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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### SACRED NORMS AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS AMONG THE MAOS OF MANIPUR

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#### Abstract

This study looks at how sacred values shape social order and moral authority within the customary institutions of the Mao Naga (Ememei) community in Manipur. Kinship, clan organization, marriage, guardianship, adoption, kingship, dispute resolution, and ritual life are explored and analysed. Rather than existing apart from modern influences, these customs interact with Christianity and state law, creating a plural and evolving legal world. The paper draws on theories of legal pluralism (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Benda-Beckmann, 2006), Durkheim's sociology of the sacred, and anthropological perspectives on kinship, gender, and ritual (Fortes, 1958; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Ortner, 1974; Turner, 1967; Foucault, 1977) to interpret how moral order is maintained. Sacred rituals like genna and Okhroecha act as community-wide systems of moral regulation, blending fear of divine punishment with social accountability. Family and clan networks remain the moral foundation of governance, balancing hierarchy with care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. The Movou (chief) and village councils uphold justice through dialogue, reconciliation, and ritual, rather than punishment alone. Ultimately, the Mao experience shows that customary law is not a relic of the past but a living, adaptive moral order that continues to anchor identity, ethics, and collective life within a changing modern world.

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#### Introduction:-

The Mao Naga community of Manipur, locally known as Ememei, sustains a rich and complex social world in which kinship, customary law, ritual, and material culture are tightly interwoven. Despite significant transformations brought by Christianity, state law, and modern education, Mao institutions such as family, clan, marriage, chieftainship, dispute resolution, and ritual practice continue to provide a powerful framework for social order and identity. Yet, much of this is preserved in scattered ethnographic notes, oral narratives, and community memory rather than in systematic, analytically grounded studies. This paper examines Mao social institutions and customary norms as an order that regulates everyday life, negotiates change, and safeguards cultural continuity. It addresses the problem that, despite the centrality of Mao Naga customary institutions in organising social life and mediating

contemporary change, there is a lack of systematic, theoretically informed studies that analyse these institutions as an integrated regime of social order rather than as isolated “customs” documented in descriptive or fragmentary form. Drawing on detailed ethnographic material on family organisation, clan structure, marriage rules, guardianship, adoption, maintenance, cultural attire, warfare and hunting, burial practices, kingship, dispute settlement, and customary sanctions, it situates Mao customary law within anthropological debates on legal pluralism and social control. The central argument is that Mao institutions cannot be understood as “static tradition”; rather, they operate as a flexible, morally charged system that mediates between cosmological beliefs, economic needs, and contemporary law of the society.

#### **Theoretical Framework:-**

The paper situates Mao Naga customary institutions within an interdisciplinary framework combining legal pluralism, Durkheimian sociology, and anthropological theories of kinship, morality, and ritual. Drawing on legal pluralism (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Benda-Beckmann, 2006), it interprets Mao customary law as a dynamic, contextually legitimate moral-legal system coexisting with church and state law. Durkheim's (1912/1995) theory of the sacred informs the analysis of moral sanctions, showing how transgressions are treated as threats to collective order and cosmological balance. Kinship and gender relations (Fortes, 1958; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Ortner, 1974) are viewed as moral economies grounded in reciprocity and social obligation rather than rights. Ritual and power, interpreted through Turner's (1967) and Foucault's (1977) frameworks, reveal how kingship and communal rites performatively sustain authority and self-regulation. Altogether, these perspectives depict Mao customary institutions as adaptive moral sovereignties that reproduce social order through sacred legitimacy, collective participation, and negotiated coexistence within plural legal and religious domains.

#### **Legal pluralism and customary regimes:-**

The Mao society is approached through the lens of legal pluralism, which recognises that multiple normative orders—state law, church norms, and customary rules—coexist and interact within the same social field. For Mao villagers, institutions such as exogamous clans, village councils, and the Movou king operate alongside statutory law and Christian marriage regulations, creating layered regimes of authority. The absence of formal marriage registration in “custom-only” unions and the reliance on the Indian Christian Marriage Act for church weddings illustrate this plural landscape, where legitimacy is simultaneously customary and statutory. Legal pluralism also highlights the negotiated character of enforcement. Divorce proceedings, for example, are heard by village councils in public, yet Christian norms of monogamy and modern ideas of individual choice shape how causes like adultery, barrenness, or mutual consent are evaluated. Rather than treating customary law as pre-modern, the Mao material points to an active, ongoing recalibration of norms as people move between village courts, church structures, and state institutions.

#### **Social control, solidarity, and the sacred:-**

Durkheim's ideas about the sacred reinforce the reading of Mao beliefs in omens, curses, and ritual sanctions as mechanisms of social control. Practices such as genna (collective days of rest and ritual atonement), Okhroecha (annual “curse of the moon”), and taboo status of suicides, witchcraft, or incest illustrate how transgressions are framed not only as infringements against individuals but as threats to the moral and spiritual health of the community. Fear of divine or supernatural retaliation complements human punishment, helping to regulate behaviour in the absence of codified penal law. At the same time, clan-based solidarity and kinship obligations operate as positive forms of social integration. Maintenance duties towards widows, orphans, disabled kin, and childless elders, as well as the moral expectation that relatives will step in as guardians, reveal a regime where care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility are central to the social order. In this sense, Mao customary law embodies both repressive and restitutive dimensions: it punishes grave offences like murder or bigamy but also re-establishes equilibrium through compensation, ritual purification, and communal support.

#### **Methodology:-**

The method is based on qualitative, interpretive methods that treat the Mao customary traditions as both a normative text and a set of lived practices. The empirical foundation is a rich documentary compilation containing descriptive accounts of Mao family types, clan organisation, marriage forms and prohibitions, divorce norms, child custody and guardianship, adoption practices, maintenance obligations, ritual attire, warfare, burial, and institutions of kingship and dispute resolution. These descriptions incorporate local terminologies, case anecdotes from villages such as Makhel and Makhan, and explanations of rules and beliefs. Methodologically, the paper proceeds in three steps. First, it organises the dispersed descriptive material into thematic clusters—kinship and domestic organisation;

marriage and conjugal; law, sanction, and dispute settlement; and ritual-material culture allowing internal comparison across domains. Second, it reads Mao norms through selected theoretical lenses: legal pluralism, Durkheimian notions of social solidarity and collective representations, and anthropological debates on kinship, gender, and property. Third, it foregrounds Mao concepts of different traditions and institutions not merely as "customs" but as key analytical terms that encode local theories of order, personhood, and responsibility. The paper adopts an interpretive, humanistic stance rather than a strictly legalistic one. Instead of treating "customary law" as a list of rules, it attends to how rules are embedded in narratives, ritual performances, and everyday expectations about care, reciprocity, and moral danger. Given the secondary nature of the source material, the analysis does not claim to exhaust Mao diversity or contemporary change but offers a framework for future fieldwork-based studies.

#### **Family and clan as foundational institutions:-**

Mao family organisation is explicitly patrilineal and patrilocal, yet it contains spaces of female agency and affective emphasis that complicate a simple patriarchal model. The family is defined as parents and unmarried children, with the father recognised as the head, manager of household affairs, and representative in village meetings and courts. Under traditional rules of primogeniture, the eldest son historically appropriated the largest share of inheritance, while the youngest son inherited the parental house and bore primary responsibility for aged parents; contemporary practice, however, tends toward more equal division among sons and flexible residence based on parental preference. Within this structure, women shoulder heavy domestic and agricultural labour, welcome and serve guests, guide children, and perform key elements of family ritual, including household worship and sacrifices to the deity. The classification of families—complete, incomplete, orphaned, and single-adult households further show how kinship categories adapt to demographic and life-cycle realities while maintaining lineage continuity. Clans constitute the broader agnatic framework within which families are embedded. Each Mao clan, composed of lineages tracing descent from a common ancestor, is strictly exogamous and occupies a recognised territorial segment of the village, including cultivated and jhum lands. Clan elders monitor members' conduct, manage internal disputes, and act as intermediaries between households and village authorities, striving to ensure that individuals remain "socially acceptable" in the eyes of the wider community. Although modernity and population growth have weakened some aspects of clan organisations such as everyday political salience and the use of clan names in personal names, clans still play crucial roles in marriage negotiations, guardianship, economic cooperation, and informal dispute settlement.

#### **Marriage, conjugal, and gendered obligations:-**

Marriage among the Mao is framed as both a personal union and a critical social institution for reproduction, labour, and inter-group alliance. Agricultural livelihood makes additional hands in the field a central rationale for marriage, while exogamous unions strengthen ties between clans and villages. Monogamy is the norm and the socially acceptable form of marriage; bigamy, where it occurs, is rare and heavily sanctioned, including property forfeiture and public censure. Multiple forms of marriage are recognised: arranged marriage via match-makers, marriage by engagement, limited forms of levirate (younger brother marrying elder brother's widow), and marriage by elopement in cases where parental opposition is strong. Customary marriage does not involve a groom-side "bride price" as in many tribal societies; instead, the bride's side transfers substantial marriage goods to the groom, including paddy, buffaloes, tools, clothing, and ritual attire, reflecting local idioms of reciprocity and status. The wedding ritual itself—hair-growing as sign of engagement, exchange of rice beer in banana-leaf cups, touching metal at the threshold, tabooed consumption of the bride's wine by youths, and the three-day *nobu* observance with new fire, utensils, and field visits—binds the couple into both household and cosmological orders.

Marriage rules are tightly regulated by clan exogamy and nuanced prohibitions on cousin unions. Parallel-cousin marriage on the father's side is forbidden, while certain cross-cousin marriages (such as sister's son with brother's daughter) are allowed, and others are not, creating a complex map of permissible and prohibited unions. Violations of clan exogamy can lead to the union being declared void, expulsion from the village, forced clan change, and ritualised acts of propitiation to avert divine anger. Consent occupies a dual layer: young people may form relationships, but parental approval remains essential for a marriage to be valid, reflecting a patri-centred society in which alliance is between families and clans as much as between individuals. Divorce, locally known as *Tu-amara*, is firmly institutionalised and accessible to both spouses, challenging stereotypes of "indissoluble" tribal marriages. Recognised grounds include adultery, theft that brings shame, barrenness or impotence, ominous signs or bad dreams in the first days after marriage, mutual consent, and bigamy. Penalties for adultery are severe: the guilty party, husband or wife, must leave the household without any property, underscoring the moral weight attached to fidelity. In cases of barrenness or impotence, by contrast, common property is divided equally, reflecting a more

pragmatic understanding of misfortune. Divorce proceedings are conducted before village authorities, often in public, and aim to re-establish social balance through property redistribution, clear custody arrangements, and, where necessary, ritual atonement. Widowhood and remarriage are governed by the ritual calendar, especially the OkroKathemei period, during which ceremonies are conducted to bid farewell to the dead. A widow or widower is expected to wait until completion of OkroKathemei before remarrying; marriages before this ritual are considered invalid. Remarriage within the deceased husband's family allows the widow to retain property within the same clan, while remarriage outside entails loss of claims to the former husband's estate, indicating how property rules and marriage choices intersect.

#### **Guardianship, adoption, and maintenance:-**

Child custody, guardianship, and maintenance reveal how Mao society institutionalises care and property management for vulnerable persons. In divorce, young children typically stay with the mother initially but eventually return to the father, whose lineage they belong to; nonetheless, practice is flexible, and emotional bonds with the mother are recognised. Fathers are regarded as primary natural guardians, with mothers assuming this role on the father's death so long as they do not remarry; older brothers or grandfathers step in when needed, illustrating layered obligations within the patrilineage. Testamentary guardianship in the written, legal sense is absent; guardianship devolves automatically through kin and clan structures rather than formal wills. Secondary guardians appointed by clan elders may manage minor's property but are tightly constrained: they cannot alienate assets except for the child's welfare or to repay the deceased's debts, and they can be removed if they abuse their position or seek personal gain. Minority is defined in gendered terms—pre-puberty for girls and roughly under fifteen for boys—linking legal capacity to physical and reproductive maturity.

Adoption (Koki), though rare historically, exists as a mechanism to secure care for childless couples and orphans and to ensure succession to property. Once adopted, a child is treated as born into the new family, severing ties with the natal family and acquiring full rights and obligations within the adoptive clan, including marriage prohibitions with fellow clan members. The rarity of adoption is attributed to broadly equitable land distribution and strong clan obligations to support childless elders, which reduce structural pressure to "give away" or "take in" children. Maintenance obligations extend beyond the nuclear unit. A Mao man is personally bound to maintain his wife, minor sons, unmarried daughters, and sometimes aged parents living with him, while, after his death, his relatives and clan assume responsibility for his widow and children, often out of both moral duty and property considerations. Widows who remain chaste in the husband's house may enjoy maintenance from his estate; those who remarry relinquish such claims. Illegitimate children, where paternity is known, are a charge on the father, and couples may be compelled to regularise unions to ensure legitimacy. In extreme traditional views, children of unknown paternity were denied the right to live, reflecting older, now ethically contested, notions of social and spiritual pollution.

#### **Ritual, attire, warfare, and death:-**

Mao material culture especially attire embodies social status, ritual roles, and gendered identities. Traditional garments made from plants such as *Okhrio* and *Shiingho*, as well as ritual shawls like *Zhorosa* and *Khepi cha kade*, signal ritual performance and affluence. Festive and wedding attire for both men and women are highly codified: brides wear specific shawls, jewellery, and carry baskets and rice-beer gourds, while grooms don necklaces, waistcoats, leg guards, belts, and spears, transforming the couple's bodies into sites of cultural display and protection. Modernity has altered colours, styles, and patterns, yet the basic symbolic logic of dress continues to mark festivity, status, and ethnic identity. Warfare (*oru*) and hunting remain important in historical memory as arenas of courage and masculine prestige. Men went to war with armour made from pig and buffalo skins, shields of bamboo, machetes, and multiple spears, underlining the embodied and material dimensions of conflict. Hunting, mostly conducted in groups, uses similar equipment and is associated with family honour and communal pride, while women's role is to guard the household and children. These practices, together with narratives of head-hunting and controlled warfare with prior consent between villages, suggest a regulated martial culture where violence is both ritualised and normatively contained.

Burial practices reveal deep concern with continuity between the living and the dead. The dead are interred with gender-specific objectswomen with walking sticks, baskets, weaving tools, and shawls; men with hunting arrows, spears, machetes, shields, rice beer, and garmentsso that they are equipped for the afterlife. The hem of garments is intentionally left uncut, in line with ancestral beliefs that these ends might "catch" onto something in the next world. Suicides, however, are excluded from ordinary burial: they are denied coffins, sometimes kicked into graves, laid

upside down, and not mourned publicly, reflecting a powerful moral condemnation of self-killing as a rupture with community and cosmology.

#### **Kingship, disputes, and customary sanctions:-**

At the apex of the Mao village stands the Movou, the king or chieftain, whose authority in traditional Ememei culture is described as absolute in matters of law, order, and discipline. The Movou convenes elders at the Tukhu, a daily gathering place, to discuss village affairs, enact laws, and invoke genna; announcements are made from the king's stone, Movou-tu, and each village may develop its own set of laws, underscoring the localised nature of authority. Disputes are resolved through a graduated process called Ochiikophro-kodu. Initially, families are expected to settle conflicts internally; failing that, clans intervene; only when both levels fail do village elders and the Movou take up the matter in public hearings. Each side presents its case, often through skilled orators rather than professional lawyers, witnesses (Shakimei) testify, and even onlookers may contribute. The king issues verdicts after consulting elders, with minor disputes decided swiftly and more serious ones sometimes postponed. Court fees, modest in amount, are consumed collectively as rice beer rather than converted into private gain, reinforcing the communal nature of adjudication.

Customary sanctions for major offences are severe but rationalised within a moral-religious logic. Murder triggers exile (Shotu-tu) for seven years, destruction of the offender's house, compensation in rice and clothing to the victim's brothers, and potentially dangerous oath-taking on the Shiprie-kholo plant to test truthfulness. Theft is rare but punished by restitution and public beating by youths, while prostitution incurs public beating and head-shaving for visiting sex workers. Witchcraft accusations, though taboo to discuss openly, can lead to severe beatings, forced renunciation, and expulsion from the village. In each case, punishment is both social and cosmological: it protects communal honour while averting the anger of spirits. Norms around sexual offences and rape are interpreted through metaphors Loka-Lekhru (above the road) and Loka-Lerii (below the road) linked to hilly village geography. Incidents above the road are read as more likely consensual, with both parties treated as guilty and compelled to marry; incidents below the road place primary blame on the man, who must pay fine and marry the woman if she is pregnant. These interpretive rules, while problematic by contemporary human-rights standards, demonstrate how local physical environments and ideas of bodily effort inform notions of consent and responsibility.

Finally, collective rituals such as genna and Okhroecha function as village-wide mechanisms of moral regulation. Genna days, declared by the king after misfortunes or serious transgressions, require universal rest from labour, ritual purification, and propitiation of deities, simultaneously humiliating the offender and restoring cosmic balance. Okhroecha, performed annually at year's end, involves men encircling a ball of twigs and grass (prodzii), thrusting spears into it and cursing all hidden offenders, who are believed to suffer bodily pain and sores if guilty. The fear of such invisible punishments supplements formal sanctions, making customary law effective even where surveillance and evidence are limited.

#### **Findings and Analysis:-**

The Mao Naga social order is anchored in the interlocking institutions of family and clan, which together constitute the primary sites of moral formation and social control. The Mao family exhibits a patrilineal and patrilocal structure, where authority and lineage continuity pass through the male line. Yet, this structure does not translate into a rigid patriarchy. Women retain spaces of ritual and affective agency they perform crucial religious duties, manage domestic economies, and embody the moral ethos of hospitality and fertility. This coexistence of hierarchy and interdependence illustrates what Ortner (1974) termed "female complementarity within male dominance." Mao women's ritual participation in household worship complicates Western dichotomies of gendered power, pointing instead toward a relational model of authority embedded in cosmology rather than rights discourse.

Clans (agnatic groups tracing descent from a common ancestor) extend the moral jurisdiction of the family into the collective. Clan elders enforce social discipline, adjudicate minor disputes, and mediate between the household and the village, functioning as custodians of moral reputation. Even as modern governance and Christianity have diminished clan-based politics, these institutions retain symbolic capital in marriage negotiations, economic cooperation, and dispute settlement. Their continued relevance demonstrates how moral legitimacy, rather than coercive power, sustains customary authority in a plural legal environment. Marriage among the Mao operates simultaneously as a personal union and a social contract that binds families, clans, and cosmological orders. Its functions are reproductive, economic, and symbolic producing not just households but alliances of labour and lineage. The ethnographic data reveal a tension between autonomy and alliance: while young people exercise limited

choice, ultimate legitimacy depends on parental and clan approval. This dual consent system exemplifies Durkheim's (1912) thesis that the sacred governs even intimate relations. The strict rules of clan exogamy and nuanced cousin prohibitions act as moral boundaries that prevent the collapse of social categories. Violations of exogamy invite severe sanctions—expulsion, forced clan change, or ritual atonement—underscoring that marriage transgressions are read not merely as social deviance but as cosmological disturbances threatening communal harmony.

The ritual of marriage itself—beer exchange, metal touching, and the nobu—observance operates as a rite of passage that transforms individuals into moral subjects of the community. These performances reaffirm the sacred norms that underwrite social order, transforming private unions into acts of public and divine recognition. Gender relations within marriage reveal a system of asymmetric reciprocity: women contribute labour and ritual service; men contribute lineage continuity and legal authority. However, the accessibility of divorce (Tu amara) to both spouses—on grounds ranging from adultery to misfortune—demonstrates the procedural rationality and moral balance embedded in Mao customary law. Divorce restores rather than ruptures moral equilibrium, showing a pragmatic ethics that privileges communal peace over rigid indissolubility. Systems of guardianship and maintenance among the Mao reveal a collective ethic of care rooted in kinship morality rather than statutory obligation. Fathers are considered natural guardians, but caregiving responsibility diffuses through the patrilineage and clan when needed, indicating that personhood is relational and distributed. Adoption (Koki) though rare, functions primarily as a mechanism of lineage continuity rather than humanitarian rescue. The act of severing natal ties and acquiring new clan identity transforms the adoptee's social being, signifying a ritual rebirth into moral belonging.

Maintenance norms, including support for widows, orphans, and illegitimate children, reflect layered moral hierarchies: while chastity and legitimacy remain valued, social obligations transcend nuclear families, extending into the clan as a moral safety net. In this sense, the Mao kinship system exemplifies what Benda-Beckmann (2006) calls a “moral economy of law”, where norms of reciprocity and shame function as enforcement mechanisms.

Mao material and ritual culture reinforce the moral architecture of social life. Dress codes, for instance, transform the body into a text of identity and moral status. Ritual shawls, jewellery, and specific garments signal not only aesthetic taste but also cosmic order and ethical rank. The symbolic coding of attire in rites of passage like weddings, warfare, and funerals illustrates Turner's (1967) notion of the body as a site of liminality, where individuals are reconstituted through ritual. The burial practices, with gender-specific grave goods and exclusion of suicides, encode a cosmology in which death itself is a moral commentary on life lived. The denial of proper burial to suicides reveals the ultimate sanction—moral reparation for those who break from communal solidarity. Warfare and hunting, once central to masculine prestige, are remembered as moralized violence: regulated, announced, and sanctified. Their transformation from active practice to symbolic heritage underscores the Mao capacity for ritual containment of aggression, a feature consistent with their broader ethos of order through sacred regulation.

At the apex of Mao political structure stands the Movou (chief), whose authority is at once judicial, ritual, and symbolic. His power is absolute yet bound by sacred responsibility; he governs not through coercion but through ritual legitimacy. The Tukhu council and Movoutu stone institutionalize deliberation, reflecting a theocratic model of governance rooted in oral jurisprudence. The graded dispute process (Ochiikophrokodu)—family → clan → village → king—embodies a restorative rather than adversarial conception of justice. Conflict resolution is participatory and performative, emphasizing truth-telling, reconciliation, and communal reintegration over punishment. The collective consumption of court fees as rice beer symbolizes the sacralization of justice as communal communion. Sanctions ranging from exile to ritual oath-taking reinforce both moral and cosmological order. Murder, adultery, theft, and witchcraft are punished not merely as crimes but as pollutions that require ritual purification. Even the spatially coded interpretations of sexual offences (Loka Lekhru vs. Loka Lerii) reflect an indigenous semiotics of morality rooted in environmental experience illustrating how topography informs ethics. Collective rituals like genna and Okhroecha extend justice into the supernatural realm. By invoking deities to punish hidden offenders, the Mao community externalizes moral surveillance into the sacred cosmos, achieving what Foucault (1977) described as a “self-regulating moral order.” Fear of invisible retribution thus becomes a powerful deterrent—sacred norm internalized as conscience.

Across these domains—kinship, marriage, guardianship, ritual, kingship, and sanction—the Mao moral world operates through sacralised sociality. Authority is legitimized by cosmology; justice is performed as ritual; and social control is sustained through moral fear and collective responsibility rather than coercive state apparatus.

This system demonstrates the persistence of customary institutions as moral sovereignties in contemporary Mao society. Even amid Christianization, state law, and modernization, sacred norms continue to regulate conduct, reaffirm identity, and maintain cohesion. The Mao case thus exemplifies how sacred legitimacy can coexist with modern governance, producing a hybrid moral order that is adaptive, resilient, and deeply ethical.

### **Discussion:-**

The study of Mao Naga customary institutions shows how law, morality, and spirituality come together to maintain social order in deeply interconnected ways. Far from being remnants of an older “tribal tradition,” these customs represent a living moral system that continues to adapt to new religious and political realities. The Mao community’s everyday life unfolds within overlapping frameworks of customary, Christian, and state laws, reflecting a vibrant legal pluralism. People move fluidly between these systems whether marrying under church law or through traditional rites, or resolving disputes in village councils instead of formal courts. These choices are not acts of resistance but of negotiation, allowing the Mao to preserve moral autonomy even within broader state and religious structures. Mao law thus operates less through written codes and more through shared conscience, persuasion, and ritual accountability. From a Durkheimian perspective, the sacred underpins this entire moral order. Collective rituals such as genna and Okhroecha transform wrongdoing into opportunities for renewal, turning social transgressions into sacred crises that restore unity through ritual cleansing. The fear of divine punishment and the shame of public exposure serve as strong moral deterrents. Sanctions like exile, purification, or confession not only punish but also reintegrate individuals into the moral fold, revealing that justice among the Mao is as much spiritual healing as it is social correction. Here, morality and cosmology are inseparable—the sacred functions as both belief and discipline, ensuring that order persists even without coercion.

Kinship and gender relations further illustrate how Mao society builds governance on relationships rather than individual rights. Families and clans serve as moral anchors, creating networks of obligation that guide care, inheritance, and responsibility. Duties such as guardianship and maintenance are rooted not in written law but in shared moral understanding. Even within a patriarchal system, Mao women play powerful ritual and emotional roles—they are the custodians of fertility, hospitality, and moral continuity. Their influence, though indirect, sustains the social and spiritual life of the household, embodying what Ortner (1974) described as “female complementarity within male dominance.” Kinship here is more than a bloodline—it is a moral economy grounded in reciprocity, care, and collective conscience. Ritual and authority are deeply intertwined in Mao governance. The dispute resolution process, known as Ochiikophrokodu, reflects a participatory and performative form of justice. Truth is established not through documents but through speech, witness testimony, and community participation. Even the act of sharing rice beer after a case symbolizes justice as a communal rather than bureaucratic act. The Movou (chief) embodies sacred leadership, his authority flows not from force or codified law, but from ritual legitimacy and moral trust. Power, in this context, is performative and spiritual. Following Foucault’s notion of self-discipline, individuals internalize moral control through their own conscience, guided by fear of divine retribution and communal judgment. The sacred becomes a subtle yet pervasive form of governance, a moral technology that turns belief into behaviour.

Taken together, these elements form what can be described as a sacralised moral regime, a system where law, kinship, and ritual create harmony without centralized coercion. The Mao experience challenges the usual divide between “tradition” and “modernity.” Sacred law does not resist modernization; instead, it reshapes it, translating new influences into moral and cultural language. In this sense, Mao society represents a form of ethical modernity one grounded in both faith and reason, continuity and change. Sacred norms remain vital not because they resist the present, but because they reinterpret it in ways that preserve moral coherence and community solidarity. Ultimately, the Mao Naga example offers a broader lesson about moral sovereignty—the idea that communities can sustain order through belief rather than domination. In places where state law feels distant, people find legitimacy in sacred cosmologies that make morality a shared responsibility. This convergence of legal pluralism, Durkheimian thought, and anthropological ethics reveals how customary law endures as a living moral force in postcolonial societies. The Mao do not merely preserve their traditions; they use them to navigate modern life, ensuring that justice, harmony, and solidarity remain rooted in the sacred foundations of their world.

### **Conclusion:-**

The Mao Naga institutions described here present a dense, internally coherent normative universe in which kinship, property, ritual, and law are deeply intertwined. Family and clan structures anchor individuals in networks of

obligation and care, marriage rules articulate ideals of solidarity and purity, and guardianship and maintenance norms ensure that the vulnerable are rarely left unsupported, even as patriarchal hierarchies and harsh judgments of illegitimacy or suicide persist. Kingship, village courts, and elaborate sanctions for murder, theft, sexual offences, and witchcraft show that Mao customary law is not a loose assemblage of customs but a structured system of governance grounded in both social consensus and cosmological fear. At the same time, the corpus reveals ongoing transformation. Christian marriage, statutory registration, altered inheritance practices, changing clan salience, and the visible influence of modern education and western attire all point to an evolving legal and cultural landscape. Rather than treating Mao custom as vanishing "tradition," this paper suggests understanding it as a living repertoire of concepts and practices through which people continue to negotiate identity, morality, and authority in contemporary Manipur. Future research grounded in long-term fieldwork can build on this framework to explore how younger Mao generations reinterpret genna, marriage, and clan obligations under the pressures of migration, gender politics, and state law.

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