

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS IN UPHOLDING UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES IN MISING SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DOLUNG KÉBANG

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Abstract

The Mising community of Assam, an indigenous tribe of Mongoloid origin, exemplifies universal human values such as cultural integrity, social justice, equality, and communal harmony through their rich traditions, socio-political systems, and governance structures. Rooted in an agrarian lifestyle centered around Assam's major rivers, the Misings maintain a deep connection to the environment, reflected in their traditional farming practices and animistic belief system that reveres natural elements like the Sun and Moon. Their vibrant festivals, such as Ali Aye Ligang and Po:rag, and musical heritage, including Nitom songs, further highlight their spiritual and cultural identity.

At the heart of Mising society is the Dolung Kébang, a local governing body present in every village, which addresses social, cultural, political, and economic challenges. By fostering democratic deliberation, impartial justice, and reconciliation, the Dolung Kébang ensures social harmony and equality. Alongside this, the Murong, a cultural hub, and the Mímбір Ya:me, a youth organization promoting cooperative labor and mutual support, collectively reinforce the community's principles of inclusivity, egalitarianism, and interdependence. Despite challenges like annual floods, land erosion, and socio-economic decline, the Misings have demonstrated remarkable resilience through adaptive practices and the establishment of the Mising Autonomous Council. Their

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traditional systems not only preserve their cultural heritage but also serve as a model for fostering justice and equity. By studying the Dolung Kébang and other socio-political institutions, this research underscores how indigenous governance systems embody universal values, offering lessons in sustainable and inclusive social organization. The Misings' example stands as a testament to the enduring strength and relevance of indigenous communities in promoting collective harmony and justice.

Keywords: Dolung Kébang', Mising, Universal Human Value, Social Justice, Tribal Society

Introduction

Tribal life of Assam

Assam, celebrated for its vibrant diversity, is home to 29 recognized tribes, each contributing uniquely to its cultural richness. According to the 2011 Census, 12.44% (3,884,371) of the state's population of 31,205,576 belong to Scheduled Tribes (STs), with a decadal growth rate of 17.46% from 2001 to 2011. The largest tribal group, the Bodos, constitutes 35.05% of the ST population, followed by the Mishings (17.51%), Karbis (11.08%), Rabhas (7.62%), Sonowal Kacharis (7.1%), and Tiwas (5.7%). Together, these tribes represent nearly 90% of Assam's ST population, while smaller groups like the Dimasas (2.65%) and Deoris (1.12%) enrich the state's tribal mosaic.

Primarily of Mongoloid origin, these tribes are classified into hill and plain tribes, reflecting their adaptation to Assam's diverse geography. Linguistically, they belong to the Austric and Shyam-Chinese language families, with Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups comprising the majority.¹ Tribal communities thrive through self-sufficient practices such as agriculture, fishing, and traditional crafts like woodcarving and cotton spinning. Livestock, particularly pigs and poultry, holds cultural and ritual significance, especially during festivals.

The Misings exemplify the integration of tradition with universal human values through their festivals, such as Ali Aye Ligang and Po:rag, which honor agricultural cycles and community bonds, fostering collective joy and mutual support. Their governance system, the Kébang, reflects an ethos of collective decision-making, promoting equity, justice, and harmonious coexistence. These systems, rooted in inclusivity and respect for nature, resonate with universal ideals of unity, cultural integrity, and sustainability.

The vibrant traditions, music, and crafts of Assam's tribes not only form a cornerstone of its multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious identity but also highlight their commitment to preserving cultural heritage. This enduring legacy, grounded in universal human values, stands as a testament to the resilience and harmonious coexistence of indigenous communities amidst the region's rich cultural and social fabric.

Objectives of the study

1. To Analyze the Evolution of the Kébang System in Relation to evolving social fabric
2. To Examine the Role of the Kébang in Social, Judicial, and Political Domains Through the Lens of Universal Human Values
3. To Assess the Impact of Modern Political Structures on the Kébang
4. To Investigate the Contemporary Relevance of the Kébang in the 21st Century as a Model of Universal Human Values

Method of study

The method of this research is primarily qualitative in nature, utilizing both historical and socio-cultural analytical approaches to study the Kébang system of the Mising community. The methodology follows a descriptive-explanatory approach, aiming to provide a detailed understanding of the evolution, functions, and transformations of the Kébang system.

Historical Analysis: The historical development of the Kébang system is traced, starting from its traditional forms of governance, conflict resolution, and social administration during the early days of Mising society. This includes an examination of how external influences, such as the Ahom and British colonial rule, impacted the structure and functioning of the Kébang.

Fieldwork and Case Studies: Insights into the practical operations of the Kébang system are drawn from various sources, including secondary data, ethnographic studies, and anecdotal evidence. The research relies on real-life examples and specific instances of the Kébang's functioning in different time periods and geographical settings to illustrate its role in resolving disputes, administering justice, and maintaining social order.

Comparative Analysis: The study compares the traditional practices

of the Kébang with the modern political and legal frameworks introduced post-independence, particularly with the implementation of the Panchayat system. This comparative approach highlights the shifts in governance and the erosion of traditional systems under the influence of state-administered structures.

Interviews and Oral Histories: Given the strong oral tradition of the Mising community, the methodology includes the collection of oral testimonies from community elders, Kébang members, and local leaders. These firsthand accounts help in capturing the evolving practices of the Kébang, its cultural significance, and the community's perceptions of its relevance in contemporary times.

Document Analysis: Secondary data sources, including literature on the history of the Mising people, government records, and previous research, have been consulted to gain insights into the legal, social, and political shifts that have influenced the Kébang system. This approach helps contextualize the Kébang's changing role in light of broader societal changes.

In summary, the methodology combines historical research, field-based ethnography, comparative analysis, and oral traditions to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Kébang system and its transformations in modern Mising society.

The Mising Community of Assam

The Mising tribe, also referred to as the Miris or Tanees², belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group. Their cultural and traditional practices closely resemble those of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Geographically, the Misings have predominantly settled along the southwestern belt bordering Assam, particularly in districts such as Dhemaji, Majuli, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, North Lakhimpur, Biswanath, and Golaghat. Most of their settlements are situated along the banks of the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, with agriculture and fishing as their primary occupations. They speak the Mising language and are organized into 12 clans, including Paggro, Delu, Moying, Sayang, Dembuk, Oyen, Soma, Bebejia, Samuguria, Tamer, Bangkual, and Bihia.

Mising culture is rich, diverse, and vibrant, characterized by traditional dances, music, and festivals. Their dances, known as Paksong or Soman, are accompanied by songs in the local dialect called Nitom. The Nitom are categorized into three types: Oinitom, Aku Nitom, and Anu Nitom. While Aku Nitom focuses on cultural and historical themes, Oi Nitom and Au Nitom are contemporary

love songs often set to modern music. Instruments such as drums, cymbals, and flutes are integral to Mising musical traditions.

Among their festivals, Ali Aye Ligang holds prime significance and is celebrated in February on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month Phagun to mark the sowing of new crops. This festival is accompanied by hunting expeditions, feasts, and cultural performances. Another important festival, Po:rag, is associated with the harvest and involves communal feasting and dancing with guests from neighboring villages. Pork and rice beer are staple items during these festivities. Religious festivals like Dobur involve rituals to appease deities, often through the sacrifice of chickens. Other festivals include Taleng Uyu, Urom Apin, and the three Assamese Bihus—Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu, and Kati Bihu.

The Mising people traditionally follow a joint family system with the husband as the family head. Arranged marriages are preferred, and the community retains a blend of animistic and Hindu religious practices. Their belief system venerates natural elements like the Sun (Do:nyi) and the Moon (Po:lo)³, with their current religion reflecting a synthesis of animism and other influences.

Historically, the Misings maintained a self-governing system. The Migom (king) acted as a nominal head, supported by Gams (ministers) who managed internal village affairs. Village assemblies, known as Kébangs, were held in the Murong, which also served as a cultural and youth welfare center.

However, the Misings face significant challenges due to their geographical location along riverbanks, making them vulnerable to annual floods. Floods cause severe losses to property, crops, cattle, and human lives. Land erosion by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries has led to the destruction of villages, agricultural fields, and cultural institutions. The community also suffers from inadequate access to government schemes due to the remoteness of their settlements.

Economic challenges have further exacerbated their situation. While the Misings were among the strongest tribal communities in Assam before 1950, their socio-economic condition has declined over the years. Many young men have migrated to urban areas and other states for employment, often taking up menial jobs.

To address their socio-political concerns, the Mising Autonomous Council was established following an agreement on June 14, 1995, between the Assam government and the Mising Autonomous Demand Committee. The Council operates as a “satellite council” without specific geographical boundaries under its jurisdiction.

Social System of Mising Community of Assam

Murong

The Murong, a traditional socio-cultural institution among the Mising people, holds significant importance as a space for communal interaction, decision-making, and cultural celebration. Historically, it served as a hub for organizing youth to safeguard the village from external threats, demonstrating the values of protection and collective responsibility. Although many of its traditional roles have diminished over time, the Murong continues to embody universal human values of unity, inclusivity, and social equity, particularly during cultural events like the Po:rag festival.

Today, the Murong is a gathering place where the Mising youth and other community members come together to plan programs, engage in social decisions, and celebrate cultural milestones. It serves as a symbol of inclusivity, as it welcomes all sections of Mising society, irrespective of social standing, age, or gender, reinforcing the principle of equality. As noted by N. Pamegam, “There is no distinction of rich and poor, high and low, old and young. A class barrier is shattered on those days, making the festival the most democratic one and a powerful unifying force.”⁴ This observation underscores the Murong’s role in upholding the universal human value of egalitarianism by fostering an environment where all individuals are treated equally, regardless of their socio-economic status. The Murong’s transformative power during the Po:rag festival illustrates how cultural traditions can serve as platforms for promoting social justice and communal harmony. By breaking down class barriers and encouraging collective participation, the Murong exemplifies the enduring relevance of universal human values in shaping communities that prioritize equality, unity, and mutual respect. Through this traditional institution, the Misings continue to highlight the significance of inclusivity and democratic engagement as fundamental pillars of human society.

Dolung Kébang

The Dolung Kébang, as the highest social authority in a Mising village, plays a crucial role in ensuring social order, justice, and conflict resolution within the community. Composed of village elders who convene under the leadership of the village headman, the Kébang is responsible for making critical social decisions, resolving disputes, and imposing penalties when necessary. Despite its significant role

in governance, the system embodies the universal human value of democracy and fairness, as it operates through a collective decision-making process where every member of the village can participate.

Unlike many traditional systems, there is no hereditary leadership within the Mising community. The authority of the village headman is limited to his village, and leadership is not passed down through family lines, reflecting the values of equality and meritocracy. This ensures that leadership is based on the individual's capabilities rather than inherited privilege, emphasizing the importance of competence and community trust in governance.

Inclusivity is another key universal value upheld by the Dolung Kébang. While the system traditionally does not include women as members of the Kébang, women have the opportunity to express their opinions or contribute their perspectives when invited. This practice recognizes the importance of representation and equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

The system also demonstrates justice and reconciliation, as punishments for offenses are not physical but instead involve fines or rituals of purification. The harshest penalty, Yodnam, entails social isolation and public disapproval, illustrating the community's reliance on social cohesion and collective morality rather than punitive measures. This approach aligns with the human value of social harmony, as it encourages individuals to reconcile and reintegrate into the community after transgressions.

Importantly, the Kébang's commitment to non-violence is a reflection of the universal human value of compassion. By rejecting physical punishment, the community places emphasis on spiritual and social healing, opting for measures that restore harmony and balance rather than inflicting harm. As noted by N. Pamegam, "There are no courts of law, no jails. The only penalty is public disapproval. A man who rebels against custom will be isolated and considered outcast. This is a form of social boycott." This system, based on the restoration of social balance rather than punitive measures, highlights the importance of human dignity and respect for all individuals in Mising society.

In summary, the Dolung Kébang embodies key universal human values such as democracy, inclusivity, justice, compassion, and social harmony. These principles ensure that the Mising community's traditional governance system remains a vital force for maintaining peace, equality, and collective well-being.

Mímbír Ya:me: A Benevolent Youth Organization

The Mímbír Ya:me, a benevolent youth organization central to the social structure of Mising villages, plays a crucial role in fostering community service and social solidarity. Composed of unmarried boys and girls, this organization is one of the most significant and powerful institutions within the village, providing essential support for various social and domestic needs. The Mímbír Ya:me is grounded in the universal human value of cooperation, which is reflected in its activities, ranging from assisting in house construction to helping with agricultural work, and organizing family and cultural events.

The spirit of mutual aid is at the core of the Mímbír Ya:me's function. Families in need formally invite the organization for assistance in tasks like house-building, transplanting paddy, or organizing major life events such as weddings and death ceremonies. This practice underscores the importance of community support and shared responsibility, which transcend individual family concerns to strengthen the fabric of the entire village. Such actions not only support families in times of need but also promote social integration and solidarity within the Mising community.

The Mímbír Ya:me is also instrumental in organizing cultural and religious festivals like Po:rag, Ali-A:ye Lígang, and Bihu, highlighting the value of cultural preservation and collective participation. By coordinating these events, the Mímbír Ya:me fosters a sense of unity and collective identity, enabling villagers to come together to celebrate their heritage and uphold traditions. These occasions promote the universal value of belonging, as members work together to celebrate and strengthen the cultural bond within their community.

Additionally, the practice of Abír Gínám—rendering physical labor upon the invitation of a fellow villager—exemplifies the Mising people's commitment to mutual understanding and human solidarity. This system of helping one another fosters deep-rooted relationships among villagers, ensuring that no one is left behind, and that all contribute to the well-being of the community. Similar to the Sagri or Sanguri systems of other tribes, this practice promotes a sense of collective responsibility and fellowship, reinforcing the importance of human interconnectedness.

Despite changes in the social structure, such as the shift from the Murong to the Namghar as a cultural and religious hub, the Mímbír Ya:me continues to uphold key human values. The Namghar now serves as a venue for important rites and festivals, as well as a place for resolving disputes, reflecting an evolution in the socio-religious practices of the Mising community. Yet, the fundamental values of

respect, mutual assistance, and community involvement remain central to the Mímbír Ya:me's role in maintaining social harmony.

In summary, the Mímbír Ya:me plays a pivotal role in maintaining the universal human values of cooperation, mutual aid, cultural preservation, and community integration. Its contributions to the social, cultural, and governance systems of Mising villages continue to foster an environment of unity, solidarity, and respect for all members of the community, ensuring the survival of these values for generations to come.

Dolung Kébang: The Traditional Pillar of Equality and Social Justice in the Mising Community of Assam

The Kébang system stands as the cornerstone of equality and social justice within Mising society, a tradition that has been passed down through generations, shaping the community's sense of fairness and democratic participation. This system serves as an inclusive platform for addressing a range of issues, from social disputes to criminal matters, with a core focus on delivering justice impartially and ensuring equal treatment for all members of the village. The Kébang reflects the universal human values of justice, fairness, and equality, ideals that are deeply embedded in the Mising community's practices.

Similar to their close relatives, the Adis, the Misings have long upheld a democratic social structure where the Kébang, meaning 'public meeting,' serves as the political and judicial body for resolving disputes and addressing communal welfare. This structure ensures that every adult member of the village has the right to participate in the decision-making process, reinforcing the value of democratic inclusion and community engagement. Whether dealing with conflicts between individuals, families, or villages, the Kébang ensures that everyone's voice is heard, aligning with the universal principle of equal access to justice.

The discussions in the Kébang are led by the Kébang-Abus, respected village elders chosen not by hereditary right but through personal influence, experience, and their ability to present cases in a fair and traditional manner. This process highlights the Mising commitment to merit-based leadership, where authority is granted based on one's abilities and contributions to the community rather than family lineage. The Do:lung Kébang, the highest social authority within the village, embodies this ethos, overseeing both the social and political life of the Mising people. By passing judgments and administering penalties, it plays a crucial role in upholding social harmony and ensuring that justice is administered without bias.

Sessions of the Kébang are traditionally held in the Murong, a public hall centrally located in the village, emphasizing the importance of community participation. The proceedings are guided by experienced leaders, and decisions are often made through consensus rather than formal voting, which fosters a sense of cooperation and mutual respect. The goal is always to reach a compromise that ensures social harmony and reconciliation, values that underscore the importance of community cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

While gender equality is an area where the Kébang system has room for improvement, as women traditionally cannot participate as full members, they can attend as complainants, defendants, or witnesses, ensuring that their voices are still heard in the judicial process. This reflects the ongoing evolution of the Mising community, where gender inclusivity may be increasingly integrated into their traditional systems.

In cases where evidence is lacking or when there is disagreement with the Kébang's decision, supernatural guidance is sometimes sought, invoking the deities Do:nyi Po:lo (God) for a final verdict. While such practices have declined in modern times, they once played a significant role in ensuring spiritual and moral clarity in the decision-making process. As society progresses, however, complex cases may be referred to higher Kébangs or even administrative authorities, promoting the value of accountability and transparent governance.

The Kébang system reflects the universal human values of justice, equality, and community participation, serving as a powerful mechanism for social cohesion, fairness, and democratic engagement within Mising society. Though it has evolved over time, its core principles continue to shape the collective identity of the Mising people, guiding them toward a more just and inclusive future.

Function of the Dolung Kébang

The Kébang is traditionally convened to address judicial matters, where it serves as the interpreter of existing laws rooted in traditional practices. In these judicial roles, the Kébang ensures fairness and impartiality, reflecting the universal human values of justice and equality. This commitment to equity is crucial for maintaining a social structure in which all members, regardless of their background or status, are treated with respect and fairness. In addition to its judicial responsibilities, the Do:lung Kébang assumes a vital role in the

administration and development of the village. It functions as the central body overseeing the day-to-day operations, from organizing community services to managing local resources. By addressing both administrative and developmental matters, the Kébang ensures that the needs of the community are met in a fair and equitable manner. This reflects a strong commitment to social well-being and sustainable development, values that promote community progress while upholding the collective interests of all members.

Discussions within the Kébang often revolve around essential issues of village development and welfare, such as the construction of community halls, fencing, and infrastructure like village paths and bridges. They also include organizing communal activities, such as hunting, fishing, and festival celebrations, which reinforce community spirit and mutual cooperation. Through these actions, the Kébang fosters a sense of collective responsibility and unity, allowing for the harmonious development of the village as a whole.

The Kébang's approach to problem-solving is inherently democratic, with members collaborating to develop action plans, allocate responsibilities, and assign roles based on individual strengths and capabilities. This collaborative model ensures that the decision-making process is inclusive and reflects the shared values of participation and accountability. Once a decision is reached, an announcer known as the Barik publicly disseminates the conclusions, signaling the start of the implementation phase. This transparency is key to maintaining trust and cohesion within the village community.

The functions of the Kébang can be categorized into three main areas, each of which embodies universal human values:

- **Administrative and Development:** Ensuring the growth and sustainability of the village, while upholding principles of equity and justice.
- **Judicial:** Interpreting and applying traditional laws impartially, ensuring fairness in resolving conflicts.
- **Political:** Facilitating governance and maintaining the political structure that supports the common good of the community.

Administrative and development

In its administrative capacity, the Kébang convenes meetings to deliberate on and decide various important matters concerning the village, ensuring equitable decision-making and collective responsibility. These matters include selecting new settlement sites, clearing land for cultivation, organizing community hunting and

fishing, and constructing and maintaining key community spaces such as the Murong and Namghar. The Kébang also oversees the management of community forests, fencing, and the celebration of significant cultural events like Dobír, Ali-aye-ligang, and Po:rag. Through these activities, the Kébang fosters community engagement and social cohesion, embodying the universal human values of unity, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

Moreover, the Kébang is entrusted with overseeing the observance of important social practices, such as taboos (Yodnam), as well as managing the establishment of new settlements and the allocation of land to new migrants. These responsibilities underscore the inclusive nature of the Kébang, ensuring fair treatment for both established and new members of the village community. It also plays a key role in implementing defense measures, maintaining peace and order, and ensuring the safety and security of all villagers.

Additionally, the Kébang is charged with the construction and upkeep of essential infrastructure, including bridges and roads, and with organizing inter-village relief during emergencies such as fires or natural disasters. This responsibility illustrates the compassionate and solidarity-driven ethos of the Kébang, ensuring that the well-being of individuals and the community as a whole remains safeguarded during times of need.

This extensive list of administrative functions positions the Kébang as a central authority that upholds traditional customs, ensuring peace, security, and community cohesion. Through its work, the Kébang embodies universal human values of justice, equity, and service to the common good. It remains the vital force in Mising society, orchestrating not only daily social matters but also the most significant political decisions that affect the integrity of the village and the broader well-being of the state.

Judicial functions

In judicial matters, the Kébang serves as the supreme authority, issuing verdicts based on customary laws and practices, upholding the principles of justice and fairness within the Mising community. Often referred to as the “court of the people,” it interprets and enforces the laws and customs that have long governed the society. The Kébang is responsible for adjudicating all disputes, whether between clans, families, or individuals, concerning land, water, property, possessions, rights, and liberties. Civil and criminal cases such as money suits, mortgages, non-clearance of dues, misappropriation,

encroachment, personal injury, divorce, elopement, adultery, rape, theft, and even murder are brought before it.⁵

The Kébang has the authority to impose punishments and fines on wrongdoers, ensuring that justice is carried out in a manner that aligns with community values. When a decision cannot be reached due to a lack of evidence or disagreement between the parties, the Kébang may resort to ordeals or oath-taking in the name of Do:ny-Po:lo, the supreme God of the Misings, invoking spiritual justice. Punishments range from simple reprimands and fines—either in cash or kind—to more severe penalties such as bodily punishment or ex-communication (Yodnam). Ex-communication is considered the gravest penalty, as it completely isolates the individual from the village community, stripping them of all social privileges and denying them basic offerings such as rice, water, or rice beer (Apong).

The ex-communication serves as a profound act of ostracization, reinforcing the values of social harmony and respect for traditions. As Nandeswar Pamegam has noted, “There are no courts of law, no jails. The only penalty is disapproval. A person who rebels against customs is isolated and regarded as an ‘outsider’ or ‘outcast.’ This amounts to a social boycott.”⁶ In this way, the Kébang ensures that the integrity and cohesion of the community are upheld by reinforcing the universal human values of social responsibility and accountability.

Moral offenses, such as adultery, are treated with the utmost seriousness and are met with appropriate consequences, reflecting the community’s commitment to maintaining moral integrity. In the past, such offenses were often punished through fines and the performance of purification rites. In extreme cases, offenders faced harsh punishments, including being thrown into a gorge after being placed in a cage known as “dirdang.”⁷ Thus, the Kébang retains its authority to handle all types of offenses, including murder, and historically, it even had the power to issue death sentences, aligning with its customary procedures for ensuring justice and maintaining the social fabric of the Mising community.

The judicial processes of the Kébang, through its combination of spiritual authority and community-led justice, ensure that the fundamental human rights of individuals are balanced with the community’s emphasis on order, respect, and collective well-being.

Political functions

In the early days, when feuds and warfare were frequent, the issues of village defense and security were handled with great care and strict secrecy within the Kébang. In times of external threats or

aggression, the Kébang would convene a meeting of the village to devise strategies for resistance and defense. The Kébang would also coordinate both offensive and defensive measures and, if necessary, engage in peace negotiations to resolve conflicts. During such tense periods, the unmarried young men of the village would sleep in the Murong (the village meeting hall), serving as guards to protect the community, symbolizing the collective commitment to safeguarding the well-being of the village.

Today, the Kébang still plays a crucial role in matters of defense, but its scope has expanded to include a variety of social, political, and developmental issues. In addition to overseeing traditional activities like community welfare and conflict resolution, the Kébang now addresses matters related to elections and election campaigns, adapting to the modern needs of the community. It also takes proactive steps to maintain the unity and harmony of the village. For instance, the Kébang may convene meetings to submit memoranda to political leaders or to receive visiting political figures and officials, ensuring the village's concerns are represented at higher levels.

Furthermore, when conflicts arise between two villages, particularly concerning village boundaries or other disputes, the matter is brought before a larger Kébang, known as the Gam-Kébang, which oversees inter-village matters. The Gam-Kébang works diligently to peacefully resolve disputes, ensuring that the interests of all parties are respected and maintaining a sense of unity and cooperation among the villages. This system highlights the Kébang's ongoing relevance in the governance, defense, and social cohesion of the Mising community, as it continues to serve as a critical institution for conflict resolution, collaborative decision-making, and upholding the universal human values of peace, solidarity, and justice.

The Changing Scenario

The Kébang system of the Mising community, once an essential institution responsible for village administration, justice, and social cohesion, has undergone profound transformations that reflect the changing socio-political landscape of Assam. Historically, the Kébang served as the supreme governing body in Mising villages, performing multifaceted roles—from resolving disputes and delivering justice to overseeing community development and welfare activities. It maintained social order, clan integrity, and the collective management of village affairs, while upholding traditional customs and strengthening unity within the community.

However, over time, particularly during the colonial period and

into the post-independence era, the Kébang began to undergo significant changes. The Mising people's first substantial contact with external political structures occurred during the reign of the Ahom kings, who recognized clan elders or chiefs of the Misings as gams and headmen. These chiefs were integrated into the political apparatus of the Ahom Kingdom, which elevated their status. As a result, the Kébang evolved into a more secular institution, with the influence of religious figures in the community gradually diminishing.

Under British rule, the Kébang system was further transformed. While the British maintained the Ahom policy of appointing the gams as village leaders, the colonial administration introduced new structures that influenced traditional governance.⁸ Village elders were recognized as the official leaders or chiefs, acting as intermediaries between the administration and the people. This secularization of the Kébang continued, reducing the influence of religious figures and introducing bureaucratic forms of leadership.

The most significant changes occurred after India's independence, particularly with the introduction of the Assam Panchayat Act of 1959. This act brought modern governance structures into rural areas, integrating villages into a larger political system and diminishing the Kébang's role as the central authority. The introduction of elections and political parties further altered the landscape, as political affiliation rather than traditional clan-based authority began to dominate village leadership.

The rise of political parties, especially during Panchayat elections, had a transformative impact on the Kébang. Initially, the Kébang operated in a party-less, class-less, and caste-less system, where decisions were made through consensus and traditional authority. However, the influence of political parties led to a polarization of village politics, with traditional leaders losing prominence in favor of elected Panchayat members who increasingly became dominant figures in Kébang deliberations. This shift replaced the traditional community solidarity with factionalism and competition among political groups.

Moreover, the establishment of modern judicial institutions and the growing influence of education further eroded the authority of the Kébang. Younger, educated generations, more familiar with formal legal procedures, increasingly turned to state-run legal systems for dispute resolution, bypassing the Kébang's traditional authority. The emergence of modern courts and administrative bodies diminished the Kébang's role in both civil and criminal matters, which had once been the cornerstone of its governance.

In terms of its practical functioning, the Murong, once the heart of Kébang activities, has gradually lost significance, particularly in larger villages where modern community halls or the Namghar (community prayer hall) now serve as the gathering places for Kébang meetings. This shift mirrors a broader trend: the diminishing importance of traditional structures in the face of modern institutions in Mising society.

Despite these challenges, the Kébang retains symbolic significance in many rural and remote villages. In smaller, more traditional communities, it continues to function, albeit with a more advisory role rather than as the authoritative body it once was. While its decisions are respected, younger generations are increasingly inclined to question its authority, especially when these decisions conflict with modern legal frameworks or political ideologies.

As Mising society continues to evolve, the concept of universal human values—such as justice, equality, and social cohesion—becomes more pronounced in the ongoing transformation of the Kébang system. Human dignity, respect for individual rights, and the promotion of fairness are principles that have become integral to the community's growing engagement with modern legal and political systems. This shift marks a convergence between traditional governance and modern democratic ideals, wherein the Kébang, while losing some of its traditional authority, aligns itself with broader values of social equity and human rights.

Thus, while the Kébang was once the pillar of Mising society—providing leadership, resolving disputes, and maintaining social order—it now faces significant challenges in adapting to the demands of the 21st century. The introduction of modern political structures, legal systems, and education has caused a gradual erosion of its traditional authority. The Kébang has been supplanted by more formalized governance structures, and its influence over daily life has diminished significantly. Yet, despite these changes, the Kébang remains a vital cultural institution, symbolizing the traditional values and social cohesion of the Mising community. As Mising society continues to evolve, the Kébang's ability to adapt to contemporary needs while preserving its cultural heritage will determine its future relevance. These changes to the Kébang system underscore the broader transformation occurring within Mising society—reflecting the community's ongoing efforts to balance tradition with modernity and universal human values in a rapidly changing world.

Major findings

Historical Role of the Kébang: Initially, the Kébang played a central role in Mising society, overseeing village administration, justice, defense, and social cohesion. It was deeply rooted in traditional customs and practices, ensuring unity and clan integrity.

Transformation Under External Influence: The Kébang system evolved over time due to external political structures. During the Ahom reign, the Kébang began interacting with the Ahom rulers, who incorporated Mising leaders into the political system, leading to a more secularized Kébang.

Impact of British Rule: Under British rule, the Kébang became further secularized as village leaders were appointed as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the villagers, shifting the balance of power and reducing the role of religious figures.

Post-Independence Changes: The introduction of the Assam Panchayat Act of 1959 and modern governance structures integrated villages into a larger political system, diminishing the Kébang's authority. Elections and political parties further altered leadership dynamics, shifting the power from traditional clan-based authority to political leaders.

Polarization and Political Influence: The rise of political parties has caused a polarization of village politics, replacing traditional community solidarity with factionalism. Village leadership shifted towards elected Panchayat members rather than traditional Kébang leaders.

Decline in Judicial Authority: The rise of formal legal institutions and the increasing influence of education has led younger generations to rely more on state-run legal systems, bypassing the traditional Kébang for dispute resolution.

Modernization and Adaptation: Traditional meeting places like the Murong have been replaced by modern venues, reflecting the growing influence of contemporary institutions. However, in smaller, traditional communities, the Kébang still holds an advisory role.

Symbolic Role in Modern Society: Despite its diminished authority, the Kébang still holds symbolic significance, embodying traditional values and social cohesion. As Mising society modernizes, the Kébang must adapt to balance tradition with modern democratic principles and universal human values, such as justice, equality, and human dignity.

Cultural Relevance: The Kébang remains a cultural institution that signifies the community's efforts to preserve its heritage while engaging with modern political and legal systems. Its future

relevance depends on how effectively it can adapt to contemporary needs without losing its cultural identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kébang system, once the cornerstone of Mising society, has undergone significant transformations in response to external political, legal, and social changes. While its role in governance, justice, and community cohesion has diminished in the face of modern institutions, the Kébang still holds cultural and symbolic significance in many Mising villages. The evolution of the Kébang, from a traditional body of consensus-based leadership to one influenced by political parties, legal systems, and education, underscores the community's struggle to balance its rich cultural heritage with the demands of modernity. However, the principles of universal human values, such as justice, equality, and human dignity, continue to be reflected in its functions, ensuring that, despite its diminished authority, the Kébang remains a vital cultural institution. Its future relevance will depend on its ability to adapt to contemporary needs while preserving the core values that have long shaped Mising society.

Notes

1. H. Neog & L. Gogoi (Compiled & edited), *Asamiya Sanskriti*, p. 203.
2. Nandeswar Pamegam, 'Po:rag' in Brigumoni Kagyung (ed.), *Mising Sanskritir Alekhya*, Vol. 1, Guwahati, 1970, p. 89.
3. Ibid, p. 89.
4. 'PORAG'-N. Pamegam, *Amar Protinidhi*, 2nd Yr. V. the issue, 1961.
5. T. Nyori, *History and culture of Adis*, New Delhi, 1993, p. 137.
6. Nandeswar Pamegam, 'Po:rag' in Brigumoni Kagyung (ed.), *Mising Sanskritir Alekhya*, Vol. 1, Guwahati, 1970, p. 89.
7. N.C. Pegu, *The Mishings of Brahmaputra Valley*, Dibrugarh, 1981, p. 72.
8. J.S. Bhandari, *Kinship Affinity and Domestic Group*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 27.

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List of Informants:

Name	Village	Male/ Female	Age	Profession	District
Rajkumar Pegu	2 no. Lakhipathar	M	65	farmer	Dhemaji
Appel Doley	Jonai	F	68	writer	Dhemaji
Prabin Doley	Gali Mesaki	M	57	craftsman	Dhemaji
Dimbeswar Doley	Abhaypur Maj Gaon	M	76	retired teacher	Lakhimpur
Eram Taid	Abhaypur Maj Gaon	M	57	priest	Lakhimpur
Bhadra Mili	Abhaypur Maj Gaon	M	47	gaonburha	Lakhimpur
Ananta Taid	Dihingmukh	M	58	teacher	Sivsagar
Jatnalal Pegu	Bahphala Mising Gaon	M	66	gaonburha	Jorhat
Sarnalata Pegu	Ujani Gejera	F	72	house wife	Majuli
Ranjit Loying	Tamar Mising Gaon	M	60	teacher	Golaghat