

 <p>ISSN NO. 2320-5407</p>	<p>Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com</p> <p>INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)</p> <p>Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/21276 DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/21276</p>	
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE OLLO TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 01 May 2025
Final Accepted: 04 June 2025
Published: July 2025

Key words:-

Tribal Society, Ollo, Arunachal Pradesh,
Social Structure, Tribal Culture

Abstract

This study explores the intricate social structure of the Ollo tribe, an indigenous community inhabiting the Laju Circle of Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh, India, and parts of Myanmar. The Ollo tribe, a subgroup of the Tangshang Naga, possesses a rich oral tradition, ancestral worship practices, and distinct cultural identity rooted in their connection with nature, kinship, and clan-based social systems. Despite external influences such as urbanisation and religious conversion, the community has remained resilient in preserving its ancestral customs, particularly those transmitted through folksongs and storytelling. The research adopts an ethnographic and historical approach, drawing upon oral histories, folklore (notably the Voorang folksong), clan records, and customary practices to document the social and familial systems of the Ollo people. Special attention is given to the tribe's hierarchical organisation based on clan divisions, particularly the roles of the Lowang (chiefs) and Ngongpa (leaders), and the strict patrilineal inheritance system. The study maps out the 13 Ollo villages in Arunachal Pradesh and 5 in Myanmar, providing detailed insight into their demographic spread and sub-clan formations. Findings reveal that the Ollo society is deeply patriarchal, with well-defined roles based on gender and lineage. Family, kinship, and leadership are governed by strict traditional norms that prioritise male succession and property rights. Despite their isolation, the Ollo have preserved a unique cultural ethos through rituals, dormitory systems, marriage customs, and annual festivals like Voorang, which reflects their agrarian roots and mythic past. The study concludes that the Ollo tribe's social structure, while rigid in some respects, serves as a stabilising force in maintaining community cohesion and cultural continuity. It highlights the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge systems, especially in communities with limited written documentation, and calls for further interdisciplinary research to support their cultural survival amid changing socio-political dynamics.

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Introduction:-

Deep within the verdant hills of Arunachal Pradesh, a state nestled in the north-eastern corner of India, lies the Laju circle of Tirap district. It is here, amidst the picturesque landscape, that the Ollo community has made their home. Spread across 13 villages, this distinct subgroup of the Naga tribes has cultivated a unique cultural identity, shaped by their history, traditions, and the rugged terrain they inhabit. For generations, the Ollo people have lived in harmony with their surroundings, developing a profound connection with the land and its rhythms. The Ollo Tangshang Naga or Ollo Laju people share a rich cultural heritage with the broader Naga and Nocte tribes, yet their unique experiences, customs, and practices have woven a distinct narrative. Their language, social organisation, and livelihoods have evolved in harmony with their surroundings, reflecting the intricate web of traditions that define them. The Ollo or Ollo Laju community's story is one of resilience, adaptation, and cultural richness, waiting to be shared and celebrated.

The Ollo community, which lives in the Laju circle, boasts a rich history and distinct heritage. As one of the region's lesser-known groups, their story remains untold. The Ollo community lacks any written documented records of their history, culture, and traditions. Instead, it is deeply rooted in their ancestral heritage, which was passed down from generation to generation. Their unique folksong and storytelling practices have been the primary means of transmitting their cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs. Every aspect of their life is connected to their ancestors, who are revered as the guardians of their collective memory. While urbanisation and the influence of city life have led to the erosion of some of their peripheral traditions, the Ollo community remains steadfast in their ancient ancestral customs, ensuring the continuation of their cultural legacy (Rangsong, 2023). Ollo people are not just found in the Laju circle and the Deomali town in Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh, but there are many Ollo villages found in Myanmar (Burma), and they share a history as the Ollo tribe. In the distant past, when the concepts of nations, states, and countries did not exist, the Ollo people lived as a unified tribe, unbounded by geographical divisions. From that time, they share a common identity, language, and culture that transcended the borders that would later separate them. As time passed and boundaries were drawn, the Ollo people found themselves divided between countries, yet their shared roots and traditions remained a strong bond, a testament to their enduring legacy (Sapong, 2023). The Ollo community's relationship with their ancestors is profound and multifaceted, permeating every aspect of their lives. Their ancestors are revered as the guardians of tradition, wisdom, and cultural heritage. The Ollo people believe that their ancestors continue to play an active role in their daily lives. The Ollo community has a deep connection with their ancestral land, believing that their ancestors' spirit inhabits the territory. This connection fosters a sense of responsibility, encouraging the Ollo people to care for and protect their land, ensuring its fertility and productivity (Hamhok, 2022). As stated above, Ollo people are not just found in the Laju circle and the Deomali in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, but there are many Ollo villages found in Myanmar (Burma). They are settled in many villages of the Tirap district, namely, Laju, Lower Chinhan, Upper Chinhan, Noglo, Lonyen, Sennyu, Raho, Liangchen, Longliang, Pongkong, Senliam, Longbo, and Longkhong. On the other side, in Myanmar (Burma) (Mophuk, 2023), their settlements are in Hachitnoknyu, Pomshong, Longkho, Longkhu, and Tonyu.

Objectives of the Research:-

The objective of the research is to explore, document, and analyse the social organisation, clan structure, kinship system, and traditional customs of the Ollo tribe, with a focus on understanding how these elements shape their cultural identity, governance, and community life. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Document the clan-based hierarchy and leadership roles (e.g., Lowang and Ngongpa) in Ollo society.
2. Understand the kinship and family systems, including marriage customs, inheritance patterns, and gender roles.
3. Examine the oral traditions and ancestral beliefs that preserve cultural memory in the absence of written records.
4. Highlight the mechanisms of cultural preservation and adaptation, especially amidst external influences such as urbanisation and religious conversion.
5. Trace the geographic and demographic spread of the Ollo community across Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar, emphasising the evolution of sub-clans.

This objective reflects the study's emphasis on ethnographic and cultural-historical inquiry, aiming to preserve and understand the Ollo tribe's unique social fabric.

Methodology:-

The methodology of the research work is primarily qualitative and ethnographic. The study relies heavily on first-hand observations and community engagement to understand the cultural and social practices of the Ollo tribe. It explores daily life, rituals, festivals, family systems, and leadership structures through a detailed descriptive narrative, which is characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork. Since the Ollo community has no written historical records, the research draws extensively from oral traditions, especially voorang folksongs and ancestral storytelling. These oral sources provide insights into origins, migration, clan formation, and social values.

The study includes a historical reconstruction of the tribe's migration from the mythical land of Tanghneu. It describes the evolution of clans and social structures over time, using traditional narratives as primary evidence. Cultural practices, marriage norms, leadership succession, and property inheritance are all analysed using indigenous frameworks, with attention to the meanings and functions assigned by the Ollo themselves. The research identifies and lists the villages inhabited by the Ollo tribe in both India and Myanmar, indicating a spatial awareness and comparative dimension to community structure and evolution.

The methodology combines ethnographic fieldwork, oral traditions, and descriptive-historical analysis to capture the complex social fabric of the Ollo tribe. It prioritises indigenous voices and internal perspectives to authentically represent the community's worldview.

Discussion:-

Ollo, their Origin and Migration

The Ollo community thrives, carrying the torch of their ancestors' legacy. Theirs is a story of resilience, courage, and the unbreakable bond with their heritage. The voorang folksong, a cherished oral tradition of Ollos, whispers tales of their forebears; a journey from the mystical land of Tanghneu. Tanghneu is a place of origin where the Ollo people's ancestors acquired the essence of their identity—ornaments, dress, culture, and traditions. This sacred land, etched in the community's collective memory, is the fountainhead of the civilisation. The voorang folksong, a melodic testament to their ancestral legacy, echoes the stories of their forebears' prowess and wisdom. As the narrative unfolds, they are said to have ventured from Tanghneu (Koocha, 2023). The term "Ollo" itself originated from the traditional stories of the Ollo community, which were passed down from one generation to the next. According to the sources, in the past, head-hunting was very common among the tribal people in their neighbouring villages. The Kahang was the name given to the brave and strong warriors of the Ollo community, which means warrior. Whenever war broke out, during their enmity, the victorious used to chop the heads of the defeated ones. The severed heads of the ones who lost the battles were taken by the victorious to their respective villages. The severed heads of the enemies represented skill, power, strength, vigour, and bravery. There are many kahangs in the Ollo oral traditions. Nowadays, most of the skulls were burned by the villagers after they converted to Christianity. Although Ollo people are very friendly but, whenever someone tries to attack or raid the village, they are always prepared to face the enemies. So, in the past, when it came to saving their community, they could be very territorial. Their territory consisted of rivers, hills and forests.

According to the Ollo people, there are five major clans or kuthiams in the community. They are Tangmo, Keepi, Kyakte, Thingman, and Mente. And under each clan, there are sub-clans. One important festival of the community is called Voorang festival, also known as Nockrang Changrang, because it is celebrated by (nock), which means all. Voorang, in the Ollo language, consisted of two words: 'Voo' means Hornbill and 'Rang' means celebration, and Voorang means celebration of 'Hornbill'. According to the Ollo people, there is a story behind the name of the festival Voorang, as the Ollo people believe that it is the bird 'hornbill' who taught them how to do farming and how to grow crops. There is a legend behind this: "In the dawn of time, two Ollo hunters ventured into the mystical forest, seeking to provide food for their family. The gods smiled upon them, guiding their spears to strike a Hornbill. As they were preparing the Hornbill for the feast while cutting the Hornbill's stomach, they discovered hidden treasures within its belly, strange yet fascinating seeds. Unaware of their secrets, they throw those seeds away because they did not know their use. And so on, Mother Earth received the seeds, nurturing them with ancient wisdom. The day passed, and the seeds sprouted, revealing the first tender shoots of a new era. The Ollo people beheld the miracle, and their lives were forever changed. That is why Hornbill is very important to the Ollo people." (Koocha, 2023) In the realm of the Ollo community's collective memory, the Voorang folksong remains an indelible mark, a reminder of their ancestors' journey and their legacy. As the community moves forward, their heritage remains an integral part of their identity, a source of strength and inspiration.

The Social Structure of Ollo

Early British explorers collected a good number of ethnographical reports on the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, which served as the artery of information, throwing light on the social, political, economic, and religious conditions of medieval Arunachal Pradesh. Although the ethnographical reports of the British explorers are mostly from the 19th century A.D., there was hardly any radical social change in the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh upto the reporting period. Besides, since we do not have any other source materials giving information about the social condition of medieval Arunachal Pradesh, we must accept that the material condition that prevalent during the medieval period continued to be the same till the 19th century A.D. (Osik, 1996). The people of Arunachal Pradesh are closest to nature. Their living, economy, society, culture, music, art traditions, religion, etc. All are dependent upon nature. Their social system is framed on the simple norms related to the extent the human sense can think in terms of their natural habits and habitats. The fact is that the tribal culture is established by the direct imitation of nature, and the customs and traditions are directly related to the natural habitat and environment. The norms related to this aspect are not very complex, but art is defined in terms of the circumstances prevailing around. The social norms make them follow a realistic way of life. Their social customs and traditions are based on the consideration of realistic values. (Hiri, 2016)

The Ollo community operates under a complex social structure, divided into clans, Raatey system, paang system, or Dormitory system. The system provides the foundation for the community's organisation and governance. The Ollo society is led by the Lowang, a highly respected chief who plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony and upholding traditional practices. Each village has its own Lowang, who commands authority and influence due to their wisdom and experience. Kinship ties are highly valued in Ollo society, with a strong emphasis on patriarchal and patrilineal traditions. Family relationships are traced through the male line, and inheritance and succession follow patrilineal principles. As a result, men hold significant authority and decision-making power. The community places great importance on tradition and cultural heritage, with a strong focus on clan identity and community cohesion. The Lowang's leadership is instrumental in preserving the community's unique practices and ensuring the continuation of Ollo culture. Through their guidance, the community navigates social, economic, and cultural challenges while maintaining its distinct identity. (Hamhok, 2022)

The Ollo clan is characterised by a strong patriarchal and patrilineal system, where ancestry and lineage play a vital role in shaping social hierarchy and leadership. In the Ollo dialect, the clan is called Kuthiams. At the heart of the Ollo clans, society is divided into two significant clans: Keepi and Tangmo. The Keepi clan is the esteemed title of Lowang, the village chief. The Lowang serves as the highest authority in the village, responsible for guiding decision-making and maintaining social order. Notably, the title of Lowang is reserved exclusively for the members of the keepi clan, and the Lowang's son will inherit the position of the Chief or Lowang after the death of the respected former Lowang. In contrast, the Tangmo clan produces respected leaders known as Ngongpa, who wield considerable influence and wisdom. While not holding the same level of authority as the Lowang, Ngongpa leaders play a crucial role in maintaining balance and harmony within the community. Distinct from these two prominent clans is the Kyaktey clan, comprising common people who form the backbone of Ollo society. Although integral to community life, members of the Kyakte clan are not eligible to hold the esteemed titles of Lowang or Ngongpa, reflecting the hierarchical nature of the Ollo social organisation. The hierarchical system ensures that power and responsibility are concentrated among the Keepi and Tangmo clans, while the Kyaktey clan contributes to the community's economic and social well-being. (Mophuk, 2023) As time progressed, the Ollo Laju community underwent significant transformations, driven by population growth and the quest for new settlements. Initially, the Ollo Laju people resided in the Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh, specifically in the village of Laju. However, as their numbers swelled, they began to expand and establish new villages. Today, the Ollo Laju community boasts 13 thriving villages, a testament to their resilience and adaptability. This expansion was not limited to geographical spread alone; the clan also underwent internal transformations. Over time, the original Ollo clan diversified into numerous sub-clans, each with its distinct identity and lineage. This process of sub-clan formation was a natural response to growth, allowing for more effective organisation, social support, and cultural preservation within the larger Ollo community. As the sub-clans emerged, they retained strong ties to their ancestral roots while fostering unique traditions and customs. The evolution of the Ollo clan into various sub-clans reflects the dynamic nature of social structures in response to demographic changes. This development has enabled the Ollo community to maintain its cohesion and cultural heritage while embracing diversity and adaptation. (Wangdong, 2023)

Kinship

The Ollo community's kinship system is a vibrant tapestry woven from threads of love, protection, and ancestral tradition. Rooted in a strong patriarchal and patrilineal structure, this intricate network of relationships nurtures a deep sense of belonging, responsibility, and cultural identity. With a loving and protective nature, the Ollo community places great emphasis on family ties, communal harmony, and social cohesion. Their kinship system is guided by time-honoured ancestral rules, meticulously passed down through generations, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional values.(Lowang, 2023)

Family

In the Ollo community, family is the cornerstone of their social structure. A typical household consists of a father, mother, and their unmarried sons and daughters, bound together by a linear and patriarchal system. This ancestral tradition emphasises family lineage and heritage, shaping every aspect of community life. At the heart of this system stands the father, a pillar of strength and guidance. He provides for his family through hunting, fishing, and gardening, ensuring their sustenance and well-being. Beyond provision, he represents the clan in meetings and decision-making processes, teaching his children, particularly sons, valuable skills and cultural values. Protection of his family's security and legacy is his utmost priority.(Lowang N. , 2023) When a son reaches marriageable age, the family builds a new house for the couple, symbolising the beginning of a new patriarchal unit. Unmarried sons remain under their father's roof until marriage, after which they establish their households, perpetuating the system. This tradition ensures continuity and family expansion, reinforcing the community's ancestral heritage.(Sapong, 2023) In contrast, women are expected to manage domestic responsibilities. Homemaking is their primary role, encompassing household chores, children, farm maintenance, and animal husbandry. While their contributions are vital, women are generally excluded from public and social spheres, with limited opportunities for expression.(Kongkang & Lowang, The Social Structure of Ollo Tribe, 2023) Children are raised with distinct expectations. Sons of leaders must learn leadership skills, traditional practices, and cultural values from their fathers, preparing for future roles. Sons from the family also learned to use weapons to protect the society, wars, hunting, guarding the Paang or Dormitory, and, cultural values from their father.(Mongyut, 2023) Daughters assist mothers in domestic duties, honing skills essential for their households. The community follows this tradition, where fathers lead, mothers nurture, and children learn, ensuring their ancestral legacy endures.

Marriage and family expansion are integral to Ollo society. Newlywed couples receive newly built houses, while unmarried sons establish their households upon marriage. Families grow, perpetuating the patriarchal system. Elderly care is also significant, with respect and support within the family structure. Respect for elders and tradition is deeply ingrained. Community members seek guidance from experienced leaders, ensuring continuity and cultural preservation. Interdependence and cooperation are essential, with families relying on one another for support.(Rumsu, 2023)The Ollo community's patriarchal structure reinforces clear roles and responsibilities, shaping their social fabric, cultural values, and ancestral legacy. This intricate system ensures continuity, respect for tradition, and a clear social hierarchy. In Ollo society, family life revolves around traditional practices and cultural values. Respect for elders and community leaders is paramount. Their unique social organization emphasizes family lineage and ancestral heritage, perpetuating the patriarchal system.(Kongkang & Lowang, The Social Structure of Ollo Tribe, 2023)

In the Ollo society, family properties, passed down through generations remain firmly in the grasp of the male lineage. This patriarchal inheritance system ensures continuity and social security, but at what cost? Land, houses, and ancestral homes—the very fabric of the community's identity—are controlled by the head of the family, the father. Upon his passing, the eldest son inherits all the family properties, shouldering the responsibility of managing family assets, caring for younger siblings, and providing for their education and well-being. As brothers grow up, the property is divided among them, perpetuating the patriarchal lineage. But what about the women? Their rights to family property are limited, and restricted to personal ornaments, traditional attire, and gifts received during marriage. The eldest son's role is pivotal. He assumes responsibility for his younger brothers and sisters, taking his father's place as the head of the household. This includes family assets, providing for education and well-being, and caring for younger siblings and his mother. This tradition is deeply rooted in the Ollo community's cultural heritage. Agricultural heritage and ancestral lineage have shaped the community's values, reinforcing the patriarchal structure. Colonialism and traditional practices have further solidified this system.(Rumsu, 2023)

Marriage

One of the most important features of the family, which is now losing its significance, is that it functions as an economic unit both for production and consumption, especially when the rearing and maintenance of children make heavy demands on the economic resources of the parents. (Gisbert, 2007) To perform its social functions, it has a number of customs or institutions such as courtship, betrothal, and above all, marriage. As in other communities, marriage is a legal union of a man and a woman for the establishment of a firm family. Polygamy and widow remarriage are allowed, although monogamy is the common practice and considered good for a peaceful family life. A man can marry the widow of his brother. Marriage of a couple hailing from the same clan, ku, is prohibited. There may be more than one clan with which marriage cannot be held; they are known as fawna. Incest, or immoral affairs between persons hailing from the same clan, e.g. Lowang with Lowang, is strictly prohibited, and the couple can be excommunicated from society. Marriage of a couple having identical surnames, hailing from different groups, is allowed. (Lowang W. , 2006) In the Ollo community, marriage is known as the 'Diakbu and the Meliyat', marking the beginning of arrangements. This tradition involves the parents of the prospective bride and groom exchanging bangles and engaging in discussions about the potential union, often during the childhood or teenage years of the couple. During this period, the bride and groom-to-be are given time to consider the proposal and weigh its merits. They have the right to accept or decline, and if either party is uncertain, they may request an extension. This allows for thoughtful deliberation, ensuring both individuals are committed to the union. The Ollo people are more focused on the couple's compatibility, and suitability is assessed. If either party remains uncertain, they retain the right to withdraw from the arrangement. Families of the bride or groom may play a role in the decision-making process, although coercive or forced marriages are strictly prohibited under Ollo customary law. In the Ollo community, marriage is viewed as a lifelong commitment between two individuals. Polygamous relationships are not recognised or sanctioned by customary law, emphasising the importance of monogamy and fidelity. The polygamous couple will be expelled from the village. In addition to this, they also must impose fines for bringing shame to their parents as well as to their society and hurting the feelings of their legal wife or husband. In the case of a barren wife than family must give the wife's sister to her husband. This practice although outdated, reflects the community's traditional approach to addressing fertility issue. (Mophuk, 2023)

Conclusion:-

In conclusion, the Ollo community's intricate social structure, governed by its clan-based hierarchy and traditional leadership, has played a vital role in shaping its identity and governance. The prominence of the Keepi and Tangmo clans, alongside the contributions of the Kyakthey clan, ensures a balance of power and responsibility within the society. The enduring leadership of the Lowang and the influence of the Ngongpa reinforce the community's adherence to its customs and values. As the Ollo Laju people expanded and established new villages, their adaptability and resilience allowed them to preserve their heritage while embracing necessary changes. The formation of sub-clans further strengthened their social fabric, ensuring continuity and cohesion. Through these evolving dynamics, the Ollo community has successfully maintained its cultural identity, demonstrating a deep-rooted connection to tradition while navigating the challenges of an ever-changing world. The Ollo community's social structure is deeply rooted in its patriarchal and lineage-based traditions, where family plays a central role in maintaining continuity and cultural heritage. The clear division of responsibilities between men and women ensures the smooth functioning of society, with fathers as providers and decision-makers, while mothers manage domestic life. The inheritance system, which favours male lineage, reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy, preserving ancestral wealth and identity through generations. While this structure ensures stability and cohesion, it also raises questions about gender equity and evolving societal norms. Despite external influences and changing times, the Ollo community remains steadfast in upholding its traditions, ensuring that its ancestral legacy endures for future generations.

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