chief. The members work collaboratively to address community concerns, share knowledge, and contribute to decision-making processes. This hierarchical structure ensures a clear chain of command while fostering a sense of unity and shared responsibility. The Lowang's role extends beyond leadership; it symbolises the continuity of Ollo traditions and the community's rich heritage. The chief's position serves as a unifying force, bridging generational gaps and reinforcing social cohesion. As the embodiment of Ollo's values and wisdom, the Lowang inspires respect, loyalty, and devotion from the community members. (Rumsu, 2024)

Ngongpa

Next to the Lowang stands the Ngongpa, a position of immense importance and respect, equivalent to the governor or the chief's right-hand man. The Ngongpa assumes significant responsibilities, particularly in the absence of the Lowang, when he takes charge of decision-making processes. As

the second-in-command, the Ngongpa wields considerable power, rivalled only by the Lowang. A notable aspect of the community's structure is the presence of two dormitories in every village, one reserved exclusively for the Lowang and the other for Ngongpa. This distinction underscores the Ngongpa's elevated status within the community, solidifying his position as a trusted advisor and leader. The Ngongpa's role demands exceptional leadership skills, strategic thinking, and a deep understanding of Ollo customs and traditions. As the chief's deputy, the Ngongpa must be well-versed in conflict resolution, mediation, and community development. His position requires unwavering loyalty to the Lowang and the community, as well as the ability to make informed decisions in the chief's absence. The Ngongpa's presence ensures continuity and stability in the community's governance, providing a reliable support system for the Lowang. This dual leadership structure allows for a balanced distribution of power and responsibilities, fostering a harmonious and effective decision-making process. Through the Ngongpa's contributions, the Ollo community benefits from a robust and resilient governance system. (Rumsu, 2024)

Additional Members of The Losavang

The Losavang, the traditional governance institution of the Ollo community, comprises a hierarchical structure with distinct roles and responsibilities. Following the Ngongpa, the second-in-command, are additional esteemed elders and members who contribute their wisdom and expertise to the community's governance. Among these respected individuals is Ngonba, who provides valuable advice and guidance to the Losavang. The Losavang also encompasses various sub-heads, each addressing specific aspects of community governance. These sub-heads include Ramchoong, Nokpa, Rumsu, Kongkang, Menyak, Hoodiang, etc. There is one head in each sub-clan of the Ollo community. These sub-heads work in harmony, addressing various aspects of community governance and ensuring a comprehensive approach to leadership. Through this collaborative structure, the Ollo community benefits from a rich tapestry of wisdom, experience, and skills, empowering its members to build a brighter future together. (Rangsang, 2024)

Customary Law in The Ollo Community

Customary law has not been framed by any legislative assembly or parliament and has not thus been codified, unlike formal laws of countries. Like codified law, there is no procedure for bringing to book a criminal procedure code that is quite exhaustive. The law of evidence is quite detailed, whereas customary law is ¹²the whims and fancies of the village authorities. In the present day, people get prejudiced as village politics has affected the lives of the people. The customary laws are tried only by the village authority. Every society has its system of customary laws, which were designed to maintain peace, harmony, settlement of disputes in the community. The basic principle of customary law is to maintain unity, the solidarity in the Community with definite behavioural

patterns. The belief in the existence of the omnipotent power reinforced with people's inner faith and support in the system enables the tribal society to live in contentment through the ages. (Hiri, 2016) The customary laws are the property of the people, so interpretation by experts was natural and instinctive. They are not required to be enforced. Punishment was considered a natural consequence of the violation of the customary law, which is natural. The Ollo community does not have any written codified law, but the law they followed and accepted has always been followed for generations. The Ollo community does not have an oath-taking system. The Ollo people already know their traditional customary laws. And every Ollo person knows their limitations and the boundaries. All the punishments that applied, all the rules and the regulations that were enforced were always the same. (Wangdong, 2024)

Benshong: A Ritual of Justice

In the Ollo community, Benshong is a sacred occasion when the Losavang convenes to settle disputes and offences. Through a ritualistic process, the Losavang fixes the fine for each case, taking into account the nature and severity of the offence. This ritual serves as a means of purging wrongdoing and restoring balance, reinforcing community values and norms, and demonstrating the Losavang's authority and wisdom. On Benshong, the community comes together to witness the ritual, ensuring transparency and accountability. The fixed fine is then paid as a form of restitution, closing the case and reaffirming harmony within the community. The ritualistic process underscores the significance of Benshong as a day of reckoning, where justice is served and community cohesion is maintained. (Rumsu, 2024)

Crime and Punishment

There are certain punishments for crimes like theft and Murder. Stealing may result in fines like Pig, Buffalo, Bangle, Hen, Iron Stick (Sithom), Opium, Rice Beer, upon the committer. In the case of murder, fines of Gong, Local Buffalo, Full Traditional Dress with Ornaments, Millet, Bamboo Mat, Lipha, Litcha, etc., and the perpetrator will face expulsion from society or even a death sentence. No mercy will be shown, and the murderer will be required to pay every single demand made by the victim's family. This includes any form of restitution, compensation, or penalty deemed fitting by the family and the Losavang. The punishment is intended to reflect the gravity of the crime and provide justice for the victim and their loved ones. In case of adultery, a fine of Sithom, Pig, Buffalo, Money, Bangles and Ornaments, Hen, Opium, or sometimes exiled from the village. In minor disputes, fines of Pig, Gong, Beads, Money, Local Beer, Opium, or sometimes both parties, compromise the disputes in front of Losavang. While in major disputes, it will lend to Buffalo, Gong, Pig, Beads, Hen, Opium, Local Beer, Ornaments as fines. In case of divorce, fines of Pig, Bangles, Buffalo, Chicken, Money, and some ask for a second chance. (Rumsu, 2024)

Changes And Continuity

The administration was further consolidated after independence. In 1952, a large Tract of the hitherto unadministered Wancho area was brought under administration. In the fifties, the civil administration extended effectively to the deep interior parts of the area. During this period, administrative centres and units were opened at Bordumsa in 1953, Khonsa, Changlang, Nampong, Niauxa, and Wakka in 1954, Laju, Pongchao and Kanubari in 1955, Namsang in 1958 and Lu-Banfera in 1959. (Choudhury, 1980) Under the North-East Frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation, 1954, the administrative units were reconstituted with redefined boundaries. Accordingly, the Tirap Frontier Tract was renamed as the Tirap Frontier Division. In 1954-55, when Shri P. N. Luthra was the political Officer (from January 25, 1954 to March 22, 1955), the division headquarters started moving from Margherita to Khela inside the district. Khela was the headquarters from August 17, 1955, when Shri B. N. Waghray held the charge of Political Officer (from November 14, 1956 to September 25, 1959). The headquarters were shifted to a very low place, was not congenial to health and the place was not suitable enough for administrative purposes. In 1965, the Tirap Frontier Division came to be known as Tirap District, and the political Officer was redesignated as Deputy Commissioner according to the provisions of the North-East Frontier Agency (Administration) Regulation of 1965. Shri R. K. Patir, then Political Officer, became the first Deputy Commissioner of the district on September 1, 1965. (Choudhury, 1980)

The Olo, an indigenous community, has witnessed significant changes in its traditional political institutions. External influences and internal dynamics have altered the fabric of their governance, leading to a blend of traditional and modern practices. Colonialism introduced foreign governance structures, diminishing the authority of traditional practices day by day. Modernisation and urbanisation have drawn younger generations away from customary ways, while government recognition and integration have decreased external control. Social and economic changes have transformed the power structure, creating tensions between traditional and modern governance. Conflicts over decision-making have arisen, challenging the Olo people to adapt their institution to changing circumstances. Despite these changes, the Olo people have continued to navigate their governance with resilience and adaptability. Amidst the change, the Olo have maintained significant continuity in their traditional political institutions. Their customs, language, and cultural heritage remain vital, with community efforts to preserve traditions.

Traditional chiefs continue to command respect and authority, adapting to changing circumstances. Community participation and consensus-based decision-making persist, ensuring active engagement and pride, while traditional dispute resolution mechanisms remain relevant, integrating with the model legal framework. Social cohesion and stability are maintained through

traditional institutions, which play a crucial role in times of crisis. The Ollo's ability to balance continuity with changes has ensured the enduring significance of their traditional political institution. The Ollo community, like many other indigenous groups of Arunachal Pradesh, India, experienced significant changes in their traditional governance system after India gained independence. The introduction of modern governance structures and the influence of Christianity have had a profound impact on the Ollo people's political, social, cultural, and religious practices. Traditionally, the Ollo community was led by a Lowang, who used to hold absolute authority. However, with the introduction of the modern administration system, his authority became limited. The establishment of the Panchayat Raj institution and the introduction of the Gaonbura further eroded the traditional authority of Losavang. The influence of Christianity has been particularly significant. With 90% of the Ollo people converting to Christianity, traditional socio-cultural and religious practices have been largely replaced by Christian beliefs and values. (Rangsong, 2024)

As we conclude our in-depth exploration of the Ollo community's traditional governance system, we are struck by the remarkable resilience and adaptability of this ancient framework. Despite the profound influences of modernisation, Christianity, and external governance structure, the community's patriarchal societal structure and traditional institutions remain vibrant and integral to their way of life. The chief council, now a blend of tradition and modern elements, continues to play a vital role in governance, reflecting the community's capacity to evolve while preserving its cultural heritage. The story of the Ollo community's traditional governance system holds significant implications for our understanding of indigenous governance and its place within modern society. Firstly, it highlights the importance of recognising and respecting traditional governance systems, rather than dismissing them as outdated or irrelevant. This requires a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between traditional and modern governance structures. Secondly, it underscores the need for cultural sensitivity in government governance, acknowledging the unique cultural context and existing traditional institutions that shape community life. Finally, it emphasises the value of community engagement, encouraging active participation and collaboration with community members to ensure that governance initiatives resonate with their needs and aspirations.

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