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From Khral To Mang Sa: Customary Land Categories, Social Stratification, And Economic Transformation Among The Monpa Of Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Land has historically constituted the foundation of social organisation, economic life, and political authority among the different communities in the world and Monpa of Arunachal Pradesh are no exception. Embedded within a complex system of customary law, Monpa land categories structured access to resources, defined social hierarchy, regulated inheritance, and mediated relations between households, monasteries, and governing institutions. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Dakpa-Pangchen region of Tawang district, this paper documents and analyses indigenous land categories such as Mang Sa, Khral, Ma Khral, Zhurpa, Gan Sa, and Parmong. This study argues that these categories function not merely as economic units but as socio-political institutions that ensured social balance, ecological sustainability, and inter-generational continuity. In the contemporary context, however, these traditional systems are undergoing transformation due to state administration, market integration, and changing aspirations. This paper further examines how these traditional categories translate into economic outcomes in the present day, particularly in the context of government land acquisition, compensation distribution, and shifting livelihood patterns. By recording these practices at the village level, the paper contributes to the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and provides an empirical basis for culturally sensitive land governance in the eastern Himalayas.

Keywords: Monpa, Monyul, Khral, Indigenous Land Systems, Dakpa-Pangchen, Customary Law, Social Stratification, Economic Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Monpa are a prominent indigenous community of Arunachal Pradesh, primarily inhabiting the districts of Tawang and West Kameng. The region is characterised by highly diverse terrain ranging from high-altitude plateaus to fertile river valleys, producing significant variations in climate, agricultural practices, and economic opportunities. This ecological diversity has historically shaped settlement patterns, livelihood strategies, and systems of land control among the Monpa people.

In Tibetan historical and geographical terminology, the Monpa region is referred to as Monyul, denoting the territory situated between the Tibetan plateau and the foothills leading to the Assam plains. The term Mo refers to the southern lowlands, while pa denotes the inhabitants of a region; hence, the people of Monyul came to be known as Monpa. Locally, yul signifies a village, district, or territorial unit. The region is also described in historical sources as Lhoyul or Lho Mon, with Lho meaning south, reflecting its position within the broader Tibetan politico-cultural sphere. Historically, Monyul formed part of U-Tsang, one of the three major prefectures of Tibet, a positioning that profoundly influenced its administrative, cultural, and economic institutions.

Historical accounts trace the consolidation of governance in Monyul to the early medieval period. During the reign of the Tibetan king Choegyal Tri Ralpachen in the eighth century, Prince Tsangma, the king's elder brother, was exiled to the Mon region following internal political conflict (Shakabpa, 1984). After an unsuccessful attempt to establish authority in Paro, Bhutan, Tsangma and his entourage settled in Monyul, where strategic marital alliances with local elites facilitated the formation of a dynastic lineage. Over time, the descendants of this lineage unified fragmented local polities and laid the foundations for more structured systems of governance.

A major transformation occurred in the seventeenth century with the establishment of the Ganden Phodrang government under the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642. Administrative authority over Monyul was consolidated through religious and secular officials appointed from Lhasa. Monasteries and dzongs functioned as key institutions of governance, regulating land allocation, taxation, labour obligations, and dispute resolution. These institutions operated not merely as religious centres but as comprehensive administrative authorities overseeing economic and social life.

Central to this feudal land system was the institution of Khral, which defined hereditary landholding units bound by obligations to monasteries and administrative centres. Khral holders possessed usufruct rights over land in exchange for taxes paid in agricultural produce, labour services, or monetary contributions. Khral status also conferred social prestige and political authority within village communities. The region was further organised into multiple Tso (territorial units), which structured land categories and resource management at both macro and micro levels.

Despite the centrality of land to Monpa society, there exists limited micro-level documentation of indigenous land categories as they function in contemporary village life. Modern administrative frameworks, revenue systems, and market-oriented land use increasingly overlook these customary classifications, contributing to their gradual erosion. This study addresses this gap by examining traditional land categories in the Dakpa-Pangchen region and analysing their role in shaping social hierarchy, inheritance patterns, and community governance.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to:

1. Document traditional land categories among the Monpa of the Dakpa-Pangchen region.

2. Examine inheritance patterns and village-level variations in land distribution.

3. Analyse the relationship between land categories and social hierarchy.

4. Examine how traditional land categories shape economic outcomes in the contemporary context.

5. Preserve indigenous knowledge related to land governance for future generations.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a two-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Dakpa-Pangchen region of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Primary data were collected from twelve villages through semi-structured interviews with village elders, Khral holders (Khral Ten), Zhurpa families, and Tsorgyen (village headmen). The twelve villages covered in this study are: Buri, Dudungkhar, Namtsering, Kharteng, Blaiteng, Bhakar, Sharbang, Gispu, Mangnam, Lumpo, Kharman, and Shok-tsen.

Informants ranged in age from approximately 45 to 85 years and were selected based on their knowledge of customary land practices, village governance, and local history. Interviews were conducted primarily in Monpa and Tibetan, with interpretive support where required. Field visits to agricultural fields, forest holdings, and residential sites enabled direct observation of land boundaries, usage patterns, and natural markers. Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants, and indigenous terminologies were recorded in their original form to preserve conceptual accuracy.

4. DAKPA-PANGCHEN: TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

Monyul was historically organised into seven major political divisions comprising thirty-two territorial units (Tso), of which the Dakpa-Pangchen region forms a significant part. The seven divisions encompass territories now distributed across India (Tawang and West Kameng districts), Tibet, and the border regions

with Bhutan. This broader administrative framework structured taxation, resource management, and governance across the entire Mon region under Tibetan rule.

Within this larger structure, Dakpa-Pangchen is divided into the following territorial units:

1. Pangchen Dhing-Druk, consisting of six Ding: Upper Shocktsen, Middle Shocktsen, Lower Shocktsen, Lumpo, Muchot, and Kharman (presently under Tawang district).

2. Dakpa Tso-Gye, consisting of eight Tso: Mugha-Shaksum Tso, Zanglum Tso, Kharbong Tso, Woongla Tso, Sakpret Tso, Thonglek Tso, Lho Tso Ga, and Pemakhar Tso (presently under Tawang district).

These territorial divisions historically structured land administration, taxation, and resource management. The Dakpa-Pangchen region was selected for this study because its relative isolation from rapid modernisation has helped preserve traditional land tenure practices that have been abandoned or significantly altered in other parts of Monyul.

5. TRADITIONAL LAND DEMARCATION

The Monpa people developed a distinctive system of land demarcation based on natural features, primarily streams, rivers, and ridgelines. This system operates at multiple scales, from individual village boundaries to international borders. The boundary between Monyul and Bhutan, for example, is demarcated by the Dangme Chu (river), demonstrating how local demarcation practices scaled to territorial administration.

Village territories are defined by watersheds, with the landmass situated between two streams constituting a distinct village area. This method provides clear, permanent boundaries that require minimal maintenance and reflect an ecological understanding of the landscape. The system has historically prevented boundary disputes and continues to be respected by communities in the Dakpa-Pangchen region.

6. TRADITIONAL LAND CATEGORIES IN MONPA SOCIETY

6.1 Mang Sa (Community Land)

Mang Sa refers to land collectively owned and managed by the village community. Such land is reserved for common purposes including grazing, firewood collection, community rituals, festivals, and worship. Decisions regarding Mang Sa are taken by the Tsorgyen in consultation with Khral holders, reflecting consensus-based governance.

Mang Sa cannot be sold or transferred to individuals, ensuring inter-generational access to essential resources. Grazing and resource extraction are regulated through customary norms to prevent overuse. Functionally, Mang Sa operates as a mechanism of social equality, ensuring minimum resource access for all households while reinforcing collective identity and village solidarity.

6.2 Khral (Hereditary Private Land)

Khral constitutes hereditary taxable land and forms the backbone of the traditional land and taxation system. Khral holders (Khral Ten) historically occupied a privileged position within village society, enjoying both economic security and political authority. Khral land is primarily used for agriculture, including paddy cultivation and terrace farming.

Inheritance practices vary across villages. Land may be divided equally among male heirs, or inherited predominantly by the eldest or youngest son. In many cases, one son is sent to a monastery, a practice known as Bhusum Barma (middle son among three) or Buzhi Barma (third son among four). This practice functioned as a household strategy to prevent excessive fragmentation of landholdings while maintaining religious merit. The Buzhi Barma tradition, which sent the third son to Tsona Monastery, ceased after 1959 when Tsona became part of China.

Beyond its economic function, Khral operated as a political institution, as tax payment confirmed land rights and legitimised ownership under Tibetan administration. Thus, Khral was simultaneously a unit of production, taxation, and social status.

Following the end of Tibetan administration in 1959, khralpa no longer paid taxes to the Tibetan government. However, the obligation shifted to Tawang Monastery, with khral holders required to pay an annual sum of Rs. 3,000 as a form of religious tax. Additionally, families who failed to send their middle son (Bhusum Barma) for monastic study were required to pay fines in cash to the monastery. This practice continued until it was abolished by the late Chief Minister Dorjee Khandu, who paid a substantial sum to Tawang Monastery on behalf of the people to secure relief from the annual tax obligation. The monastery continues to benefit from the interest earned on this endowment. Interestingly, even though the mandatory taxation has been abolished, people from the Pangchen region continue to voluntarily offer butter to Lha Thuthem (Buddha Shakyamuni) at the monastery, demonstrating the persistence of religious devotion and community ties beyond formal obligations.

6.3 Ma Khral (Women's Land)

Ma Khral refers to land inherited through female lineage. Women inheriting such land typically bring a husband (Makpa) to reside in their natal household. Ma Khral land may be used for residence, agriculture, and allied activities.

This system provided women with economic security and social recognition as legitimate landholders. The Makpa assumes responsibilities associated with sons, including elder care and property maintenance, though land rights remain anchored in the female line. If no daughter exists to inherit, male family members inherit the land through family consultation. Ma Khral thus represents a gender-inclusive land system that challenges simplistic notions of patriarchy in tribal societies.

6.4 Zhurpa (Non-Heir Land)

Zhurpa refers to family members who do not inherit Khral land due to primogeniture or ultimogeniture practices. Zhurpa households are typically provided smaller plots of land, sometimes accompanied by a house constructed by parents.

Although Zhurpa do not enjoy the same status as Khral holders, the category ensures minimum economic security and social inclusion. Many Zhurpa households diversify livelihoods through trade, craftsmanship, or wage labour. The Zhurpa category institutionalises inequality while simultaneously mitigating its social consequences.

6.5 Gan Sa (Elders' Land)

Gan Sa is land reserved for elderly couples after the transfer of Khral to heirs. It typically includes a small house and sufficient agricultural land for subsistence. Gan Sa allows elders to retain dignity, autonomy, and economic independence in old age.

This practice reduces inter-generational conflict and reflects Monpa values of respect for elders. After the death of the parents, Gan Sa is generally retained within the family for future needs.

6.6 Parmong (Family Forest Holdings)

Parmong refers to forest land owned by individual families, distinct from communal Mang Sa. Parmong provides essential resources such as firewood, timber, leaf litter, and non-timber forest products.

Families manage Parmong through customary sustainable practices including selective cutting and seasonal harvesting. Parmong exemplifies indigenous ecological knowledge and household-level resource stewardship.

7. SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND LAND OCCUPATION

The Dakpa-Pangchen region currently does not contain any unclaimed land. All territories are divided among villages, and villagers in turn distribute them among families. Earlier generations migrated in search of new land as part of Tibetan expeditions or while searching for untouched grazing lands for yaks and sheep. In the present day, however, most areas have been explored and settled, reflecting centuries of continuous habitation and the carrying capacity limits of the mountainous terrain.

Villages across Dakpa-Pangchen have distinct origin stories that explain how each settlement was established. One such account comes from Buri village. The name Buri derives from Bu (meaning male) and ri (meaning lineage). According to Ama Yeshi Drema of Buri, during the distant past an epidemic wiped out most of the village population. Only one male survived, and it was he who led the reconstitution of the village. Such origin narratives are common throughout Monyul and serve important social functions beyond historical record. They establish the legitimacy of land claims, create bonds among families with shared histories, and transmit moral lessons about community resilience and cooperation.

When the Indian government requires land in Monyul for development or other projects, it approaches the village Panchayat head, locally known as Tsorgyen or Tsogen. The Tsorgyen discusses the government's proposal with the villagers. If the community approves, the Tsorgyen communicates this to the government representatives and negotiations regarding compensation take place. This process demonstrates how traditional governance structures continue to interface with modern state administration, giving villages some leverage in negotiations while reflecting the broader authority of the state.

8. TRADITIONAL LAND CATEGORIES IN TRANSITION: ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The traditional land categories documented above have not remained static. As Monpa villages increasingly interface with state administration, market economies, and new forms of employment, these customary systems are undergoing significant transformation. This section examines how traditional land categories translate into economic outcomes in the contemporary context, drawing on observations and accounts collected during fieldwork in Dakpa Pangchen.

8.1 Shifting Land Use and New Economic Opportunities

The introduction of cash crops, particularly apple and kiwi cultivation, along with dairy farming and seasonal employment, has changed how villagers relate to their land. Younger generations are beginning to use inherited land not solely for subsistence agriculture but also for market-oriented production. However, these new economic opportunities have not been equally accessible to all categories of landholders. Khralpa, who hold larger and often better-located plots, are in a stronger position to adopt commercial farming or to use their land as collateral. Zhurpa families, working with smaller and often less fertile plots, face greater

difficulty in participating in these new economic activities. This uneven access means that the economic advantages that Khral traditionally conferred within the village are being carried forward into the modern economy, even as the original reasons for those advantages — namely, taxation under Tibetan rule — no longer apply.

8.2 Inheritance and the Unequal Starting Point

The inheritance system, particularly ultimogeniture, plays a central role in shaping economic outcomes across generations. When the youngest son inherits the main family land and an older son becomes Zhurpa, the two brothers begin their adult lives with very different economic foundations. The inheriting son receives productive agricultural land, a family home, and the social standing that comes with being a Khralpa. The Zhurpa, by contrast, often starts with a small plot, sometimes without even a house, and must build his livelihood through alternative means — trade, labour, or government employment where available.

In one village, a system was observed in which a lottery determined which young men would be sent into government employment. Those selected gained a stable income but forfeited any claim to family land. Over time, many of these individuals settled in towns and did not return to the village. While government employment provided economic security, it also meant that these families lost their connection to ancestral land and the social networks built around village life. This pattern illustrates how the interaction between traditional inheritance norms and modern employment opportunities can pull families apart and create new forms of economic division within communities.

8.3 Compensation Disparities and Wealth Distribution

When large portions of Mang Sa (community land) are acquired by the government for military installations or road construction, villagers receive monetary compensation. However, the distribution of this money does not follow the principle of equal community ownership that Mang Sa is supposed to represent. Instead, compensation closely mirrors the traditional social hierarchy, with khralpa receiving significantly larger shares than zhurpa. During fieldwork, it was observed that in cases where khralpa received around Rs. 60 lakh in compensation, zhurpa families received only approximately Rs. 36 lakh for the same land acquisition — a difference of nearly 40 percent. This disparity does not reflect any difference in the quality of the land or the contribution of individual families to its maintenance. Rather, it reflects the entrenched social standing of khralpa within village decision-making, which continues to influence how collective resources and benefits are distributed.

This unequal distribution has significant long-term consequences. For many rural families, government compensation for land acquisition represents one of the largest sums of money they will ever receive. When this money is distributed unequally, the gap between khralpa and zhurpa families widens further. Khralpa families are better positioned to invest compensation money in children's education, small businesses, or additional land purchases, while zhurpa families, receiving less, have fewer options for economic advancement. Over generations, this pattern risks creating a more rigid economic divide than the one that existed under traditional subsistence agriculture.

However, compensation practices are not identical across all villages, and there are signs that some communities are beginning to question the fairness of status-based distribution. In one documented case, a daughter who had married and moved to another village still received a share of the compensation money from her natal village's land acquisition. This was unusual, as in most villages, women who marry out are not considered entitled to compensation from their family's original land. The fact that this village chose to include her suggests that some communities are interpreting their customary rights more broadly and more inclusively than the traditional hierarchy would allow.

8.4 Erosion of Social Networks and Collective Responsibility

As economic pressures reshape family decisions — whether to stay in the village or migrate, whether to invest in land or education — the social fabric that traditional land categories helped maintain is also changing. Mang Sa, which historically served as a space for collective activity and shared resource use, is increasingly being lost to government acquisition. Each time a large portion of community land is acquired, the village loses not only physical space but also one of the foundations on which collective identity was built. Zhurpa families, who already had less economic security, are disproportionately affected by this loss, as they had historically depended more heavily on community resources.

At the same time, the obligation for every household to contribute labour to Mang Leka (community work) continues, regardless of land status. This means that zhurpa families, who receive less compensation and hold less decision-making power, still bear equal responsibilities toward the community. This tension — between unequal rights and equal obligations — is one of the most visible points of friction in contemporary Monpa village life.

8.5 Balancing Tradition and Change

The transition from a purely subsistence-based land system to one that interfaces with markets, government, and new forms of employment has not been straightforward or uniform. Some villages are adapting more quickly than others, and within villages, different families experience these changes very differently. What is clear from the evidence gathered in Dakpa Pangchen is that traditional land categories continue to shape economic life in meaningful ways, even as the original context in which they were created — Tibetan feudal administration — no longer exists.

The challenge facing Monpa communities is not simply whether to preserve or abandon traditional systems, but how to navigate the tension between customary practices that provide social order and cultural continuity on one hand, and the need for more equitable economic outcomes on the other. The examples documented here — from unequal compensation to the gradual inclusion of previously excluded members like married daughters — suggest that this negotiation is already underway, shaped by the communities themselves rather than by outside forces alone.

9. CONCLUSION

The traditional land categories of the Monpa constitute a sophisticated system of indigenous governance that integrates economic production, social hierarchy, ecological sustainability, and cultural values. Land categories such as Mang Sa, Khral, Ma Khral, Zhurpa, Gan Sa, and Parmong functioned not merely as property regimes but as institutions regulating social relations and ensuring community stability.

This study demonstrates that the erosion of these systems is not solely a consequence of modernisation but also of the lack of formal recognition within contemporary administrative frameworks. The economic analysis presented in this paper reveals how traditional hierarchies embedded in customary land categories continue to shape wealth distribution, compensation patterns, and livelihood opportunities in the present day. The differential compensation between khralpa and zhurpa during government land acquisitions, the unequal access to new economic opportunities, and the tensions between collective obligations and individual rights all illustrate that land tenure is not merely a historical phenomenon but an active force in shaping contemporary social and economic life.

Significantly, the transformation of khral obligations demonstrates the adaptive nature of traditional institutions. While the mandatory taxation system evolved from Tibetan administration to monastic taxation and was eventually abolished through state intervention, the voluntary offering of butter to Lha Thuthem (Buddha Shakyamuni) by the people of Pangchen reveals that traditional practices persist not merely through obligation but through genuine cultural commitment. This continuity amid transformation suggests that Monpa communities maintain agency in selectively preserving valued aspects of their heritage while adapting to changing political and economic contexts.

Documenting and understanding these practices is therefore essential not only for academic scholarship but also for policy formulation aimed at culturally grounded development. Recognising indigenous land systems can contribute to more inclusive governance and sustainable resource management in the eastern Himalayas. Future research should examine how these systems continue to evolve across different Monpa villages and what aspects are preserved or transformed as communities navigate the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

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