

# **TRADITIONAL VILLAGE POLITY OF THE KIORENG TRIBE IN MANIPUR**

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## **Abstract**

Manipur is the home of the most diverse peoples in North East India. There are more than 35 tribes in the hills areas of Manipur which is also a meeting place of various racial and cultural elements of India. Obviously the Koirengs are one of the smallest tribes of Manipur. They belong to the Tibetan- Burman family who migrated to Manipur since times immemorial. The koirengs were referred to by the earlier British writers and administrators under the colonial British rule in India in different names. In 1911, a political agent Mr. T.C Hudson referred to Koireng as Quoireng. Mr. John Shakespear in 1913 called them Kolhen. The koirengs have a close affinity with the koms. Both Koms and the Koirengs claimed that they are a part of the same community which called them as Karen. As such, it is clear that the name koireng was a derivative name from *koren* or *kolren* which literally meant men or the people of the east: as *kol* stands for east and the *ren* stands for men or people. As tradition, the administrative system at village of the Koireng tribe was responsible by the chief of the village. The Koireng society is a Kinship society. The Chief of the Koireng village came through hereditary. The most important political institution of the Koireng is the village council or Khuo. It is responsible for overall administration of a Koireng village. The designations and responsibilities of the village councilors are the Chief of village, Chief of water, Religious priest, in charge of wine, watcher of luggage, agent to deal with Meitei, male dance and song leader, female dance and song leader. The chief was originally called Khuorung in koireng dialect. Khuo means village, 'Rung' means 'king'. In koireng political system, the chief was the supreme authority in every affairs of the village. He was assisted by the village council members. The administration of village was based on the customary laws the society. Thus, though small, the Koireng tribe had been historical evidence of their exist existence from time immemorial. However, with the coming of the modern administration a lot of changes took place in their traditional village administration.

## INTRODUCTION

The land Manipur is the home of the most diverse peoples in North East India. There are more than 35 tribes in the hills areas of Manipur which is also a meeting place of various racial and cultural elements in this part of India. Obviously the Koirengs are one of the smallest tribes of Manipur. Koirengs are among the various tribal groups of the Tibetan- Burman family who migrated to Manipur from the times immemorial. It is also observed that the Kioireng had been migrated from one place to another which was necessitated by economic and other forces such as in search of food, lands for their settlement, security reason etc. They were greatly threatened by the constant warfare between the migrating rivals. In course of time the Kioireng people came to a particular place for their settlement. Now the koirengs are settled mostly at the sadar hills area of Senapati District in Manipur.

It is recorded that the koirengs were referred to by the earlier British writers and administrators under the colonial British rule in India in different names. In 1911, a political agent Mr. T.C Hudson referred to Koireng as Quoireng. Mr. John Shakespear in 1913 called them Kolhen. It is also thought that Koireng appeared to have been a corrupted form of either Kolren or koren. Since G.A Grierson wrote about the derivation of the name “Koireng” from kolrengs or koireng which appeared as a small tribe in the state of Manipur. Damant also wrote that they dwelt in the eight small villages on the hills, the northern part of Manipur valley. Kolren is considered to be the original name of the tribe and koireng is probably a Manipuri corrupted name as per the outcome of my search. As such, according to Hudson, “Quoirengs” are not the present koirengs but “the Liyangmei” or kacha- naga.

The koirengs have a close affinity with the koms. Both Koms and the Koirengs claimed that they are a part of the same community which calls them as Karen. Now it is clear that the name koireng was a derivative name from *koren* or *kolren* which literally meant men or the people of the east: as *kol* stands for east and the *ren* stands for men or people. However in common usage “ren” is no longer mean as “men” in koireng dialect. To the koirengs, “*kol*” people may perhaps be taken to mean the Mongolian people of South East Asia as they use frequently the terms like, *Kolm*=man of the east; *kolbu*=food of the east, *kolsa*= animals of the east; *Nisomi*=men from the land of the rising sun, probably the far east.

## ORIGIN OF THE KOIRENG

It is fortunate that like other tribes the koirengs inspite of the absence of written document or literatures, have preserved to a great extend their legends and folktales. Though, not in a recorded form, all the memories could be regarded as the history of the Kioireng people. The koireng traditions, folk lore and songs are their history. It can be regarded as the

reminiscence of their long ancestors who lived in caves before they could understand the art of making houses by themselves for their dwelling.

It is believed that according to koireng tradition, pathian is believed to be the creator of the universe, the earth and the mankind. The story goes, in the beginning, pathian created two clay creatures beneath the surface of the earth known as Leidur and Leingan. Pathian named Leidur as kithapa and Leingan was named. However, due to rains, the two clay-made figures were cracked up. So pathian wished to bring them on the surface of the earth in for the same purpose. Therefore, the same were created by pathian but name were changed as Joulkik-joukkak which stands for vertical crack also. Further, they were also called khurpi and charam. The meaning of khurpi-and charam were big caves and destroying respectively. Later two living being known as kithapa and kinipa came out from the cave to the surface of the earth. There was an ape believed to be a spirit attacked them. One of them was cut deep into the flesh by an axe. The deep cut of that being turned into a female organ with that the being became a woman. The other one whose flesh was chopped off and almost about to fall turned into a man. The union of the two person gave birth to a son AND a daughter. The son was known as Roulphun and the daughter was named as Roultei. As desired by pathian to multiply number the son and daughter lived as husband and wife which gave birth to many. As the number increased, their descendants were divided into eight clans of koireng.

## **VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION**

As tradition, the administrative system at village of the Koireng tribe was responsible by the chief of the village. The Koireng society is a Kinship society. The Administrative roles of the chief of Koireng tribe at village are as follows:

The Chief of the Koireng village came through hereditary. Their social system is based on the patriarchal system. Their society is a male dominated society. The ancestors of the clans were all through male lines and succession came through male as practiced through the ages. As already mentioned, those eight clans were founded by the eight sons of Ruolphum and Ruotlei. They were the first progenitors of the Koireng tribes. Each and every one of them gave their names to the clans which were descendent from them.

The Kioreng political system was confined to the village only. It was more or less a village polity. The most import political institution of the Koireng is the village council or Khuo. It is responsible for the overall administration of a Koireng village. The origin of the village council was shrouded in mystery. Nobody was sure when that institution was established by the Koirengs at what period or point of time of their history. The Koirengs had traveled a long before they occupied their present habitat in Manipur. Their history of migration

is a saga of adventure, wars, sufferings and struggle for survival. When they settled down in Manipur, they came into contact with the Meitei kings of Manipur and restructured their administrative system in the new context. The Meitei king of Manipur established their control in some of the valley based Koirengs but they did not directly rule the villages which were left to the traditional village system. Because of their such contact with the Meitei's the names of the village functionaries were coined in Manipuri words, like khullakpa, luplakpa, yupal, Meitei lampu, potsang etc. the period of their contact was assumed to have been given in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The powers and functions of the village council were well defined. They divided the administrative areas as judicial, religious and developmental functions. These functions are carried out through the various members of the council including the chief. The following descriptions are the different functionaries of the village council. It clearly indicates the duties of the council under various sub-offices.

#### **THE VILLAGE COUNCIL AND THEIR FUNCTIONARIES**

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|------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Khoreng =     | Chief of village              |
| 2. Tuireng =     | Chief of water                |
| 3. Thakvar =     | Religious priest              |
| 4. Yupal =       | In charge of wine             |
| 5. Potsang=      | Watcher of luggage            |
| 6. Meitei lampu= | Agent to deal with Meitei     |
| 7. Lapu=         | Male dance and song leader    |
| 8. Lapi=         | Female dance and song leader. |

#### **NATURE, POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE VILLAGE**

(a) Koireng, the village chief: The chief was originally called Khuorong in koireng dialect. Khuo means village, 'Rung' means 'king'. In koireng political system, the chief was the supreme authority in every affairs of the village. It is said that the chief was originally called 'khoreng' which means 'chief of the village'. As regards to the origin of chief ship or kingship, there was a popular koireng folktale. Once upon a time, the koireng people suffered greatly because the Koireng land was facing a lot of natural calamities and consequent chaos. Even the sun also disappeared and there was darkness in all the Kioreng's lands for many days and it was very cold and the suffering of the people increased greatly. It was decided that every Koireng people should worship the sun goddess by offering rice beer to her, since they regarded the sun as a goddess. Still, the sun could not be seen in the sky. Latter, a man belong to the Shong clan offered rice beer to their god Pathian was very happy with his worship and prayer.

As such he blessed the koireng people so the sun could be seen and the rays of the sun had given light to their land and darkness had gone out. Since then, the elder of the shong clan who worshiped of pathian was made the khoreng (chief) of the koireng. Thus, in the early days, the office of the chief ship acquired through selection. The can be done from among the member of the shong clan only in order to become a chief. The office of the Khoreng or khullakpa was hereditary within the shong clan; it is not necessarily the succession through the sons of the chief. Other clans namely, Yei, Tielu, Thamthu, Uirei, Khuonglung, Mariam and Mikan without any question accepted this high status of the shong clan. The tradition of getting God's blessing by the prayer of Shong clansman may not be the lone reason for this acceptance; but the ownership of the land by the Shong clan in the original koireng settlements might have also been a factor responsible for this practice. In respect of the membership of the village Khuo, there was a system of clan representation in the village council. As regards to succession to the chief ship, by tradition, the eldest male member of the lineage or family of the chief succeed the chief.

**(b)** The powers of the khullakpa were almost unlimited theoretically. He was the head of the village council. Nothing could be done in the council without his approval. He was the supreme authority in various areas of the village. But in practice, he was assisted by the other seven members of the village council. He alone could not decide or settle any dispute or case. He was guided by the majority opinion of the village council, though theoretically, he has the power to veto the decision of other members. The opinion of the village council could be vetoed by the village elders but happened in a very rare situation. The nature of the functioning of the village council also had a great influence of the chief. He got due respect from the villagers. He was honoured in all the village functions of both secular and religious. He was given the "first meal" in any community feast or festival. He was also the representative of the village in matters concerning to village government.

**(c)** Luplakpa: In the village council the Luplakpa was the second head of the village council as next in position to the khullakpa. Luplakpa is traditionally called as Tuireng in koireng. Tuireng literally mean "Tui-water Ren-king". To Koireng people, water management was very important. To fetch water from far off places was dangerous during headhunting time. Tuireng was responsible for overall administration of the village and more especially on the matter of judicial affairs. Luplakpa was generally from a non-shongthu clan. Preferably from Yei clan. The office of the Tuireng was not necessarily to be succeeded from the songthu.

**(d)** Thakwar: Thakwar was the priest; he took the charge of any religious affair including religious festivals of the village. He was the one who offered wine to god.

(e) Yupal: The yupal was also another executive member of the village council. He was in charge of the local rice beer. In every festival or religious ceremonies of the village local rice beer was one of the most important and an indispensable ingredient without which any koireng's ceremony could be celebrated.

(f) Potsang: Potsang was a Meitei word meaning watcher of luggage. In the past, the khullakpa used to visit the king at the palace at imphal. Before entering the palace, his luggage was kept outside the palace and it was being looked after by a man who accompanied him. He was the attendant or watcher of the luggage (potsang) who became a member of the village council his duty was to accompany the khullakpa during his trips to the capital. Nowadays his duties have been slightly modified; he would select a person from the village to accompany the khullakpa or luplakpa whenever they attend the court or government offices in the village affairs.

(g) Meitei Lampu: Meitei lampu was established when the koirengs came into contact with the kings of Manipur. Meitei lampu was the one who deals with the Meitei kings and people including the external affairs. Today this post exists only for nominally. This man acted as an interpreter between the Meitei king and khullakpa.

(h) Lapu: Lapu is the male dance and song teacher of the village. He was in-charge of dance to provide training in dancing to youths, boys and girls. He was an important person when the ritual dances being performed during festival and special feasts of merit.

(i) Lapi: Lapi was the female dance and song teacher for teaching the girls in dancing. It is a very interesting to note that a female was made the member of the village council which was a very rare case in traditional tribal political system. This shows the high status given to women in koireng society. The members of the village council do not get any remuneration for the service rendered to the people. Every member of the village council respected the responsibility assigned to them in the exercise of their powers. Each one of the council member will get a portion of meat of the animals sacrificed at the ceremonies and festivals. This meat could not be taken or eaten by the ordinary villager.

(j) Panchi: The members of the village council were to be chosen from amongst the panchis of the village. Panchis were the heads of the major lineages in a village. A panchi was chosen from among the oldest members of the lineage. He was to perform a ceremony in which a pig was sacrificed and one jar of wine was offered to pathian. This ritual was to be performed by a thempu, the village priest, and all the village council members would be invited; other villagers might attend that feast. If a panchi died, his next younger brother would be chosen as the next panchi. If a panchi dies without any son or brother, there will be no panchi in that lineage. The panchi was the oldest representative, head of his lineage.

## **THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE LAW**

The administration at Koireng village has been performed through the village council. All the important political matters and institution of the koireng village were executed by the village council. The village council was responsible for all the administration of the village and also exercised their power based on the customary laws to both the individual and the society. The village laws for society could be prepared and amended by the village council. He with the help of the village elders known as the Khou, the council solves the various cases within the village. In case of its inability in solving a case or a problem at the village council level, they put-up the case to the koireng customary committee, in order to solve that. In normal condition, the village court was the highest court of the village and whose decisions were final and binding on all matters.

Some of the important traditional social laws which had been strictly followed were; (i) Marriage law (ii) Divorce law (iii) Bride-law (iv) Price law etc. The koireng tribe had separate laws of marriage and they were classifying into three types. They are: (i) Moiruo (ii) kerdeitaan and (iii) keitout. (i) The word Moiruo was taken from the koireng dialect meaning Moi-house wife, and Ruoi-take. Moiruo was type of negotiation marriage of the both families. The boy family visit three times to the girl's family along with local rice beer asking for negotiation of marriage. If the girl's family accepted for marriage, they fixed the marriage date at the third visit. (ii) kerdei means love, taan means run. Therefore, Kerdertaan type of marriage was a type of elopement marriage. (iii) keilout: this type of marriage was kidnapping of a girl by a boy to marry her. Keilout literally meant pulling by holding the wrist of the girl, it was a force marriage.

### **LAW OF INHERITANCE**

According to the customary law of koireng the eldest son inherit family's properties both moveable and immovable. If the family does not have a son eldest one from the same parent or brothers can inherit. If there is not such nearest relative to inherit from the family line, the village council or khuo takes over the properties.

### **LAW OF PUNISHMENT AND FINE**

Whatever may be the case when one was found breaking the customary law, he or she would be punished by the village council with a fine of five or two jars of wine and a pig of five hands. If a culprit has committed a serious crime, he or she will have to pay two pigs of five hands.

### **VILLAGE COUNCIL ACT**

The traditional administration system of koireng village council has been greatly changed with the introduction of the Manipur hill areas Village Authorities Act 1956. This act has established a statutory village authority to function as a village court. The membership of the village authority is fixed according to the population of the village. The village court is empowered to try cases upto a certain value. The position of the khullakpa has become ex-officio chairman of the village authority.

The village council and the village authority go together in the administration. Whereas, the judicial functions of the village council has been reduced by this Act because the cases to be tried in V.A. court was limited to the value of Rs. 250/- only whereas, in the tradition, the village council could try even murder cases. The economic and religious functions are still vested in the village council as per tradition. In respects of developmental works like establishment of school, dispensaries, water supply scheme, construction of roads and transport etc. have been controlled by the government. Thus, the activities of the traditional village authorities have been changed to a great extend in the present day in the Koireng society too.

## **CONCLUTION**

Thus, though small, the Koireng tribe had been historical evidence of their exist existence from time immemorial. They had their way of administration of their villages. Their villages were independence of their own under the leadership of their village chief. Their villages were ruled by their respective chiefs with the help of their village councillors. Like other tribal peoples, they too did not have any written law or rules for their administration. However, their tradition or old aged practices could clearly lead them to live in a peaceful life and administration. Today, with the coming of the modern administration and Christianity, in their land, some of their activities and cultures had been given up. However, they still observe and respect their culture.

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