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## A Discourse On Clan-Based Political Culture In Nagaland's Electoral System

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the complex interplay between traditional clan structures and modern electoral democracy in Nagaland, a tribal state in Northeast India. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and secondary literature, the study examines how clan-based loyalties continue to shape political participation, voter behavior, and candidate selection in Naga society. Far from being passive cultural remnants, clans function as powerful political actors that influence both the structure and outcomes of elections. Through interviews and field observations, this paper highlights how the pressure to conform to clan decisions often overrides individual political choice, raising critical questions about the health of democratic ideals in a kinship-dominated context. The study also considers how candidates strategically manipulate inter-clan rivalries and alliances to secure votes, sometimes undermining the democratic process. By situating these practices within broader theoretical debates on democracy, tradition, and identity, the paper argues for an in-depth understanding of how indigenous institutions adapt to and reshape electoral politics. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing discourse on the challenges of practicing liberal democracy in culturally embedded societies, where collective identity and traditional authority continue to play a central role in political life.

**Key words:** Clan, Voting, Collective Identity, Democratic Ideals

### INTRODUCTION

Nagaland is one of the small states in the northeastern part of India, known for its beautiful hills, rich culture, and diverse tribal communities. It is home to several tribes, each with its own unique language, customs, and traditions. With the passing of time, the influence of modernity has crept into the social fabric of the state and the traditional richness of the state has seen challenges of losing the original grandeur and significance. However, though modern developments have reached the state, many traditional ways of life are still preserved, making Nagaland a place where culture and heritage remain deeply rooted. It may be noted that the state has maintained a relatively isolated existence, which has helped preserve its traditional ways of life and cultural practices. In this regard, Wouters (2014) noted that traditional institutions remain influential in Naga society, with clanship systems continuing to play a significant role in shaping electoral politics.

This paper is built upon the premise that, Nagaland, a state rich in tradition and community life, continues to be shaped by strong clan and tribal affiliations, despite the indomitable influence of modernity, particularly in the domain of electoral politics. In Naga society, clans are more than just family groupings, they form the core of social identity, decision-making, and even political behavior. Despite the adoption of modern democratic systems, clan loyalties continue to play a powerful role in electoral politics. According to Gangmei and Thamarasani (2020), Clans play a crucial role in the social structure of every Naga village, which typically comprises several exogamous clans. While modern democratic structures such as elections and political parties exist, they often operate alongside traditional systems that continue to hold sway over public opinion and collective action. From the selection of candidates to the way people vote, clan influence often determines the outcomes of elections. As a result, political competition often becomes an extension of inter-clan rivalry or negotiation. This paper is then an attempt at exploring how the traditional structure of clans continue to shape the political landscape of Nagaland, examining both their impact and the challenges they pose to democratic ideals. It explores how the clan functions as a political force in Naga society, examining its role in electoral politics, community decision-making, and the broader democratic process.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CLAN SYSTEM IN NAGALAND

In simple word, clans may be understood as large family groups that trace their roots to a common ancestor. In many tribal societies, including those in Nagaland, clans form the foundation of social life. People within a clan consider themselves as extended family, and they help maintain social order, settle disputes, and guide important decisions like marriage and even political matters. As Khazaleh (1993) explains, a clan is a social unit whose members share descent from a single ancestor and includes several family branches, with shared duties and responsibilities binding all members, regardless of direct blood relation. Similarly, Daggar (2009) describes the clan as a group that rallies around a founding ancestor or forefather. In every Naga society, the clan forms the basic unit of social organization, forming the core of family connections and marriage customs. Each clan is linked to a particular totem, often tied to spiritual or ancestral beliefs. Marrying within the same clan is strictly forbidden, as it is seen as a serious taboo that could bring supernatural harm to the entire community. Those who break this rule may face harsh punishments, including being cast out and banished from the village (Hodson 1911).

In Naga society, each tribe is divided into several clans. For example, the Angami Naga tribe comprises of clans such as; Usou, Pienyu, Rutsa, Sote, Keretsu, Sachu, Sekhose, Belho, Suokhrrie, Linyu, Liezietsu, Chielie etc. (Suokhrrie, 2015). The Chakhesang Naga tribe also comprises of various clans such as; Kezo, Puro, Chuzho, Vese, Veswuh, Mero, Veyie, Sakhamo, Curhah, Sazo, Hesuh, Medeo, Nakro etc. Similarly, the Ao Naga tribe also comprises of various clan such as; Aier, Lemtur, Jamir, Ozukum, etc. According to Hamdan (2009, p. 114), a tribe is defined as “a group of people who form a community and are united with each other,” whereas a clan is “a group of individuals descended from one lineage, sharing common roots, with membership passed down through the paternal line.” It may be noted that, in the context of the Naga society, while the term “tribe” refers to the larger ethnic group, like the Angami, Chakhesang, Ao, or Sumi, there are smaller groups called clans within each tribe, with their own roles or history. Further, while, a village refers to a place where people live, every village includes members of different clans. In other words, while the tribe shows a person’s ethnic group and the village shows where they live, the clan shows their family ties and social identity. The distinction between a tribe and a clan lies in their structure and origin: a clan traces its lineage back to a single common ancestor, typically a grandfather, while a tribe is made up of multiple clans and represents a broader community united by shared identity (Temeiza, 2022).

## THE INTERFACE OF CLANS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Anthropologists have recurrently emphasized the central role clans play in traditional societies, particularly in shaping social, legal, and spiritual life. Over time, the influence of clans has extended beyond customary practices and into modern political systems. In many parts of the world, including regions in Africa, the Middle East, and Northeast India, clan-based politics have become increasingly visible. For instance, Khagai (2004) observed that clans played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of Central Asian

countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As powerful informal institutions, clans were instrumental in state-building efforts and influenced electoral outcomes by mobilizing support for particular candidates. Al-Essa (2018) also noted that clans significantly influence political participation in Jordan, particularly by shaping voters' behavior during parliamentary elections. Similarly, Ahmed (2003) emphasized the influential role of clans in Yemen, where they are deeply involved in the selection of candidates, mobilizing male members, and providing strong support during elections. This evolution shows how traditional kinship structures have adapted to and become embedded within contemporary political frameworks, including in democratic processes.

In the context of Nagaland as well, the role of structure of clans have visibly evolved and has become interwoven with the modern day democratic processes. Within each clan, the clan elders command respect due to their age and wisdom and they often act as the decision-making body in matters concerning the clan. Their influence extends to the political sphere, especially during elections or major village-level decisions. Clan meetings are often called to discuss which candidate the clan should support, and the decision reached, either through consensus or the elder's recommendation, is usually followed by all members. This system creates a powerful form of collective political behavior, where individuals align their votes not necessarily based on party ideology or personal preference, but on clan loyalty and elder guidance. In this way, the clan becomes a political unit as much as a social one, capable of mobilizing votes and exerting influence on the wider political landscape.

In a study by Jamir and Achanger (2023) on electoral and voting behavior in Nagaland, conducted in Mokokchung with 500 participants, only 3% reported that their vote was influenced by party ideology. Notably, 69.8% admitted they do not read the party manifestos or programs. A large portion of respondents indicated that their voting decisions were guided by loyalty to their village, and many shared that when village or clan elders make a decision, there is a strong sense of obligation to comply, driven by the fear of being viewed as non-conforming.

Kh (2024) in another study looked at the interface of clan structures and electoral politics in Nagaland. The study employed a social constructionist framework and focused on fieldwork conducted in Phaibung Khullen village and provided insider insights into how clan structures influences modern electoral processes. The findings revealed that clan loyalties continue to play a vital role in political mobilization, while also being reshaped by contemporary electoral practices. This study reinforced a broader understanding of how traditional institutions remain central to electoral behavior in Naga society, highlighting the dual processes of continuity and change within clan-based political engagement.

## CASE EXAMPLES AND FIELD OBSERVATIONS

In many parts of Nagaland, voting is often seen as an act of collective identity rather than an individual democratic choice. A widely acknowledged but unspoken rule in rural and even semi-urban areas is: *Vote as your clan votes*. It is widely noted that, among the Nagas, voting is rarely an individual act; instead, it often occurs at the level of the family, clan, or village. This pattern of collective or particularistic voting is deeply rooted in the complex interaction between modern electoral politics and the traditional structures and principles of Naga village governance (Wouters, 2014). Before elections, clans often hold internal meetings to discuss candidates, assess their alignment with clan interests, and decide whom to support. Once a decision is made, often influenced by senior clan members or elders, it is expected that all members, regardless of their personal views, will comply. The social pressure to conform is strong, and going against the collective decision is often viewed as disloyalty, leading to subtle or direct social consequences.

One participant expressed this sentiment clearly during the interview:

*"I have my own views, but when the clan supports someone, it becomes difficult to go against it. There is pressure from family and community. Even if the candidate is not very capable, we vote for him if he belongs to our clan."* (Respondent 2, Female, 45, School Teacher)

Another participant responded that;

*"Sometimes, I feel like voting for someone from a different tribe or clan who I think is better, but the clan meeting before the election always changes my mind. You don't want to cause problems in the family or village."* (Respondent 5, Male, 38, Government Employee)

The interview excerpts presented above reflects the deep-rooted influence of clan-based social norms on individual political behavior in Nagaland. Despite the respondent's personal views, the collective decision of the clan takes precedence, indicating a strong sense of obligation toward group loyalty. This demonstrates how electoral choices are not always shaped by policy preferences or candidate competence, but rather by traditional kinship expectations. According to Wouters and Wijunamai (2019), the family, lineage, clan, and ultimately the village community were expected to act and speak as one, grounded in the belief that the village functioned as a reciprocal community with common goals and shared responsibilities. Among the Chakhesang Nagas, this idea is expressed in the Chokri language as *müthidzü* or *müthikülü*, meaning "the voice of the community" or "the collective thought of the people."

A candidate's viability is not just judged on merit or popularity but on which clan they belong to and how many votes that clan can potentially mobilize. Clans, in turn, take pride in promoting one of their own as a candidate, often rallying financial and logistical support to ensure their representative succeeds. Electing a candidate from the clan is seen not only as a political victory but also as a symbol of clan status and influence. For instance, a participant stated that;

*"When someone from our clan wins, it feels like all of us have won. It raises the name of our clan and gives us more respect in the village and even outside. People start seeing our clan as powerful."* (Respondent 7, male, 52 years, Village Council Member)

Across various constituencies in Nagaland, clan allegiance has often played a decisive role in determining electoral outcomes. In many rural areas, voters report that decisions about whom to vote for are taken collectively during clan meetings, where discussions revolve not just around a candidate's capability, but primarily around their clan background. For instance, in a village in Phek district, it has been observed that when there were two candidates from the same village, the clan identity was used as the major differentiating factor. Inter Clan meetings were held and it was decided that the bigger clan will represent the village. This practice is not officially recorded but is widely acknowledged within the community as a norm.

Interviews with voters in several villages across Phek district reveal that clan elders are often key actors in the early stages of political campaigning. Candidates frequently approach these elders to seek endorsement, recognizing that their support carries significant weight within the community. Once an elder publicly declares backing for a candidate, clan members are generally expected to follow suit. Many younger voters reported feeling obligated to vote in line with the clan's decision, even when it conflicted with their personal preferences. This pressure to conform reflects the strong communal ethos within Naga society, where loyalty to the clan often overrides individual political judgment. In some cases, candidates offer monetary or material incentives—not directly to individuals, but through clan structures. Such collective forms of distribution help secure loyalty and promote bloc voting, further entrenching the role of clans as gatekeepers in the electoral process.

A particularly telling example of how clan becomes a political force came from a personal conversation with a village elder in Phek district. He recounted an election in which a veteran politician, belonging to one of the smaller clans, managed to secure a win despite lacking broad support from the major clans. Aware that he stood little chance if the two dominant clans united, the politician strategically sowed discord between them, ensuring that they did not field or support a common candidate. By dividing their vote, he effectively manipulated clan rivalries to his advantage, allowing his smaller clan's votes, now undivided, to carry the election. This incident illustrates the tactical use of clan politics and highlights how traditional social structures can be both mobilized and manipulated in the electoral arena. It highlights the complex ways in



which clan affiliations, internal rivalries, and strategic calculations intersect to shape political outcomes in Nagaland. Rather than functioning as neutral cultural institutions, clans in such cases become active players in political strategy, capable of being influenced, co-opted, or even turned against each other in the pursuit of power.

These examples highlight that elections in Nagaland are not merely political exercises focused on party agendas or individual merit, but are deeply embedded within the fabric of traditional social structures, particularly clan identity and loyalty. The act of voting, candidate selection, and political campaigning are all shaped by the unwritten rules of kinship and communal allegiance. Clan elders, as custodians of tradition and authority, often function as political gatekeepers whose endorsements can significantly influence electoral outcomes. Voter behavior, especially among younger generations, is frequently guided by a sense of duty to uphold clan unity and maintain social cohesion, even when it conflicts with personal convictions or political awareness.

Furthermore, the strategic manipulation of inter-clan dynamics, such as the deliberate fostering of divisions among larger clans by candidates from smaller ones, reveals how traditional systems are not just passive cultural legacies but active elements in contemporary political contests. These practices reflect a political culture where loyalty, identity, and collective honor often outweigh ideological alignment or democratic ideals. As such, elections in Nagaland serve as a mirror of the society's deep-rooted kinship networks, where the boundaries between political engagement and traditional allegiance remain blurred, and where the success of a candidate often hinges on their ability to navigate and negotiate these complex social currents.

## CLAN POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

While the clan system holds deep cultural significance in Naga society, its influence on politics poses significant challenges to democratic ideals, particularly the principle of individual political agency. In theory, democracy upholds the right of each citizen to make independent political choices based on personal beliefs, priorities, and conscience. However, in practice, the pressure to conform to clan decisions often overrides personal preferences. Individuals who dissent from the collective stance of their clan may face social exclusion, criticism, or even subtle forms of intimidation, leading to a silencing of alternative political voices within the community.

A striking example of how clan-based politics can undermine democratic ideals is found in the case of Phugwumi, a Chakhesang Naga village, as documented by Wouters (2015). In this instance, two candidates from the same village, each representing rival clans with a long history of tension, decided to contest in the state elections. Supporters from both clans insisted on backing their respective candidate, intensifying the divide.

Concerned that having two candidates from the same village would split the vote and ultimately result in a loss for both, the village elders intervened. The apex body of the village convened a meeting in an attempt to select a consensus candidate. However, the meeting ended in deadlock, with neither side willing to withdraw. A second meeting was called, but again, no agreement was reached. This internal division eventually led to the victory of a candidate from another village—someone who reportedly capitalized on the rivalry, understanding that a united Phugwumi front would have significantly reduced his chances of winning.

This incident raises important questions: *Is the idea of selecting a "consensus candidate" itself democratic? Shouldn't any eligible person be free to contest? Shouldn't each voter decide independently whom to support?* (Wouters, 2015). These are valid concerns, especially in the context of a democratic society where individual choice and equal opportunity are foundational principles. However, in the Naga context, clans remain deeply embedded in the social structure and continue to influence modern institutions, including democracy. The challenge, therefore, lies in navigating the tension between collective kinship-based decision-making and the democratic ideal of individual political freedom. This case illustrates not only how

traditional structures can complicate democratic processes but also how they persist as central forces in shaping political outcomes.

This dynamic has a profound impact on youth and gender participation in politics. Young voters, especially those who are educated or exposed to alternative viewpoints, often struggle to assert their independence in the face of clan pressure. Similarly, women's voices are frequently marginalized within clan political structures, where leadership and decision-making roles are traditionally male-dominated. Although efforts are being made through civil society and church-led initiatives to encourage clean elections and inclusive political engagement, the entrenched authority of clans continues to limit broader democratic participation.

## CONCLUSION

The clan system continues to function as a powerful political force in Naga society, shaping electoral behavior, candidate selection, and the overall nature of political participation. Deeply rooted in cultural traditions and social organization, the clan remains a source of authority, identity, and collective action. Its influence is particularly strong in rural areas, where political decisions are often made within the framework of clan loyalty and customary expectations. However, this traditional system poses significant challenges to democratic ideals, particularly the principle of individual political agency. While it fosters community cohesion and a sense of belonging, it can also suppress dissent, marginalize youth and women, and limit issue-based political engagement. Therefore, this paper has been an attempt at raising awareness on the growing need for political education and awareness that empowers individuals to make informed choices, while also acknowledging the enduring importance of traditional institutions. Rather than dismissing the clan system, efforts should be made to engage with it constructively, encouraging a more inclusive and democratic approach to political participation. As society evolves, so too must the ways in which traditional structures interact with modern democratic practices, ensuring that both cultural heritage and political freedom are upheld.

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