

Traditional Authority and Conflict Regulation among the Nocte: An Analysis of the Ngoathun System in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

In tribal societies across generations, people have governed themselves autonomously through customs, shared authority, and collective responsibility, grounded in historical knowledge and lived experience. Long before formal institutions and codified laws existed, these systems of governance were already in place. The Ngoathun stands as a proud example of this tradition of self-governance among the Nocte. It represents a traditional council and judicial system shaped by ancestral wisdom and sustained through cultural continuity. However, despite its central role within the Nocte community, the Ngoathun remains largely undocumented and has received limited scholarly attention. This paper seeks to understand traditional authority, its structure and functions, and the ways in which conflicts are resolved and regulated within Nocte society. Drawing upon data from primary sources such as oral narratives and field observations, along with secondary literature, the study highlights the importance of indigenous governance systems.

Keywords: Nocte, Ngoathun, Lowang, customary law, governance.

Introduction

The Nocte are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, mainly inhabiting the central part of Tirap district, with an approximate population of 35,000 as per the 2011 Census (Census of India, 2011), and are also found in some parts of Changlang district. The Nocte are generally categorised on the basis of rivers: those residing at the river-mouth (Jukuh) are considered Upper Nocte, and those at the river tail as Lower Nocte. The social institution of the Nocte is based on chieftainship, wherein the chief holds supreme authority within the community. The chief, along with the council of elders known as the Ngoathun, functions as the governing body regulating the socio-cultural life of the people and matters related to the community within their respective villages (Bhuyan, 2010). Hence, each Nocte village has a chief, above whom exists a paramount chief who oversees the overall welfare and issues of the Nocte tribe as a whole.

The Ngoathun plays a vital role in maintaining law and order, settling disputes, and enforcing

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customary norms to ensure peace and security within the village. Among the Nocte, conflicts are regarded as matters of community concern, as unresolved issues are believed to disrupt social order and social relationships. Justice within this system is not driven by rigid procedures but is achieved through dialogue and communal participation, emphasising reconciliation.

The idea of restorative justice visible today is reflected in the practices of the Ngoathun. Communal accountability, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and the restoration of social balance form the basis of justice rather than punishment alone. At its core, the Ngoathun is more than an adjudicatory body; it is a symbol of authority, pride, knowledge, trust, and responsibility. Although certain practices have receded over time, the memory of the Ngoathun continues to shape the moral foundations of the community and affirms the enduring relevance of its traditional system of governance and justice.

Despite its crucial role and contribution to the governance of tribal society, there is very limited work on the Nocte's indigenous governance system. Against this background, this study attempts to analyse the structure, traditional authority, and the manner in which conflicts are handled and regulated by the Ngoathun, and to underscore its relevance. The study mainly focuses on the Upper Nocte, especially the Dadam area of Tirap District.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research approach. Considering the absence of codified customary law and the limited scholarly and published literature on the Nocte, especially on indigenous governance systems, primary data were collected through oral narratives, informal interviews, group discussions, and personal observations. Elders of the tribe, village chiefs, and individuals well-versed in customary knowledge served as key informants. In addition, secondary sources such as edited books, research articles, and academic works on tribal governance and customary law in Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast were consulted to derive a comprehensive understanding of traditional authority among the Nocte.

Ngoathun as Traditional Authority

The Nocte traditionally possessed a strong political organisation represented by their council of elders and headed by the chief. This traditional council, known as the Ngoathun, forms the backbone of the customary governance and judicial system among the Nocte tribe. 'Ngoa' means hereditary council of elders, and 'Thun' means to meet. Thus, Ngoathun literally signifies a formal meeting of the hereditary council.

The political life of the people is maintained and regulated by this council, as it is empowered to maintain law and order and decide disputes and matters related to the village and the Nocte people. It functions in a manner similar to a modern-day panchayat and undertakes activities related to village welfare in addition to dispute settlement. Among the Nocte, every village has its own Ngoathun, with jurisdiction limited to the respective village.

The Nocte Ngoathun is centred around the village chief, known as the Lowang, who chairs the council proceedings. The council consists of the Lowang, twelve Ngoawas collectively called Ngao-chi-tang-Ni, Lamwa, and Thanraam. The Ngoawa functions like a minister who assists

the chief. Lamwa acts as an informant, responsible for conveying matters related to disputes or cases to the parties concerned. Thanraam serves as a messenger in charge of making public announcements regarding council meetings, festivals, and other important occasions. This position is generally held by members of the Wangsa title. Besides these, villagers known as Nok-Atang are also part of the council.

The Ngoathun is headed by Mindam-Tangti, also known as Ngao-khaphu, meaning the senior council elder. Membership in the council is generally based on age, social status, wealth, experience, and knowledge of long-standing customary laws and practices of the Nocte. This reflects a collective and consensus-based leadership rather than a single-dominated authority. Such collective leadership enhances the legitimacy of the council and acceptance of its decisions, which are generally viewed as fair and unbiased.

The council derives its legitimacy and authority from age-old customs, morals, traditions, and practices socially accepted and recognised by Nocte society, unlike modern judicial systems that derive legitimacy from codified laws. Obedience to this authority stems from social acceptance, moral sanction, and respect for tradition, indicating that the council's authority is rooted in consent and social trust rather than coercive power.

Being the supreme authority within the village, the Ngoathun not only functions as an adjudicatory body but also regulates the social life of the villagers. It intervenes whenever disputes arise, hears cases of both civil and criminal nature, and deals with matters related to village welfare. This reflects its diverse functions encompassing social, political, and cultural aspects of Nocte life. The Ngoathun follows restorative and transformative justice, focusing on reconciliation, correction, and reintegration, with punishment remaining secondary to restoring balance.

Nature of Conflict Regulation Under Ngoathun

The Ngoathun is vested with the authority to handle the following types of cases:

- 1. Interpersonal and community-level conflicts:** These include theft (Huh), quarrels involving physical fights, accusations, and similar issues. Such matters are considered petty offences and are regulated through fines (changmin), symbolic apologies, reconciliation, and warnings depending on the severity of the offence. Although petty in nature, these issues are not left unregulated, as they violate social norms and disturb social harmony. For instance, in cases of theft, fines are corrective rather than punitive, aiming to prevent repetition of the offence. This reflects the moral policing role of the Ngoathun rather than criminalisation.
- 2. Grave offences:** Certain actions are considered highly serious and require timely and strict intervention. An example is Khulong-lak (Overturning the Stone), a sacred ossuary where the skulls of the deceased from secondary burials are kept along with ornaments or other traditional belongings of the dead. Removing or stealing from these ossuaries is considered a grave offence and is traditionally punishable by banishment from the village. Such acts deeply affect both individual and community sentiments. These matters require the direct intervention of the Ngoathun council, which also

implements preventive measures to discourage their occurrence.

3. **Family and kinship-related issues:** The council regulates matters related to marriage, divorce (Chiakhatmin), and inheritance. Such issues are considered to affect not just individuals but entire families and kin groups. Therefore, priority is given to restoring family unity and harmony, reflecting the emphasis on restoration rather than punishment.
4. **Inter-village conflicts:** The Ngoathun is empowered to regulate inter-village conflicts arising from land disputes (Ratri-Lomin) and resource use. Such issues require collective authority beyond a single village council. Typically, the Lowang of the concerned village sends the Lamwa to the aggrieved village chief to initiate settlement. This reflects mutual cooperation among village councils and the importance of early resolution to prevent escalation into violence or prolonged hostility. Resolution is grounded in shared customary values and norms.

Mechanisms of Conflict Regulation

Traditionally, in the absence of codified law and a formal judicial system, any issue arising in Nocte society—particularly within the village—was regulated through the Ngoathun, an indigenous governing body that still exists today and commands relevance. The Ngoathun regulates issues by adopting and employing various mechanisms:

1. **Hearing:** When the plaintiff files a petition, the council is convened orally through the Lamwa. The hearing is conducted openly in the presence of council members and male villagers, allowing both the accused and the aggrieved party to present their case.
2. **Mediation and negotiation:** In certain cases, the Ngoathun attempts to resolve disputes through dialogue and mutual understanding between the parties involved, without necessarily bringing the matter before the council.
3. **Reconciliation:** It is generally carried out through collective dialogue under the purview of the Ngoawas, and the Chief (Lowang) ensures that the disputes are resolved with the objective of restoring social harmony. The Ngoathun encourages dialogue, acknowledgment, and acceptance of wrongdoing by the accused. This may include symbolic gestures such as the exchange of items or apologies to resolve the issue, restore social harmony, and maintain brotherhood within the community.
4. **Fines:** Fines are considered a tool of healing and compensation, serving as a symbolic acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of the wrongdoer and as a ritual closure of conflicts. The Ngoathun imposes fines (changmin) depending on the nature and severity of the offence and in accordance with customary norms.

Discussion

The structure and composition of the Ngoathun reflect that leadership within the council is collective and consensus-based rather than concentrated in a single authority. This collective leadership leads to collective deliberation of decisions and justice rather than single-dominated decision-making, enhancing the legitimacy of the council's authority and the acceptance of its

decisions, which are generally perceived as fair and unbiased.

The legitimacy and authority of the Ngoathun are derived from age-old customs, morals, traditions, and practices of the Nocte tribe, which are socially accepted and recognised by Nocte society. Unlike modern judicial institutions that derive authority from codified law, the Ngoathun's authority is rooted in social acceptance, moral sanction, and respect for customary norms. This indicates that obedience to the council is based on consent and social trust rather than coercive power.

Although offences such as theft and physical quarrels are considered petty, they are not left unregulated, as they violate social norms and disrupt social harmony. The emphasis on fines, symbolic apology, and reconciliation reflects that the Ngoathun prioritises moral correction and behavioural regulation over criminalisation or harsh punishment, thereby functioning as a mechanism of social control.

In family and kinship-related disputes, the procedures of the Ngoathun prioritise restoration of family unity rather than punitive justice. This reflects the communitarian nature of Nocte society, where disputes are seen as affecting the collective rather than isolated individuals.

In cases of inter-village conflict, the involvement of multiple village authorities reflects mutual cooperation and interdependence among Ngoathun councils. Early resolution is considered crucial, as unresolved disputes may escalate into prolonged hostility, historically associated with practices such as raids and headhunting. Thus, shared customary norms act as the basis for conflict resolution beyond individual villages.

The mechanisms adopted by the Ngoathun—open hearings, mediation, and fines—reinforce transparency, collective responsibility, and social accountability. However, the exclusion of women from hearings also reflects the patriarchal norms embedded within the customary system, where decision-making authority is largely male-dominated.

Overall, grounded in shared values, customs, and traditions, the Ngoathun operates as an indigenous institution that regulates social life, resolves disputes, and maintains social order through collective authority and restorative practices rather than formal legal coercion.

Conclusion

The Ngoathun represents the highest and most powerful customary authority among the Nocte, continuing to shape and regulate the social, political, and cultural life of the community. Rooted in strong customs, traditions, collective participation, and shared understanding, it embodies a form of justice that prioritises reconciliation, correction, and reintegration. Despite gradual shifts towards state judicial systems due to modernisation and legal expansion, the Ngoathun continues to command legitimacy, trust, and relevance due to its accessibility, cultural familiarity, and swift dispute resolution. Acknowledging the absence of scholarly work on Nocte traditional institutions, this paper aims to fill the research gap by systematically documenting and analysing the traditional authority, its structure, roles, and mechanisms of conflict regulation. It further emphasises the need for greater academic engagement with indigenous tribal governance systems, which are crucial for preserving tribal culture and traditions.

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