

NESRC peace studies series 4

Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution

In Three Tribal Societies of North East India

**Editor
Alphonsus D'Souza**

**North Eastern Social Research Centre
Guwahati
2011**

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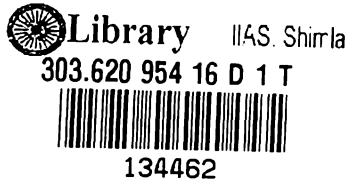
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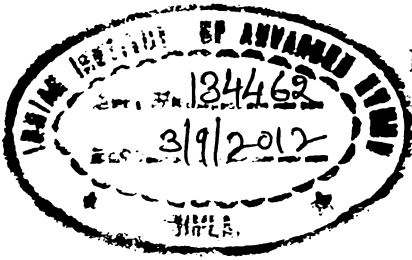
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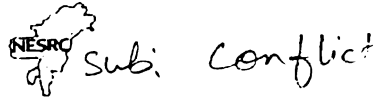
NESRC Peace Studies Series - 4

Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution in Three
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Published by 303. 62095416
DIT



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Assam, India

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www.nesrc.org
www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/NESRC

Cover page designed by
Arup Jyoti Das
Panos South Asia
110 Kharghuli Road (1st floor)
Guwahati 781004
Assam, India

Printed at
Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd.
7 Lachit Lane, Rajgarh Road, Guwahati-781007

ISBN-13 978-81-922349-1-5

Acknowledgements

This booklet is the aspirations for peace of many persons from Northeast India. The study was done by the three authors under the guidance of Prof. Alphonsus D'Souza. In the field the research fellows were supported by C. P. Anto in Nagaland and Tom M. in Karbi Anglong and N. C. Hills districts of Assam. NESRC received financial support for these studies from Cordaid and Misereor through NED Social Forum. We are grateful to all of them for their support. Above all we thank the three authors for the effort they have put into this work.

We are equally grateful to all the staff members of NESRC particularly Dr Gita Bharali, Dulumoni Gogoi and Mala Das.

Guwahati, 30th January 2011
North Eastern Social Research Centre

Dr Walter Fernandes
Director

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Alphonsus D'Souza / 1

Traditional Methods of Conflict Management
among the Dimasa

Padmini Langthasa / 5

The Karbi Community and Conflicts

Sunil Terang Dili / 32

Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution
Adopted by the Lotha Naga Tribe

Yanlumo Ezung / 64

Introduction

Alphonsus D'Souza

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Social conflict is found wherever individuals or groups engage themselves in antagonistic or hostile relationships. Conflict can arise because of such reasons as differences in personal preferences, group interests and aims. It can take different forms like quarrels and disputes, feuds and armed fights. It is generally recognised that social conflict is destructive in nature. Therefore whenever a conflict emerges, efforts are made to resolve it before it does irreparable damage.

It is said that social conflict is universal in the sense that it is found in all societies. At the same time, it is acknowledged that also methods of conflict resolution are universal because there are mechanisms and processes of conflict resolution in every society. However, there are different ways in which conflicts are resolved.

It is worth noting here that in tribal societies governed by the traditional law, conflict resolution is within the context of a restorative and reparative

system rather than an adversarial and punitive system. In a criminal case, the goal is to heal and restore the victim's well-being, and to help the offender to save face and to regain dignity. In a civil case, the parties involved are helped to solve the dispute in a way that there are no losers, but all are winners. The ultimate aim is to restore personal and communal harmony.

The three essays presented here deal with the traditional methods of conflict resolution practised in three tribal communities in the Northeast. These communities have many features in common. All the three communities have their traditional habitat, distinctive social organisation and culture. But they differ among themselves in their history and present experiences especially in their relations with other tribal and non-tribal communities.

The Dimasa are found in Dima Hasao district of Assam and in the adjoining areas of other districts and in other places. Similarly the Karbi live not merely in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam but also in adjoining areas. More or less the same can be said about the Lotha Naga whose traditional habitat is Wokha district in Nagaland.

In situations of conflicts with other communities, the Dimasa and Karbi seemed to have avoided a confrontational approach because their leaders were concerned about the possible loss of life among their followers. They were concerned about the safety and welfare of their people. Though the Lotha leaders did not mind taking up arms in order to protect their interests, their ultimate objective was to ensure the safety and well being of the people. Wherever possible,

inter-tribal conflicts were resolved through negotiations and compromises so that peaceful relations could be restored.

In the case of internal conflicts, all the three communities adopted very similar, if not identical, mechanisms, methods and procedures. The elders played a leading role. The parties involved were given ample opportunities to express their grievances and to present their case. Witnesses were examined and cross examined. In extreme cases when evidence was not very clear, supernatural powers were invoked through oaths. The final verdict was given by the elders in such a way that the guilty were punished, injustices were undone and victims were suitably compensated. The ultimate aim was to ensure harmonious living within the community.

An attentive and careful consideration of the traditional methods of conflict resolution practised by the three tribal communities shows that those methods are relevant even today. Among other things, traditional processes show that leaders and elders must be genuinely concerned about the welfare of the people. They also indicate that the parties involved must be given ample opportunities to make their views heard in an atmosphere of freedom. Further, traditional methods point out how willingness to make compromises by the parties in conflict, and their readiness to abide by the common decisions can lead to solutions acceptable to all. This can result in lasting harmony and peace based on mutual respect and justice in this troubled land which is the home of so many tribal communities.

The three essays presented here are the work of young persons. They are not experienced “researchers”, but have personally experienced conflict situations in their communities. Hence they provide an insider’s view in understanding the traditions of their communities. They hope that their work will help other young persons to appreciate the wisdom enshrined in their traditions and to use it in dealing with conflicts in their own communities.

Traditional Methods of Conflict Management among the Dimasa

Padmini Langthasa
Jirsong Asong, Diphu
Karbi Anglong Dt., Assam

Introduction

The Dimasa is one of the major tribes living in the state of Assam in North East India. In the past the Dimasa have been described as a peaceful and peace loving community. But during the first decade of the third millennium they have been involved in three major conflicts with other tribal communities. They were: the Dimasa-Hmar conflict in 2003, Dimasa-Karbi conflict in 2005, and Dimasa-Zeme Naga conflict in 2009. As reported in the media, during these conflicts there were gruesome killings, arson and looting. Almost all the victims were simple ordinary people. These conflicts and the tribal organisations of the communities concerned have drawn the attention of various organisations and persons: social workers, human rights activists, organisations of civil society, social analysts and commentators, and scholars. The present study is an effort to look at the situation from the perspective of the common person. It is an attempt to see whether such conflicts can be resolved through traditional processes with which the common person is familiar.

Both secondary and primary data have been used for this study. Secondary sources include published studies on the Dimasa. Unfortunately such studies are very few. Other sources are the reports of the conflicts published in local and regional newspapers. They cannot always be considered as truly accurate and reliable. Primary data was collected through visits to various places and interviews of people. Persons selected for interviews were men and women of different age groups, occupations and experience.

The geographical area of the study included the Dimasa inhabited parts of the districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, now known as Dima Hasao District. However, there was a concentration on Manja and Dhanasiri areas mainly because the Karbi-Dimasa conflict of 2005 took place in those locations. Constraints of time and difficulties of travel imposed severe limitations on this study. Major findings of the study are presented in the following pages.

Origin and History of the Dimasa

The Dimasa tribe is one of the major tribes of the Kachari group found in Assam. Like other Kacharis, the Dimasa are Mongoloid and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Some of the other tribes that are either related to, or are a part of, the Kachari group are the Boro, Rabha, Sonowal, Mech, Hajong, Lalung, Tripura or Debarma. The Kacharis seem to constitute one of the early autochthonous population strata of North Eastern India.

The Name

The literal meaning of the word 'Dimasa' is 'river folk'. 'Di' means 'water', and 'sa' means 'son'. Thus the 'Dimasa' are the people or the sons of water. Hence, the etymological meaning

of the name 'Dimasa' most probably stands for the 'children of the big river', perhaps the Brahmaputra. In actual practice, the Dimasa like to live on the banks of rivers. According to Edward Gait (1906), the Dimasa were called 'Timasa' by the Ahoms, which is a corruption of the term 'Dimasa'.

Scholars have put forward different theories about the origin of the term 'Dimasa'. According to Sonaram Thousen, before coming to Dimapur the Dimasa called themselves 'Bodosa'. They came to be known as 'Dimasa' only after arriving at Dimapur. According to another view proposed by Nirupama Hagjer, it is a common practice among the Dimasa to introduce themselves by adding 'Sa' to the name of the place of their origin. This old tradition is prevalent even today, and that is why the people living in Dimapur refer to themselves as Dimapursa. In course of time, Dimapursa changed to Dimasa.

Present Habitat

According to the Census of India, in 2001 the total number of the Dimasa in Assam was 110,976. Their main habitat is Dima Hasao district, till recently known as North Cachar Hills district. In 2001, 64,881 of them were living in that district. But in the same year as many as 46,095 Dimasa were living in Karbi Anglong district, formerly known as Mikir Hills district. In Cachar district, the Dimasa are known as Barman, and in 2001, there were 10,908 of them in that district. Some Dimasa are found also in other districts, but it is likely that they are called Kacharis. There were also 7,807 Dimasa living in Dimapur district of Nagaland, where they are classified as Kacharis.

Origin and Early History of the Kacharis

The Kacharis are one earliest settlers of North-East India. In the Mahabharata and other ancient Hindu scriptures there

are references to the 'foothill dwellers' or 'Kiratas' of the Eastern Himalayas. The term 'Kirata' stands for Mongoloid racial communities, but some historians believe that it indicates the Kacharis.

The earliest Kachari settlements were in the foothills of the Himalayas. From there they moved to the Brahmaputra valley with their capital at Kamruli (Kamrupa). Sir Edward Gait, in his *History of Assam* (1906), says that the Kacharis were the aborigines or earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. After hundreds of years of stay in the Brahmaputra valley, the bulk of this race, due to socio-political turmoil, were believed to have crossed the mighty river and settled in the areas of the present Sadiya of Assam. This section of the Kachari is now known as 'Dimasa', meaning 'the children of the great river' (di = water, ma = big, sa = children) (Bordoloi 1988, Gait 1906).

In course of time, facing Ahom aggression, they further migrated towards the south, on to the Dhansiri valley. They established their capital at Dimapur, presently in the state of Nagaland, after a short stint at Kasomari about forty kilometres from Dimapur.

Dimapur

It was at Dimapur that the new settlers undertook the arduous task of state building and flourished for several hundred years. In 1536 they shifted their capital to Maibang in the present district of Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills). In spite of the constant ravages of human encroachment, historical relics of the Kachari royal dome still exist in and around Dimapur, particularly in the Dimapur fort called Kachari Rajbari. These relics show that the Kacharis at that time had perfected the skill of brick making. Among the large tanks that they built, Podum Pukhuri, Bangle Pukhuri, Bamun Pukhuri, Raj Pukhuri, and

Jor Pukhuri survive to this day. It is said in a folktale that during the invasion of the Ahoms, the Kachari king dumped gold and other precious metals in some of these tanks. He is believed to have told his subjects that long after he left, a day would come when a male mithun would come from the hills and dig up this gold by its horn which would weigh a maund (about 240kg) and it would be the time when the Kacharis would rise again and prosper.

The Dimapur kingdom of the thirteenth century extended along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, from the Dikhow River in the east to Kalang in the west and Dhansiri valley. Historians are not in a position to tell us the exact date of the establishment of the Kachari capital at Dimapur. However, according to a Kachari tradition, the Muli bamboo (Wa-thi) which flowers once in fifty years, had flowered nine times during the reign of the Kachari kings at Dimapur. This means that they ruled for about 450 years at Dimapur. Since the Kacharis shifted their capital to Maibang in 1536 A.D, it can be estimated that Kacharis had established Dimapur approximately in 1087 A.D. This seems to be a fair estimate because when the Ahom invasion took place in this region, Dimapur was said to have been flourishing at its full glory.

Shifting to Maibang

The end of the glorious rule of the Kacharis at Dimapur began with the advent of the Ahoms in the upper Brahmaputra valley towards the close of the fifteenth century. The expansionist behaviour of the Ahoms led to constant hostilities between the two. Thus in 1490 A.D. there was a major battle in which the Ahoms were completely routed and their chief Chuhenpha was forced to sue for peace. However peace did not last for long, as the Ahoms intruded into the Kachari territory and set up a fort at Morangi, near the present town of Jorhat. This led to a battle

in 1526 A.D. and the Ahoms were again defeated and pushed back beyond the Dikhow river which became the natural boundary between the two principalities for some years.

When the Ahoms kept on consolidating their army, the Kacharis, emboldened by previous successes, became complacent and neglected the security affairs of their country. Taking advantage of this, the Ahoms again broke their peace treaty with the Kacharis and set up a fort at Morangi. Another battle ensued, and the Kacharis were finally defeated due to the superior strength of the Ahom army. A folk tale among the Kacharis says that the Ahom soldiers rode on cows during this battle which completely shocked the Kacharis who refrained from attacking because it could result in the killing of cows. The Kacharis thought that killing of cows would cause defilement of their fighters. It may be noted here that the Kacharis, particularly the Dimasas, at that time considered cows as 'kushu' or impure. It was only later on, after they embraced Brahmanical Hinduism, that they came to believe that the cow was a sacred animal.

After defeating the Kachari monarch Khunkradao Raja, the Ahoms installed Dehtsung, the king's brother as king at Dimapur on condition of allegiance to the Ahom ruler. However, within a few years, the Kachari king revolted and refused to pay tribute to the Ahom ruler. Thus another battle became inevitable. In 1536 A.D. a fierce battle was fought and the Kachari king was completely defeated, and the city of Dimapur was sacked. The survivors of the ruling clan, along with loyal subjects, thereafter shifted their capital to Maibang. The royal family then moved to Kashpur of Kachar district of Assam. The Kachari kingdom was annexed by the British East India Company along with Assam following the Treaty of Yandabu of February 1826.

The British Period

In 1832 the British East India Company annexed South Cachar, consisting of the plains of the Barak valley, which was a part of the princely state of Cachar. The hills division comprised of the North Cachar Hills, parts of the Diyung valley, the Kopili valley and the Dhansiri valley, including the ancient capital of Dimapur, the 'Brick city' of the Dimasa Kachari kings. The hills division was finally annexed by the British in 1854 on the death of Senapati Tularram, the Dimasa chieftain, who held sway over that area. But instead of tagging the Northern (Hills Division) with South Cachar the British added the territory to the Assam district of Nowgong. The territory was then placed under the charge of a Junior Political Officer with headquarters at Asalu. Subsequently in 1866, this territory was sliced away and distributed among the neighbouring districts of Nowgong and the Naga Hills. Thus, parts of the Diyung valley and the Kopili valley were given to the district of Nowgong, and a portion was joined with the newly created district of Naga Hills. The rest formed the territory of the North Cachar Hills comprising exclusively the hilly region.

The land settlement procedure adopted by the British encouraged a large number of outsiders to settle down in the fertile areas of Cachar. The tea gardens that were started depended on labourers from outside the Northeast. Because of a large influx of outsiders the Dimasa were outnumbered. The Dimasa were also not able to adjust themselves to the new situation. Therefore, they began to settle down in the interior areas. They started settlements in remote and dense forest areas. The Indian Independence movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, and the Second World War also brought about several changes, which in turn affected the Dimasa way of life, their society and economy.

After Independence

After India's independence there were several changes in Assam. In 1951 a new district was created in the name of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. The Mikir Hills sub-division of the district was formed by carving out some areas from the districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar. The North Cachar Hills sub-division was separated from Cachar and tagged on to Mikir Hills to form the new district. Dimapur area was attached to the Naga Hills district. In 1970 the North Cachar Hills sub-division was separated from Mikir Hills district and formed into a full-fledged district. The Mikir Hills district was later renamed as Karbi Anglong district. In 2010, the North Cachar Hills district was renamed as Dima Hasao.

When the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district was formed, two Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India were established, one in each of the sub-divisions. When the North Cachar Hills district was formed in 1970, its boundaries coincided with those of the existing Autonomous District Council. Thus the North Cachar Hills district, the present Dima Hasao has a distinct system of local administration in the form of the Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

In the process of these administrative changes, the Dimasa people with their distinctive culture, language and religion were divided. They are a majority only in the district of Dima Hasao. In other districts they are a minority and are known by different names. Only those living in Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts retain their name and are classified as a Scheduled Tribe (Hills). In the plains district of Nagaon they are classified as 'Hojai Kacharis' recognized as Scheduled Tribe (Plains). In the district of Cachar, they are known as 'Barman', and are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (Plains). The Dimasa in Nagaland are known as 'Kacharis' and belong to Scheduled Tribe (Hills). The

Dimasa of Hailakandi and Karimganj districts are recognized as 'Rukini Barman.' Thus the Dimasa have lost their unity and distinct identity. It is in this context that the Jadikhe Naisho Hoshom (JNH), the Dimasa apex body, and other organisations came into existence.

Social Organisation and Cultural Life

The social organisation and cultural life of the Dimasa has many distinctive features. The nature of village settlements, religious beliefs and practices, kinship organisation and cultural life have features that are unique to them.

Village Settlements

The Dimasa villages are situated in forest areas where there is sufficient cultivable land. However it is almost axiomatic that there must be a river or stream flowing nearby, which proves that the Dimasa people love rivers. Villages are usually named after the river flowing nearest to the settlement, though some villages are named after the clan of the original settler. The establishment of a new village is accompanied by various rituals (Naiding 2009).

The territory of a village is clearly identified. The number of households in a village usually varies from about ten to a few hundred. Houses within the residential site are at some distance from one another and are scattered according to the convenience of the villagers. Besides the youth dormitory, sites of communal significance like meeting places, dancing grounds, shrines, graves, water sources, etc. are marked out. Land used for cultivation is all around the village. As a defensive structure from enemies and wild animals, a Dimasa village has a fence of wood and bamboos around it. Lookout houses are constructed at the topmost place of the village. A Dimasa village is homogenous

in the sense that it is inhabited only by the Dimasa people. If there are any outsiders, they are temporary employees of the Government like teachers.

Economy

Agriculture is the principal occupation and the main source of livelihood. Those who live in the hills practise shifting cultivation or jhuming, though they also have some permanent wet cultivation fields wherever possible. Those who live in the plains have wet cultivation. Paddy (rice) is the main crop. Other food crops include maize and various types of vegetables. Some cultivate fruits like oranges and pineapples. Domestic animals include buffalos, pigs, goats and fowls.

In general, the Dimasa are economically backward. This can be seen from the situation of the Dima Hasao district. In 2001, the literacy rate among the Dimasa in Assam was 59.6 percent (69.4% for males and 49.3% for females). A large number of villages in the district do not have access roads and other basic facilities.

Religion

Dimasa religion is a blend of traditional tribal religion and some Hindu beliefs and practices. Their Hinduisation became stronger after the acceptance of Hinduism by their king in the year 1790. Dimasa religion includes beliefs in several deities, Sibrai being the chief of them. It also includes beliefs in lesser spirits of both malevolent and benevolent nature. In former times the entire Dimasa territory was divided into twelve religious areas, each with its own presiding deity. These presiding deities were known as daikho. The priests were called zonthai and were selected from the Hojaisa clan. The priests had to perform pujas for the well being of the Dimasa.

These are also village deities. The term Madai stands for all such unseen/invisible deities, spirits, witches, etc. and Madai-kho (Madai=invisible deities/spirits; kho=the home or place) stands for the place of worship. Every Dimasa village has several madai-khos, as there are many deities/spirits who cannot be worshipped at the same place because of their contrasting qualities.

Kinship Organisation

A unique feature of the Dimasa is their kinship system of double descent. There are both male clans (patri-clans) and female clans (matri-clans). Male clans are known as sengphong and the female clans are called julu or jaddi.) There are 40 male clans, of which 12 are important. Each clan has a titular deity. The titular deities of the 12 important clans are also considered important. There are 42 female clans. Sons belong to the father's clan and use the clan name as their surname. Daughters belong to the mother's clan. Rules of inheritance also follow the double descent system. It is important to note that this double descent system is strengthened by ritual performances at different levels.

While tribe endogamy is the normal practice, clan exogamy is strictly observed. Monogamy is the most common practice. Divorce on such grounds as adultery and insanity is accepted. The Dimasa family is nuclear in structure. It is not possible to have joint families in Dimasa society because females of two matri-clans (julu and jaddi) cannot live under the same roof.

Bachelors' Dormitory

The bachelors' dormitory called Nodrang was an important institution in the past. Though it has lost its pre-eminence, it continues to exist. It is a large hall where unmarried male youth

of the village spend the night. This hall is also used for meetings. There is no dormitory for unmarried girls. The youth are organised into groups or labour force to carry out several public works in the village such as the construction of village paths and cleaning of water holes, as well as to help the needy villagers in their fields.

Modern versions of the bachelors' dormitory are the Hangsao or youth organisations. They play a role similar to the one performed by the traditional dormitory.

Rights and Duties

Every Dimasa enjoys various rights and has to perform different forms of duties. These rights and duties belong to three basic categories: economic, political and religious. While every Dimasa, irrespective of sex and age is respected, there are differences in rights on the basis of sex and age. With regard to economic rights, customary laws of inheritance vary according to sex. While a son inherits land and immovable property of the father, a daughter is entitled to movable properties like ornaments of the mother. With regard to political rights, a woman can never be the head of a village or a member of the village council. Similarly, unmarried men have no place in the traditional village political organisation. In religious matters, a woman cannot perform any priestly functions, though witchcraft is usually associated with women.

In general, the status of women in Dimasa society is lower than that of men. It is not surprising that women are often accused of creating trouble within the family or with neighbours. For example, in the course of an interview during this study, one of the elders said: "In our Dimasa villages sometimes problems arise because of rumours and false news. There are also occasions when women accuse one another. In such cases, the problems are settled within the village".

Cultural Life

Dimasa cultural life is rich with songs, music and dances. The dance forms are complex in character and depend on instrumental music, not songs. The important musical instrument is 'muri'. Music from a muri appears to be monotonous, but there are variations for different dance forms.

As in the case of other tribal communities, the traditional ceremonial or formal dress of the Dimasa is colourful. Women wear various ornaments made of silver, beads and shells.

Traditional Organisations and Settlement of Disputes and Crimes

The village is the basic unit of traditional Dimasa political organisation. As noted above, every village has a definite territory marked by boundary lines, which are maintained by the villagers and are accepted by the neighbouring villages. Though inter-village relationships were generally good in the past, there was probably no organisation that embraced several or all Dimasa villages. The reason for the absence of any organisation is that the former monarchical system came to an end with the absorption of the territory ruled by the Dimasa kings and rulers into British India. Thus under the British, the traditional village organisation continued but came under the control or the supervision of the mouzadar.

This situation changed in modern times when a three tier system of administration was introduced. This system applied also to the delivery of justice and the solution of disputes and conflicts. In this system, the village was at the base of the organisation, with the mouza in the middle, and the Autonomous District Council at the apex. In the matter of conflict resolution, this meant the three tier system of Village

court, Subordinate District Council Court, and the District Council Court (Das 1987: 581-583)

Traditional Village Council

The traditional organisation of a Dimasa village had various officials and functionaries. These were: Khunang (village headman) Dilek (assistant village headman), Daulathurao (elders, members of the village council), Habaisagao, Pharai, Mantri, Hangseobukhu and Jalairao. According to Danda (1978: 98-99) this traditional organisation has become obsolete in most villages. Changes have taken place mainly due to the introduction of Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

According to tradition the oldest member of the village became the Khunang. This made his selection unanimous. Dilek was the next in seniority by age. Daulathurao were the elders and their number varied depending on the size of the village. Their qualification was only seniority in age. Habaisagao were the next oldest males in the village. The Pharai were next in seniority by age. A Mantri belonged to the younger batch of the villagers and was selected on the basis of merit, not seniority. Hangseobukhu were assistants to the Mantri. The lowest position in the structure was that of the Jalairao. All the married males of the village belonged to this category. All these categories constituted the traditional village council. Unmarried males were, therefore, excluded from the village council.

In the traditional village council, the Khunang or headman was the most powerful man. He commanded the respect of the whole village. He had considerable executive and judicial powers. But in practice he could never be a despot because he had to consult others while taking any major decision. As the Dimasa society was guided by customary law, there was not much scope for abuse of power.

As noted above, according to Danda (1978: 98), the traditional village council with all the office bearers exists only in Semkhor, the oldest and most conservative Dimasa village. Danda provides details about the structure of the Semkhor village council as reproduced in the table below.

Designation of Officers	Number of positions
Khunang or gaonbura	1
Dilek or assistant gaonbura	1
Daulathurao	15
Habaisagao	2
Pharai	2
Mantri	8
Hangseobukhu	25
Jalairao	Unlimited

In keeping with the tradition, the Dimasa village Council has two main functions, namely, executive and judiciary. The executive functions are related to development work or any other activity for the improvement of the community. Judicial functions are related to the maintenance of law and order in the village. This includes conflict resolution and the administration of justice in the village.

Judicial Functions: Village Court

According to the present law under the Autonomous District Council Act, the Village Court is constituted from among the elected members of the Council. It must follow procedures of the customary law. Further, it can try only cases between members of the same tribe who are resident of the village. Its power is limited to deal with minor offences, and it can impose a fine of not more than Rs 50. More serious offences must be dealt with by higher courts, namely the Subordinate District Court and the

District Court. In former times such restrictions did not exist because disputes were settled within the village.

The Dimasa are basically peace-loving and law-abiding people. They do not easily violate traditional laws. From early childhood they are trained to respect traditions and customs. Nevertheless, there are always some quarrels and disputes. As one elder says, "Sometimes there are quarrels in a family, between brothers and sisters or between husband and wife. But they are settled within the family". In the past, family quarrels were usually settled by the elders in such a way that the dispute was not taken to the village council. However, if a dispute was actually taken to the village council, both the complainant and the accused were heard and witnesses were examined. Finally the case was settled by a majority decision. The punishment could be a fine, and in extreme cases, banishment from the village. The fine realised would be shared by the members of the court and the village headman received a greater share.

Witnesses and Oaths

If there were no witnesses or satisfactory evidence, the court could resort to the tradition of oath taking. The oath was taken not by the accused but by the victim or the complainant. The wording of the oath was roughly as follows "If the accusations that I have made are false, let misfortune such as loss of paddy, or illness befall me, or let a tiger kill me within three months". If nothing happened to the victim or the complainant during the specified period of three months, the period could be extended. At the end of the stipulated period, if nothing happened, the accusations were considered to be true, and a punishment was imposed on the accused. Taking an oath was a serious matter because a false oath could lead to the displeasure of the spirits and bring disaster on the individual and the clan. A "tiger oath" was an extremely serious

matter because funeral ceremonies were not performed for a person killed by a tiger. Due to the fear of the spirits no Dimasa would take an oath unless he or she was absolutely certain that he or she was right.

Higher Courts

After the establishment of their rule, the British introduced the Mouzadar system at an intermediary level. The Mouzadar's court decided cases on the basis of traditional or customary law. The court consisted of the Mouzadar and at least three Gaonburas (village heads). The court was held in public. It decided cases on appeal. It also settled disputes between villages. But cases of a more serious nature were decided by the Political Officers or District Commissioners.

After Independence and the formation of the Autonomous District Council, the Subordinate District Council Court came into existence. The Autonomous District Council Court became the higher court. These courts also followed the customary law. However, serious offences like murder came under the judicial system established by the Indian Criminal Code.

Appeals to Higher Courts under Customary Law

Adherence to traditional practices in the present system is illustrated by the following case reported by Das (1987: 591-92).

There was a love affair between a boy and girl, and the girl became pregnant. But they belonged to the same clan. Sex relations between persons of the same clan are forbidden by customary law. The father of the girl complained to the village court, which heard the case. The boy denied causing the pregnancy. But on the basis of circumstantial evidence the court was satisfied that the boy was responsible. Both the boy and the girl were fined for violating the customary law. The boy appealed to the Subordinate District Council Court. This court directed the girl to take the

traditional oath because there was no direct evidence. The girl's father then appealed to the District Council Court because of the fear of oath taking. The Court examined the case in detail and upheld the decision of the Village Court.

It can be seen that in this case, the courts upheld the customary law and traditional methods in settling the dispute.

The Changed Situation

In olden days Dimasa villages were homogenous and all the inhabitants were Dimasa. Today this may be true only in the remote interior villages. In many villages, people belonging to other communities are also found. In this situation, it is difficult to follow the traditions and customary law of the Dimasa alone. Hence disputes are settled by the village council rather than the Khunang or Gaonbura.

It has been mentioned above that in a traditional Dimasa village, the Khunang or Gaonbura was the most powerful man. He commanded respect and his authority was accepted in the whole village. But nowadays the power of the Khunang is honoured only in interior villages. In the towns and in villages near the towns, the power of Khunang is only in name. This has happened because of the formation of Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) in 1995. The DHD is an armed organisation fighting for the separate Dimaraji State comprising the Dimasa inhabited areas. Though a peace process began in January 2003, conflict has continued. It is in this context that it is useful to look at the traditional methods of conflict resolution of the Dimasa community.

Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution

Though the Dimasa community has been described as peace-loving and respectful of customary laws, disputes and

conflicts have been reported. There have been disputes at various levels: within the family, between families in the village, between villages and with other tribal communities. Information on how they were resolved is presented below. This information is drawn from both secondary sources and the responses given by persons who were interviewed. The names of the respondents are not given here for reasons of confidentiality and prudence.

Disputes in the Family

According to an elder, “sometimes there are quarrels in a family, between brothers and sisters or between husband and wife. But they are settled within the family”. Thus quarrels within the family are usually settled by the elders of the clan. The method of settlement would be to listen to the parties and come to an amicable settlement. In the Dimasa society, the heads of the family are respected and obeyed.

Disputes within the Village

There can be various types of disputes between the families living in a village. Some of them can be offences against the person, others offences with regard to property. Insulting others, spreading false stories about others, hurting others, murder or attempt to murder, adultery, elopement, and rape are some of the offences against the person. Common offences against property are thefts and trespasses.

In former times, serious offences like murder were dealt with by the Raja and beheading was the usual punishment. After the establishment of British rule the traditional courts were not allowed to deal with cases of murder. Cases of murder were disposed of by the Deputy Commissioner (Das 1987: 588).

Other disputes and conflicts were managed by the traditional village council or court. As an elder said, “in our Dimasa villages, problems arise. But they are settled within the village”. The parties

involved in the dispute were given opportunities to explain their case. If women were involved, they too were given an opportunity. Witnesses were also called. If the evidence was not adequate, the complainant was asked to take the oath. After due deliberation the Khunang and the elders solved the dispute through a majority decision.

Punishment imposed on the wrong doer was usually in the form of fines or confiscation of belongings. In extreme cases, there could be expulsion from the village. In dealing with offenders, even the village headman was not spared. Danda (1978: 111) reports a case in which the headman himself was found guilty and punished.

The headman was a good man. But in his later age he committed incest with his daughter's daughter. At this the village people excommunicated him and his granddaughter and forced him to live outside the village. He had a son by his granddaughter. Before death the excommunicated headman suffered from ailments very seriously and requested the villagers to allow him to live in the village. He apologised to them. Then out of pity they allowed the old man to live in the village.

This incident shows that the village usually dealt with all the cases of disputes and wrong doings at the level of the village itself. This is because "A village is responsible for the misdeeds or anti-social activities that take place in it. Strict law and order are maintained. The wrongdoers are punished with fines and penalties by the village council" (Naiding 2009: 126).

Inter-Village Disputes

Inter-village disputes are very rare simply because village are at considerable distance from one another and boundaries

between villages are clearly marked. On the other hand, as most of the villages are small, there is a considerable amount of cooperation between neighbouring villages. Sometimes they come together for the celebration of ceremonies like marriages and funerals. However, inter-village dispute can always arise.

Inter-village disputes can arise mainly because of trespass. There are occasions when people from a village need to cross the territory of another village for cultivation. In such cases, the village concerned seeks the permission of the other village. A real dispute arises when buffaloes or cattle from a village destroy the jhum fields of another village. In such a case, the headmen of the two villages come together and settle the dispute and impose a fine on the owners of the animals. If the owners are not identified, a fine is imposed on the entire village. All possible efforts are made to settle the dispute at that level because in former times there was no possibility of appeal.

Inter-Tribal Disputes and Conflicts

In the past, though the Dimasa lived close to, or even surrounded by, villages and settlements of other tribal communities, inter-tribal conflict was rare. The reason for this is given by a teacher:

“From the ancient days, the Dimasa are peace loving. If there was any problem or threat, they shifted to a safer place. I have heard from my elders that this happened during the rule of Dimasa kings in Dimapur. The king shifted his capital from Dimapur to Maibang, and from Maibang to Khaspur in Silchar district. Thinking of their subjects, kings have always shifted to safer and interior places. That is why we find Dimasa people in remote places like N.C Hills”.

The Dimasa tradition accepts that there were a few instances of inter-tribal conflicts. Thus an elder from Gunjung says:

“In the past conflicts with other communities did not exist, and if there were any such conflicts, they were settled through negotiations. In my childhood I have heard from my elders that once there was a war with the Nagas. This war is narrated in some traditional dances”.

This incident is narrated in greater detail by another elder. He says that the conflict was resolved through negotiations in which the Dimasa king took the initiative. The elder gives us this information in the following words:

“There was also a communal clash during the reign of King Govind Chandra Hasnu. At that time the king would identify a place for the establishment of a Dimasa village by shooting an arrow. It was understood that the Dimasa would settle where the arrow fell. Once when the king shot the arrow, it fell in a place close to a Naga village near Maibang. So, a Dimasa village was settled there. After a few years there was a conflict between the Naga and the Dimasa. But it was peacefully solved through negotiations because at that time the king was ruling. This conflict is still narrated in a Dimasa traditional Dance”.

A more recent case of inter-tribal conflict is narrated by a Dimasa working as a teacher in a school. He says:

“Many years ago, after Independence, there was a problem on the Assam Nagaland border. The Naga people burnt the Dimasa village, and chased the people from Nagaland. In those days the Khunang or Gaonbura was a very powerful man in Dimasa political hierarchy. He was responsible for all government programmes in a village. When this conflict took place, Maibiram Jigdung, the first Khunang and Khisairam Girisa of Darokajan, met the DC of Kohima together with the Naga leaders and solved the conflict through negotiation”.

It can be seen from the above account of the inter-tribal conflicts of the past that the Dimasa tradition has been to avoid such conflicts. But when conflicts actually took place, they were

settled through discussion, negotiations and compromises. Given this background, it is normal that the Dimasa people as a whole were perplexed during the recent conflicts. This can be seen from what some of the Dimasa elders have said. Their views are given below:

“The real cause of the Dimasa-Hmar conflict of 2003 is not known. But I am sure it was the insurgents who caused the problem in which lives of both the communities were lost. Both the communities suffered a lot. At the end it was solved by J.N.H. (Apex Body of the Dimasa) and the leaders of Hmar community coming together in order to bring peace with mutual understanding” (A teacher).

“My first experience of conflict with others was the conflict with the Karbis in 2005. But we were friends with the Karbis and considered them as our own brothers and sisters. It may be the politicians who played a violent role. If we want to bring about peace we must talk to each other and should have mutual understanding. But the main problem is with the insurgents, not with the public” (An elder).

“In the olden days there was no conflict between us the Dimasa and other communities. From my childhood onwards, we lived with the Karbis as brothers and sisters. Even now we are like that. I was in the relief camp when my village was burnt, and I know most of the innocent villagers were also in the relief camp”.

“The people who have torched our village and the Karbi village were insurgents of both the communities. We all know that simple villagers cannot have arms like AK47s. We don't have 30 Rupees to buy 1 kg of rice. How can we get Rupees 30 thousand, the price of

an AK47? Even if we get one, we do not know how to shoot or fire at innocent people” (A Gaonbura).

It can be seen from the above views that the ordinary persons are wondering why the recent conflicts took place. They blame the insurgents and politicians. Perhaps they do not understand the reasons or factors that have led to the outbreak of conflicts. At the same time, they think that all the problems, including violent conflicts, can be solved through negotiations and compromises in which the leaders play their part for the welfare of the people.

Conclusion

Dimasas think of themselves as peace-loving people. They want to live in peace especially with other villages and communities. But they also accept that there can be disputes at various levels, namely, within the family and within the village, as also between villages and even between tribal communities. Here is a summary presentation of the traditional methods of settling disputes and resolving conflicts.

Within the family and the village, the Dimasa tradition is to resolve disputes through the intervention of elders and village headmen. The process involves a careful consideration of the evidence. All the parties in the dispute are given an opportunity to present their case. Evidence is scrutinised and evaluated. In the absence of adequate evidence, there is recourse to oath taking. The role of the elders, the village headman and other officials is of critical importance.

Disputes between villages were resolved by the headmen and other elders of the villages concerned. The process adopted was one of negotiations and compromises. Appeals to higher authorities were rare even after the establishment of the British rule.

In the course of their history, the Dimasa seem to have avoided conflicts with other communities. They seem to have moved away when they were attacked by others. In the few cases of disputes and conflicts that are reported, the king and the leaders were concerned about the welfare of their subjects and followers. Therefore, the methods adopted to settle the dispute and to resolve conflicts were negotiation and compromise.

* * * * *

List of Persons interviewed

1. Anirudh Jidung
2. Nibash Jidung
3. Gohendra Jidung
4. Upendra Johorisa
5. Rajendra Nunisa
6. Jomendra Hojai
7. Jonon Langthasa

Acknowledgements

Many persons and institutions have helped me in carrying out this study. It is my duty to express my gratitude to them.

I am very thankful to Fr. Tom Mangattuthaze, Peace Team Director, Diphu, for appointing me as a researcher in the team. I am indebted to NESRC (North Eastern Social Research Centre) Guwahati, and particularly to Prof. Alphonsus D'Souza of NESRC for guiding me.

I am also very grateful to my parents for their support and encouragement, especially my dad, Mr Sachin Langthasa, who helped me a lot in collecting books of different authors.

I am thankful to Fr. Arul S. and Fr. Nilesh Parmar for their hospitality during my field visit and interviews in N.C. Hills, and to Sr Teresa, Sr Proti, and Sr Lesi for their kindness and hospitality at Diyungbra.

I am thankful to all my fellow researchers of Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura for their generous help and suggestions. I am also thankful to all the village headmen and village elders for their kind cooperation.

I am also thankful to Sunil Terang who was my research partner for his cooperation and help during my travels. I am very much thankful to our Peace Team coordinator and animator for helping me in managing time and to complete my study.

Padmini Langthasa

Manja, 5th February 2010

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The Karbi Community and Conflict

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Introduction

Karbi Anglong district in Assam is very rich in diversities of peoples, cultures, languages and religions. The district has two divisions, East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. In both divisions, in the past, people of different ethnic groups and tribes have been living in peace and harmony with one another. This was true even when there were violent conflicts in other places, such as the Naga-Kuki conflict (1992-93), Kuki-Paite tensions (1994-94) and the long Naga-Meitei tensions. But the situation has changed in recent times, and there has been inter-tribal conflict in Karbi Anglong itself.

Recent Conflicts

In Karbi Anglong there were two major conflicts in recent times. They were the Karbi-Kuki conflict of 2003-04 and the Karbi-Dimasa conflict of 2005-06. During these conflicts there was violence which resulted in the loss of life and destruction of property belonging to the communities concerned. Thousands of people were rendered homeless, many hundreds fled to safer

areas within the district or to other districts in Assam or even to other states. A large number of families and people had to take shelter in several relief camps. Families were affected because husbands were separated from their wives, and children from their parents. Many students lost academic years in schools or colleges. The saddest part was that a large number of people were displaced from their own homes and land, and were forced to migrate to strange places and begin a new life.

There have been many reports and analyses of these conflicts in the media. But most of them have been superficial in nature because they have dealt with the description of the conflicts and their immediate causes and consequences. Hence there is a need to look at these conflicts within the broader context of the situation found in the district and to look at them from the perspectives of the tribal communities involved in the conflicts.

Objectives of this Study

This study is an attempt to understand why these conflicts took place. In this effort, this study looks at the conflicts from the view point of the Karbi people because they are the most affected community. Thus the objectives of this study are as follows.

1. To trace the history of the Karbi people and to look at various aspects of their life, with special reference to the traditional methods of conflict resolution.

2. To look at the recent conflicts in which the Karbi people were involved and to examine the role played by the tribal leaders and youth organisations during these conflicts in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts.

3. Finally, to find out the possibility of using traditional and others methods for peace building among all the tribes and communities living in Karbi Anglong district.

Methodology

This study makes use of both secondary and primary data. As it is, there is very little published material on the Karbis. This study uses whatever material that is accessible. It also uses the reports published in the newspapers. But the study relies heavily on data collected through field work.

Field work was done in the whole district, both in the Eastern and Western parts of Karbi Anglong district. In the East, fieldwork was done at Manja, Dillai and Sukhanjan. In the West it was done at Tika, Hamren, Baithalangso, Amtereng and adjoining Villages. Manja is a good example of a place where people belonging to several tribes live together. Manja was included in the field of study because it is one of the towns near the Singhason Hills range, which was the epicentre of violence in the conflicts. The people of Manja not only witnessed the conflicts but also became victims of the violence during the Karbi-Kuki and Karbi-Dimasa conflicts.

During the field work data was collected through personal interviews of village headmen, office bearers of youth and student organisations, and other persons. Data was collected through some focussed group discussions. In the case of personal interviews, three approaches were adopted. The first was to interview people who were selected in advance, the second was to interview people whom the researcher had not selected, but who came to a meeting of an organisation or a group, and the third was into interview persons who were introduced by friends and who were victims of the conflict. In the case of group interviews, the participants were members of a family, people who attended a meeting at the village, youth organisations and the members of peace committees.

Karbi Anglong : The District and the People

Karbi Anglong, which literally means Karbi Hills, is the largest district in Assam. It was formerly known as Mikir Hills district. It is predominantly a tribal district.

Location and History

Karbi Anglong is situated in the central part of Assam. It is divided into two parts, West Karbi Anglong consisting of Hamren sub-division, and East Karbi Anglong with Diphu and Bokajan sub-divisions. The district is bounded by the Nagaon and Golaghat districts in the north, North Cachar Hills in the south, State of Meghalaya in the west and the State of Nagaland in the east. Thus the district occupies a very strategic position bordering Nagaland and Meghalaya.

The present Karbi Anglong district came into existence because of administrative reorganisation. In 1951 a district called the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was formed with some parts of the districts of Sivasagar (now Golaghat), Nagaon, Cachar and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district of present Meghalaya. In 1970 this district was bifurcated into Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills districts. In 1976, the Mikir Hills district was rechristened as Karbi Anglong District, with its headquarters at Diphu. The district enjoys autonomy with its Autonomous District Council under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

The Population

According to the Census of India, in 2001 the total population of Karbi Anglong was 813,311, with 422,250 males and 391,061 females. The sex ratio was 926. Most of the people lived in villages. There were 2,633 inhabited villages and only three towns. The proportion of urban population was only 11.30 percent.

As the very name indicates, the district is hilly in terrain. The district as a whole is socially and economically backward. Most of the villages are in remote areas and lack basic facilities. In 2001, as many as 78.4 percent of the houses were kutcha, built of mud walls and thatched roof. The literacy rate was 57.70 percent, with 67.22 for males and 47.30 for females. The main economic activity is agriculture, with shifting cultivation as the common form.

Ethnic Composition

According to the Census of India, in 2001 the Scheduled Tribe population consisted of 452,963 persons, constituting 55.69 percent of the total population. The Scheduled Caste population was 29,520, that is, 3.63 percent of the total. Thus a majority of the population was tribal. But there were several tribal communities in the district.

In 2001, the largest tribal community was that of the Karbi with a population of 345,540, constituting 76.28 percent of the tribal population. Next came the Dimasa tribe with a population of 46,095, forming 10.18 percent of the tribal population. The third was the Garo tribe with a population of 20,604 or 4.55 percent of the tribal population of the district. People of other tribes were Bodos in Langhin area, Kuki/Thadou/Hmar tribes in Singhason and Koilamati areas, Tiwas in areas bordering Nagaon and Morigaon District, Mon-Tais in Bokajan, some Khasis in Hamren Sub-Division and some Rengma Nagas in Nilip Block area. Thus the district has a multi-tribal population.

Among the non-tribals are people belonging to the Adivasi, Assamese, Bengali, Nepali and other communities. Most of them have been living in the district for a long time. Thus the district has a multi-ethnic population.

Most of the ethnic groups, especially the tribals, have their own culture, language, traditions and practices. The multi-ethnic

and multi-cultural character of the district makes it unique. In the past all these communities have been, in general, living in peace and harmony.

The Karbi and their Organisation

The Karbi were known in the past as Mikirs in official documents, including the Constitution Order of the Government of India that listed them among the Scheduled Tribes. But they never call themselves Mikir but Karbi, and sometimes as Arleng, which literally means 'a man'.

The Karbi belong to the Mongoloid racial stock and are a part of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Anthropologists place the Karbi linguistically between the Kuki and Naga tribes of North East India. At present they are a major tribe or community in Assam. According to the Census of India, in 2001 the Karbi (Mikir) tribe consisted of 353,513 persons living in Assam. They constituted 10.7 percent of the tribal population of Assam. There were 345,540 Karbis living in Karbi Anglong district and the rest were in some adjoining areas of other districts of Assam.

Origin

According to scholars the North East fringe of India was, in the past, the link that connected the mainland with East and South-East Asia. This region was a major corridor of human migrations and a major linguistic contact zone that witnessed an extensive population interaction. Some scholars are of the opinion that these migrations and contacts that began in pre-historic times have not completely stopped because even now there are some movements of peoples. One of the major groups of people involved in this migration was that of the speakers of languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family. In course of time they were distributed in different regions assuming different

names. Some tribes are small and are confined to particular localities. Others are very large and are distributed over large areas, sometimes forming sub-groups or sub-tribes within the same tribe. The Karbi are one such group or tribe.

An attempt to trace the route taken by the speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages in general, and by the Karbi in particular, to reach their present habitat is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. It is said that the Karbi came to the area of the present North East region before the coming of the Ahoms in the early thirteenth century. One of the explanations about the migration of the Karbi is that they came from China via Burma and Manipur. Referring to a Karbi tradition, J. H. Hutton and H. Bareh mention that southern Nagaland offered a land route to the "tribes migrating from Burma via Manipur Hills, through which a passage was made by the tribes. Bareloug Terang writes that the Karbi, along with other tribes, fled from oppressive Chinese rulers. To avoid confrontation with hostile tribes, they moved from Burma to Manipur and Nagaland. After staying in Manipur for about 500 years the Karbi, along with some Kuki and Naga groups, migrated to the Barak valley in Assam leaving the remaining tribes like the Lotha, Ao and other Naga and Kuki groups in the hills of Nagaland and Manipur.

All these accounts based on tradition and legends show that the Karbi, like almost all the tribes now living in North East India, have come into the region from outside. But they have been living in the region and in their present habitat for several centuries.

Present Habitat

Stack and Lyall say that the Karbi originally settled down in the eastern parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills near the Koppili river, and that some of them moved towards the hills lying between Dimapur and Diphu. According to Bordoloi, from

the point of view of habitation, the Karbi who live in the hills are divided into three groups, namely, Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. These are geographic divisions, not clan names. It is common to distinguish between the Karbi who live in the hills and those who live in the plains.

In West Karbi Anglong, the Karbi are sandwiched between the Khasi of Ri-Bhoi district in Meghalaya and the plains people of Assam. It is interesting to note that some of the Bhoi-Khasis have Karbi clan names, but follow the matrilineal system. At the same time, there are some Karbi who have typical Khasi names, but speak Karbi and follow the patrilineal system. Hamren in West Karbi Anglong may be considered as the hub of Karbi culture because it is the base of the Karbi kingship, namely, the Lyndok Habe system, which resembles the Lyngdoh system of the Jaintias in many ways.

In the plains of the Kamrup district of Assam, the Karbi are considered one of the sub-castes of Assamese society. In some Karbi villages in this area, women take the clan name of the husband after marriage. In North Cachar Hills, the Karbi consider the leopard as equivalent to tiger because there are no tigers there. It may be mentioned that the tiger is an important animal in Karbi society because it is considered the guardian of villages, and the tiger is invoked while taking oaths. These instances show that the Karbi are influenced by their neighbours and that the Karbi tribe adapts itself to the surroundings.

According to some scholars, during the Ahom period, the Karbi settled down along the banks of the rivers Kalang and Koppili and the Kaziranga area. During the reign of the Kachari kings they were driven to the Jaintia hills, where they established their own kingdom with Socheng as the capital. Later, they shifted their capital to Niz Rongkhang. This place is also known as Ronghang Rongbong, situated about 16 kms south of Hamren.

Karbi Clans

There are five clans called 'kur'. They are: 1. Ingti, 2. Terang, 3. Teron, 4. Timung, and 5. Inghi (Enghee). There is some sort of hierarchy among them, and the above order is usually accepted. The Ingti clan has the highest position because it is a priestly clan. At the same time, all the clans or kursos are socially equal and have no scruples as to eating together or intermarriage. In fact, clans are strictly exogamous. A person must marry someone from another kur. A man of the Ingti clan may marry a woman from any other clan. Violation of this rule known as clan exogamy leads to severe punishment which is usually excommunication.

The following are some of the common personal names of Karbi males: Sardoka, Mon. Dili, There, Kangther, Taimoi, Temen, Bura, Pator, Long and Bi. Some of the common names of women are: Kareng, Kache, Kaban. Kamang, Kaet, Kajir, Kaku, Kare, Kasang, Kadom, Dimi and Sotera.

The Family

The Karbi family is patriarchal in structure. The authority of the father is accepted by all the members. A family usually consists of father, mother and unmarried children. When a son marries, he begins to live separately with his wife. However, there are some cases of joint family.

Clan exogamy is strictly enforced. Violation of this rule can lead to excommunication. On the other hand, cross cousin marriages are preferred. Divorce is very rare.

Sons inherit all the property from the father. Daughters have no share at all. If there is no son, the property goes to the nearest male members of the clan. A childless couple may adopt a son from the clan of the husband.

It is said that Karbi women have a fairly high status compared to women in Hindu caste society. At marriage, a Karbi

woman retains the clan name of her birth. She has some responsibilities in the family and village of her birth. The role of a woman is clearly determined by tradition. Her status is lower than that of a man in religious matters and in the decision making processes within the village. She can never be a member of the village council.

Economy

Agriculture is the main economic activity of the Karbi. Those who live in the hilly areas practise shifting cultivation, and those in the plains have settled wet cultivation. Paddy is the main food crop. But they also grow maize and vegetables for domestic consumption and also for the market. At present tea is grown in some parts of the district.

In recent times many cash crops have been introduced. Chief among them are sugar cane, ginger, mustard and various vegetables like chillies, yam, brinjal, radish and cabbage. These have brought about significant changes in the agricultural economy of the district.

Karbi Anglong is known for various handicrafts. Men are skilled in bamboo, cane and various woodcrafts. Women are good weavers and produce items with the traditional handloom.

Religion

The traditional Karbi religious beliefs and practices have been described as animism. They include beliefs in spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, and various sacrifices to appease or to thank them. Traditional rites and rituals like Chomanglean or Chomkan, a socio-religious ceremony, are woven into the social system of the people. One of the major Karbi festivals, Rongker, is held annually in the villages on a community basis to appease the territorial village deity for the welfare of the village

and to ward off diseases and natural calamities. There are also festivals related to cultivation and harvest.

A majority of the Karbi still follow their traditional religion. There are some movements towards Hinduisation. A section of the Karbi has embraced Christianity. However, Christianity seems to have created a layer over the tribal culture. Christianity has also greatly contributed to the spread of modern education.

Villages and their Organisation

Karbi Anglong is a hilly area, but with low hills and rolling valleys in between the hills. Boundaries between villages are not clearly demarcated. Karbi villages are usually located on hill tops. Villages do not have a large population. Villages are also not compact because houses are scattered over the area of the village especially where shifting cultivation is practised. Sometimes, villages shift from one location to another in search of suitable land for cultivation or establish new hamlets. But in the plains villages can be large and permanent because of wet cultivation.

Each village has a headman called Gaonbura or Sarthe. Each of the hamlets in a village also has a headman. Usually a Karbi village or hamlet is named after the Gaonbura or Sarthe. The post of the village headman has some privileges attached to it. He is honoured first at religious rites and festivals. Therefore the post of headman is a coveted one.

Karbi houses are built with locally available material. In the hills, a typical Karbi house is built on a bamboo platform raised a few feet above the ground, with timber posts for support. Walls are made of split bamboo and are plastered with mud. Domestic animals are kept under the bamboo platform. In the plains, Karbi houses are built with local material or material bought from the market.

The Bachelors' Dormitory

The bachelors' dormitory of the Karbis is known by different names such as the Terang Ahem, Terang Hangbar, Pharle and Jirkedam. In the past it was generally constructed in a central place of the village. It was a place where the youth were trained. It was in the dormitory that the youth acquired a spirit of cooperation and readiness to help others.

The bachelors' dormitory has disappeared from most of the Karbi villages because of rapid changes brought about by development activities including the spread of education. But, the spirit of offering a helping hand to the needy by the youth of a Karbi village has not disappeared. At present various youth organisations perform this role. There are, in fact, youth organisations of different types.

Youth Organisations at Present

Some important youth organisations are very active at present and need to be taken into account.

The Karbi Students' Association (KSA) was formed in 1954 to provide a platform for the youth of Karbi Anglong and to stand united for the progress of the student community. In 1986, a political party called Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) was formed under the leadership of Dr. Jayanta Rongpi in order to launch a mass movement for the implementation of Article 244 (A) for the creation of an Autonomous state of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills within Assam. This led to a division in the KSA with one faction aligning itself with the ASDC. In 2000 the ASDC itself underwent a split as a result of clash of political ideologies when Dr. Rongpi decided to align himself with the CPI (ML) to strengthen the statehood movement. With this split, the KSA aligned with the ASDC and underwent another split, with one faction backing the ASDC (P) and the other backing

the ASDC (U). There are differences between them not in their objectives but in their ideologies.

Karbi Students' and Youth Forum (KSYF) was formed in May 2003, when leaders of the three factions of the KSA gathered together to stand united in protest against Clause 8 of the Bodo Territorial Council Accord. This clause made a provision for the grant of Scheduled Tribe (Hills) status to the people of Bodo community settled in Karbi Anglong and NC Hills. Another reason for the formation of KSYF was to bring youth from different political backgrounds together so that they could stand together on behalf of all the students and youth of Karbi Anglong and to fight for their rights. It was meant to be a youth organisation without any political leanings and to bring youth together irrespective of their political differences.

The United Christian Youth Forum (UCYF) was formed in 2002 to provide a platform for Christian Youth belonging to different Churches to be united in spreading the message of peace. The UCYF brought Christian youth from different communal and denominational backgrounds together. It holds regular meetings to discuss and work on common problems and goals. The UCYF has started holding joint Christmas celebrations for the youth and community members of different Christian denominations. The UCYF also organises training and other programmes for building the capacity of youth in various fields.

The Diphu Diocesan Youth Commission (DDYC) was formed in 1999 after dissolving the Catholic Youth Association (Diphu Diocese Unit). It brings together the Catholic youth of different communities and parishes to work for the development of society in general and youth in particular. The DDYC has been active in promoting peace.

Traditional Institutions for Conflict Resolution

Like other tribes, the Karbis too have various traditional institutions. While some of them are socio-political in nature, others are economic in character. Some of these institutions have proved outdated in the modern context and others continue with modified functions.

Karbi King or Chief

The traditional Karbi chief or king, with his seat at Niz Rongkhang was known as 'Lingdokpo'. He was selected by a parliament called 'Pinpomar'. In the erstwhile Karbi kingdom a village was headed by a village headman called 'Rong Sarthe'. Several contiguous Karbi villages constituted one 'Longri', and the administrative officer of a Longri was called 'Habe' or 'Habai'. The kingdom had 12 such Longris, and these Longris were constituted into 4 'Artu', and each Artu was governed by an officer called Lingdok. At the apex of the 4 Lingdoks was the chief called 'Recho' or 'Lingdokpo'. The Karbi king or chief still exercises his traditional authority in respect of socio-religious matters.

Karbi folklore, in the form of 'mosera' traditions or myths, displays basically a uniform theme about the origin of the tribe and the position of their king. The mosera describe the ordeal of the tribe's migration from the earth's navel or 'Longle achete' through diverse lands and endless persecutions to its present habitat. At Longle achete' the Karbi first attempted to install their first king 'Sot Recho', the Truthful King. In order to install the king, a road was constructed with stones (arlong adon). Sot Recho was installed on the highest peak of Longle achete.

But Tongklong Meji (Demon) pursued the Karbi in an attempt to kill their new king. The Karbi failed to defend their king in spite of all their collective might. The king himself asked

his people to allow the attackers to come to him. Tongklong Meji and his soldiers reached the peak with a golden sword (ser anokjir) and the king confronted them. Realising his inevitable defeat, the king requested a last wish, namely, to have 'ingtat' (betel leaf and nut or pan) before the enemies beheaded him. But with every stroke of the enemy's sword the king grew in size. Frustrated, the enemies put him in an iron cage (ingchin a: um) and imprisoned him for three months without food or water. The king survived the ordeal. Enraged, and their frustration doubled, the enemies decided to kill his subjects instead. When the killing of the Karbi subjects started, the king asked his subjects to flee to secure places telling them that he would join them in a new avatar in his next birth. He told them to look for signs such as when humans became dwarfs, chilly plants outgrew their original size and were fit enough to be climbed, and when the wooden rice pounding staff 'longlengpum' germinated. These would be the signs of the king's impending rebirth. He would be born in the middle of Ronghang village, now in West Karbi Anglong. After listening to the king, the Karbi began to flee to safer places.

This tradition or myth explains how the Karbi do not have a king to rule over them or to lead them in wars. They have a chief called 'Recho' or 'Lingdokpo'. But he has no political authority over the entire tribe. His authority, if that can be termed as such, is limited to socio-religious matters.

The Village Council and the Great Council

The traditional village council of the Karbi is called 'Me' or 'Mei'. It is composed of all the householder male members of the village. The council is presided over by the Sarthe or Gaonbura, the village headman. The Mei plays an important role in regulating the social, economic and religious life of the village. It settles disputes in the village which are not of a serious

nature. It also decides whether the village must be shifted to a new location for the sake of better land for cultivation, and identifies the new location. At present, the Mei is not as powerful as in the past because people prefer to go to the law courts to settle disputes.

The Great Council is called 'Meipi'. It consists of the headmen of several contiguous villages. It is headed by one of the headmen on the basis of seniority and merit. He is known as 'Habai' or 'Habe'. Disputes and crimes of a more serious nature are settled by the great council. It deals with such cases as witchcraft aimed at life and various sexual offences.

Processes of Conflict Resolution

With regard to the resolution of disputes and crimes, there was a three tier system in each geographical area in which the Karbi lived. As noted earlier, these divisions were Chinthong, Ronghang and Amri. The three tier system consisted of the village council with the headman called Sarthe, the Great Council headed by the Habe and the Lingdok headed by the Lingdokpo.

Disputes within the Village

In former times, the village council settled all disputes and cases including murder. Complaints were brought to the village chief. The complainant also brought with him rice-beer and eatables for the headman. This made the complaint formal or official. The headman gathered all his advisors, and together they heard the complaint. Then dates were fixed for the hearing of the case. At the hearings, the village headman and the ten ministers were present to judge the case, the village chief being the main judge.

According to Mr. Joysing Terang "An application to conduct a case along with rice-beer and eatables had to be first

submitted to the chief, who would then study the case and also make enquiries about the case. After knowing the case fully, both the parties (complainants and defendants) were called for a meeting. The main idea of the chief was to make them compromise on the case. The guilty party had to pay a fine for its mistakes.

If they could not come to a conclusion, the next step was to go to Meipi or the Great Council consisting of headmen of other villages. If the case was not solved even at this stage, a conclusion was brought about through oath taking.

A priest (Kakre) usually conducted the oath taking ceremony. The person who claimed to be innocent had to take the oath. At the stipulated time, the oath taker had to say: "If I lie, let me turn to dust and die with fire". In another type of oath, the one who had to take the oath bit the tooth of a tiger, to signify that if he had lied, a tiger should bite him when he went out to the jungle. People believed that taking a false oath would lead to serious consequences, including the death of family members. Oath taking was usually resorted to when there was no clear evidence. Oaths are considered a serious matter even today though many of the customs have changed.

Regarding traditional customs about sexual matters, Mr. Chondrosingh Terang Dili says: "Marriage or intercourse among members of the same clan is a taboo in Karbi society". Illicit or tabooed sex is called 'senem', and tabooed sex between persons of the same clan is termed 'kur senem'. Those accused of these violations must be purified and their cases settled. These cases are settled by the Great Council according to the provisions of the Karbi customary law.

It is important to note that in these processes, the parties involved in the dispute are given a fair hearing. Witnesses are also examined. Attempts are made to arrive at an understanding through compromise. Principles of natural

justice are observed. Usually the final decision is accepted and harmony is restored.

Inter-Village and Inter-Tribal Conflicts

Most of the disputes and violations of traditional law that have been explained above are cases and problems within the village. Inter-village conflicts probably never existed because of the nature of the villages. In the past, population was thin and land was easily available for shifting cultivation.

The Karbi have never been a warlike tribe. When there was an attack from outsiders, they preferred to move to interior places. They did not have the practice of head-hunting. But the Karbi seem to have been victims of head-hunting by the neighbouring Angami Nagas. For example, in 1886, in the month of January, the Nagas of the village of Razepemah raided and destroyed a Karbi village in the North Cacher Hills. In the same year, in the month of June, they raided the village of Sergamcha of the Karbi community. They killed twenty six Karbi on this raid. Again in the following winter, the Nagas from Razepemah burnt down a whole village of the Karbi. The Karbis did not retaliate..

Karbi-Kuki Conflict (2003-04)

There are two groups of Kuki living in Karbi Anglong. One group is in some pockets of Hamren sub-division, and the other in the Singhason-Khumbamon hill range of Diphu subdivision. It was mainly the second Kuki group that was involved in the conflict.

Background to the Conflict

The first group of the Kuki was settled in Hamren subdivision for a long time. In the 1960s some of them

migrated to Singhason hill range in search of fertile land for cultivation. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of Kuki came to this place due to conflicts in Nagaland and Manipur. It is said that the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council permitted them to settle in Singhason-Khumbamon hill range. This led to a significant rise in the Kuki population.

With the growth of population, the Kuki desired to have a distinct identity in the form of a Kuki Regional Council (KRC) within Karbi Anglong district. They formed the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in Karbi Anglong. The Karbi perceived this move as a threat to their own identity.

The Karbi leadership had been struggling for a long time to make Karbi Anglong an Autonomous State in Assam. When the response from the Central and Assam Governments was not encouraging, some of the leaders decided to adopt armed struggle as the means to achieve their objectives. The result was the formation of an armed group, United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). This group split later on the issue of holding negotiations with the Government. The faction that opposed negotiations or talks came to be known as Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF). Meantime, the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), which was formed in Manipur to use armed struggle as the means for securing a homeland for the Kuki, became active in the Singhason-Khanbomon area. When the KRA began to levy taxes on the Karbi in Singhason-Khanbomon area, the KLNLF intervened. Thus two militant or extremist groups began to operate in the area.

Phases and Effects of the Conflict

The conflict began in 2003 as skirmishes between the two militant groups. During the first phase there were some incidents of violence between them. During the second phase, which began in January 2004, violence reached its highest level. Extremist

groups as well as common people on both the sides were involved. Villages of both the communities were burnt and innocent people were killed. During the third phase, violence reduced and the conflict was brought under control by deploying the army. However, the conflict continues in a dormant stage.

The Karbi-Kuki conflict has resulted in the loss of hundreds of innocent lives, burning of houses and destruction of villages. The effects of the conflict are much more than economic losses. The social costs are incalculable. Some of the social costs are social disharmony, widespread distrust and an atmosphere of fear.

Karbi-Dimasa Conflict (2005-06)

According to analysts and observers, the Karbi-Dimasa conflict of 2005-06 is mysterious because it cannot be easily explained. Though there were other inter-tribal conflicts earlier, there was no history of the main tribes of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills attacking and killing each other. Hence it is necessary to understand its background.

The Background

The general background of this conflict is the ethnic composition of Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills. The Karbi and the Dimasa have been living in these districts for a long time. Usually they lived in their homogenous villages or in compact areas, they lived in peace and harmony. This harmonious living began to change in recent times.

The immediate background of this conflict can be traced to various political and administrative developments that took place after Independence. One of these was the demand for a separate state consisting of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills made by the ASDC. A later development was the setting up of the two districts of N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong with

distinct Autonomous District Councils. During these developments ethnic consciousness grew among both the Karbi and Dimasa. The situation became more complicated with the emergence of the armed groups in 1990s. Chief among them were the KLNLF and the DHD, especially DHD-J. However, people of different communities continued to live more or less in peace with one another. Then at the beginning of this decade one witnessed some inter-tribal and inter-community conflicts. In 2003 there was the Karbi-Kuki conflict. In early 2005, there was violence involving the Biharis and Adivasis. In August 2005, there was tension between the Karbis and Khasis. Then came the Karbi-Dimasa conflict.

Nature of the Conflict

The conflict erupted suddenly on 26th September. A brief chronological account of the conflict is given in the Appendix.

There are different interpretations of the conflict. The common view was expressed by Upen Ingty, the spokesman of SKA. He stated that a preliminary investigation into the killing had proved that neither the UPDS nor the DHD was involved in starting the conflict. "This is the work of a third party" Ingty said. Without giving any clues to its identity, he said that a third force was trying to create hurdles in the peace talks of the two communities with the Centre. Similarly, Debajit Thausen, JNH spokesman, said that the killings were the handiwork of an external force. It is said that one of the reasons for the conflict was to derail the peace processes. Another reason is said to be an attempt to slow down the process of economic development in Karbi Anglong.

Peace Processes

In restoring peace, the security forces played a role. But much more important was the role played by the Karbi Anglong

leaders and youth organisations. Even in the midst of brutal killings and burning of villages and houses, the leaders of both the communities appealed for peace. They also met and discussed how they could restore peace. Youth organisations too were active in promoting peace and in helping the victims of violence. These peace processes must continue to restore the traditional harmony.

Conclusion

Like other tribal communities in the Northeast, the Karbi have a distinct identity and culture. One of the elements of their culture is the traditional methods of conflict resolution. These methods are summarised below.

Disputes within the village were settled by the village council. The parties involved in the dispute were given a fair hearing. Attempts were made to arrive at an understanding through compromise. Principles of natural justice were observed. Usually the final decision was accepted and harmony was restored. Inter-village conflicts probably never existed because of the nature of the villages.

The Karbi have never been a warlike tribe. When there was an attack from outsiders, they preferred to move away to other places. Hence the traditional method of dealing with conflict with other tribes and communities was simply to go away. Here the leaders ensured the welfare of the community.

Karbi Anglong is known for its ethnic diversity. In the past, different tribes lived in peace and harmony. But in recent times there have been conflicts between them. The Karbi-Kuki conflict was violent. But much more violent was the Karbi-Dimasa conflict. It is said that such violence was unusual in tribal societies in general and the Karbi and Dimasa in particular. Unfortunately, both the tribes had no traditional methods for resolving inter-tribal conflicts. In the past they yielded to the stronger

opponents. However, it is possible to develop new methods of conflict resolution based on traditional practices of dialogue, discussion and compromise in view of the common good.

* * * * *

Acknowledgements

This study is an effort to analyze the Karbi traditional methods of conflict management. I am indebted to NERSC, Guwahati for giving me this opportunity to do such a study in the district. I thank Prof. Alphonsus D'Souza of NERSC who guided me during the study. Dr. Walter Fernandes, Director of NERSC, whose words of encouragement and advice inspired me to do well. I owe a debt of gratitude to Fr. Tom Mangattuthazze, Director, Peace Team and Programme Director of the peace building fellowship programme of Manja. I am also grateful to Miss Sarah Phangchopi, the Peace Team Co-ordinator, who advised me during my field work.

Without my parents' support this work would not have been possible. I am thankful to my family for the faith they placed in me. I am grateful to Mr. Bimol Terang, District Co-ordinator (NGO of OMD), for the orientation course that enabled me to utilise the tools necessary for the completion of the study. He was ready to help me in all my difficulties. I am also thankful to the Staff of the Peace Team of Manja with whom I had the opportunity to discuss and interact while doing the study. I am thankful also to Mr Anil Ekka and Mr Bimol Terang Dili who were always ready to help me with technical suggestions

I am grateful to Mr Radhon Teron of KSA, member of West Karbi Anglong, who helped me during my field work, and introduced me to persons whom I could interview. I am

also thankful to all those who answered my questions during the interviews and shared their opinions without any complaint. I am also grateful to Miss Padmini Langthasa who was my research partner and helped me during the study. And lastly, I thank the Teron family who were my hosts and fed me with good food during my research in West Karbi Anglong.

Sunil Terang Dili

Abbreviations Used

ASDC (P)	Autonomous State Demand Committee (Progressive).
ASDC (U)	Autonomous State Demand (United).
ASDC	Autonomous State Demand Committee.
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).
DDYC	Diphu Diocesan Youth Commission.
DHD	Dima Halam Daogah
DHD-J	Dima Halam Daogah - Jewel Garlossa Faction
KAAC	Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.
KLNLF	Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front.
KNA	Kuki National Assembly.
KNV	Karbi National Volunteers.
KPF	Karbi People's Force.
KRA	Kuki Revolutionary Army.
KSA	Karbi Students' Association.
KSO	Kuki Students' Organisation.
KSYF	Karbi Students' and Youth Forum.
NC Hills	North Kachar Hills.
NEDSF	North East Diocesan Social Forum.
NESRC	North Eastern Social Research Centre.
UCYF	United Christian Youth Forum.
UPDS	United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity.

Appendix Chronology of the Karbi-Dimasa Conflict (2006-06)

(Source: Mangattuthaze 2008: 57-62)

- 26th September:** Three Dimasa auto drivers aged 22, 23 and 35, belonging to Mohendijua Dimasa village near Manja (16 km from Diphu) are abducted and murdered. Their bodies are found at the Karbi majority Ramsapather village. Two autos are recovered and the third is reportedly burnt. Motives or identity of killers are not known.
- 1st October:** Dimasa organisations call a 10 hour bandh in protest against the killings. The bandh is supported by the Karbi Organisations.
- 2nd October:** 5 Karbi males are hacked to death at Phonlangso. They are from another village, but 15 masked gunmen forcibly take them to Phonglangso village, 8 km from Diphu and kill them there.
- The Peace Team and Diphu Citizens' Peace Forum convene a Peace Fellowship to celebrate Gandhi Jayanti by involving all the religious and political leaders in and around Diphu. The inter-faith meeting of more than 1,000 persons is followed by an inter-tribal cultural programme.
- 3rd October:** A 34 hour general strike begins in Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills in protest against the attacks on the Karbi. Emergency meeting of UCF (United Christian Forum) decides to talk to influential people of both communities to urge them to restrain from violence.
- 4th October:** According to police information, four assailants dressed in black went to Mauja Fanchu village, 40 km from Diphu town around 8:30 pm and entered the houses of three villagers aged 20,30,40, and forcibly took them to a nearby jungle and hacked them to death.

A 24-hour bandh is called but ends in 10 hours.

Rockybul Hussain, Assam State Home Minister visits Karbi Anglong. UCF delegation meets him and submits a Memorandum to him urging him to restore normalcy.

5th October: 10 hour bandh called off. The *Jathike Naisho Hasom*, which is the apex organisation of the Dimasa tribe and the DHD blame the UPDS for the killings. The UPDS, which has a ceasefire agreement with Delhi and Dispur, refutes the allegation and accuses the DHD of trying to sabotage the ongoing peace process by killing innocent people and blaming others. The common factor in all three incidents is that firearms were not used.

6th October: UCF meets with North East Joint Peace Team.

7th October: Peace rally is organised by UCF and Somindar Karbi Anei (SKA), the apex body of the Karbi; Memorandum is submitted to the Deputy Commissioner by the SKA. *Jatikhe Naisho Hasom* (JNH), apex body of the Dimasa and Karbi decide to find a solution to the problem through peace talks. SKA spokesman, Upen Ingty states that a preliminary investigation into the killing has proved that neither the UPDS nor the DHD was involved in them. "This is the work of a third party" Ingty said. Without giving any clues to its identity, he says that a third force was trying to create hurdles in the peace talks of the two communities with the Centre. He also added that a special peace drive would be carried out in cooperation with all the leading political and non-political organisations. The JNH spokesman, Debajit Thausen promises full cooperation and says that the killings are the handiwork of an external force.

8th October: More than 500 persons participate in a silent procession of ASDC/ KSA/ KNCA to the office of the Deputy Commissioner, Diphu and submit a memorandum

to the Governor of Assam. Jirsong Asong, other like-minded NGOs, religious and social organisation and schools participated in it.

More than 50 houses in 5 Karbi villages are burnt down at 12:30 am; 6 persons are hacked to death, and a 2-year-old child is burnt to death. At 5.00 pm, 19 houses in Bura Terang and Engti villages are burnt down and 50 houses in Walingdisa and Kothalbari Dimasa villages at 8.00 am. Five villagers are missing.

UCF begins daily review meetings to keep track of incidents and discuss the means for reducing them. ASD, KSA, KNCA and KCA take out a Peace Rally in Diphu.

9th October: Five Karbi villagers, including the village chief and his two sons, are killed at Singh Terang Karbi village, 8 km from Diphu. Their bodies are recovered from Langsoliet. Relief camps set up in KASA stadium and several schools in Diphu since 3,000 Karbi and an equal number of Dimasa flee their villages.

Peace meeting held at Tumpreng at the initiative of Shri Bajong Tisso, Joyram Engleng and Sing Teron, members of the Autonomous Council. Participants include both Karbi and Dimasa. They form a peace committee.

UCF and united Christian Youth Forum (UCYF) appeal for peace and request organisations to desist from calling bandhs. Discussion is also on mobilizing relief materials for the relief camps. Different churches agree to donate food, clothing and money and send their youth as volunteers for relief. Though anger mounts, many from both the sides ask for an amicable solution.

10th October: 336 houses burnt down in Karbi villages and 67 in a Dimasa village. Five Dimasa are killed. Also the Garo from Basbari Garo village in Daldali take shelter in the Rengma Community Hall in Diphu.

DHD leaders hold talks with senior police and intelligence officials about the ongoing situation in Karbi Anglong.

Shri Tarun Gogoi Chief Minister of Assam and Shri P.K. Mahanta, Former Chief Minister visit some affected areas and relief camps. The Chief Minister holds an all party meeting and another meeting of the district administration; announces an enquiry headed by retired Justice Shri P.C. Phukan and an ex-gratia of Rs 3 lakhs to next of kin of the dead and rehabilitation of those whose houses have been gutted. Peace rally organised by CPI (ML), KSA, KNCA and KCS.

The Jirsong Asong team and UCF visit relief camps to find out about the immediate requirements of the people.

11th October: 16,299 people are taking shelter in 31 Relief Camps. The District administration starts distributing essential commodities like food and clothes at the relief camps. A team of health workers visits relief camps and provides treatment to patients.

12th October: 51 Dimasa houses burnt down and one woman killed. The district administration forms a peace mission with representative from student, women's and political organisations. The Assam Sahitya Sabha condemns the violent incidents. Peace rally held at Tumpreng by the Peace Committee.

The number of relief camp goes up to 34 with 21,375 persons in them.

13th October : The peace Mission Team visits many affected areas and relief camps . A team from Jirsong Asong and UCF meets the DC, reports about the relief works undertaken by them and requests him to improve the situation in the camps. The number of relief camps grows to 35 with 20,238 persons.

14th October: Peace Mission under the Commissioner, Hills

and Barak Valley, visits the affected areas. The number of relief camps increase to 37 with 20,280 people.

15th October: 16 houses burnt down. 3 men are feared killed in the attack, 2 women and 2 men injured and 8 persons including 5 women are reported missing. The number of camps grows to 42 with 22,111 persons.

16th October: 69 houses in 3 Karbi villages and 54 houses in 3 Dimasa villages are burnt down.

The ethnic strife takes a turn for the worse with the Bodo community being sucked into it after a Bodo young person dies. Various Bodo organisations react angrily to it and blame the Government's lackadaisical attitude to the strife.

Karbi Anglong DC complains of a shortage of security personnel.

Rockybul Hussain visits Karbi Anglong for the second time and meets various officials to take stock of the situation.

Manja police pick up 38 persons for interrogation. The Karbi apex body, SKA appeals to all organisations in the state to come forward to find a solution to the ongoing violence and promises them full co-operation. SKA also appeals to the state to shift the militant DHD designated camp from Dhansiri. The UPDS publicity secretary Tong Eh Nongloda makes a similar demand. The Government decides to deploy two additional companies of the Central Reserve police Force.

17th October: Two District Council buses are stopped along the Diphu Jirikyndeng road at Charchim at 6.30 a.m. and 70 Karbi passengers are hacked to death and the buses are burnt. A total of 189 Karbis and Dimasa houses burnt down and 12 persons killed. JNH asks the two parties to remember the age old brotherhood and fellowship between the two communities and asks for a halt to violence.

The Christians forum of Dimapur requested all churches to observe 23rd October as a 'day of Prayer'.

The relief camps increase to 45 with 26,429 persons.

18th October: 71 Dimasa houses burnt down.

CPI(ML) representatives submit a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India.

The number of relief camps reaches 46 with 26,842 persons.

19th October: Villagers from 14 Karbi villages in NC HILL District take shelter in relief camps at Kheroni.

7 Karbis are feared killed in NC Hills district and several Dimasa houses in Karbi Anglong are burnt down.

The Assam governor visits the affected areas and some relief camps. The number of relief camps grows to 47 with 26,870 persons.

20th October: About 50 Dimasa houses and 19 Karbi houses burnt down.

The number of relief camps increases to 49 with 42,627 persons.

21st October : Bodies of 9 unidentified persons are recovered in the Hojaiapur area.

An All Party Delegation visits the district and meets representatives of both the communities. Curfew relaxed for 12 hours.

The representatives from ASDC meet the President of India.

22nd October: Five dead bodies are recovered, four of them in army fatigues of UPDS. UPDS Claims that 6 DHD militants were killed in an encounter in the Hojaiapur area. An All Party Peace Team visits Karbi Anglong.

23rd October: UPDS clarifies that it has not declared war on the DHD. Five DHD cadres are arrested near the relief camp at Umrangso in NC Hills.

Delegations of various students' organisations visit the affected areas.

24th October: A four member team representing various NGOs visits Karbi Anglong.

25th October: More than 400 Karbi houses burnt down near Diyungbra in NC Hills. The NC Hills Autonomous Council condemns the killings and violence in Karbi Anglong. The DC of NC Hills has been providing food, shelter and healthcare to about 3,215 inmates, both Karbi and Dimasa at relief camps in the district.

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Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution Adopted by the Lotha Naga Tribe

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This essay is an effort to identify the traditional methods used by the Lotha Nagas to solve social conflicts of various types. The first part of the essay presents a general picture of the tribes of the Naga family. The second part situates the Lotha tribe within the Naga family and presents a general picture of the Lotha. The third part deals with the traditional methods of conflict resolution used by the Lotha Nagas.

1. The Family of Naga Tribes

The mountainous region of North-East India and the adjacent areas of Bangladesh and Myanmar are the home of a large number of ethnic groups or tribes. These tribes belong to different conglomerations or “families”. The Naga tribes constitute one such family.

The Family of Naga Tribes

The Nagas are a group of indigenous peoples belonging to the Mongoloid race, inhabiting the hilly areas of the North

Eastern Indian State of Nagaland and the contiguous areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur in India as also in Myanmar (Burma). The habitat of the Nagas is a compact area extending over 47,000 sq. miles and a population of approximately 3.5 million (Shikhu 2007:1). It is generally accepted that the word "Naga" is a generic term referring to the group of tribes who inhabit this area (Venuh 2005: 7).

The Nagas are Mongoloids like the Burmese, Indonesians, Thais, Japanese and the Chinese. The Nagas also have close affinities with other tribes like the Kuki and Chin peoples who inhabit the areas around the habitat of the Nagas. But the Nagas are quite distinct from them as they have a different history, culture and ethnic identity (Yonuo 1974: ix-xi).

The origin of the term "Naga" has been a matter of debate among researchers and scholars because the term appears to have been given by others and not coined by the Nagas themselves. However, most Naga scholars feel that the first reference to the word "Naga" was made in the second century by Claudius Ptolemy, a Greek philosopher and historian in his *Geographia* volume VII, II, 18 as "Nagaloï" meaning "the realm of the naked" (Sanyu 1996: 7). The term came into common usage during the British rule. It became popular and gained currency after the rise of the Naga Club in 1918. It is now in universal use.

There are various explanations about the origin of the word "Naga". Some have said that word "Naga" is derived from the Sanskrit word "nag" which means "snake" or "snake worshippers". This explanation has been rejected because there is no trace of snake worship in the history of the Nagas. Many scholars say that the word "Naga" is derived from the Sanskrit word "nanga" or "naga" meaning "naked", or "mountain" respectively. This explanation seems to satisfy some people because the Nagas are highlanders or hill men, and also have a history of being semi-naked. However, the mountain theory suffers from a logical

incoherency because not all the hill men in the area are Nagas. In fact, there are several other hill tribes in the region. Another explanation is that the “Naga” is an adaptation of the Assamese word “Noga” meaning “naked”. This explanation can be dated back to the thirteenth century in the historical records of Assam called *Buranjis*. In reference to this term, Hokishe Sema (1986: 4) writes, “originally the word Naga was used for the naked people of the hills who often came in contact with the people of the plains in Assam”. Some say that word “Naga” is derived from the Burmese word “naka”, which means, “people with pierced ears”. This view is accepted by some people because piercing of the ear lobes was a widespread practice among the Nagas who loved to wear flowers and vines as pendants from the ear lobes.

All the explanations given so far are based on words used by outsiders or non-Nagas. But there are some who think that the word “Naga” was used by the Nagas themselves as an expression of their self-identity. Among other explanations, Horam (1975:25-26) seems to indicate that the name “Naga” has its origin in the Tangkhul Naga language. In that language the word “naokhoka” means “a brave child”, and in the course of time, “naokhoka” became “naokha”. When people came in contact with the Ahoms of Assam, the Ahoms pronounced the word “naokha” in their own peculiar way, leading to the emergence of the word “Naga” (Shimray 1985: 40). Whatever the theory or explanation, the fact is that every one of the explanations given above describes some aspect of the character and behaviour of the Nagas.

Origin and Migration

The origin and migration pattern of the Nagas remain shrouded in mystery despite extensive research done by scholars. However, the majority of the scholars say that the Nagas are of Sino-Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burmese origin. It is generally

believed that in the remote past, various ethnic groups of the Mongoloid stock were sparsely scattered in the vast area that is today known as China, Mongolia and Korea. In course of time, some of these people are said to have migrated in stages. The Nagas are believed to have been among those who followed the southern direction passing through Yunnan province of China, Thailand and Burma to reach their present habitat (Vashum 1996: 68). It is likely that separate groups of these people migrated at different times and entered their present habitat in waves of close succession. This can be seen from the various myths and legends of origin.

It is interesting to note that every Naga tribe has its own version of its origin and patterns of migration. Going by the legends, one can form a rough idea that most of the Nagas trace their origin to Makhel (or "Mekhoromia" in Angami) meaning "the place of departure", or its adjacent area. Makhel is located in the Mao area of the present Manipur State, about 20 kilometres from Kohima. The legends of the Angamis, Chakhesangs, Rengmas, Semas, Lothas, Tangkhuls, (including Somra Nagas), Maos, Marams, Thangals, Marings and even Meiteis (Manipuris) point to Makhel or its adjacent areas as their original place (Horam 1975:27-34). Some Naga tribes identify other places of origin. The Ao Nagas claim that they lived in Chungliyimti village before migrating to other villages.

Though it is not possible to determine the exact date of migration and settlement of the different Naga tribes, there is adequate historical evidence to prove that the Nagas were living in their present habitat or territory even before the Christian era. According to Shimmi (1988: 45) the first historical mention of the Nagas dates back to as early as 2500 B.C. - 2000 B.C. when the Hindu epics were composed because these epics mention the presence of Mongoloids in India. The second reference can probably be traced back between late 100 B.C.

and A.D. 100 by the Greeks when they visited Western and South India. The early third mention of the term "Naga" can be found in the historical records of the Chinese pilgrim Huang Tsang in A.D. 645 when he visited Assam. These references show that the Nagas have been living in their present habitat for a very long time.

The British first came in contact with the Nagas in 1832 and after a long period of resistance, finally took full control of the administration of the Naga Hills in 1880. When the British left in 1947, the Naga territory came to be known as the Naga Hills district of Assam State. On December 1st 1963, Nagaland became the 16th full-fledged State of the Indian Union. Today Nagaland has 11 districts: Kohima, Dimapur, Mokokchung, Wokha, Zunheboto, Mon, Phek, Tuensang, Kiphire, Peren and Longleng (Shikhu 2007: 3).

Tribes and dialects

It is estimated that there are at least 45 Naga tribes living in the four states of North- East India and Myanmar. Each of these tribes living in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal, and Myanmar, has its own name and language or dialect. Unfortunately names of some of the minor tribes are not recorded. According to official records and the Census of India, the Naga tribes living in Nagaland are: Ao, Angami, Chakesang, Chang, Khiamnungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Yimchungre, and Zeliang. In Arunachal state, the Naga tribes like Tangsa, Wancho and Nocte live in Tirap district. The Naga tribes in the four districts of Manipur are Thangkhol, Thangal, Mao, Maram, Poumai, Anal, Kabui and Zeliangrong (which is the combination of Zemi, Liangmai and Rongmai tribes living in a compact area). In Myanmar such Naga tribes as Western Konyak, Khiamnungan, Tikir, Chiir, Mokaware, Phellungri, Mimmi and Sangphuri live

in the Chin states. There are also many Naga villages in Assam with a large territory, though many of these villages are occupied by tea gardens.

According to the Census of India, in 2001 the total number of Nagas living in Nagaland was 1,741,692. They belonged to different tribes as given in Table 1.

Table 1. Population of Naga Tribes in Nagaland (2001)

Name of Tribe	Population
1. Angami	124,696
2. Ao	231,823
3. Chakhesang	134,646
4. Chang	60,885
5. Chirr	19
6. Khiemnungan	38,137
7. Konyak	243,758
8. Lotha	148,210
9. Phom	115,389
10. Pochury	15,908
11. Rengma	50,966
12. Sangtam	83,714
13. Sema	241,806
14. Tikhir	10,377
15. Yimchungre	75,983
16. Zeliang	71,871
17. Naga*	79,273
18. Unclassified Naga	14,231

* Those who wrote their tribe name 'Naga'.

Source: Census of India 2001. Nagaland: Data Highlights :
The Scheduled Tribes.

Though all the Nagas have Mongoloid features there are differences in minute details between the tribes. Because of such differences it is possible to distinguish the people of one tribe from those of others tribes. Apart from such physical differences, there are differences in dress and culture, and especially in languages and dialects.

Languages and Dialects

Every Naga tribe has its own language, though some of them are often classified as dialects. Philologists categorise the Naga languages as belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. All the Naga tribes have their own language or established dialect. There are however some variations to be found even within a tribe. For example, the Ao language has four dialects, namely, Mongsen, Chungli, Chanki and Merinakpu, though Chungli is their official language. The multiplicity of Naga languages is mainly because of the living conditions of the past when villages were isolated, and there was little friendly communication between them. The Naga languages within Nagaland are divided into three groups:

1. The Western sub-group which comprises Angami, Sema, Rengmas and Chakhesang language.
2. The Central sub-group which comprises Ao, Lotha and Phom languages.
3. The Eastern sub-group that is made up of Chang and Konyak languages.

Nagamese, a mixture of Assamese, Bengali and Nepali is the common dialect of the Nagas in Nagaland. It has no script and does not follow strict rules of grammar. Nagamese has been useful to the Nagas for the purpose of daily activities. In the early part of 2003, an article about the Naga script appeared in *Nagaland Post*, a daily newspaper, asking the public for suggestions and recommendations for creating a distinct script

for Naga languages. But unfortunately, there was no response from the people.

Distinctive Features of Naga Tribes

Each Naga tribes has its own established norms and traditions, has its own colourful dresses, dances and festivals. In the past Naga society was basically rural in character. The Nagas lived in villages and thus remained isolated from the rest of the world. Therefore, they kept their culture intact until the arrival of the British and of Christianity in the 19th century. Community spirit was the bond that knit together the entire social life of the Nagas. It was a society with high standards of honesty, sincerity and truthfulness.

The main occupation of the Nagas is agriculture. They practise two methods of cultivation, namely, wet terrace cultivation and jhuming or shifting cultivation. Their main food crop is rice. But they also grow crops like potato, sweet potato, garlic, sugarcane, barley, cotton, beans, maize, millet, ginger, and different spices. Though rice is their staple food, the Nagas are generally non-vegetarian in their food habits.

The traditional religion of the Nagas is said to be animism. But a large section of them have embraced Christianity. Religion permeates all aspects of life. In traditional tribal societies such as that of the Nagas, there were no irreligious people (Shikhu 2007: 11). Though they did not have written scriptures, their religion was engraved in their hearts and minds. Therefore, each individual, family, clan and village was a living creed. The traditional Naga religion, unlike the world religions, had neither a founder nor a great historical person as a central figure. In order to express their awe towards supernatural beings, their fascination with the mystery of existence, fear, pain, and terror, the Naga tribes practiced religion in the form of animism. Their beliefs were expressed through their worship of nature and

natural phenomena and through their faith in the power of magic and omens (Sema 1986: 35).

According to J. P. Mills (1973: 176), the real political units in the Naga tribes are the villages. In the past, each village was independent and had its own administrative system or village council that dealt with all the aspects of community life such as politics, social customs, economy and even religion. The village administrative system was self-governing under the village council. The village council of elders had representatives of different clans, and the number of representatives depended on the population of the clans. This representative character of the council and the selection of the chief is a proof of the democracy practised by the Nagas. The council dealt with all matters including the settlement of disputes in the village. For this reason J. P. Mills considers the Nagas as republican by nature (Shimray 1985: 240).

Though democratic and republican by nature, in the past the pattern of administration and chieftainship differed between the Naga tribes. For the Ao and Lotha the warrior became the village chief. It was neither through appointment nor election, but on the basis of his capability of being powerful and influential or for his ability to collect the largest number of human heads through head hunting. Thus being powerful and superior, he could invade the neighbouring villages resulting in enmity, vengeance or complete breakdown of inter-village relationships. On the other hand, the village under his administration was well knit together. Customs and discipline were rigidly maintained and adhered to by every member. He could not be removed or impeached by the general public unless his capability diminished in a significant manner.

In tribes like the Angami, Rengma, Chakhesang and Zeliang, the chief did not have absolute power over the people. He was just a nominal head. He had no power except that he had to be consulted in all religious matters and in calling public

meetings (Venuh 2005: 18). He also had no real power to collect revenue. The village was controlled and administered by a group of people like the warriors, the oldest men and the priest along with the representatives from the clans. Among the Sema and Konyak, the chief known as the “Angh” was the most powerful man in the village. Among the Sema, the chief was the ruler and founder of the village, or a descendent of the chief because chieftainship was hereditary. This is why when a person with outstanding abilities wanted to establish his authority or had a difference with the chief of his village, he went away from the village and established a new village. Among the Konyak, the Angh was the supreme head of the community and had the political power to rule the people. As among the Sema, Anghship among the Konyaks was hereditary and inter marriage was possible only between the clans of the Anghs. It was the responsibility of the Angh to keep his territory in peace and justice, initiate war or conclude a peace treaty with his enemies. His word was final in case of disputes of any nature. His power was highly autocratic.

2. The Lotha Nagas

The Lotha are one of the 16 major tribes living in Nagaland. The etymology of the word “Lotha” is clearly not known. One only knows that they call themselves “Kyon”. According to the Census of India, the number of Lothas living in Nagaland in 2001 was 148,210. Though the traditional habitat of the Lotha is Wokha district, many of them live outside the district, both within Nagaland and outside.

Origin

The Lotha are known by different names among the other Naga tribes. The neighbouring Sema (Sumi) of Zunheboto

district call them “Chuwami” (the ones who preceded). This word indicates the sequence of migration of the Lotha and the Sumi. According to one story the ancestors of the Lotha, Sumi, Rengma and the Angami had together migrated from Burma and entered the Mao area of Manipur. They stayed at Kezakenoma village of that area for a long time and later migrated to the Kohima region, where they were divided into two tribal segments. The Angami pushed the Lotha to their present place (Singh 1994: 112).

The Habitat

Wokha district of Nagaland is the traditional home of the Lotha. It is situated in the mid-western part of Nagaland. The district is bounded by the districts of Mokokchung in the north, Zunheboto in the east, Kohima in the south and the state of Assam (Asom) in the west. Geographically, it is located in the heart of Nagaland with easy access to the neighbouring regions like Kohima (Capital of Nagaland), Mokokchung, Zunheboto, and Merapani (Asom).

The whole district is mountainous in terrain. The topography of the district is more or less similar to that of other districts in Nagaland, having hill ranges and ridges dissected by seasonal streams. The altitude ranges from 303.3 mtrs to 1313.67 mtrs. The highest mountain peak is Tiyi Enung, with an altitude of 1970 mtrs. Important rivers which flow through the district are Doyang, Chubi, Nzhu and Nruk. The district lies in a seismically active earthquake zone. The climate is warm in the lower plain areas, moderately warm in the upper region during summer but cold in winter. The monsoon season starts in May and continues till October. The annual rainfall varies from 200 cms. to 250 cms.

The district is divided into three ranges. They are: 1) Wokha Range or Upper Range, which falls in the upper north eastern

parts of the district; 2) Sanis Range or Middle Range, which covers the middle part of the district; 3) Bhandari Range or Lower Range. It is the outermost part of the district and extends from the Japukong range of Mokokchung district and gradually slopes down to the Assam plains in the north western side. Two of the most fertile valleys are in this range and they are the Baghty and Tchiying valleys.

Demographic features

The total population of the district in 2001 was 161,223 of whom 83,670 were males and 77,553 females. The sex ratio was 927. The literacy rate was 80.55, with 85.35 for males and 75.32 for females. However, educational levels were not very high as only 5,988 or 5.34 percent of the literates were graduates.

The entire district is classified as rural, having 107 recognised villages with VDB, though according to the Census of 2001, there were 128 inhabited villages. The rural population was 123,587 (76.66% of the total). The only urban centre was Wokha Town, the district Headquarters.

153,983 persons or 95.51 percent of the total population was tribal. As can be expected, 131,203 (85.21%) were Lothas and the rest belonged to other Naga tribes.

155,009 persons or 96.15 percent of the population of the district were Christians. There were some Hindus and Muslims. Nearly all the Lothas have embraced Christianity, though they belong to different denominations.

Appearance, Language and Culture

Like other Nagas, the Lothas have Mongoloid features. The colour of their skin is generally dark brown and a few of them are yellowish in colour. A majority of the Lotha have high nose, oblique eyes and straight hair but no beard. The Lothas

are generally slim and moderately tall, and women, as usual, are a little shorter than men.

The language that the Lothas speak among themselves is "Lotha", also known as "Kyonyi". This language has no dialectical variations, except for minor differences between the Upper Lotha and the Lower Lotha. This is not the case with Ao, which has significant variations between regions. With others Lothas speak Nagamese, which is a simplified form of Assamese. Many Lothas who have studied Hindi at school also use Hindi for communicating with outsiders. The educated class can converse in English fluently.

There are some cultural differences between the Lothas living on the three ranges but such internal differences are not very significant. In general, the lifestyle of the Lotha Nagas is simple yet fascinating. It is simple because of their simple understanding of life, fascinating because their traditions are undergoing changes due to modernisation and westernisation. The staple diet of the Lothas consists of rice, bamboo-shoots of various types, fermented or dried fish, yam, vegetables, and meat, which is a delicacy. Food is mostly boiled and spices are rarely used.

Agriculture and Land

Most of the Lothas living in the villages depend on agriculture. The traditional method of agriculture is shifting cultivation, though some have begun terrace cultivation. However, given the nature of the land with steep slopes, shifting cultivation dominates. The main crops are rice, maize, and a variety of vegetables. Fruits like oranges, passion fruit and pineapples are also grown.

There are four types of land with regard to ownership: 1) village land which is owned by the village, 2) khel land owned by a khel or a particular clan, 3) family land owned by a family

which is passed from father to son and so on, and, 4) individual land owned by an individual.

Social Organisation

Every Lotha village is an independent unit, but leagues of villages were formed in the past for purposes of war. In the past, each village was ruled by the village chief known as the "Tongti" with the assistance of the village elders. Mills (1922: 96) observes that in some villages the chiefs had the privilege of free labour of the villagers for cultivating their fields. The chieftainship was hereditary in the family of the man who originally founded the village. But chieftainship had practically ceased already during the British period and the village came to be ruled by a group of elders (Mills 1922: 96).

Among the Lothas, there are no specified hierarchical divisions and no caste-like system of social stratification. The community is divided into phratries and clans. They are also divided into two territorial divisions, the Northern Lothas and the Southern Lothas. Some minor dialectical and cultural differences are observed between them. Among the different clan groups, no specific economic and religious relations are maintained. The clans however regulate marriage relations. As a majority of the Lothas have become Christians, many of the old religious practices and customs have been abandoned.

The Morung

As in other Nagas tribes, the bachelors' dormitory known as *Morung* played a very important role in the life of the people. Boys and girls had different Morungs. The Morung was the home and the school for the youth. It was the learning hub where the youth learnt life skills, warfare skills, dances, singing and so on. They learnt the realities of life and the way they should face life as adults. Most of the social relations between

peers were established during their stay in the Morung. This system has changed and modern educational institutions have taken the place of the Morung.

Marriage, Family and Status of Women

The Lotha follow monogamy and clan exogamy. Rules about marriage are strictly followed. In the past there seems to have been the practice of marriage by service in which a boy served the family of his prospective bride before marriage took place (Singh 1994: 113-114).

The nuclear family is the norm. The older sons establish independent households when they marry. The youngest son continues to stay with the parents even after his marriage and inherits a major portion of the property. The head of the family is respected, feared and obeyed. Thus the system was patrilineal and strongly patriarchal.

The position of women was high. Women had almost equal status with men in society because in every field of physical and domestic work, their work was of equal value. In fact, women worked more than men. There was no discrimination against women at home. But in matters of social activities such as village administration, settling feuds and establishing peace with others, women generally did not take part. Things are changing gradually and women are beginning to take part in various social activities. They have their own associations of various types based on their needs and welfare. Some have taken up modern professions, and have even contested Assembly elections.

As already indicated above, Lotha society has been changing especially in recent times because of modernisation. Conversion to Christianity has been a major factor of change. Despite the changes, old traditions and traditional values continue to exert an influence on people and their behaviour. It is with this

background that we examine the conflict situations and traditional methods and institutions for conflict resolution.

4. Conflict Situations and Remedial Measures of the Past

Conflict is universal and is found wherever people live in groups: in the family, neighbourhood, community and society. Conflicts take different forms like disagreements, disputes, quarrels and clashes, with or without violence. Whatever their form, conflicts are harmful because they lead to disharmony, tension and even destruction. Therefore, like conflicts, methods or mechanisms for resolving conflicts are also universal. In modern societies important mechanisms for dealing with conflict are law enforcing agencies like the police and the courts. But before the establishment of modern courts of law, most societies, especially tribal communities, had their own mechanisms and institutions for resolving conflicts. We shall look at the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms of the Lotha Naga tribe.

Nature of the Present Study

Information on the traditional mechanisms and processes of conflict resolution among the Lothas has been collected from various sources. Writings of Hutton (1969) and Mills (1980) have been helpful because of the vast amount of information they provide. Similarly writings of Naga scholars like Horam (1975), Shimray (1985) and Yuonuo (1974) give valuable information. Much more significant have been recent official records and writings. However, the most important sources of information for this study have been various persons who were interviewed in the course of the fieldwork. Some of them were interviewed formally and others informally. These were

knowledgeable persons, elders, those who knew about customary laws, laymen, and even those who were convicted under customary laws. Basically this study deals with the traditional methods of conflict resolution. But an effort has been made to explain the changes that have taken place in these methods due to the forces of modernisation and recent developments.

Traditional Institutions

Prior to the coming of the British and the establishment of their administration, the Lothas had an efficient village-centred administration of their own. In every village, there was a body of elders known as “Tongti” representing every khel in the village. They were also known as “Ephyo-Esan” (spokesmen) of the village. They were responsible for the maintenance of law and order and the dispensing of justice. Any problem or dispute in the village or with other villages was settled by these elders.

In settling disputes and resolving conflicts, the elders followed the local customary laws. At the village level, the customary law was almost supreme, though in some cases the customary courts dealt with issues outside the preview of customary laws and norms. The present study covers only limited areas selected mainly to understand the traditional processes and designs of dealing with conflict situations and to see whether they can be used at present. We shall briefly examine the traditional or customary design in areas like marriage and family, divorce, conflict over land and natural resources, fighting, cheating, robbery, killings and abduction. These areas have economic, social, political and religious dimensions.

Family Conflicts

The term “family conflicts” here is used in a comprehensive sense. It refers to all the negative and disruptive things that happen in a family. These could be misunderstandings, tensions, envy,

jealousy, quarrels, verbal exchanges and physical fights. Such conflicts can exist between husband and wife, parents and children and between siblings. They are found everywhere.

Among the Lotha when such conflicts arise, the head of the family deals with them. The Lotha have the patriarchal system. The head of the family is revered, feared and respected by all the members of the family. He is expected to be fair to all the members of the family. Therefore his decision is accepted without any question. Besides, family quarrels are kept secret by most of family members because exposing such conflicts to outsiders brings a bad name to the family. Hence the members of a family seldom report such conflicts to the elders of the clan or of the village.

There may be cases when a family conflict is reported to the elders. In such cases, the elders listen to the parties involved in the conflict. They also investigate matters. Then they give a decision which is binding. Such decisions usually involve warnings and fines. The fines vary according to the gravity of the matter.

Conflicts Based on Divorce and Extramarital Relations

In Lotha society divorce was recognised, but unlike marriage it did not involve any ceremony. Divorce could be on such grounds as infidelity, barrenness or simply incompatibility. Whatever be the cause of divorce, it was intimately connected with the refund of the bride price depending on the merit of the case (Ghosh: 1979: 42). It was also dealt with in the village community, by the families concerned or by the council of elders.

If the wife went away of her own volition, she or her parents did not get back any part of the bride price. It may be noted that there was no bride-price in the strict sense, but the groom had to work in the fields of his would be father-in-law for one year. He also had to bear the entire cost of the marriage. In case

the wife went away for no fault of her husband, she would have to repay the cost of the marriage to her erstwhile husband. If the wife went back to her parents, they would have to make the payment. If the husband drove away his wife because of her infidelity, then she would get only a small amount of money from her husband as divorce cost, but the husband would get back a part of his marriage expenses. If she went away with her paramour, naturally he would bear the cost. However, in some villages her second marriage had to be recognised by her erstwhile husband because of the traditions of those villages. In the Lotha tradition, each village has a set of local traditions and practices known as "Yanthi", which literally means the "fruit of the village". The "Yanthi" of some villages gave the erstwhile husband the moral authority not to recognise the second marriage of his erstwhile wife. It was not mandatory for the erstwhile husband to exercise this authority. But the fact that such an authority was given to him in cases when a woman went away with a paramour, even after making the payment of the costs of the marriage, the erstwhile husband was seen as the wronged party in the divorce.

If the wife left her husband due to his infidelity or incompatibility or for any other reason which was not her fault, she would get back her personal properties such as clothes, ornaments, weaving apparatus, agricultural implements, etc. But she did not get any other property. If the husband deserted his wife for no fault of hers, he would have to pay a heavy fine which was settled through discussion between the two families.

All cases of marital infidelity on the part of the woman did not end in divorce. There were cases when the husband reported the matter to the council of elders. The council summoned both the parties on a specific date, and inquired into the matter in great detail. If the council came to the conclusion that the wife

was indeed guilty of infidelity, it imposed a suitable punishment on the guilty woman in the form of a fine on her family.

Extramarital relations on the part of a man could be with a married woman or with an unmarried woman. More important is the case of a married man indulging in extramarital relations with an unmarried girl. If the relationship does not result in having a child, nothing really happens except disquiet at home and some social scorn. But if a child or children are born, the man may take the woman into his family and give her the status of his second wife, or the girl may live as an unmarried mother and claim the cost of bringing up the children.

In some villages, if an unmarried girl gives birth to a child, she is blamed for the inglorious and infamous situation. Anyway, cases of unmarried mothers or widows giving birth to children are found in the Lotha society, though they are not very common. Unmarried mothers and illegitimate children are not looked down upon by their society.

A case of extramarital relations may be settled by the families concerned, and usually ends up with imposing fines. In many villages a fine is levied in the form of money. The amount to be paid as a fine is not fixed. It varies according to the gravity of the offence. In some villages a fine may be in the form of livestock. In the past money was a very valuable asset because it was very hard to earn. It was also rare and hence it became all the more difficult to have money even if one was willing to work for it. In such circumstances, it was very difficult to pay fines in the form of money. Thus a fine was a strong deterrent, and a heavy punishment imposed on an offender for his or her wrong doings. If a person was unable to pay the fine, his belongings or property could be confiscated.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that in former times any conflict arising due to marriage, extramarital relations and divorce were settled in the following manner.

1. They were settled within the community. Efforts were made to find a solution first at the level of the families concerned, and then at the level of the council of elders.
2. The traditions of the village and local customary laws were followed.
3. The guilty party was punished through restitution of expenses and fines, which could be in cash or kind.

Two factors have brought about changes. The first is the conversion to Christianity. The second factor of change is the introduction of new systems of administration after the formation of the State of Nagaland. At present most Lotha Nagas are Christian and do not easily go in for divorce. Divorce is an option, but is disapproved by the Church, and for that matter, by their society as a whole. It is treated as a social evil and can result in ex-communication from the Church. Civil society including the custodians of the customary laws, tend to impose some fines. The traditional law prevails over the new administrative and legal institutions. Thus, in practice conflicts in this area are now not common and when they do occur, they are usually resolved through traditional institutions and processes.

Stealing, Robbery, Cheating

Stealing, robbery and cheating are found in all societies, though the level of their occurrence varies. Consequently every society has mechanisms and institutions to deal with them. Lotha society too had its customary rules and regulations, mechanisms and processes to deal with stealing and robbery.

When there was a case of stealing or robbery, it was usually the victim who took the initiative in seeking justice for the wrong done to him. The victim approached the elders or the custodians of customary laws or the customary court known as "Yitso ki". The elders of the customary court or Yitso ki were people well versed in customary laws and practices. They settled disputes or

resolved conflicts sometimes as individuals and at other times as a body depending on the complexity of the matter which they were dealing with. As far as possible, the elders of the Yitso ki tried their best to avoid any flaws while passing their verdict. This was because a wrong judgment was powerful enough to ruin the life of the person adjudged guilty and destroy the reputation and good name of his or her family.

When a victim of robbery approached the elders of the Yitso ki, the elders summoned the offender to appear before them within seven days. At the hearing, the victim was given the first chance to place or submit his/her grievances before the elders of the Yitso ki. The members of the Yitso ki noted each and every detail of the aggrieved. They tried to find out whether there was any other animosity between the two parties before the situation took place and for which the victim lodged complaint against the offender. After this, the offender was given due time to present his/her standpoint and justify his/her action(s). If the offender was found to be guilty, the offender was made to pay the victim the value of the articles stolen. Besides, some fines were also imposed. The amount of the fine depended on the gravity of the offence. Also the amount of fine imposed varied from village to village. The guilty was also warned with further severe action if he/she was caught with similar actions in the future.

Here is an actual case that took place in a village. A man was caught stealing water pipes. The court summoned him for interrogation and found him guilty of stealing and spoiling the name of the village. He was fined an amount of Rs.250/- with the warning that if he committed the same crime, he would be fined Rs.500/-. He accepted the verdict and promised not to commit the same mistake again.

If the offender did not answer the summons of the Yitso ki elders within the stipulated time given to him/her, his/her

fine would be doubled. Further, because of his failure to answer the summons, he/she would be made to pay a fine for the contempt of the Yitso ki.

If a person got into the habit of stealing even after being warned several times, he/she was dealt with more severely. Some villages banished the culprit from the village, other villages imposed a very high fine, and in some village, a special ritual was conducted for the culprit in order to make him/her give up the habit of stealing.

This ritual or ceremony is known as “Pungrum”. This ceremony was not found in all the Lotha villages. Where it existed it was performed according to the “Yanthi” of the village. It was a scary ceremony and was performed by the elders of the village. The ceremony began by selecting a huge pig. It was slaughtered in the kitchen of the culprit. Then the pig was cut into pieces without removing the hair. The pieces were distributed among the elders of the village. Children and youngsters were forbidden to eat the meat out of fear that they might inherit the bad habit of the culprit. This ceremony was performed for various reasons. In the first place, it was to condemn the wrongdoings of the culprit. Secondly, it was to scare him so that he would mend his ways out of fear. Thirdly, it was believed that such a ceremony took away the wrong habit of stealing from the thieves. Lastly it was done in order to make it an example to others so that they would not commit the same misdeeds.

Murder, Killings and Related Actions

Killings, murder and other violent acts have always been strongly condemned by the Lotha culture and tradition except in times of war. Consequently such crimes are very rare in Lotha society. But if they did take place, they were severely dealt with.

Intentional killings were taken very seriously by the members of the victim’s family. However the members of the

victim's family might or might not report the matter to the elders of the Yitso ki for action to be taken against the culprit(s). It was possible for the matter to be solved amicably by both the parties. However, more often than not, the matter was reported to the Yitso ki for justice.

If the crime was committed intentionally, the punishment was very high. The offender, and in some cases, the entire family of the offender, was asked to leave the locality and the village for a specific period or even permanently. The guilty were condemned by the entire society and no mercy was shown to him/her. He/she became unwelcome in the entire society. If a person was killed inadvertently, for example in the course of hunting, fishing, playing, etc, the matters could be settled by the families of both the parties (the victim's and the offender's). As far as possible, the members of both families tried to settle the whole affair between themselves. But if they were not satisfied with the settlement, they proceeded to the Yitso ki for justice. In some villages like Longsa, whether one was killed intentionally or not, the matter was referred to the Yitso ki. The Yitso ki in this case consisted of the elders of the village who were either selected or came from the hereditary lines of such elders. They listened to the plea of both the parties and then decided on their penalties.

The usual punishment for murder was excommunication or expulsion of the guilty person the village. Both the families did not exchange raw meat and did not dine together fearing that if they did so, various types of evil would befall on them. This practice was common among all the Lotha Nagas. According to the proceedings of the general meeting convened on the 30th of January 2009 by the Baghty Town Council, if anyone was found guilty of killing or murder, he/she should be expelled from the Town for 10 consecutive years and pay a fine of Rs 500/-.

The excommunication and expulsion from the village or its locality is a very serious matter. This kind of penalty evolved from the idea that if one is banished from one's own village or area, he/she will have no protection whatsoever. In former times, when tribal warfare was continuous, an exiled person became an easy target for hostile head hunters. There was also the danger of being exposed to wild animals. Thus expulsion was, in practice, equivalent to the capital punishment of the present day. It was also an indirect elimination of the guilty for the offence committed by him/her.

It is very hard for a person to become a member of another clan or village. A person cannot be simply admitted or welcomed by another clan or village. In former times, it was believed that evil times or things would befall the clan or the village. In case a clan or village decided to welcome a newcomer, they would have to perform various rituals. One such ritual was passing through the fire. The host clansmen would gather at a place and make a huge fire and the person to be welcomed into the clan would have to strip off all his/her belongings and jump above the burning fire from one side to the other. This would be followed by other rituals and chants. Only then the host clan or the family would accept him/her as a new member of the family or of the clan. In recent times, because of Christianity and modernisation, these rituals have been given up. All the same, even today expulsion is a serious matter. Expulsion is treated as the most extreme penalty but is less commonly found.

Conflicts based on Land and Natural Resources

Land and other natural resources are valued and treasured by the people. The major economy of the people, which is agriculture, rests on land itself. Forest, water sources, streams, stones etc., are some of the natural gifts that people enjoy. In the past, most of the inter-tribal conflicts were connected with

land, either snatching land from others or defending their land from aggressors because land and other natural resources were their very existence.

As noted earlier, among the Lotha there are four types of land with regard to ownership: 1) village land which is owned by the village, 2) khel land owned by a khel of a particular clan, 3) family land owned by a family which is passed from father to son and so on, and, 4) individual land owned by an individual.

Village land is owned by the village as a whole, and all the products and things produced from the village land are used and shared by the villagers. House building materials and other things which are of general use of the villagers are taken from the village land. In most cases, the Village Council takes care of the village land.

Clan land is owned by a clan. In almost all the established villages of the Lotha Nagas, every clan has its own land. It is controlled by a few representatives from among the members of the clan or by the head of the particular clan. The produce of the land is for the use of the members of that particular clan. Others may use the products of this land but only with due permission from the head or whoever is put in charge to look after the land.

The system of family land is an important element in Lotha tradition and has been in existence from time immemorial. Every family has its own piece of land which it has received from the ancestors. Family land is handed down from one generation to the next, along the male line. At the death of the father, the family land is divided among the sons. If a family has only one son, all the family land is inherited by him. If the family has no male offspring, then the closest members of the family related through clan and blood inherit the land. Daughters are not entitled to any share of the land and immovable properties. In recent times, there has been a significant change in this matter. Some parents have begun to give a share of their land to

daughters. This is usually done by the head of the family to show his love and care for his daughter(s). But this act is not traditional and hence cannot be taken as a part of the Lotha tradition and customs

Conflicts Based on Land

Conflicts based on land and natural resources are more common than any other type of conflicts. We shall study some cases where conflicts broke out over land and other natural resources and see how they were resolved.

Case Study 1

In a village, a man had a plot of land bordered by two small streams. A dispute broke out between him and his neighbour when an approach road was being constructed. While cutting the road, loose soil filled up the small streams and the traditional boundary was obliterated. This led to confusion between the owners of the two plots about the demarcation of the boundary. Both sides marked their own boundaries and each one claimed that his boundary was the actual one. Thus a conflict broke out between the two neighbours.

As neither of them was ready for a compromise, the Village Council decided to intervene in the settlement of the dispute. The members of the Village Council and some villagers inspected the land. After carefully inspecting the land, the Chairman of the Council asked all the men who were present to stand holding each others' hands along the edge of the loose soil. This human chain was taken as the boundary dividing the two neighbours' land. This was accepted by the two disputing neighbours.

If the two disputing parties had refused to accept the verdict passed by the Council, they would have to go through the oath-taking ceremony. This is a very solemn traditional ceremony. In this ceremony, the party in the dispute that does not accept the

verdict of the Council, bites a sacred object and swears that his position is the correct one. Among the Lotha Nagas, the sacred object in this case is the tooth of a tiger. Like other tribals, the Lothas hunt wild animals, including tigers. When they hunt a tiger they extract the tooth to be preserved as a prized and sacred object. In the oath taking ceremony, the person taking the oath, holds the object between his teeth, invokes the spirits of his ancestors, and asserts that his position is correct and just. The implication is that if he makes a false claim, he will be killed by a tiger. It is believed that if he makes a false claim, he and his family will, sooner or later, suffer various types of misfortunes like sickness and even death. This ceremony is so solemn and serious that young people, especially children, are not permitted to come anywhere close to the place where the ceremony takes place. An oath taking or swearing ceremony is the final and irrevocable step in the settlement of a dispute, and very few people dare to take such an oath.

Case study 2

In a village, there was a dispute between two persons over the boundary of their land. After many attempts to solve the dispute, both of them approached the Gaon Buras' Court. The matter was considered by the court and both the claimants were called for questioning. After investigating the matter, the court members visited the area and found that the boundary markers were still intact. The boundary of their land was marked by three stones put together from three different directions. This pattern of aligning three stones as boundary markers was a practice found from the ancient times. After inspecting the boundary markers of the three stones, one of the disputants was found guilty of encroaching on the land of the other. The guilty was fined a sum of Rs.250/- and was further warned that if the same matter happened again, the court would impose a fine of Rs.500/-.

It can be seen from the two cases that there are well established traditional methods of conflict resolution. The elders and the traditional courts or the councils play a definite role. They are expected to be impartial and fair. The parties are given an opportunity to state their case. If the decision of the court is not accepted by any of the parties, there is recourse to the traditional practice of oaths. However, people are not always willing to swear an oath because of their fear of the spirits. Even today, in Naga societies recourse to oaths is considered the ultimate means for solving disputes of all types.

Inter-village Conflicts

In the past disputes and conflicts between Lotha villages were rare mainly because land was abundant and population was thin. If a dispute did arise, messengers were sent to the villages in order to fix a day for a meeting of the elders of the villages concerned. On the appointed day, the elders met on the path half-way between the villages. If the dispute was caused by the action of an individual, and if he was found to be guilty, he was fined. The settlement of the dispute culminated with the elders eating together.

Inter-tribal Conflicts

Inter-tribal relations in the past were marked by continuous warfare. However, there were also conflicts or disputes between villages of two tribes living on either side of the tribal boundary. Mills (1922: 100) speaks about such a conflict between the Lotha village of Okotso and the Ao village of Nankam.

In all inter-tribal conflicts, negotiations were carried on by the elders who were recognised as ambassadors. Every village had at least two such persons. They enjoyed a special status with a permanent safe conduct, and no one dared to do any harm to them for fear of evil befalling on them. When there was a dispute,

the ambassadors met together on the boundary and negotiated a settlement and sealed it with a meal. Usually such settlements were temporary because the game of war soon resumed.

The Modern Trend

Prior to the coming of the British, the system of self-government was found in every Lotha village. But with the establishment of British administration, some changes were brought about in the system of village administration. One important change was the introduction of the institution of Gaon Bura. The Gaon Buras are village elders selected by the villagers, but approved by the government. The Gaon Buras act as the liaison officers between the villagers and government, a system that still exists. But at present there is also a three tier system of local self-government in the form of Village Council, Area Council and Regional Council, corresponding to the Gaon Panchayat and Zilla Parishad in many other parts of India.

Village Council, Area Council and the Regional Council

Every recognised village has a village council for administration of that village. It consists of members chosen by the villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practices and usages, hereditary Village Chiefs, Gaon Buras and Anghs. Its main function is to maintain customary law and order in the village, and to dispense justice according to customary law. In case of disputes between villages falling in different areas or districts, two or more Village Councils may settle in a joint sessions or refer it to the appropriate authority.

Formerly there was a Range Council but now it has been changed into Area Council. It comprises of a circle or a group of contiguous villages. Its members are elected by the Village Councils. The Council looks into the execution of welfare and

development schemes and suggests ways and means of development of that area. It also settles inter-village disputes and feuds under its jurisdiction.

Some years ago, the Tribal Council was replaced by the Regional Council. This was done because of the spirit of tribalism found in the Tribal Councils. The Regional Council's main concern is developmental work of the district and to assist the Deputy Commissioner in his administration.

The Town Municipalities, District Executive Force (DEF) and the Office of the Deputy Commissioner are the main agencies of the modern times where all kinds of disputes are settled. Victims of various offences rush to the modern legal authorities for settling any kind of dispute, be it personal or professional. This logically implies that the modern way of administration in providing justice to the people is more popular than the traditional method. It may also be that people are ignorant about the way traditional customary law functions.

The village headman who was formerly a hero, does not enjoy the same status and position of eminence. In the villages, people first approach the village council or the nearest local customary courts. But when the verdict is given, the parties are usually not satisfied. Therefore they go to the modern courts in the towns and cities where legal proceedings are done within the framework of the modern Indian constitution. Thus recourse to modern courts is becoming more common. Money and politics are also used by those who have them to influence the legal processes. However, even these courts must take into account the traditional or customary laws. In fact, it is necessary that even in the most sophisticated era of the present century, the legal experts must look into the treasury of customary law when they deal with disputes and conflicts. Traditional methods have some elements that are valid even now and will continue to be so also in the future.

Conclusion

This brief study has shown that in the Lotha Naga society there were well established traditional methods for dealing with disputes and conflicts of all types. At the end of the study, it is possible to present the following conclusions.

Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution

The salient features of the traditional processes of conflict resolution can be summarised as follows.

1. In the traditional system, the council of elders functioned as a court in disputes within the village. The elders also played a decisive role in inter-village and even inter-tribal disputes and conflicts. The assumption was that the elders were knowledgeable, wise and impartial and that they were concerned about the common good and welfare of all.
2. All the parties involved in a dispute were given an opportunity to explain their case. Not responding to the summons issued by the council of elders was treated as contempt of the council and was dealt with by imposing fines.
3. In deciding a case, the council of elders examined the evidence carefully. They also examined carefully the parties involved. But when the evidence was inconclusive the ritual of oath taking was adopted.
4. The guilty party was required to undo the damage or by making a restitution by paying the price of the object. Further, the guilty were made to pay a fine in cash or kind. Fines were realised without any consideration shown to the persons concerned.
5. The traditions of the village and local customary laws were followed in the entire process. These are closely bound up with the traditional religion. Belief in spirits, especially the fear of evil as punishment for wrong doings, was the basis of such traditions.

6. All the disputes, including inter-village and inter-tribal ones, were seen as harmful to the orderly life and smooth functioning of the community. Therefore, efforts were made to find a solution at the level where it first occurred. Family disputes were sought to be solved at the family level, and only when a solution was not found, the higher levels like the clan and the village were involved. The aim was to restore harmony so that community life could continue.

Changes in the Traditional Methods

It is possible to identify some changes in the traditional methods. While traditional processes continue to function, there is a growing tendency to approach the so called modern systems like the courts dispensing justice under the legal system, established in recent times after the formation of the State of Nagaland. Two factors have brought about such changes. The first is conversion to Christianity and the second is the process of modernisation.

Most of the Lothas are now Christians. One of the important consequences of the conversion to Christianity is the weakening of the belief in spirits and the giving up of practices considered superstitious. In general, the fear of the spirits has greatly decreased. Similarly the belief that offending the spirits leads to all types of evil has become considerably weak. Thus the religious foundation of the traditional methods has become weak.

Modernisation has affected the Lothas in various ways. Modern ideas are replacing traditional ones, and new practices have begun to emerge. Simultaneously, along with a weakening of the community feeling, there is a rise in individualism. The community is not seen as important if an individual can manage by himself or herself. Thus communitarian dimension of the traditional practices and the respect for the elders have become weak. A further development is the introduction of the new legal system and the administration of justice.

Looking towards the Future

Though the traditional processes and institutions of conflict resolutions have become weak, the ideology behind them is still relevant. This ideology is based on the primacy of the community and on the system of religious beliefs in the activity of the spirits in the world of human beings. The sense of the community must be strengthened. At the same time, Christian beliefs and principles must be made part of the Lotha outlook. If this happens, the traditional methods can be included in the present institutions of the village councils and the area councils. They can, then, interpret the customary laws and practices in the present day changing situation.

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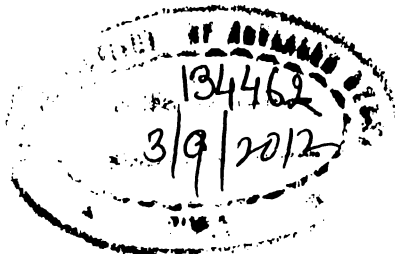
Personal meetings and interviews

1. Chubao Murry, G.B. Baghty Town on 27th August, 2009
2. Chubathung, Chairman Longsa Village Council on 13th January, 2010
3. Thungbemo Patton (Lawyer), Head Master, SMB School Wokha on 16th May 2009, 17th September, 2009
4. Nrithung Patton, a senior citizen on 6th March, 2009
5. Yanpanthung Humtsoe, a senior citizen on 18th and 19th of May 2009

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About the Book:

The three essays presented in this volume deal with the traditional methods of conflict resolution adopted by three tribal communities, namely, the Dimasa and Karbi of Assam and the Lotha of Nagaland.

The findings of the authors, each of whom has studied her or his own community, show that all the three communities adopted very similar procedures in resolving conflicts. In the case of internal conflicts, the elders played a leading role and adopted a procedure aimed at restoring personal and communal harmony. In situations of conflicts with other communities, wherever possible, efforts were made to find a solution through negotiations and compromises so that peaceful relations could be restored.

The authors feel that these traditional methods of negotiations and compromises are relevant even today and can be effectively used to secure lasting peace in this region plagued by conflicts of all types.

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