

CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY- BASED LAND MANAGEMENT: A STUDY OF LIANGMAI NAGA PRACTICES IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the vital role of customary institutions in the community-based management of land among the Liangmai Naga, an indigenous tribe of North-East India. Rooted in collective ownership, ancestral traditions, and indigenous ecological knowledge, Liangmai customary system regulates the use of land, forest, and water resources through the authority of the *Chawang/Nampou* (village chief) and village councils. This study emphasizes how traditional ecological knowledge and socio-cultural norms shape sustainable resource governance practices, particularly in the management of land, forests, and water. Drawing on historical accounts, ethnographic insights, the paper highlights how traditional institutions and social norms reinforce sustainable use and conservation. It also analyses contemporary challenges, strategies and its continuity. Overall, the study underscores the relevance of indigenous institutions in fostering ecological resilience and sustaining cultural identity in rapid changing socio-political landscape.

Keywords: Liangmai Naga, customary institutions, community-based land management, indigenous knowledge, resources, tribals, village council, village authority, North East India.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many tribal groups throughout Northeast India, indigenous knowledge systems of resource governance and customary institutions have long served as fundamental mechanisms for the management of land and natural resources. In recent decades, environmental scholars and policymakers have recognized these traditional forms of ecological stewardship offer valuable lessons in sustainability, especially in ecologically sensitive regions. However, over the years, the role of these communities in managing of the resources has been under pressure due to nationalization of forests and establishments of government forests and agencies; growth of international timber markets and increasing entry of the private sector in rural resource use practice; development of silviculture as a dominant forest management system; the reduction in effectiveness of traditional institutions responsible for managing resources due to growing social structures and growing inequalities etc¹. Yet, even today in North-East India, including among the

Liangmai Naga, rural indigenous institutions continue to play a vital role in the governance of land, forests, and natural resources. Indigenous communities across the world have long governed their natural resources through complex systems rooted in customary laws and institutions. These systems emphasize collective ownership, sustainable use, and reciprocal relationships with the environment.

2. OVERVIEW OF LANDHOLDING AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AMONG NAGA TRIBES

Historically, the village has served as the fundamental political and administrative unit of Naga society. Despite variations among tribes, Naga villages share common institutional foundations. Every village has a chief and council, though the balance of authority varies: in some tribes, chiefs exercise greater influence, while in others, village councils' function more democratically. Authority within villages was shared between chiefs and councils, though the balance of power varied across tribes—from strong chieftainship to more democratic, clan-based institutions. Clans form the backbone of village and tribal councils, whose leaders remain accountable to the community. As observers such as John Butler² noted, “Every Naga village has a polity of its own...decidedly democratic,” while Verrier Elwin described “Naga society presents a varied pattern of near- dictatorship and extreme democracy”³ reflecting diverse but participatory governance models. Because decisions arise from community consensus, customary laws enjoy greater legitimacy and compliance than external directives. Many Naga communities preserved systems of self-governance under British colonial rule through indirect administration. Colonial measures such as the Frontier Tract Regulation Act (1880) and the Government of India Act (1935) formalized limited state interference, enabling customary systems to function autonomously. After independence, constitutional provisions, particularly the Sixth Schedule, further safeguarded traditional institutions and communal land tenure in Northeast India.

Naga communities maintain deep historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to the land, which is governed through a customary tenure system regulating ownership, access, and resource use. Forests and natural resources are accessible to all members of the community, yet regulated by customary laws that prevent individual domination or exploitation. These customary norms strictly observed and swiftly enforced ensure communal welfare and reinforce the compact, cohesive structure of village life. Customary law forms the foundation of Naga land governance, assigning rights and responsibilities to households, clans, and villages while ensuring that land is managed sustainably for both present and future generations. Institutions such as village chiefs, village councils, clan heads, and tribal councils enforce these norms, mediate disputes, and impose sanctions for violations. Together, these structures preserve a diversified land-use system that supports livelihoods, ensures food security, conserves forests, and sustains cultural and religious values.⁴ The village council exercises supreme authority over land administration, dispute settlement, and transfers within the village. Although individual holdings may be transferred under customary limits, inherited land generally remains within the clan, reflecting a strong communal ethos. Sale of land to outsiders is strictly forbidden and punishable. As noted by T. C. Hodson⁵,

while land may be held in several ownership, its alienation beyond the clan or village is not permitted, and attempts to do so were dealt severely with the offender, underscoring the primacy of collective ownership norms.

In disputes between individuals or families, the council functions as a customary court, conducting inquiries and issuing decisions that are final and binding. Non-compliance may result in forfeiture of the contested land to the Council for community use. The council also adjudicates matters concerning land rights, succession, ancestral property, and common resources, and any state land acquisition must be mediated through it. No individual may sell or transfer land without its consent. Thus, the village council remains the ultimate and supreme authority in all matters concerning land within the village.⁶

Tribals claimed absolute ownership over their land. The one who established the village is the first owner in Naga society.⁷ Naga customary tenure rests on the principle that all land within village boundaries is collectively regulated, leaving no unclaimed territory. Land is inalienable to outsiders and inherited according to customary hierarchy—family, clan, then community. Village authorities supervise allocation and management, while higher councils handle inter-village disputes, emphasizing negotiation, consensus, and reconciliation in customary justice.

As Mahendra Lal Patel notes “in a Naga village there are three types of land ownership systems—individual land, clan land and community land...”⁸ Among the Naga tribes, land is traditionally classified into four main categories: common village land, *khel* land, clan land, and individual land. Common village land is reserved for collective purposes such as village councils, playgrounds, educational institutions, and other public utilities. Managed by village authorities, it is accessible to all bonafide households for cultivation and domestic use without payment of revenue, and it is neither saleable nor mortgageable. *Khel* land or group land belongs collectively to a ward or hamlet, serving social, economic, and ritual functions, including sites for *morungs* (dormitories), *jhum*/shifting cultivation, forests, and communal gatherings; it is likewise inalienable. The rights towards the land rests only with the respective *khel* members. Clan land, vested perpetually in clan members, is inherited across generations and allocated by clan leaders. It encompasses agricultural fields, forests, and meadows, reinforcing the kinship-based structure of Naga society. Individual land, typically comprising residential sites and cultivable holdings, is held by family heads and inherited according to customary norms, which vary among tribes.⁹ Despite minor tribal variations, Horam observes that Naga landholding broadly follows a shared framework of three principal categories: community land, clan land, and individual land, with a fourth—chief-owned land¹⁰—appearing in some areas as a localized adaptation. The system reflects a fundamentally communal ethos: community land includes forests and water sources; clan land is lineage-managed; and individual holdings, such as fields or homesteads, remain subject to customary norms. Although individuals possess use rights, land remains embedded in collective authority, and transfers especially to outsiders are strictly regulated or prohibited.

Unlike many Indian states where land is state-owned, in Naga society land largely belongs to the people. Landholding patterns vary across Naga tribes but share fundamental similarities. For example, among the Ao Nagas, landownership is predominantly communal and clan-based, and

rarely vested in hereditary chiefs. Unlike tribes such as the Sema or Konyak, whose systems historically allowed chiefs to control substantial portions of village land, the Ao conception of land centers on the rights of the people as a collective entity. Ao lands are inherited from forefathers or, in some cases, purchased, and are categorized into community land, village land, clan land, individual land, church land, government-acquired land, confiscated land, and village reserved forests.¹¹ Each category operates within customary norms that regulate use, inheritance, and conservation. Community and clan lands are particularly important for ensuring group cohesion, while village reserved forests function as ecological buffers essential for timber, water sources, and biodiversity.

In the Koireng community, land administration rests primarily with the village council or *Khuo*, which holds ultimate authority over governance and resource management, while the chief (*Khoreng*) functions under its guidance. Three forms of landholding exist—community lands, individually owned lands, and lands with heritable possessory rights—and jhum cultivation is regulated by the *Khuo* (village council), which allocates fields, oversees agricultural rituals, and enforces forest-use norms. The Maram Nagas, by contrast, maintain a markedly democratic system in which the village headman (*Sagung*) exercises only nominal authority and clan-based distinctions in land tenure are minimal. Land may be communally or individually owned, and village land can be temporarily leased to outsiders through formal agreements requiring annual rent, the proceeds of which support community development. Despite these democratic practices, the chief's approval remains necessary for the extraction or use of any resources belonging to the village.¹² Among the Poumai Nagas, all village lands are communally owned but administered in the name of the *Veio* (village chief). Land is categorized into individual, clan, and village lands, with clan heads distributing clan-owned plots—particularly for jhum cultivation—to their members. Village reserve lands remain accessible to all villagers for subsistence use, though commercial extraction for external trade is regulated by the chief and council. The *Veio* may also reserve high-value forest resources, such as quality timber or bamboo, for community or ritual purposes. Among the Rongmei Nagas, landholding systems vary considerably depending on the historical origin of each village—whether settled by a single clan, multiple clans, or mixed groups. Nonetheless, a characteristic three-tier structure is widely observed: the *Nampou* (village owner), *Rampou* (intermediary owners, often families or lineages), and *Laopu* (tillers or field holders). The village council oversees the entire landholding structure, regulates cultivation cycles, enforces forest-use norms, and conducts agricultural rituals, ensuring that community forests remain protected village property.

The Tangkhul Nagas traditionally regarded forests as communal resources vital for subsistence and ecological balance. Deforestation was strongly discouraged, and institutions such as the *Meiyan* reinforced conservation norms. While land was formally vested in the chief (*Awunga*), effective control lay with the village council, which regulated distribution and use. Land was classified into homesteads, clan holdings, private forests, and village reserves. Those without land could cultivate reserve areas only with council approval. Customary sanctions against forest destruction and regulated land allocation demonstrate a deeply rooted system of collective

stewardship and environmental responsibility. Similarly, the Maos (*Ememei*) Nagas maintain communal ownership of village land in the name of the village chief, supplemented by individual land, clan land, and community land systems. Allocation of jhum fields is handled annually by clan heads. Extraction of forest products for personal use is generally permitted, but large-scale commercial extraction requires authorization from the village headman and council, underscoring a collective approach to sustainable resource management.¹³

Village-level institutions also regulate resource management. Customary norms dictate land use, forest protection, water access, and boundary maintenance. Agriculture is tightly woven into this system: *jhum* (shifting cultivation) and terraced farming are common, and fallow cycles are managed under customary regulation. Community forests are protected, with controlled extraction — mostly for domestic use — and prohibitions on commercial exploitation. Violations are met with fines or sanctions. Taken together, these systems demonstrate the diversity and complexity of various Naga customary landholding practices. While some tribes historically vested substantial powers in chiefs, many others emphasize collective ownership mediated by councils or clan heads. In all cases, resource management remains deeply intertwined with customary laws, ritual practices, and environmental ethos. These shared principles not only reinforce social cohesion but also form the basis of community-based natural resource management systems across Naga societies.

3. CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS OF LIANGMAI NAGA

The Liangmai Naga are a sub-group of the larger Naga family, forming part of Zeliangrong community and are predominantly settled in the Senapati and Tamenglong districts of Manipur and Dimapur and Peren districts of Nagaland. Their livelihood depends on shifting cultivation, foraging, and community hunting. Liangmai society is organized around village governance led by the chief (*Nampou/Chawang*) and supported by council of elders (*Wangpen* and *Apai*), who are custodians of customary law. Although the chief who is regarded as the First Citizen, presides over administrative and judicial functions, real authority rests with the village council (*Apai*), whose collective decisions regulate land, resolve disputes, guide rituals, and maintain social order, reflecting a balanced blend of hierarchical leadership and participatory governance. Operating without remuneration¹⁴, the council oversees key communal functions, including agricultural planning, infrastructure upkeep, and the management of land and forest resources. In a society dependent on shifting and terrace cultivation, its custodianship of natural resources is crucial. Through its regulatory authority over economic, environmental, and social affairs, the village council remains central to the preservation of customary law and the integrated functioning of traditional society.

Like other Nagas, among the Liangmai, customary institutions are primarily centered on the village council of elders (*Wangpen* and *Apai*), the chief (*Nampou/Chawang*), and clan-based structures. In early period, the *Apai* was the supreme body of the village administration, with the chief (*Nampou/Chawang*) as the head of the *Apai*¹⁵. The *Apai* is composed of elders from each clan of the village whom the chief elect to assist him in the administration of the village. The *Apai*

has the authority to make any important decision, and the decision taken by them turns into the law of the village. Their authority is based on customs and is strictly enforced customary laws. The *Apai* performs multiple functions, including administration, judiciary, defense, religious oversight, and resource allocation. Although headed by the chief (*Nampou/Chawang*), decisions are made collectively and reflect both democratic and traditional structures¹⁶. The decision given by the *Apai*, the apex body of the village administration, is final within the village administrative domain. They have various functions, some of which are as follows:

- i. General administration of the village;
- ii. Judicial functions (the court of justice);
- iii. Regulator and controller of the social institutions of the village, such as the dormitory and other social institutions based on age and sex;
- iv. Defense and security of the village;
- v. Regulations and management of religious affairs;
- vi. Regulations of forests and land for agricultural purpose¹⁷. The *Apai* regulates the use of forests, assigns plots for jhum cultivation, protects sacred groves, and supervises hunting seasons to ensure ecological balance.

In the traditional period, the chief and the *Apai* convened at the chief's residence to deliberate on political, cultural, economic, and religious matters, including festival dates, cultivation sites, jhum practices, *genna*, and village rituals. The *Apai* withheld consent for the transfer or sale of village land to outsiders. Over time, this traditional polity evolved, particularly with the enactment of the Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956, which established Village Authorities in each village. Under this system, the chief serves as the ex-officio Chairman, while village chairman and council members are appointed or elected through a franchise system. Women do not have the right to be elected as Councilors¹⁸. Among the Liangmai, every village retains a chief (*Nampou/Chawang*), and traditional institutions such as the *Apai* continue to function alongside the Village Authority. In accordance with customary law, the *Apai* exercises judicial authority, while the chief, as the legitimate head of the village, oversees land and resource management. Together, the Village Authority, the chief, and the *Apai* constitute the principal organs of Liangmai village administration.

4. COMMUNITY-BASED LAND HOLDING AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

After performing the requisite rites to *Charawang* (Supreme God) in accordance with custom, the *Nampou/Chawang* formally established a new village, thereby becoming the legitimate owner of its territorial domain and resources. However, this ownership did not imply absolute control. In practice, the chief, in consultation with the *Apai*, allocated land and resources to villagers for cultivation and livelihood. Rather than exercising personal exploitation, Liangmai land management embodied a communitarian and democratic ethos.

Agriculture, particularly shifting cultivation, constitutes the economic foundation of Liangmai Naga society. Village land is communally owned and administered by the village

council, comprising the chief and the *Apai*. The council's authority derives largely from its control over land and forest resources, regulating internal transfers while prohibiting alienation to outsiders. They also maintain the village forests; it also maintains the *Rambow* (the forest grove) and decide on the selection of the forestland for *jhum* cultivation in a particular year.¹⁹ Cultivation boundaries are usually established for a specific time frame, and the allotted areas may occasionally shift. The council also maintains peace and social cohesion and decides the dates of agricultural processes such as the selection of sites for cultivation, felling trees, burning and clearing fields, and sowing seeds.

4.1. Land Management

As deliberated, every village has definite or well demarcated boundaries and frontiers. Every village land is therefore, intact, autonomous, and independent.²⁰ In view of the expediency of land use as well as a better defense structure for the village, the *Apai* laid down a specific pattern of land use regulations. Although not all Liangmai villages follow an identical system of community-based land management, land is commonly managed through tripartite classification:

a. ***Kiluang/ Kyluang Ram***: the village settlement zone for the village. No individual is generally permitted to reside beyond the demarcated boundaries of this area. Villagers are allowed to engage in trade and livelihood activities; but the sale of land is strictly prohibited. As the *Nampou/Chawang* is recognized as the legitimate owner of the village, transfer of village land to the outsiders by an individual has no right. Although such cases have never occurred, if in case the *Nampo/Chawang* chooses to leave the village or where no members of the chief clan have the ability to hold the chief post, the chieftainship right is to be transferred to the *Wangpen* (deputy chief).

b. ***Rambow Ram***: It is a village reserved forest grove which functions as a protected forest buffer adjacent to the main village settlement (*Kiluang Ram*), serving both ecological and protective purposes. Characterized by dense vegetation, it is designated as a communal reserve where the felling of trees for timber or firewood is strictly prohibited. Nevertheless, customary norms permit the collection of fallen dry wood and non-timber forest products such as wild vegetables, fruits, herbs, and honey. The forest is collectively owned, with no exclusive rights vested in any individual, clan, or family, and its management falls under the authority of the *Apai*, which ensures compliance with traditional regulations. Ecologically, *Rambow Ram* safeguards the village and its agricultural lands from natural hazards, including floods, landslides, wildfires, and strong winds, while contributing to air quality and water conservation. Its preservation reflects the Liangmai community's deep ecological consciousness and recognition of the interdependence between forest cover and water security. Conscious of the adverse effects of deforestation, the community strictly enforced prohibitions against unauthorized exploitation. Violations were closely monitored by the chief and the *Apai*, with customary sanctions imposed on offenders. Through such community-based governance, *Rambow Ram* has been sustained as a vital ecological and cultural institution.

c. ***Luten Ram***: It is an agricultural land used primarily for *jhum* or shifting cultivation, with specific areas allocated each year based on land conditions and communal needs. For the

Liangmai, who reside in hilly terrain with limited livelihood options, agriculture is the primary sustenance. The cultivation of various crops and vegetables in this area ensures food and security, and income generation. Although shifting cultivation (jhum) is common practice, the land is used with caution and care.²¹ The *Apai* and the chief decides on land use for each year or sometimes for a span of two to three years for cultivation depending on the conditions and the fertility of the soil, ensuring rotation and fallow periods to prevent degradation due to excessive use. As an authority in traditional polity, they decide on the selection and allocation of lands to the cultivators for jhum cultivations in a particular year, whether towards the east, west, north, or south of the village. Although the chief is considered the rightful owner of the village, land distribution is guided by communal needs and traditions of equity.²² Cultivation outside the designated area is prohibited, and all households are expected to comply with the agreed-upon regulations.

4.2 *Lutaa/ Chalu tah*

The system of land holding known as *lutaa* or *chalu tah* among the Liangmai varies from village to village. *Lutaa* or *Chalu tah* generally falls within the category of *Luten ram*, denoting the arable or cultivable zone of the village landscape. During the early stages of village formation, land was not formally apportioned among inhabitants. Instead, individuals or families established claims through their own initiative by clearing dense forest for cultivation, often confronting natural dangers and spiritual beliefs associated with the landscape. Once a tract was successfully cultivated and recognized by the village chief (*Nampou*), these cultivated tracts gradually acquired the status of *lutaa* or *chalu tah*, becoming hereditary property transmitted to descendants and protected from encroachment by others.²³

P. Namsidimbou Zeliang, in *Pamen: Liangmai Lungkiubo Racham*, identifies two forms: *malilu*, referring to individually inherited or purchased land, and *paoraolu*, a collective familial holding transmitted to descendants without rigid subdivision.²⁴ Expanding this perspective, Th. Tunchapbo²⁵ observes that the emergence of private landholding (*malilu tah*) in Liangmai villages was historically shaped by several socio-economic processes. Private landownership among the Liangmai emerged during the initial phase of village formation, when early settlers established claims through occupation. Ownership also developed when residents invited outsiders to settle and granted them land to strengthen the community. In some cases, land became private through purchase, particularly when the village council sold portions to address financial needs for the management of village. Parcels could likewise be transferred through bridewealth as part of marriage arrangements, or surrendered as compensation when debts could not be repaid. Finally, individual ownership often arose from the clearing and cultivation of previously unused forest, where labour and improvement legitimized personal claims.

While land distribution practices differ among Liangmai villages, many follow a system in which the *Nampou* (or *Chawang*) and village council allocate land to individual households. Under this arrangement, each family receives a fair share for cultivation, livelihood, and resource management. Once allotted, the land becomes the hereditary property of the household, conferring secure usufruct rights and protection from encroachment. Families retain autonomous control over their *lutaa* or *chalu tah* in accordance with customary norms. If the owner of *lutaa* is temporarily

unable to cultivate or utilize the land, it may be lent to fellow villagers for a specified period so that the land does not remain fallow without transferring ownership. Resource use, including tree felling, requires the consent of the landholding family. In cases of migration, land is not forfeited but entrusted to relatives, with full rights restored upon return.²⁶ Despite the security of hereditary tenure, transfer or sale to outsiders is strictly prohibited, and violations may lead to confiscation by customary authorities. The *lutaa/chalu tah* system thus reflects a balanced framework that combines individual stewardship with communal regulation, promoting both sustainable resource use and social cohesion. In some village every tract of land is thus, generally understood to have a recognized owner whether it be private, clan etc. However, in certain Liangmai villages, no exclusive ownership is acknowledged; instead, all land within the village boundary is regarded as common property, and households cultivate portions according to their capacity and need under customary norms. At the same time, customary norms regulate use, and excessive exploitation or indiscriminate clearing and felling of trees are subject to communal control and restriction.

4.3. Forest Conservation

Besides these lands, the area also called *Mariu Ram* (forest), neither cultivated nor inhibited. This forest zones are preserved as wildlife habitats and traditional hunting grounds, where hunting formed an integral part of livelihood in Liangmai society. Generally, the chief and the *Apai* (village council) also control such as hunting by designating hunting seasons and outlawing burning (especially wildfire), particularly during the mating and birthing periods of animals in order to provide juvenile wildlife enough time to grow and thrive. Such actions demonstrate a thoughtful understanding of ecological balance preservation, sustainable resource management, and environmental stewardship in the community. To prevent indiscriminate hunting, each village demarcated its territorial boundaries, within which only its own residents were permitted to hunt. Trespass of hunting by neighboring villagers was strictly prohibited, and such norms were reinforced through established customary rules, which were to be respected and upheld by all community members. Violations could trigger disputes between villages and invite sanctions from customary authorities. Through these regulatory practices, Liangmai communities sought to conserve wildlife resources while maintaining social order and inter-village harmony. Besides hunting, numerous wild fruits and plants contribute significantly to villagers' subsistence and local economy; consequently, the felling of such fruit-bearing trees and useful plants is also regulated and subject to customary restrictions.

4.4. Water Resource Management

Water resources such as springs and irrigation canals are protected through rituals and seasonal cleansings ceremonies. Each clan may have custodianship, and rules govern equitable use. Ecological values are reinforced through spiritual beliefs and rituals observances²⁷, ensuring sustainable water usage. Moreover, the rivers and streams, which constitute a vital source of sustenance for the village community, are also subject to a careful management and protection. These water bodies are integral to the livelihood and ecological well-being of the villagers, and as

such, their conservation is prioritized under customary governance. Excessive fishing and activities leading to the pollution of rivers are strictly regulated by the village council. In particular, the use of harmful substances and chemical agents intended to facilitate mass fish capture is explicitly prohibited and closely monitored. Such practices are deemed not only environmentally destructive but also a violation of traditional norms, and infringement is met with appropriate customary sanctions. Through this regulatory measure, the community ensures the sustainable use and ecological integrity of its freshwater resources.

5. CHALLENGES TO CUSTOMARY ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Village councils and chieftainship institutions have long played a central role in protecting forest resources and regulating land use within indigenous communities. Yet these systems face growing strain due to weak documentation, limited institutional recognition, and insufficient external support. Although constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Article 371 offer safeguards for resource governance in Northeast India, increasing state intervention through policies and regulatory measures has sought to expand formal administrative control. Judicial decisions affecting the region have further complicated customary authority. Furthermore, increasing commercial pressure have undermined the effectiveness of the traditional institutions, leading to privatization of common property resources²⁸ (especially in Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh) and also in other states of Northeast India. The resilience of the Liangmai and broader Naga traditional institutions is under increasing challenged by multiple structural and socio-cultural pressure. Legal frameworks, development initiatives, and commercialization have encouraged land privatization, often undermining communal ownership norms. At the same time, youth migration, declining transmission of indigenous knowledge, and exposure to external socio-economic values have weakened adherence to customary practices. Limited employment opportunities intensify reliance on land, while educated youth frequently challenge traditional authority, producing tensions between inherited norms and modern aspirations. Recent unrest (2023) in Manipur illustrates how policy interventions can deepen existing socio-political divisions and anxieties over land and identity. A growing shift in mindset towards individual or group ownership (ours or theirs) have also contributed to decline in communal spirit that once characterized traditional societies. Even minor legal modifications or restrictions has led communities to perceive as threats to their customs and community identity, rather than as constructive measures. Furthermore, the desire to acquire more land through unlawful acts like false documentation and decline in the traditional mutual respects for established boundaries have significantly, though to varying degrees, impacted and eroded the integrity of customary systems of governance and resource management.

6. ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AND CONTINUITY

Despite mounting challenges, the Liangmai community has undertaken significant efforts to revitalize and sustain its customary institutions. These initiatives include the documentation of oral traditions and customary laws, the demarcation of community forest boundaries, and engagement

with civil society organizations and legal advocates to secure policy recognition. Many villages have adopted a hybrid governance framework by integrating customary institutions with statutory bodies such as the Village Authority thereby enabling continuity within a modern administrative structure. Historically, tribute systems such as *Rampon* or *Ramkha* were offered to the *Nampou* and the *Apai* council as expressions of gratitude and reciprocity, often in the form of shared portions from successful hunts. These practices symbolized communal solidarity and recognition of leadership grounded in custodianship rather than coercive authority. In contemporary times, however, such customary tributes have largely declined. In their place, some villages have introduced modest cash contributions imposed by the village council, particularly on cattle-rearing and timber-related activities. These payments are not understood as taxes in a formal sense but as symbolic acknowledgments of communal authority and as contributions toward sustaining village governance and collective welfare. Such practices, along with regulated seasonal hunting and the conservation of *Rambow* (village forests), persist in adapted forms, demonstrating ecological awareness and cultural resilience. Although seasonal hunting persists in certain villages, activities such as the uncontrolled setting of wildfires which have detrimental impacts on the ecological and forests systems are strictly monitored and penalized. The councils also continue to allocate land for agricultural cultivations and tree plantation, both to individuals and to community-based groups. These practices underscore the village councils' deep-rooted environmental consciousness, which exists despite their limited exposure to formal modern education. The customary tenure system also continually develops and adapts to new circumstances by establishing new management institutions, changing village management rules, and reviewing customary tenure, for inheritance rights for women. Far from being relic of the past, villages, clans and tribes continue to adapt and strengthen the customary tenure system to meet new challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that customary institutions among the Liangmai and broader Naga communities function as effective frameworks for community-based land and natural resources management. Rooted in traditional ecological knowledge and collective responsibility, these institutions regulate land, forest, and water use in sustainable and equitable ways. With the majority of the forests in Nagas' land under community control and traditional zoning practices still in use, this system represents viable models for sustainable environmental governance. Indigenous systems, when recognized and supported, can serve as a vital partner in biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable livelihoods. They present context-specific, low-cost, and culturally relevant solutions that formal state mechanisms often lack²⁹. Safeguarding these institutions through legal recognition and policy support is essential to preserving both ecological balance and indigenous rights. Moreover, due to the deep-seated adherence of the tribal communities and their high regards for their traditional customs and rights, decision made through customary institutions tend to have greater local legitimacy and are more likely to be respected and followed than directives imposed from external authorities. Consequently, these institutions remain crucial and cannot be overlooked by policymakers. To this day, they continued to serve as

a vital driving force among the tribal communities and the Liangmai communities itself, acting as guardians of land and resource management and ecological stewardship.

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