

Research Article

Custom, Consensus, and Authority: Khasi Traditional Institutions and Local Governance in Umniuh Village, Meghalaya

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse the Khasi traditional institutions of local governance: the *Dorbar Shnong* (village council) and the *Rangbah Shnong* (village headman). Drawing on field study report, official legislation, and academic studies, we examine how these bodies function in practice, their legal context, and their roles in modern governance. In Umniuh, the *Dorbar Shnong* is an all-adult council that meets to make consensus decisions on local matters, while the *Rangbah Shnong* is the elected leader who implements council resolutions. The study found that villagers (adult men) actively participate in Dorbar meetings and respect these customs for law, land, and development decisions. The interplay between customary practice and statutory law emerges as a theme: for example, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Act (2014) recognizes *Dorbar Shnongs* and defines their functions, yet in practice their authority comes from local norms (the “sanad” of traditional rulers) more than modern law. Methodologically, data were gathered through interviews with the *Rangbah Shnong* and Dorbar members, observation of Dorbar meetings, focus groups, and document review, and analysed by thematic coding and simple descriptive statistics. In conclusion, we discuss how Umniuh’s *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* exemplify Khasi “folk democracy”, highlighting both the strengths of participatory customary governance and its challenges.

Keywords

Khasi Traditional Institutions, Local Governance, *Dorbar Shnong* (Village Council), *Rangbah Shnong* (Village Headman)

1. Introduction

In Meghalaya’s Khasi region, customary institutions coexist with modern government structures [1, 3]. Historically, the Khasi people have a four-tier governance system (Figure 1 below): the *Hima* (chiefdom) at the top, *Raids* (communes) in between, the *Dorbar Shnong* (village council), and the *Kur* (clan) at the base [1]. Today, these traditional institutions re

under the administration of the Autonomous District Council (ADC) provided under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The *Village Dorbar* (*Dorbar Shnong*) is the local council comprising all adult Khasi villagers [3], and it meets under customary law (often called *Ka Dorbar Ble* or “God’s council”) to deliberate on communal affairs [1]. The *Rangbah*

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Received: 26 April 2026; Accepted: 9 May 2026; Published: 19 May 2026



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Shnong is the elected village headman who presides over this council and acts as both administrator and dispute-settler [1]. These institutions are deeply rooted in Khasi tradition and have no formal written constitution, although they have received partial statutory recognition under Meghalaya's autonomy laws [2, 3]. Contemporary scholarship notes that *Dorbar Shnongs* serve as the grassroots of Khasi democracy and social order [2, 5], even as they face pressures from modern governance (e.g. legal reforms, development schemes) [2].

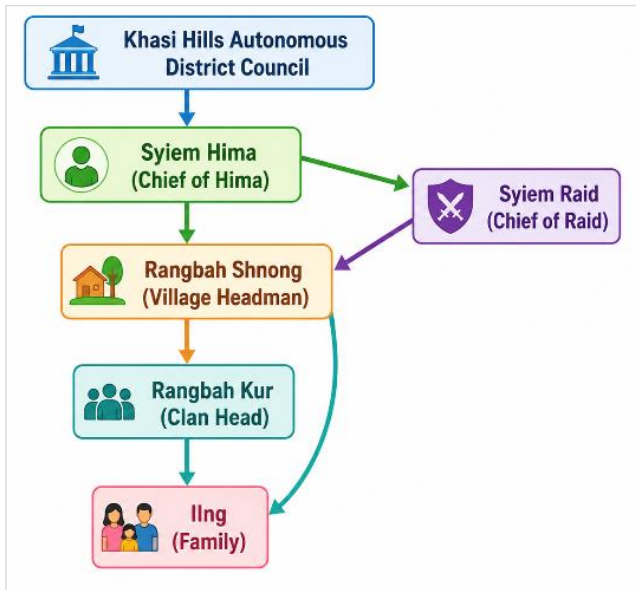


Figure 1. Typical hierarchy of traditional institutions in Khasi Hills, Meghalaya.

Kharmylliem and Kipgen (2026) emphasise that “the Khasi Hills ... are governed by traditional institutions, popularly known as *dorbar shnongs* or village councils” [4]. Similarly, Baruah’s study of Laitumkhrah Dorbar (Shillong) found that these councils, though “controversial” in a modern context, remain influential and under pressure to accommodate constitutional norms [5, 6]. Local press and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) reports confirm that *Rangbah Shnongs* and *Dorbar* councils are vital but often operate without formal government pay or resources [2, 4]. Together, these sources frame the analysis of the Umniuh study: a test of how Khasi customary governance functions today.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite formal autonomy under India’s Sixth Schedule, Khasi village governance through *Dorbar Shnongs* has ambiguous status in practice [2, 7]. The problem addressed here is how the *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* of Umniuh Village function on the ground, and how they interact with state institutions. Studies have noted tensions: e.g. traditional male-dominated leadership coexists with modern demands for

inclusion [2, 7]. There are gaps in understanding their day-to-day roles (development projects, dispute resolution, law and order), the composition of the council and its decision-making processes, and challenges such as women’s exclusion and legal accountability [2, 7]. In Umniuh specifically, comprehensive documentation was lacking. Therefore this research problem asks: *How do Umniuh’s Dorbar Shnong and Rangbah Shnong actually operate, and what do the study reveal about their authority, functions, and challenges in the plural legal context of Meghalaya?* Addressing this fills a gap in Khasi governance studies and informs policy on grassroots autonomy.

3. Objectives

This study aims to provide a detailed, comparative account of Umniuh’s customary institutions, guided by these objectives:

- 1) Describe the structure and functions of the Umniuh *Village Dorbar (Dorbar Shnong)* and its head (*Rangbah Shnong*) within local governance.
- 2) Explain the election/selection process and criteria for the *Rangbah Shnong* and council composition (e.g. *Ka Teh Rangbah* process).
- 3) Analyze the roles and responsibilities of these bodies in village administration, for example, law & order, land management, resource use, dispute settlement, issuance of certificates, and development projects.
- 4) Assess how these institutions interact with formal governance (District Council, state government) and customary chiefs, including legal sanction (e.g. *sanad* appointments).
- 5) Identify challenges and gaps, such as gender inclusion, resource constraints, or legal ambiguities, from the field evidence.

4. Research Methodology

Area of Study: Umniuh is a Khasi village in Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya, India (subdivision under Khasi Hills ADC). It lies near Umiam Lake and is governed by Khasi customary law. The site was chosen as a case exemplifying Khasi local governance. It is situated 17km away from sub-district headquarter Umsning (tehsildar office) and 37km away from district headquarter Nongpoh. According to Census 2011, the population of the Village stands at 455 with 220 male and 235 female. Umniuh village has 424 residents from the Scheduled Tribes (ST). The literacy rate of Umniuh village is about 63.30%, with male literacy at 60.00% and female literacy at 66.38%. The biggest numbers of the Umniuh population follows Christianity as their religion.

Sample: The study focus on village leadership. In particular, the *Rangbah Shnong* (village headman) was the primary informant in each report. Respondents also included other

Dorbar Shnong executive members (secretary, treasurer and elders).

Data Collection Instruments: The researchers used a mix of qualitative methods. Common instruments were:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews with the *Rangbah Shnong*, Dorbar elders, and selected villagers. Questions focused on Dorbar functions, election process, and village issues.
- 2) Focus group discussions with community members to gather multiple perspectives.
- 3) Participant observation: researchers attended *Dorbar Shnong* meetings and village gatherings to observe decision-making and social dynamics.
- 4) Document review: examination of any available records (e.g. registers, meeting minutes, *sanad* certificates, district circulars) and relevant secondary sources (Village Administration Act, Khasi customary law texts).

Data Analysis: Data were analysed primarily by thematic coding. Interview transcripts and notes were coded for recurring themes (e.g. “election criteria,” “women’s role,” “development projects”). The study used qualitative (thematic) analysis to interpret findings. Simple descriptive statistics were also reported where relevant (e.g. population literacy rate 63.3% [7], Dorbar gender composition). Cross-validation (triangulation) was used: for example, the study compared interviews with district-level documents to check accuracy [7].

5. Conceptual Framework: Village Dorbar & Rangbah Shnong

The following framework (Figure 2) illustrates how the *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* fit into Khasi governance. The *Dorbar Shnong* is conceptualised as an open council of all adult Khasi villagers (≥ 18 years) [8]. In Umniuh it meets periodically to make decisions by consensus, guided by local customs. The *Rangbah Shnong* is the executive headman,

elected by the male villagers [1]. He chairs the Dorbar, enforces its rulings, and liaises upwards. Both institutions draw authority from customary tradition and collective legitimacy more than written law [1, 3], though they operate under the protective umbrella of Meghalaya’s Sixth Schedule and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District legislation [3, 5]. For example, the Village Administration Act (2014) codifies that each village must have a *Dorbar Shnong* composed of all Khasi residents over 18 [3], and it defines the *Rangbah Shnong* as the village head elected by prevailing custom [3]. In practice, however, the Dorbar and its *Rangbah* maintain roles through unwritten norms (*sanads* granted by the Hima chief) [3, 5].

Key components of the framework include:

- 1) Composition: Village Dorbar = all adult Khasi villagers (members join via the annual *Ka Teh Rangbah* ceremony) [3]. *Rangbah Shnong* = elected village headman (also called *Sordar Shnong*, elected from among adult men) [1, 3].
- 2) Governance Roles: *Dorbar Shnong* deliberates on village affairs (disputes, land matters, customs, development). *Rangbah Shnong* executes council decisions, maintains order (acting as de facto magistrate/police), and represents the village to external authorities [1, 9].
- 3) Customary vs. Formal Authority: Decisions in the Dorbar rely on consensus and customary law (e.g. clan norms) [1]. Formally, their powers are acknowledged by District Council regulations (e.g. sanctioning a Village Development Council) [3], but external legislation (like Panchayati Raj) does not override them. This creates a plural governance context [2, 7].
- 4) Gender and Society: The Khasi matrilineal system theoretically disperses power, yet village governance remains male-led by tradition [7, 10]. The framework accounts for this by showing women’s indirect influence (through clan) and the potential for inclusion (as discussed by policymakers).

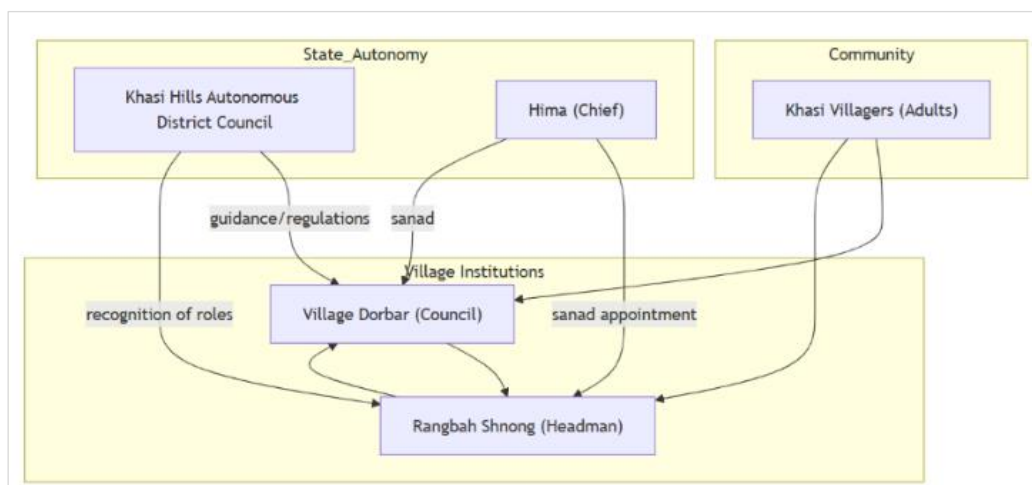


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of governance: the Umniuh Village Dorbar Shnong (council) and Rangbah Shnong (headman) operate through customary norms and consensus but within the broader Khasi Hills autonomy system. Villagers participate in both institutions; the Hima (traditional state) and the District Council provide formal sanction.

6. Field Work and Data Analysis

Each research team conducted on-site visits, often beginning with an introductory meeting with the *Rangbah Shnong* and Khasi elders. Researchers observed *Dorbar Shnong* gatherings (usually open meetings in a community space) and village events, taking detailed notes of proceedings and interactions. For example, one team noted how adults file into the Dorbar meeting and address the council by respectful titles, while the Rangbah calls for consensus on issues. Interviews with the *Rangbah Shnong* and council members (often held at the headman's compound) were recorded in notes, focusing on election processes, duties, and recent decisions. A few village-level questionnaires (e.g. on infrastructure or demographics) were also administered.

Data analysis involved thematic coding: interview transcripts were coded for concepts like “electoral criteria”, “customary laws”, “development projects”, and “social cohesion”. For instance, the study noted unanimous or majority male voting in selecting the *Rangbah Shnong* [1], confirming consistency. The analysis also triangulated interview data with legal texts: for example, when a respondent described issuing *residential certificates*, we checked the 2014 Act, which empowers Dorbars to maintain registers of villagers [3]. No advanced statistics were needed, but simple counts (e.g. Dorbar member numbers, age of headman) helped describe the setting. Critical reflection by the researchers ensured findings matched observed reality (e.g. if a council meeting seemed unanimous, the recorder cross-checked by asking multiple members later). Overall, the study reveals how Umniuh's *Dorbar Shnong* functions as a participatory council, and how the *Rangbah Shnong* operates as community leader.

7. Major Findings

The following major findings emerged about Umniuh's *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong*:

- 1) **Participatory Selection of *Rangbah Shnong*:** The study found that the *Rangbah Shnong* is elected by the adult Khasi men of the village, often requiring a consensus or a majority vote in the *Dorbar Shnong* meeting. Candidates are assessed on personal qualities and community reputation rather than formal education. The study noted that “*personal character*” is more important than qualifications in choosing the headman. Once elected, the headman is expected to serve unpaid and for a customary term; the village met with state officials who were “surprised” that leaders work without remuneration.
 - 2) **Functions of the *Dorbar Shnong*:** The council meeting itself deals with all village issues. It maintains a population register of villagers (necessary for issuing certificates under customary law). It adjudicates land and family disputes, often preferring mediation under tradition.
- Members reported that the Dorbar imposes fines or sanctions for infractions (e.g. breaking local rules). The Dorbar also takes care of communal projects: in Umniuh this included supervising road maintenance, water supply, and sanitation facilities. Reports confirm that the Rangbah and council “*looked after the welfare of the village such as water supply, health, roads, education*”. In short, the *Dorbar Shnong* acts as a sacred council safeguarding customs and organizing development, consistent with Khasi tradition.
- 3) **Role of the *Rangbah Shnong*:** As headman, the *Rangbah Shnong* presides over Dorbar meetings and implements council resolutions. He is described as the executive leader and main mediator. For example, one report observes: “*Acts as the chief executive and leader of the village, implementing Dorbar Shnong decisions. Plays a key role in maintaining peace, resolving disputes, and managing village resources.*” This aligns with formal descriptions that the village headman performs the dual role of magistrate and police officer. The *Rangbah Shnong* also represents Umniuh to the District Council and higher chiefs, conveying villagers' requests (e.g. for development funds). Community members said the Rangbah has a strong connection with residents and “goes hand in hand with the people,” illustrating his legitimacy. All agreed the office is held in trust – “*the power of Rangbah Shnong comes from the people*” – rather than derived from state salary or order.
 - 4) **Gender and Participation:** A common finding was that formal Dorbar meetings include only men; women do not sit in council meetings nor vote on the Rangbah's election. This exclusion stems from longstanding norms, as noted in the literature. All reports noted the absence of women in the *Dorbar Shnong* (only male members were listed). One report explicitly stated “*The participation of women in the Dorbar Council is prohibited.*” This reflects Meghalaya's Sixth Schedule framework, which preserves male-based leadership unless district rules intervene [7, 10]. (However, all teams noted that women participate informally in community discussions outside the council room).
 - 5) **Relation with Formal Institutions:** The *Rangbah Shnong* is recognized via a *sanad* from the Syiem (chief) or District Council, but this legal appointment is more a formality [11]. In practice, villagers and even the media described village leadership as grounded in tradition. For instance, the study emphasizes that these “*village leaders work voluntarily without remuneration*” and derive authority from customary trust. During crises (e.g. the COVID pandemic or local conflicts), state officials have often turned to the Dorbar and Rangbah for action, suggesting these bodies function as de facto local government [12, 13]. Nonetheless, the reports point out legal ambiguities: modern laws like the Khasi Hills District

Act outline Dorbar duties [3], but in Umniuh (as elsewhere) the actual power remains in customary practice rather than statutory enforcement.

- 6) Traditional Authority and Social Cohesion: The study highlights that Dorbar and Rangbah institutions foster a strong sense of community identity and cooperation. Villagers expressed pride in their self-governance: one team found that decisions in the Dorbar are taken “solely by the people’s consensus,” illustrating grassroots democracy. The *Rangbah Shnong* was often described as embodying village values. For example, one report notes the Rangbah “fosters a strong sense of belonging and mutual cooperation” among residents. Traditional ceremonies (like “Ka Teh Rangbah”) reinforce this cohesion, as new adults are formally introduced to the Dorbar.

These findings are consistent with literatures on the field: Baruah (2004) similarly observed that Khasi Dorbar councils manage local affairs with consensus, and that tradition adapts to modern challenges [5]. The highlandpost study notes the autonomy of the *Dorbar Shnong* and its power to resist external interference [14], matching Umniuh’s experience of strong local control. Overall, the major finding is that Umniuh’s *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* operate as a customary governance system that is participatory (for men), self-sustaining (volunteer-based), and pivotal for village welfare, yet remains largely outside formal state power structures [1, 2].

8. Discussion & Conclusion

The synthesis of the study confirms that Khasi grassroots institutions continue to play central roles in local governance. In Umniuh, as in other Khasi villages, the *Dorbar Shnong* and *Rangbah Shnong* exemplify a living “folk democracy” [2, 4]. Decision-making is localised and consensual, reflecting Parsons’s idea that deeply rooted institutions command compliance [2]. The model has strengths: it mobilises social capital for water and land management [4], and it adapts to change (for example, creating committees for disputes as per modern needs [3]). However, challenges arise at the intersection of tradition and law. The Sixth Schedule protects these bodies, but also insulates them from state gender reforms [7]. The study highlighted that unless district authorities mandate change, practices like male-only councils persist, limiting women’s political voice.

The role of the *Rangbah Shnong* as community liaison is noteworthy: he channels government schemes (e.g. road and development funds) but with no formal budget or staff. This creates a hybrid governance situation, where customary norms and formal duties overlap [2, 7]. The Shillong Times editorial and our data agree that *Rangbah Shnongs* often act on public issues (law & order, welfare) out of social obligation [2], essentially filling a local leadership void. The finding that Rangbahs are unpaid volunteers was echoed by the In-

dian Home Minister’s surprise when briefed by Khasi leaders [2].

Comparing Umniuh to other cases (e.g. Baruah’s Shillong Dorbar or Kharmyllem’s water governance villages), Umniuh is typical: strong consensus councils, male leadership, and self-reliance. Notably, the study (and the literature) find that traditional power derives from social legitimacy. For example, Baruah notes that “tradition is under pressure to accommodate constitutional norms” [5], and our data show this tension: villagers uphold customary law even as they interact with modern state institutions.

Conclusion: Umniuh’s Village Dorbar and *Rangbah Shnong* remain vital to everyday governance. They address basic community needs and preserve cultural identity, even without formal state support or explicit legal mandates. This suggests that policymakers should not undermine these institutions; rather, supporting them (for instance, by providing training, clarifying legal roles, or encouraging inclusivity) could strengthen local governance. In the plural system of Meghalaya, where formal and customary institutions coexist [2, 6], enhancing coordination is key. Ultimately, the case of Umniuh illustrates that durable governance at the grassroots rests on tradition-backed institutions that command community trust and participation.

Abbreviations

ADC	Autonomous District Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ST	Scheduled Tribe

Author Contributions

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Thingbaijam Alice: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft

Thangminlun Haokip: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft

Teli Pompi: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft

Thompson V Beiraduasa: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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