



Chieftainship In Transition: The Kuki Tribes' Struggle For Tradition And Modernity In Northeast India

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Abstract

The Kuki chieftainship and landholding systems in Northeast India have long served as pillars of governance, social organization, and cultural identity. Rooted in patriarchal and customary traditions, these systems vest land ownership in the chief, with village communities functioning under their authority. However, modernization, urbanization, and policy reforms, particularly the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960), have challenged their relevance and sustainability. This study, "Chieftainship in Transition: The Kuki Tribes' Struggle for Tradition and Modernity in Northeast India," explores the evolving dynamics of Kuki tribal governance and land tenure in the face of contemporary socio-political transformations.

Using a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, surveys, and case studies, this research investigates key issues such as the conflict between traditional authority and democratic governance, the socio-economic impact of the absence of formal land titles, and the resistance to state-led reforms affecting tribal land ownership. Findings indicate that while chieftainship continues to provide social cohesion and dispute resolution, challenges related to accountability, transparency, and economic adaptability persist. The study advocates for a dual-governance model, integrating traditional leadership with modern administrative frameworks. Policy recommendations include redefining the chief's role in land distribution, legal recognition of customary land rights, and community-led reforms to enhance governance structures. By balancing tradition with modernization, the Kuki chieftainship can evolve into a more inclusive and sustainable institution, ensuring both cultural preservation and socio-economic progress.

Keywords: Kuki Chieftainship, Land Tenure, Traditional Governance, Policy Reforms, Socio-Economic Transition.

INTRODUCTION

Before the establishment of bureaucratic states and modern legal frameworks, chieftaincies functioned as primary political institutions, responsible for governance, dispute resolution, and community organization. These systems independently emerged approximately 7,000 years ago across various continents, including the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Pacific, and have persisted in diverse forms into the modern era. Archaeological evidence, historical accounts, and colonial ethnographies provide crucial insights into their operations (Earle, 2011). Scholars such as Venson (1997), Rihoy et al. (1999), Peires (2000), Goodenough (2002), and Pycroft (2002) have emphasized the need to contextualize chieftaincy within democratic institutions for effective governance.

Despite the widespread introduction of democratic governance systems, chieftaincy continues to influence political structures in several regions, particularly in Africa. For instance, in South Africa, traditional chieftaincy has demonstrated remarkable resilience by integrating into modern governance frameworks. Daemane (2015) analyzed the validity and challenges of traditional leadership within decentralized governance in Lesotho, noting that chiefs continue to serve as custodians of customary law and protectors of vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans. However, challenges persist, including political contestation and unclear leadership selection processes (Deklin, 1992).

In Northeast India, diverse tribal groups maintain distinct chieftaincy systems, balancing autocratic, democratic, and communal governance elements. Horam (2018) examined the Naga chieftaincy system, which is predominantly hereditary but occasionally includes elected chiefs. While the chief leads the village, a council of elders plays an advisory role, reflecting a democratic ethos. Among the Tangkhuls, for instance, the Village Council includes clan representatives (one to three per clan, depending on size), with the clan head typically serving as the delegate. This council acts as the highest governing body, overseeing executive, administrative, and judicial functions. Tangkhul customs incorporate an unwritten constitution, known as "RIYAN" or "AIN," which governs societal norms during both wartime and peacetime. Legal structures such as "Shaiyan" (tribute laws) and "Luiyan" (field laws) regulate economic and social interactions.

Among the Sumi Nagas, chieftaincy revolves around the Ato Kukau (chief), who exercises autocratic authority over personal and public affairs, including land allocation, religious ceremonies, warfare strategies, and legal disputes (Aye & Sangtam, 2018). The Chochomis (village elders) assist in governance, but the extent of their influence depends on the chief's leadership style—some ruled despotically, while others maintained reciprocal relationships with villagers, ensuring collective welfare. Chiefs possessed judicial authority, including life- and-death decisions, highlighting their central role in societal stability. DOUNGEL (2019) explored the Lai chieftainship, a governance structure among the tribes of the Lushai Hills—including the Lai, Lusei, Mara, and Paite. Each village operated as an independent political entity, akin to Greek city-states, with ruling clans managing governance. These tribes trace their mythical origins to a cave called Chhinlung, located in present-day South China. The Lai chieftaincy emphasized local autonomy, ensuring that each village had sovereignty over its internal affairs.

The Kuki chieftaincy system, as examined by Gangte (2016), remains deeply rooted in land ownership and governance structures. Chiefs hold absolute control over land, and villagers pay annual paddy tributes to

them. In return, chiefs provide assistance during hardships, reinforcing reciprocal obligations within the community. Following India's independence, land reforms, particularly the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960), sought to modernize landholding systems. However, the Act excluded hill areas, leaving Kuki traditional landholding practices intact. This legal duality underscores the adaptability of Kuki chieftainship, which continues to operate parallel to modern governance structures. The Kuki system remains resilient, maintaining traditional governance norms while selectively adapting to modern state policies.

Across different regions and tribal societies, chieftaincy systems blend elements of autocracy, democracy, and communal governance. While modern states increasingly integrate traditional governance into legal frameworks, the enduring influence of chieftaincy highlights its adaptability. Chiefs remain custodians of cultural traditions, providers of social security, and mediators in community disputes. Understanding the coexistence of traditional and modern governance offers valuable insights into sustainable governance models, particularly in regions where customary institutions remain influential. As tribal communities navigate the pressures of globalization, legal reforms, and socio-economic change, the future of chieftaincy will depend on its ability to balance tradition with modernity, ensuring both cultural preservation and institutional evolution.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine the influence of Kuki chieftainship on landholding systems. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of traditional and modern practices, socio-economic implications, and governance challenges.

Data Collection: Data is gathered from both primary and secondary sources:

Primary Data

- (a) Interviews – Semi-structured interviews with Kuki chiefs, village elders, landowners, community members, and policymakers to gain insights into traditional practices, contemporary challenges, and perceptions of chieftainship.
- (b) Questionnaires – Online surveys (Google Forms) targeting students, youth, and literate respondents to assess their views on chieftainship and landholding practices.

Secondary Data

- (a) Archival Research – Examination of historical documents, colonial records, and anthropological studies to trace the evolution of Kuki landholding practices.
- (b) Published Literature – Analysis of books, journal articles, and reports on traditional land management, the zamindari system, and legislative frameworks.
- (c) Government Reports – Review of policies such as the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960) and their impact on tribal landholding systems.

Sampling Technique

- (a) Purposive Sampling – Chiefs, community leaders, and policymakers are selected based on their roles and expertise in landholding systems.

- (b) Stratified Random Sampling – Respondents are categorized into chiefs (semang pachong), villagers, CSO leaders, and students to ensure diverse perspectives.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic Analysis – Coding and categorizing interview and FGD data to identify recurring themes such as governance challenges, cultural preservation, and socio-economic impacts.

Comparative Analysis – Comparing Kuki landholding practices with other tribal groups and African models like Lesotho to draw parallels and distinctions.

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive Statistics – Analysis of survey data using SPSS to quantify aspects such as land distribution, community satisfaction with current practices, and access to government schemes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

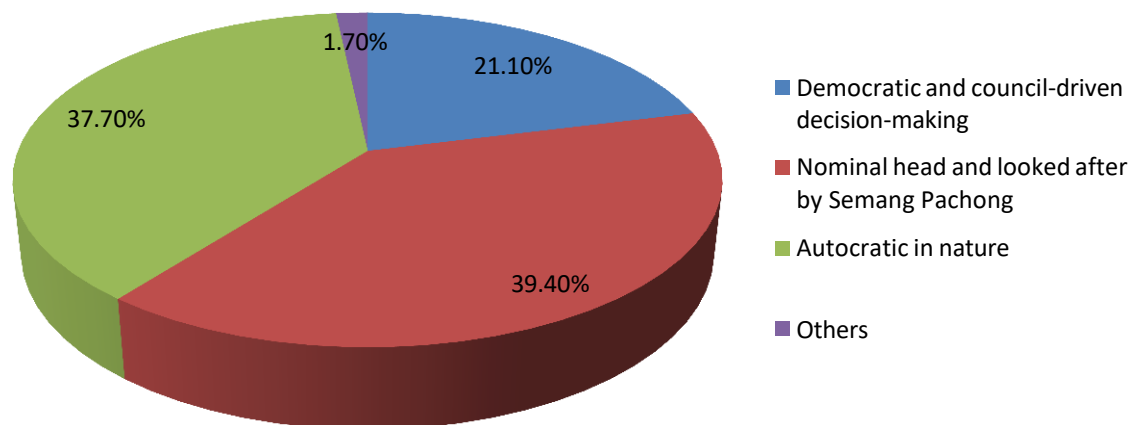
Land holds profound significance in chieftainship, governance, and communities, serving as the foundation of socio-economic stability, cultural identity, and political authority. For chieftains, it symbolizes power and responsibility, enabling resource distribution and conflict resolution. In governance, land management underpins development and sustainability. For communities, land fosters unity, sustains livelihoods, and preserves traditions, making it central to collective well-being and resilience.

Historical Context of Kuki Chieftainship

The Kuki Chieftainship historically held a central role in the administration of villages, overseeing matters related to governance, land management, justice, and conflict resolution. Chiefs, often recognized as the community's leaders, exercised authority based on traditional customs and laws while also serving as a bridge between the people and the broader socio-political systems in place.

However, colonial historiography distorted the traditional role of Kuki chiefs by framing them as individual landowners rather than stewards of communal resources. This shift in perception redefined land ownership from collective stewardship to a more hierarchical, centralized system, aligning with colonial administration's goals.

The question was asked to the respondents: "What is the original role of Kuki Chieftainship over village administration?"

Fig. 1: Original role of Kuki Chiefs over village administration

Source: Survey result, 2024

The survey results indicated that 39.40% of respondents view the chief as having a largely ceremonial role, with village administration handled by the Semang Pachong. In this structure, the chief's power is symbolic, and real authority rests with the council responsible for managing day-to-day village affairs. This suggests a more decentralized form of governance, where practical matters are overseen collectively, reducing the chief's direct involvement while maintaining his traditional leadership status.

A significant proportion (37.70%) believes that Kuki chieftainship is autocratic, with the chief holding ultimate decision-making power. In this model, the chief's authority is unquestioned, and while councils may offer advice, the chief has the final say on important matters. This system reflects the traditional roots of Kuki chieftainship, where the chief's authority was central to maintaining order and governance.

A smaller but notable portion (21.10%) perceived the chieftainship system as democratic, where decision-making is influenced by councils or assemblies. The chief, in this model, acts as a mediator between the council and the community, balancing traditional authority with collective decision-making. This reflects an adaptation of traditional governance, promoting inclusivity and shared leadership.

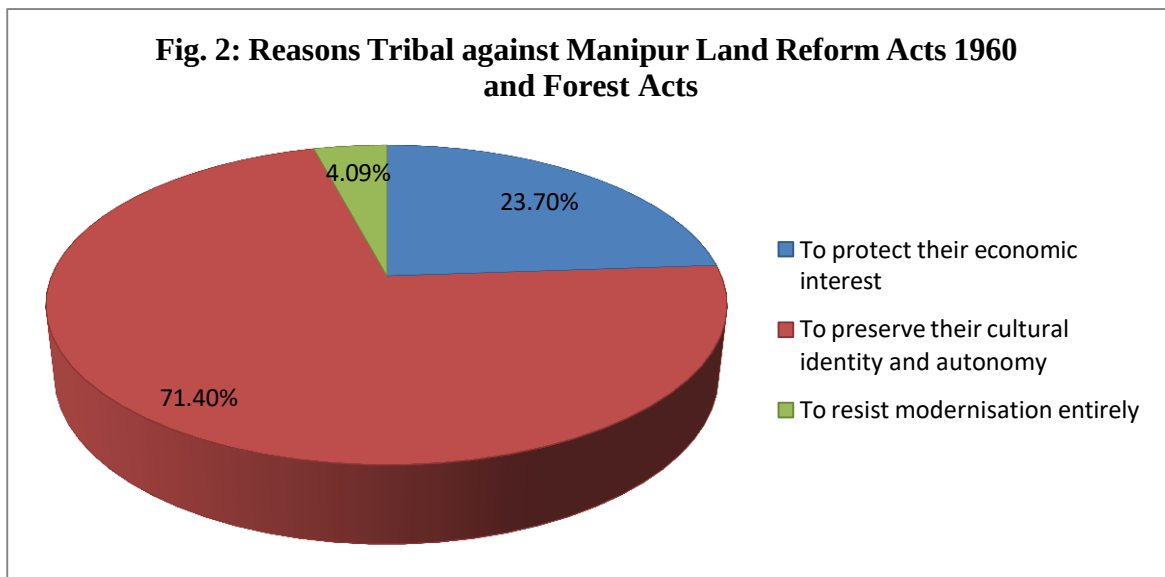
The findings demonstrate that the original role of Kuki chieftainship over village administration has diversified over time. While some communities maintain traditional autocratic models, others have adapted to more democratic and council-driven systems, reflecting the dynamic nature of Kuki governance. The flexibility and evolution of chieftainship indicate its resilience and capacity to balance tradition with modern influences.

Modern Governance Challenges

The relationship between tribal communities and land governance in Manipur has been historically defined by customary practices and traditional chieftainship systems. The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960) aimed to regulate land use, ownership, and taxation but faced resistance from many tribal communities, especially regarding its impact on their traditional landholding systems. Tribal groups, including the Kuki-Zo, have been particularly vocal in their opposition to amendments to this Act, viewing such changes as a threat to their economic, cultural, and political autonomy.

The question was asked to the respondents: "Why have tribal communities resisted attempts to amend the

Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act (1960), and what does this suggest about their priorities regarding cultural autonomy?”



Source: Survey result, 2024

The survey results showed that an overwhelming majority (71.40%) resist changes to the landholding system to preserve their cultural identity and autonomy. Land is deeply tied to their customs, ancestral traditions, and governance systems. Tribal communities fear that state-mandated reforms threaten this traditional system by undermining local leadership and diminishing their control over land.

A smaller portion (23.70%) resist amendments primarily to safeguard their economic interests. Changes to the landholding system, such as the introduction of state-controlled land reforms, could disrupt traditional agricultural practices, resource-sharing systems, and collective land ownership.

A very small percentage (4.09%) resist land reforms as part of a broader rejection of modernization, reflecting concerns that such changes could erode their distinct tribal ways of living.

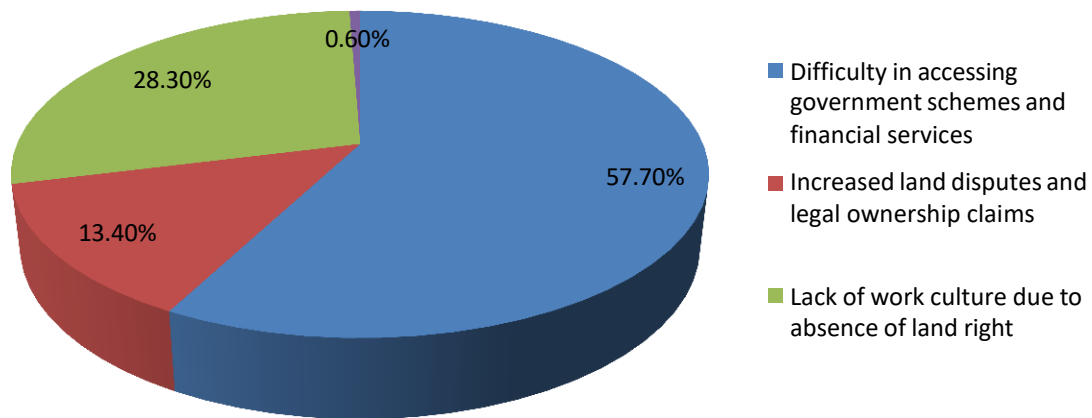
The resistance to amendments in the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act suggests that tribal communities prioritize cultural autonomy over economic integration with the state. This opposition highlights the ongoing tension between modernization and the protection of indigenous governance systems.

Socio-Economic Implications over Tribal Chieftainship and Land Holding System

The absence of formal land titles under the traditional Kuki chieftainship system has significant socio-economic implications, particularly for farmers and landholders.

The question was asked to the respondents: “What socio-economic challenges arise from the absence of formal land titles under the Kuki chieftainship, particularly for farmers and landholders?”

Fig. 3: Land holding system and economic challenges over Kuki Chieftainship



Sources: Survey result, 2024

Difficulty in Accessing Government Schemes and Financial Services (57.70%): Without formal land titles, farmers face difficulties applying for government subsidies, loans, or agricultural assistance programs. Banks require land titles as collateral, and without these, farmers are excluded from financial support.

Increased Land Disputes and Legal Ownership Claims (13.40%): The lack of formal documentation exacerbates land disputes, leading to social and economic instability.

Lack of Work Culture Due to Absence of Land Rights (28.30%): Farmers may hesitate to invest in long-term improvements due to insecurity in land tenure.

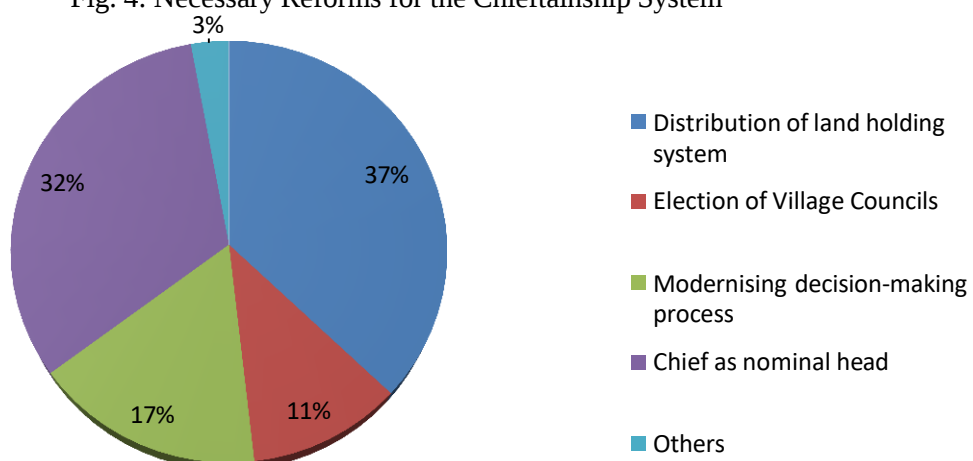
Expansion of Land Ownership Among Wealthy Farmers (0.60%): Wealthier individuals may exploit the system to expand landholdings, increasing inequality.

These challenges highlight the need for a balanced approach that respects traditional governance while addressing modern land tenure realities.

Necessary Reforms for the Chieftainship System

The traditional chieftainship system must adapt to modern governance challenges. The question was asked to the respondents: “If the current chieftainship system is not effective, which specific reforms are necessary to improve it?”

Fig. 4: Necessary Reforms for the Chieftainship System



Sources: Survey Result, 2024

Distribution of Land Holding System (37%): Clearer land tenure systems and equitable distribution are needed to enhance economic stability.

Election of Village Councils (11%): Transparent electoral systems would ensure broader community participation and accountability.

Modernizing the Decision-Making Process (17%): Inclusive and participatory approaches are necessary to address contemporary issues effectively.

Chief as Nominal Head (32%): Limiting the chief's executive powers while retaining cultural significance ensures a balance between tradition and modern governance.

The findings suggest that to improve the chieftainship system, reforms should focus on land distribution, democratic governance, and modernization while respecting traditional customs.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The traditional Kuki chieftainship system has long played a vital role in land protection and community governance. However, evolving socio-political dynamics have raised concerns about its relevance in modern times. This analysis explores the system's merits, limitations, and potential reforms.

Merits of the Traditional Chieftainship System

Land Protection and Unity: The chieftainship system has historically safeguarded communal land, ensuring resources remain within the community. Chiefs act as custodians, distributing land based on customary practices, fostering unity and loyalty.

Cultural Backbone: The system upholds traditional values such as respect for elders (mi upa) and solidarity. Chiefs, likened to fathers, provide guidance, fostering strong communal bonds and social cohesion.

Constitutional Safeguards: Article 371(C) of the Indian Constitution provides protective measures for tribal lands. However, since legal safeguards can be amended or repealed, chiefs play a crucial role in preserving customary land ownership.

Limitations of the Traditional Chieftainship System

Power Misuse: Critics argue that some chiefs monopolize land ownership, hindering development and delivering biased justice. This concentration of power can marginalize vulnerable community members.

Lack of Accountability: Without formal checks and balances, autocratic decision-making can limit transparency and restrict community participation.

Proposed Reforms and the Way Forward

Policy Reforms: A dual governance model integrating traditional chieftainship with democratic frameworks can enhance efficiency. Chiefs should assume nominal roles while village councils and elected bodies handle administrative functions.

Legalizing Customary Practices: Recognizing and formalizing customary land tenure, including private ownership, can provide legal security and improve access to government resources, ensuring a balance between tradition and modern governance.

Conceptual Framework (Suggestions)

Originally the chief act as Advisory to the village administration, the work are executed by village council (Semang-Pachong). The traditional role of the chief as a nominal head 'gulpi lup', whose authority was primarily advisory. the Semang-Pachong (village council) acted as the functional body, making decisions on behalf of the community with the chief's guidance. This underscores a model of collective governance, where power is decentralized and shared.

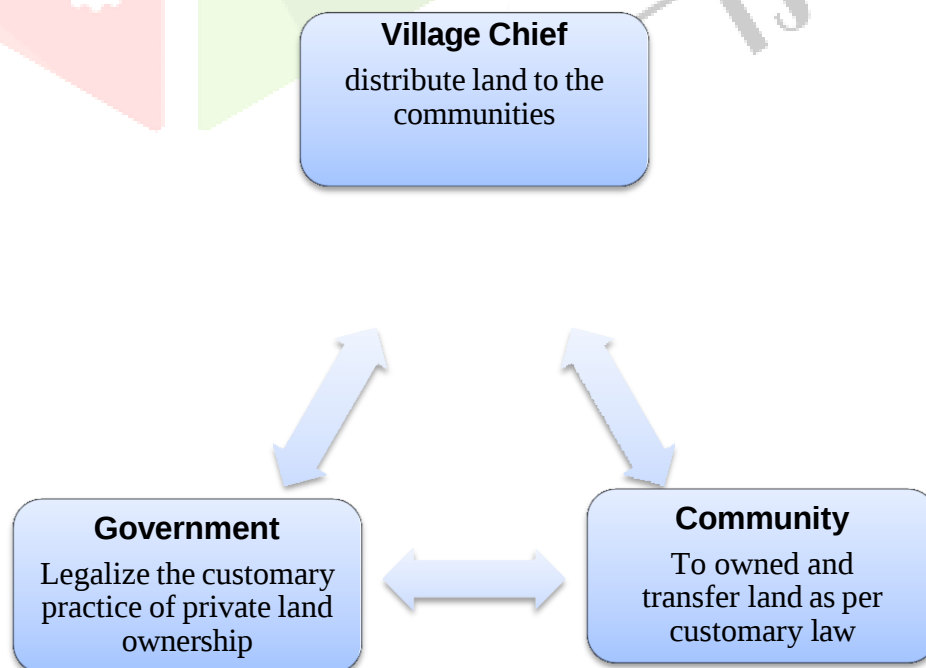
There is Interdependence between Chief and Community. The proverb "Songcha in songpi ateh'e" illustrates the mutual reliance between the chief and villagers, suggesting that leadership thrives on the support of the community. This relationship can be conceptualized as a symbiotic system, where governance is strengthened through cooperation and respect between the leader and the led.

The chief delivered Justice and Equity to the village communities. The saying "Kenleng song kitang haosa, chaga akhenpoi" highlights the chief's role as an impartial dispenser of justice, ensuring equity regardless of social or economic status. This principle can form the foundation for integrating traditional governance values with modern legal systems, ensuring fairness in administration.

It was evident from the above traditional proverbs that the traditional Kuki governance system exemplified collective and decentralized leadership, with the chief as an advisor 'gulpi lup' and the village council (Semang-Pachong) executing decisions. The interdependence between the chief and community fostered cooperation and justice, as reflected in proverbs emphasizing equity and mutual support. These values remain relevant for integrating traditional and modern governance frameworks.

In this ways a new conceptual framework can be formed over land holding system in Kuki Chieftainship as follows:

Fig. 1: Blending Kuki chieftainship over land ownership from traditional to modern practice



Source: conceptual framework of Kuki land holding system

The traditional Kuki governance system operates through a triadic relationship involving the village chief, the community, and the government, balancing customary and legal land ownership practices.

Village Chief – Custodian and Distributor of Land: The chief oversees communal land allocation based on community needs and family size, ensuring equitable distribution. This role extends beyond administration, embodying moral authority and adherence to customs, which fosters harmony and social cohesion.

Community – Ownership and Transfer under Customary Law: Once land is allocated, families or groups hold ownership rights as per customary law. They have the autonomy to cultivate, use, or transfer land within the community, following established traditions. This system preserves cultural continuity while preventing disputes.

Government – Legal Recognition of Customary Practices: By formally recognizing and legalizing customary land ownership, the government provides legal security, enabling access to government services, financial aid, and legal protection.

This ensures a seamless integration of traditional governance with modern legal structures. This triadic model safeguards cultural heritage while embracing contemporary governance needs. The transition from traditional to democratic governance is not a rejection of the past but an adaptation to modern challenges. By blending indigenous wisdom with legal frameworks, tribal communities can promote sustainable development, cultural preservation, and equitable resource management, ensuring a balanced and inclusive governance system.

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