



Research Paper

Kuki Chieftainship in Manipur: Balancing Tradition with Modern Governance

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Abstract

Traditional tribal leadership is crucial for maintaining the identity and culture of indigenous communities. In the case of the Kukis of Manipur, the chieftaincy system, headed by a hereditary chief known as the Haosa, has been integral to village life for many generations. Historically, the chief has overseen land management, resolved disputes, and safeguarded the village while adhering to Kuki customs and laws. Nevertheless, this system is currently confronted with significant challenges stemming from modernization, legal reforms, and democratic influences. These developments have prompted inquiries regarding the role and future of traditional leaders. Despite these challenges, the chieftaincy continues to serve as a powerful emblem of Kuki culture and heritage. This paper examines the traditional framework of Kuki chieftainship, its changing role in contemporary India, and the ways it can be adapted to coexist with democratic systems while still upholding its fundamental values.

Keywords: Kuki, Haosa, Chieftainship, Culture, Heritage, Governance, Tradition, Identity.

Received 13 May., 2025; Revised 25 May., 2025; Accepted 27 May., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

In numerous tribal societies, leadership encompasses not only administration but also cultural and identity aspects. For the Kuki community in Manipur, chieftainship has historically served as the cornerstone of governance. Each Kuki village operated as an autonomous entity, akin to a city-state in ancient Greece. At the heart of every village was the chief, known as the *Haosa*, who possessed hereditary authority and owned the village's land. His jurisdiction spanned all facets of life, including judicial, administrative, military, and cultural matters. Although the chief wielded significant power, he was anticipated to adhere to traditional laws and customs, acting in the community's best interest.

The Kuki chieftainship system fulfilled various roles. It upheld order, safeguarded land rights, resolved community conflicts, and maintained customs and rituals. This system was transmitted through generations, establishing a robust connection between the past and the present.

Nevertheless, with the emergence of modern governance frameworks in India, particularly democratic institutions and legal reforms, the authority of traditional chiefs has faced challenges. Numerous laws now conflict with the powers previously held by the *Haosa*, and younger generations increasingly question the necessity of hereditary leadership. Yet, in spite of these transformations, the chieftainship continues to hold significance for many Kuki individuals.

This paper examines the functioning of the Kuki chieftainship, the contemporary challenges it encounters, its comparison with analogous systems such as Naga chieftainship, and potential reforms to ensure its survival within a democratic India.

The Traditional Role of Kuki Chief

The Kuki chief, known as the *Haosa*, has historically served as the paramount authority within a village. Each Kuki village functioned as an autonomous entity under the governance of the chief. His role was hereditary, typically transmitted from father to son. The chief was not only the political leader but also the spiritual protector, judge, landowner, and defender of the village.

He possessed authority over the village land, allowing him to allocate land to villagers for agricultural or other purposes (Changsan & Borgohain, 2018). This land was not privately owned but was granted for use as

long as individuals adhered to village customs and met obligations, such as engaging in village labor or contributing a portion of the harvest. In exchange, the chief guaranteed the safety and welfare of the village.

The Haosa also served as a judge in the event of disputes. He settled conflicts by applying customary laws that had been handed down through generations. Although his governance was autocratic implying he held the ultimate authority it was not tyrannical. In many instances, his decisions were influenced by the elders and honored traditions (Lunkim, 2023).

The chief had the authority to appoint village officials, including:

The Pachong: A type of village elder or minister who provided counsel to the chief.

The Thempu: A priest responsible for spiritual affairs and rituals.

The Tumpipa: The village messenger or announcer.

These officials assisted the chief in overseeing various facets of village life, including festivals, funerals, agricultural activities, and defense.

The role of the Haosa extended beyond mere administration; it also held significant cultural relevance. The chief preserved traditional festivals, rituals, and communal values. Through this position, he sustained the village's identity and the unity of its people.

Over the years, the institution of chieftainship fostered a profound connection between the people and their land, customs, and leadership. This framework ensured that even in the absence of a contemporary government, peace and order could be upheld within Kuki society.

Challenges Faced by Kuki Chiefs in Contemporary Manipur

Despite the fact that Kuki chieftainship has persisted through generations, the contemporary era has introduced numerous new challenges. These challenges arise from legal modifications, democratic governance, social changes, and even ethnic conflicts. Collectively, they have rendered the role of the Haosa more complex and less stable than in the past.

1. Legal and Administrative Reforms

A significant legal challenge to Kuki chieftainship is presented by the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960). This legislation fails to acknowledge the traditional land rights of the Kuki chiefs. Under this law, land is deemed to belong to the state, with private ownership contingent upon official records and documentation rather than customary practices.

Nevertheless, in Kuki society, land ownership has historically been communal, albeit overseen by the chief. The Haosa determines the distribution of land among villagers, and his authority over land is rooted in tradition rather than written statutes. The Act undermines this traditional framework and reallocates power from the chief to government officials and bureaucrats (Lunkim, 2023).

This discord has generated friction between the state and tribal communities. A considerable number of Kuki individuals perceive this as an assault on their identity and autonomy.

2. Democratic Governance and Modern Political Systems

India's democratic framework is founded on the principles of elected representatives and equality. Conversely, Kuki chieftainship is hereditary, with power transmitted within a family lineage. This disparity engenders a conflict between traditional governance and contemporary democratic ideals (Haokip, 2017).

In some areas, village administration is being restructured to follow democratic models. Village development councils are being introduced, and people are encouraged to elect local leaders. While this promotes participation and fairness, it also reduces the authority of the chief and creates confusion over who is in charge.

Younger generations are also more inclined towards democracy. They often question why leadership should be inherited instead of earned, especially when some chiefs are seen as ineffective or unresponsive to the needs of the people.

3. Ethnic Conflicts and Security Issues

Manipur is a state characterized by a multitude of ethnic communities, and the relationships among them are frequently strained. In recent years, tensions between the Kuki and Meitei communities have escalated. In these circumstances, traditional chiefs occasionally become scapegoats for blame or suspicion.

Some chiefs face allegations of favoring one group over another or being complicit in acts of violence. Regardless of the veracity of these claims, such accusations tarnish their reputation and diminish their moral authority in the eyes of both the public and the state (Singh, Singh, & Sharma, 2024).

Furthermore, law enforcement agencies and the government often approach traditional leaders with skepticism or animosity during periods of ethnic turmoil, thereby undermining their capacity for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

4. Government Policies and Documentation Requirements

In contemporary India, official documentation and records dictate land ownership, eligibility for benefits, and access to government programs. The traditional Kuki system, which relies on oral agreements and customary rights, does not always align with these stipulations.

Recent policies necessitate that chiefs and villagers provide documentation to validate land ownership or to seek compensation. Many chiefs do not possess these documents, as their authority is derived from tradition rather than formal paperwork. Consequently, the government sometimes perceives them as unlawful landholders (The Economic Times, 2024). This situation exerts pressure on the traditional system, compelling chiefs to either conform to modern documentation standards or risk losing their land and influence.

5. Social and Economic Changes

The society of today is markedly different from that of the past. Advancements in education, the internet, mobile technology, and migration have transformed the ways in which people think and live. A significant number of young Kuki individuals are departing their villages for urban areas in pursuit of improved opportunities. They are increasingly exposed to new concepts, including democracy, equality, and individual rights.

As a result, they often question the fairness and relevance of the chieftainship system. Some ask why leadership should be reserved for one family or why women are excluded from leadership roles (Thangkhosei, 2016). Others feel that chiefs are not doing enough to support development or improve education and healthcare. This growing gap between tradition and modern values is putting pressure on the institution of chieftainship to reform and become more inclusive and responsive.

Summary of the Challenges:

Challenge	Impact on Chieftainship
Legal Reforms (e.g., land laws)	Weakens land authority of chiefs
Democratic Governance	Reduces power of hereditary leaders
Ethnic Tensions	Questions the neutrality and role of chiefs
Documentation Requirements	Undermines traditional land rights
Youth Awareness and Modern Values	Pushes for reform, gender equality, and democratic leadership models

Differences Between Kuki and Naga Chieftainship in Manipur

In Manipur, both the Kuki and Naga communities possess traditional methods of village governance. Nevertheless, their systems differ significantly regarding the selection of leaders, land ownership, and decision-making processes. The following description will help us to analyze the differences.

1. Basis of Leadership

Kuki Chieftainship:

In Kuki culture, the chief's position (*Haosa*) is inherited. This indicates that the role is transmitted from father to son, typically within the same lineage. The community does not participate in voting or selecting the chief. The authority of the chief is accepted by the people as a customary practice (Haokip, 2017).

Naga Chieftainship:

Conversely, Naga villages adhere to a more democratic or meritocratic approach. Leaders are appointed by village councils or through a consensus within the community. Leadership is not hereditary but is determined by an individual's wisdom, courage, or contributions to the community (JETIR, 2018).

2. Land Ownership

Kuki Villages:

In Kuki villages, the chief possesses ownership of all land. He holds the power to distribute land parcels to villagers for agricultural and residential purposes. However, the land remains under the chief's ownership, and villagers do not enjoy complete ownership rights. This arrangement grants the chief considerable influence over the village's economy and the residents' lives (Kipgen, 2012).

Naga Villages:

In Naga communities, land is owned collectively. It is the property of the entire village or clans, rather than a single leader. Decisions regarding land utilization are made collectively, and individuals have more enduring rights to the land they cultivate. This diminishes the authority of individual leaders and fosters equality (JETIR, 2018).

3. Decision-Making Process

Kuki System:

The *Haosa* predominantly makes decisions independently. His pronouncements are typically conclusive, although he may seek counsel from elders. This autocratic leadership approach affords him significant control but restricts community involvement in governance (Changsan & Borgohain, 2018).

Naga System:

The Naga system operates in a more democratic manner. Significant issues are deliberated within the village council, which comprises esteemed elders and representatives from various clans. Decisions are reached collectively, ensuring that every individual has a voice (JETIR, 2018).

4. Adaptability to Modern Governance

Kuki Chiefs:

Kuki chieftainship has shown considerable resistance to contemporary political transformations. Chiefs have endeavored to uphold their authority and traditions, even when they conflict with governmental laws. This has resulted in confrontations with the state and difficulties in aligning with official administration (Haokip, 2017).

Naga Leadership:

The Naga system has demonstrated greater adaptability. Numerous Naga villages have effectively merged traditional councils with modern governance frameworks. This integration has enabled them to maintain their cultural identity while engaging in democratic processes (Kipgen, 2012).

5. Relevance Today

Kuki Chieftainship:

The Kuki system continues to be active and influential in various regions, particularly in the rural areas of Manipur. Nonetheless, it faces challenges from legal reforms and the activism of the youth.

Naga Chieftainship:

Within the Naga community, traditional leadership is less prominent and often collaborates with or operates within the governmental framework. In certain regions, it has become more symbolic and ceremonial in nature (JETIR, 2018).

Summary of Differences:

Feature	Kuki Chieftainship	Naga Chieftainship
Basis of Leadership	Hereditary (passed within family)	Merit-based or selected by council
Land Ownership	Chief owns all land	Land is communally owned
Decision-Making	Autocratic (chief's decision final)	Democratic (council-based decisions)
Adaptability	Resists state systems	Adapts to democratic governance
Modern Relevance	Still active but challenged	Largely symbolic, coexists with state

This comparison helps us understand why Kuki chieftainship needs careful reform—it must find a way to preserve its heritage while also adapting to a democratic and legal system that values equality and participation.

Limitations of the Kuki Chieftainship System

While the Kuki chieftainship serves as a proud emblem of identity and tradition, it is also accompanied by several internal weaknesses. These shortcomings hinder the system's ability to operate effectively in the contemporary world. Many of these issues stem from the system's inflexible structure, unequal distribution of power, and resistance to change.

Let us examine the primary limitations in greater detail:

1. Concentration of Power and Absence of Democracy

In the traditional Kuki framework, all decision-making authority is vested in the chief. Although he may seek counsel from elders or advisors, he is not obligated to follow their recommendations. This results in an autocratic system where a single individual wields complete control over governance (Haokip, 2013).

Such a concentration of power can result in:

Misuse of authority

Lack of transparency

Unjust decisions

Suppression of dissenting voices

Modern democratic principles advocate for shared leadership, accountability, and community involvement. However, the traditional system restricts villagers—particularly the youth and women—from engaging in significant decision-making processes.

2. Inequality in Land Ownership

Land represents the most crucial resource in rural communities. Within the Kuki system, all land is officially owned by the chief. Villagers are permitted to utilize the land for agricultural purposes, but they do not possess ownership rights. This situation leads to economic instability among the populace (Kipgen, 2014).

Issues that emerge from this arrangement include:

Villagers are unable to use land as collateral for loans.

They cannot legally bequeath land to their offspring.

They rely on the chief's goodwill for land utilization.

This inequality fosters a power disparity and impedes economic progress. It also deters investment in the land, as individuals lack legal rights over it.

3. Suppression of Individual Rights and Merit

Given that chieftainship is hereditary, it does not take into account merit, education, or leadership capabilities. This often results in ineffective leadership, particularly when the successor lacks the necessary skills or vision to guide the village (Gangte, 1993).

This system:

Ignores capable individuals outside the chief's family.

Fails to encourage talent and innovation.

Prevents leadership change even when needed.

As more people get educated and aware of democratic rights, this system of hereditary rule appears outdated and unjust to many.

4. Resistance to Modern Administrative Systems

Many Kuki chiefs oppose the integration of traditional governance with the official systems of the state. While this stance helps preserve tribal identity, it simultaneously leads to legal and administrative disputes. For instance, land revenue officers may fail to acknowledge the chief's authority, resulting in ambiguity regarding land rights (Lal Dena, 1991).

Consequences of this resistance include:

Chiefs being excluded from policy-making and development initiatives, Villagers being denied access to government schemes due to insufficient documentation and the establishment of two parallel systems (customary and legal), which results in mismanagement.

This division undermines both the traditional institution and the effectiveness of village governance.

5. Gender Inequality

A major flaw in the Kuki chieftainship system is the exclusion of women. Women are prohibited from becoming chiefs or occupying significant leadership roles. They also lack rights to land ownership or inheritance.

This situation leads to:

The reinforcement of patriarchal values

The silencing of women's voices in village matters

A delay in the pursuit of gender equality and empowerment

In a contemporary society that advocates for equal rights, the exclusion of women from leadership roles is increasingly regarded as unjust and necessitates immediate reform.

Summary of Limitations:

Limitation	Impact
Concentrated Power	Reduces accountability and public participation
Unequal Land Ownership	Limits economic growth and land security for villagers
Hereditary Succession	Favors family over talent and merit
Resistance to Modern Systems	Creates conflict between state laws and traditional rules
Gender Discrimination	Excludes women from decision-making and property rights

Although the chieftainship system has helped preserve culture and order, these internal weaknesses make it difficult to sustain in the modern world. Recognizing and addressing these issues is the first step toward building a more inclusive and responsive governance system for the Kuki people.

Upholding Kuki Chieftainship Through Constitutional, Historical, and Traditional Perspectives

Despite the numerous challenges faced by the Kuki chieftainship system, it continues to possess profound cultural and historical importance. It transcends mere governance; it embodies the identity, values, and continuity of the Kuki people. Consequently, rather than being abolished, it ought to be acknowledged, respected, and reformed. There are three primary perspectives that advocate for the preservation of Kuki chieftainship: constitutional, historical, and traditional.

1. Constitutional Perspective

The Indian Constitution offers specific protections for tribal communities and their customs. A significant provision is Article 371C, which acknowledges the distinct needs of the Hill Areas of Manipur. This article facilitates the establishment of the Hill Areas Committee, an entity that ensures the safeguarding and respect of tribal customs, including traditional governance systems such as chieftainship (Morung Express, 2023).

Under Article 371C:

The state government must consult the Hill Areas Committee prior to enacting laws that impact tribal regions.

Tribal communities are permitted to maintain their traditional administrative practices.

This legal safeguard provides constitutional legitimacy to the role of the *Haosa* and aids in protecting the chieftainship system from being entirely supplanted by state legislation.

2. Historical Perspective

The Kuki chieftainship system was formally acknowledged during the period of British colonial rule. The British employed local chiefs to collect taxes, uphold order, and perform administrative functions. This indicates that the institution of chieftainship was not only respected but also deemed effective for managing tribal territories (Chongloi, 2018).

This colonial acknowledgment:

Affirmed the authority of Kuki chiefs in the eyes of the state, Contributed to the preservation of the chieftainship structure even amidst political transitions, Established a precedent for the recognition of traditional institutions within formal governance frameworks.

The post-independence government should draw lessons from this methodology and create a connection between contemporary administration and traditional tribal leadership.

3. Traditional Perspective

From a cultural and traditional viewpoint, the *Haosa* transcends the role of a mere political leader—he embodies the guardian of tribal identity and continuity. Chiefs hold the responsibility of safeguarding oral histories, conducting rituals, organizing festivals, and resolving disputes in accordance with customary laws (Chongloi, 2022).

The traditional duties of the chief encompass:

Maintaining harmony within the village, Coordinating communal activities (e.g., agriculture, construction) Leading religious ceremonies and rites of passage and Facilitating the intergenerational transmission of values and customs.

For numerous villagers, the presence of a chief instills a sense of belonging and order. The complete elimination of this system would not only impact governance—it would also disrupt the cultural fabric of Kuki society.

The Need for Recognition and Reform, Not Rejection

Considering the significance of chieftainship in Kuki life, a total abolition of the system would result in more harm than benefit. Rather, a balanced approach is essential. This should involve:

Acknowledging the cultural significance of the institution, Incorporating chiefs into formal administrative frameworks and Reforming the system to promote fairness, gender equality, and democratic engagement.

By adopting this approach, the chieftainship can fulfill its traditional role while also aligning with contemporary expectations.

Summary of Supportive Perspectives:

Perspective	How It Supports Chieftainship
Constitutional	Article 371C protects tribal customs and governance in hill areas
Historical	British colonial administration recognized and relied on Kuki chiefs for governance
Traditional	Chiefs uphold cultural values, rituals, and social unity within the community

Preserving the chieftainship system aligns with India's broader goal of celebrating and safeguarding its pluralistic and multi-ethnic identity. When adapted thoughtfully, Kuki chieftainship can continue to be a symbol of pride and self-governance.

Suggestions for the Betterment of Kuki Society

To maintain the essential elements of Kuki chieftainship while addressing its shortcomings, it is necessary to implement reforms. These reforms should focus on modernizing the system without undermining its cultural roots. The objective is not to eliminate the *Haosa* system, but to enhance its democratic nature, inclusivity, and alignment with contemporary governance.

Here are several practical recommendations:

1. Reform Rather Than Abolish the Chieftainship

Rather than completely removing the hereditary chief, his role should be redefined. The chief can continue to serve as the symbolic and cultural leader, while actual governance should involve a village council.

A village development council can be established to support the chief.

Members of the council should be elected by the community and serve for predetermined terms.

This collaborative model can merge tradition with democracy, enhancing accountability while honoring heritage.

Such hybrid systems have proven effective in other tribal areas of India and can be beneficial for the Kuki community as well.

2. Codification of Customary Laws

The majority of traditional laws in Kuki society are transmitted orally. While this method is effective in tightly-knit communities, it leads to confusion and legal ambiguity when engaging with the modern state.

Customary laws should be recorded and codified in a written format.

Once documented, these laws can be utilized in official proceedings and courts.

Codification also aids younger generations in understanding and valuing their traditions.

Collaborative efforts can be made with legal experts, tribal elders, and local organizations.

3. Empowering Youth and Women

To enhance inclusivity within the system, women and young individuals must be granted roles in village governance.

Women should be permitted to occupy leadership roles, participate in councils, and secure land rights.

Youth can contribute fresh perspectives, digital expertise, and vigor to village administration.

A quota system can be established to guarantee the involvement of these demographics.

Incorporating women and youth will render the system more dynamic and responsive to contemporary challenges.

4. Legal Acknowledgment of Traditional Land Rights

One of the primary challenges is the clash between traditional land governance and contemporary land regulations.

The government ought to revise land legislation to acknowledge community ownership and the chief's authority, particularly regarding customary usage.

Land rights should also be officially documented to ensure security for villagers and avert displacement.

This equilibrium can safeguard tribal traditions while guaranteeing that development initiatives do not adversely affect local communities.

5. Conflict Resolution and Peace building

Due to their moral standing and esteem within the community, traditional chiefs can significantly contribute to resolving ethnic disputes and fostering peace.

Chiefs should receive training in mediation and negotiation techniques.

Their connections across villages can facilitate community-driven peace initiatives, particularly during periods of ethnic strife.

Instead of being perceived as a source of discord, reformed chiefs can emerge as catalysts for peace and progress.

6. Partnership with State Institutions

Chiefs and councils should collaborate closely with state agencies to:

Implement government programs and welfare services.

Maintain village records and documentation.

Construct improved roads, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities.

Such collaboration guarantees that tradition and development advance in unison.

II. Conclusion

Kuki chieftainship is more than just a system of rule it is the living spirit of a people, deeply connected to their land, history, and identity. While the pressures of modernization, democracy, and legal reforms cannot be ignored, they should not be used as reasons to destroy traditional institutions.

Instead, these challenges should be viewed as opportunities to evolve. Reforming the chieftainship system by making it more democratic, inclusive, and legally recognized it can strengthen both governance and cultural preservation.

The comparison with Naga chieftainship shows that traditional systems can survive if they are flexible and willing to adapt. Constitutional safeguards such as Article 371C, and historical recognition from the colonial period, all support the continued existence of such institutions.

Ultimately, a reformed and respected chieftainship will not only protect the heritage of the Kuki people but also contribute to building a more just, pluralistic, and harmonious Indian society.

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