

Hearing Practices in the *Yakthung* (Limbu) Customary Judicial System

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Abstract

The *Yakthung* (Limbu) an indigenous nationality of Limbuwan have *Mundhum* as a philosophical source of authoritative jurisprudential guidance. So, the *Yakthung* customary law and judicial system are based on *Mundhum* jurisprudence. In the *Yakthung* customary judicial system, the hearing is an important part of the justice dispensation system; however, there is not sufficient knowledge about it. This article explores the facts and relevancy of the *Chumlung*, the hearing practices of the *Yakthung*, as it seems to be practicable and relevant for even the contemporary legal system. The *Yakthung* hearing practices were very egalitarian and consensus-oriented. The practice contained the concept of public hearing and group-based judgment system. Parties were free to present their demand and evidence. Various types of penalties existed but apology and forgiveness were the main factors to solve the dispute with amicable solutions. Apology and forgiveness were the main tools during hearings, convictional verdicts and penalization. That creates easiness and longevity of conflict resolution.

Key Words

Yakthung (Limbu), *Mundhum*, Hearing practice, Customary Law, Legal System, Judicial System.

1. Introduction

In the ancient customary judicial system of Limbu, simple hearing practices prevailed. It is found that the Limbu 'exonym' and *Yakthung* 'endonym' (here both terms are equally used) Indigenous nationalists are the main settlers of the Limbuwan (Eastern from Arun River, Nepal). The Limbu are the combination of three groups Mongoloid race – from east, north and west, (Chemjong, 2063 BS). But Ingham (2075 BS), believes, 'the Limbu (*Yakthung*) are the mixture of the *Khambongba* and ten leaders and their people.' The *Yakthung* have developed their civilization during the survival and established distinct *Yakthung* identity. Regarding the origination of the Limbu, Mabuhang (2069 BS) has a different view. He has extracted some events of *Mundhum* recitation and presents that the origination and evolution of the Limbu had occurred in Limbuwan. That means there are various thoughts about *Yakthungba* (Limbu)'s evolution in the Limbuwan. However, it can be said that The *Yakthung* is the ancient or first dweller of the Limbuwan.

They developed the *Mundhum* as their social (political, economic) and cultural (religious) philosophy. It is a compact set of history, saying, beliefs, imaginations, cosmic and terrestrial matters, and so on. So, it is a scripture, science, epic, and so on which elaborates on all religious social and cultural facts and behaviors of the *Yakthungba*, (Limbu, 2022). The *Mundhum* is the main source of Limbu Jurisprudence too, where distinct hearing practices were exercised in the ancient period to examine the crime and evidence.

In this context, this article is based on the Limbu customary legal system. The Limbuwan as a traditional territory of Limbu covers nine districts at present are- Terthum, Dhankuta, Panthar, Ilam, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Sunsari, Jhapa, and Morang. From the very beginning, their ancestors had developed a distinct civilization in the Limbuwan. They had established eight then ten petty democratic Kingdoms in different parts of Limbuwan and ruled over their clan and groups (Chemjong, 2063 BS). During their regime, they developed Jurisprudence, customary law, and hearing practices and executed till the early 21st century.

It was found that after the unification of the Limbuwan with the Gurkha Kingdom in 1831 BS, the Gurkhali's Hindu Law and ruling system were imposed in the Limbuwan, (Subba, 2080 BS). These practices gradually derailed the *Yakthung* customary law and hearing practices also. So, there is big gap about the understanding of the Limbu legal system, and hearing practices. It was based on tradition, custom and unwritten form. These norms, provisions, uses, of customary hearing practices of the *Yakthung* judicial system were ignored by the National judicial system. So, gradually such legal provisions and practices became unknown subject matter for all because the country did not recognize such *Yakthung* customary legal system. The Limbu were also compelled to follow the state's rule rather than their customary law. In the long period, the Limbu themselves became unknown about their legal provisions and practices. They had to follow the state's law but they couldn't get ownership as their juridical system. But still, there is not sufficient work to search or study Limbu's customary legal practices. In this condition, they hardly know their hearing practices in the judicial system. Simialrly, the state's legal practices also became new to follow for them. Still, it's lengthy, expensive and more procedural practices give a burden for both parties offender and victim. These are the problem because the government is still ignoring customary legal practices. In this sense exploration is relevant. In this context, this article has explored the Hearing practices of the *Yakthung* (Limbu) judicial system and the contemporary relevancy or importance of the *Yakthung* hearing practices and customary legal system.

2. The *Mundhum* Jurisprudence

The *Yakthung Mundhum* elaborates that in the very beginning of the *Yakthung* evolution the concept and ideology of just, unjust, equality, and equity has emerged and parties of the unjust should be punished. It is found in the *Mundhum* that in the ancient period in

the Limbu community, there was a preliminary justice system. *Nawa Chait Mundhum* elaborates:

Aaaa.. a..aa. *Hangen aLreaang sikcha aLreaang,*
 Porokmibale Yambhamibale,
 Mencham saga naamyapmi saga
 Aambi *Thu thu mo thoktu thetlemo thoktu.*
 Mencham saga naamyapmi saga,
 Chilli thayaro naara thayaro. (Kainla, 2060 BS:100)

(The God Porokmi Yangbhami created a human idol and insulted them by spitting out at him. They created a human idol got fainted due to such an inhuman act of the God and became a dead person).

Here the threat against the unjust is seen. The concept of just and unjust, equal and unequal emerged. Anyone, either a creator or follower falls into a wrong act should be liable and accountable for his/her deed. That ideology started the justice system in the *Yakthung* community. The creator God *Porokmi Yangbhami* also had to pay compensation to his creation (man) by doing rituals called *Mangena* to raise the faded dignity because God had insulted him or unequally behaved him. Spitting out at him was a kind of ignorance and demoralization that made man faint. So, the supreme God *Tagera Ningwaphuma* suggested he realise his unjust work and compensate to the man. In this way idea of a penalty or penal system came in exercises. These *Mundhum* elaborations developed as the *Yakthung* jurisprudence in the community.

The *Mundhum* elaborates- 'in the sky, there were two suns. So, due to hit of sun, the animals and plants started to die. And ancient people asked porcupines to help them. The porcupine also was angry with the sun because when the porcupine was sleeping in the cave his tail stretched up out of the cave, was burnt by the sun. So, he became ready to help other animals to revenge with sun. The all animals decided to kill one sun then the porcupine used his thorn and killed one sun. One of two suns was killed and day became cool than past,' (Menyangbo, 2062 B.S.). In this description of the *Mundhum* it is found that the concept of unjust should be abolished from society and any evil practices or deeds of anyone can't be accepted. Second, a decision should be collectively made and the power of the sanction comes from public or communal will third is guilty person must be punished. As per *Mundhum* such ideology or jurisprudence was developed in the Limbu community which changed as the rule and practices in ancient their regime.

Lahadangna Suhangpheba Mundhum:

Aaaa.. a..aa. *Khiyasamare Takkedangnare*
 Khasen naaktulle Kharon naaktulle.
 Tagera himdho Ningwaphu himdho,

Yonchho oppanu mudhung khesehaa.

Sendang kula nu tanchho oppahaa

Miwa tumbu nu kunam tumbuha

Wajik megere lange megere. (Kainla, 2070 BS:36)

(Teketangna a dog begs justice to the supreme God Tagera *Ningwaphuma* land, and then in the evening the meeting is held to entertain the issue of the dog beating by its mistress *Lahadangna*.)

Here the concept of apple or claim, hearing or decision making and hearing idea is shown where Lahadangna and Suhangpheba got guilty and were punished by the *Chumlung*, a judicial institution. These concepts were developed as the *Yakthung* jurisprudence especially related to the hearing practices in the judicial system.

It is found in the Limbu customary judicial system the penalty was compulsory and would be corporal, physical, and psychological. Such ideology developed their legal practices to be implemented in day to day way of life of the Limbu community. But all wrong acts or deeds were not only punishable but excusable too. It is found in *Mundhum's* elaboration if there isn't an intention for attempt to crime that act won't be a crime. In the case of self- defense an act without intention will be an excusable crime or act. 'The son of Tikhejongna (ancient female) tiger and younger son man (human) were brought up in a the same family. While they became adult then the tiger tried to kill and eat the man. So the man made arrow and bow and at last killed his elder brother, the tiger,' (Kainla, 2070 BS). It was an act of self-defense. The *Mundhum* describe various events and acts which are related to humanitarian norms. These norms were developed to solve any dispute, inequality and unjust relations between human to human, man and society and so on.

As per the *Mundhum* jurisprudence-

Norms (laws) are mechanisms to solve conflicts or disputes,

Criminals must be punished, or penalized,

Crime is social and individual evil,

Guilt should be abolished

Victims should be compensated

No variation between criminal and civil cases.

Corporal punishment was in enforcement.

Curse is the greatest punishment

3. Sources of Law, its Legitimacy and Enforcement or Sanction

The *Yakthung* law is based on *Mundhum* jurisprudence that drives the whole Limbu legal system. So, the source of *Yakthung* customary law is *Mundhum* and *Mundhum*-directed social practices and norms. The law was made by the *Hang* (King), *Tummihang* and the

Chumlung, social tradition (Limbu, 2022). But it was based on a form of a custom not in written code. It is found that the main source of *Yakthung* law was *Mundhum*. However, day-to-day social and communal practices modified legal system norms, provisions and structure too. So, the verdict of the courts, the decision of the *Chumlung*, and social practices were other sources of law. It is seen during a long time phase their judicial system was changed to solve contemporary problems or disputes or situations. That means their practices were the main guideline of the law. Based on which law and legal norms were made.

The *Mundhum*, the *Yakthung* law and legal system and judicial procedure normally were not constructed based on decree of the king or any authority. Such a law could not get legitimacy. So, the custom was main approach where social or communal acceptance has existed. That means it is seen there should be communal acceptance or approval to be a law. It was also said that if the *Chumlung* made any law or legal norms or code of conduct should have been approved by the people of the community or society. Then only it could be enforced otherwise it wouldn't be implemented. The procedure of the acceptance was both direct and indirect. So, the approval of the community was the bottom point of the legitimacy of a law. It was found that the community and society are the main power-holder institutions to make laws, norms and enforcement.

4. Legislature, Law Making Process

It was informed that the king, *Tummihang*, *Pasingpada*, *Mundhumsaba* and clan leaders jointly formed the legislature. There was no specific rule and norm for the representative of the people but it depended on the situation and people's aspirations. The representative of the clan, village and expertise were highly addressed. The body of legislature was not structured and regular.

The law was made as per the need or situation. Sometimes the retrospective law also could be made to punish the criminal of a previous crime. Similarly, the law was made by the practices of the community but there was no formal process and procedure for the law-making and approval, (Limbu, 2022). But public acceptance was the main source of power. That means sovereignty based on the community for the law-making process without the acceptance of the public any law couldn't be enforced.

5. Yakthung Judicial Instruments and Institutions

In *Yakthungba* traditional legal system there were various judicial instruments and institutions which were functioning in *Yakthungba* judicial system. According to the collected information those institutions were as follows:

5.1 Mediation (Arbitration)

The simple result-oriented cases or normal disputes were solved at a local level. In such case, local elder *Pasingpada* played the role of mediator. Such cases were entertained only at the local level.

5.2 The *Hang* (King)

The *Mundhum* and *Mundhum*-based *Yakthung* in ancient social and communal practices the *Hang* also played a role of a judge or arbitrator in the same grievous or serious cases. In those conditions, the King also heard the parties. However, in general, the disputes were resolved by the judicial institutions.

5.3 *Khasenlonden* (Court)

There were two layers or tyre of the *Khasenlonden* in the practice- The *Chuk Khasenlonden* (Lower court) at the local or whole village level (petty Kingdom) and *Tum Khasenlonden* (upper/apex) in the whole Kingdom. It is assumed that while the *Yakthung* regime existed in Limbuwan they had developed such concepts and practiced in different parts of the different Limbu kingdoms.

It is found, as ancient practices in the *Tum Khasenlonden Pan Tummihang* acted as the judges sometimes kings also presented as the judges. In the lower court, *Pasingpada* and *Tummihang* were as judges.

5.4 *Khasenlonba* (Judge)

In the local level or lower court *Pasingpada* and *Tummihangs* used to play the role of judge and in the apex court *Paan Tummihang*, *Tummihang*, and sometimes the *Hang* (King) used to play the judge.

5.5 *Chumlung* (Meeting)

It is a meeting to hear the parties and witnesses in a case.

5.6 *Thaksaba, Tura* (police/army)

These were the communal youth and militant forces. That force helped the enforcement of the law.

5.7 *Subba* and *Karbari* (local head and assistant)

The *Subba*, *Karta*, *Karbari*, *Thari*, *Budheuli* etc custom was a very new tradition during the *Subhangi* system in Limbuwan. But some legacies of *Yakthung* customary laws were exercised in that system too.

6. Trail Procedure

In the *Mundhum*-based judicial system of Limbu, there are various procedures were observed. There was no difference between civil and criminal offences in the *Yakthung* judicial system. Both were taken the same case, (*Subba*, 2081 BS). According to him following trial processes were executed, where-

6.1 FIR,/Complain/Petition

A victim may provide a first information report (FIR) about the incident or case to the court or judge.

6.2 Detention

In case of serious crime or huge damage or wrong deeds, the accused person could be taken in detention.

6.3 Investigation

After filing or reporting general investigation was started that would be conducted during the hearing process or before making the verdict.

6.4 Case file/law suit,

After preliminary investigation the case would be forwarded to the judge or authority.

6.5 Summon/call,

After filing or suing a case the accused person or party would be informed about the allegation and called in the *Chumlung* for a hearing.

6.6 Hearing,

To finalize the disputer or solve any cases or conflicts or offences the hearing was the main process where examination of proofs, witness test, and the party could present own views and demands.

6.7 Decision /verdict

After the hearing on the basis of the evidence condition of the case, circumstance and condition and capability of the parties the verdict would be made.

7. Hearing Ideology in the *Yakthung* Judicial System

It is assumed that a hearing is an official examination of a cause and effects in civil and criminal cases, before a judge according to the laws of a particular jurisdiction. That means hearing is listening to the parties' opinion in a case examining the supporting evidence and witnesses and making a verdict. So hearing is a process of examining the causes, effects and outputs of a particular case. That indicates to examination of the evidence and witnesses of any event or case. In the hearing process, the parties of a case or crime used to get the sufficient chance to prove their claim true or false. To prove their claim or charge they had to show competent evidence with real value. Similarly, during the hearing, the defender and plaintiff had to present their claim with supporting evidences.

According to the *Mundhum* during the first stage of the agriculture phase, the hearing or *Chumlung* process was introduced. Sikera Yakthuk Nama had planted various crops and vegetables which were spoiled by others. So, to find the guilty and punish the *Chumlung* was called to conduct a hearing. Similarly, *Mundhum* elaborates that to find out the relationship of Suhangpheba and Lahadangna and provide justice to a dog the *Chumlung* was organized to hear the parties. *Suhangpheba Lahadangna Mundhum* explains-

Aaaa.. a..aa.

Sendang mejupse kula mejupse.

Miwa mejupse kunam mejupse.

Mudhangdingara Khese mejupse.

Tutu mejupse tummihang mejupse. (Kainla, 2070:43)

(The sun, moon, star, gentlemen and so on representatives were gathered and discussed incest affairs)

During the hearing process, the judges used to observe events, issues and conditions of parties. It is found that in the *Mundhum* elaboration, the hearing could be originated in a place where events or issues occurred.

According to Sodhugen Lepmuhan *Mundhum*, Lepmuhan had examined the evidence before deciding against the murderer of his daughter. He made enquiries with the witness and evidence about the cases of his daughter's death. But all the witnesses or the *Phedangma (Chanaba)* denied revealing the truth. At last, Photimba *Samba* (priest) revealed the truth. Sodhugen had examined the evidence and witnesses to find out the real cause of the death of his daughter. He trusted Photimba *Samba* because he had other circumstantial evidence too. It was another event of the hearing where the verdict was made to give punishment to the guilty parties.

In this sense in the *Mundhum* jurisprudence before making a verdict proper hearing process should be conducted. That concept was established as a customary judicial system in the *Yakthung* regime where parties are free to present their views, witness and evidence to prove their claim. So that after observing the evidence and witness, the *Chumlung* and *Tummihang* would decide based on the ground of reality. To get accuracy they would make time to time cross examinations of witnesses and evidence.

8. Hearing Procedure

As per the collected information in the Limbu judicial system, it is found different procedures were applied. There was the open hearing system. During the hearing custom, circumstance, history or precedent was the base of the hearing. There is no written law or custom in the *Yakthung* tradition. Any legal process was not found as recorded and written. Everything was based on verbal form. It found in the hearing process processes were observed by the *Chumlung* which are given below:

8.1 The Date

If the hearing date is fixed by the leading judge then the other judge means *Pasingpada*, *Tummihang*, etc. and parties of cases were informed. Besides the parties, other required persons also were informed to be presented. The parties themselves inform their witness. It was found that was the very first stage of the hearing process. That means before the hearing it was base to organize the hearing process.

8.2 Chumlung of the Court

As per the found information, the *Chumlung* means a meeting. The *Chumlung* was called to hear the case of the parties examine their witness and provide evidence. It was held at a particular place or location, or place of dispute or crime where judges heard and made the decision. *Chumlung* was autonomous to make any decision. It has its own right to make required procedures, it could postpone the hearing too. There was no bar for the number of judges and participants. The *Chumlung* seating style was held in round or circle form but sometimes it could be scattered way. But normally one side the judges used to sit, and parties and witnesses to the crime or case would sit on the left and right side of the judges than other participants. Anyway, there was not any hard and fast rule about seating in a hearing. But if the *Chumlung* had to observe the damages used to visit the field or location of the case or criminal act.

In the *Chumlung* besides the judges, other participants also can present their views or facts regarding to the case. It was open and consensus-oriented principle-based.

8.3 Presentation of Parties to the Case or Crime

If in the hearing both parties were presented. Without the presentation of the party of their representative, the verdict could not be made. But in terms of grievous cases without the presentation of the offender also verdict could also be made. But such cases rarely occurred otherwise representative of the party were presented in the hearing process and they could defend of behalf of their party to the case. In some cases, the representative had to pay the liability of the wrong deed or crime too. In most cases offender or wrongdoer used to accept his/her guilty and request only a minimum penalty or excuse.

During the hearing process, at first, the victim would be asked to present his/her loss, damages, events, crime/case, time, place, effect, etc. then the plaintiff had to present evidence and witness. The plaintiff had to prove s/he was a victim by showing the evidence and witness. Then offender had to present his/her subject and present the evidence and witness.

8.4 Examination of the Party, their Evidence and Witness Presentation

After hearing the offender and plaintiff and their witness the *Chumlung* used to examine their evidence. In this process to get facts of a case *Chumlung* made cross-questions to parties regarding the case and the relation between the evidence and the situation etc. They made cross question with them, check or examine the evidence, and witness. Here burden of proof went to the claimer whose claim had to prove its fact.

If the *Chumlung* suspected that the party was not presenting the facts about a crime could give him/her physical torture for taking out facts things. Sometimes it would be cruel too. To find the truth they made the parties touch the soil before presenting the issues. Sometimes they used to touch a rock and *Sambok/Samyok* (Bermuda grass) to seek out the truth. In Limbu, there is such a belief that by touching the soil if anyone

presents false or fraud matters would be die and be changed into soil or whole life s/he has to carry the burden of curing the soil means sorrow, tears, ignorance, poverty etc.

8.5 The Verdict

During the hearing process, the judges and participants might have different views about the case. After examining the issues (crime/case), plaintiff, offender, evidence, witness, and related facts judges used to discuss the finding. Normally, the offender accepts his/her guilt. The judges or *Chumlung* discuss damages and recovery of the wrong deed. They looked at the consent of the parties too. They used to suggest the way out and made the verdict. It was the last process of the hearing process. The verdict was made at the meeting. In most cases, *Chumlung* made a verdict where an offender was apologized to by the plaintiff. To ask excuse or say sorry the offender used to put in some cash win or local beer and lean down to the victim or plaintiff. It was a kind of confession and respect for the victim. So, it is a verdict and penalty, too. In this way, the disputes were solved in the *Chumlung* hearing system. The following elements are included in the hearing and verdict.

Open hearing

Free and fair (no partiality)

Parties are free to present their views and facts)

Nature and condition a prime facts in the case of crime

Condition of victims and offenders oriented

The consensus of both parties especially offenders based

Criminal and civil cases are equally treated

The burden of proof goes to the claimer.

But there were some drawbacks of that customary judicial system, too. Sometimes it could be cruel and inhuman also in some cases. Sometimes *Chumlung* used to apply force to find facts, in serious, severe, crimes. At that time physical torture was normal and common.

9. Penal System

In the Limbu judicial system there were different penal systems. According to Limbu (2022), there were excusable and non-excusable offences. Excusable crimes won't be punished but non-excusable deeds were punishable. According to him in Limbu's customary legal system, there were two types of punishment – direct and indirect.

9.1 Direct Punishment.

Punishment is given by the authority and community or decision-making body. That means sanction is made by the same judicial body where the following types of punishment were sanctioned.

Death penalty
Tit for tat,
Fine and compensation,
Detention,
Corporal punishment,
Exile,
Labour, regretting or confession,
These were direct types of punishment.

9.2 Indirect Punishment: a Cruse

The indirect punishment was mainly given by the victim. It was an informal form of punishment, found in the Limbu community. If a victim is not satisfied by the judgment or doesn't feel justice s/he may give such punishment - is cruse. It is not a simple and nominal punishment and does not directly harm but it is punishment not for a single offender but for the whole of his/her family, business and not only a single time and his/her generation but it's for coming generation to generation. That's why also it could be a heavier punishment. So, the Limbu people are still afraid of such punishment.

10. Importance of *Yakthung* Customary Legal System

It was found that at present there are no any existences of customary law in the community and country. That means it in the *Yakthung* and other communities only national law and judicial system is imposed. The customary legal practices are ignored by the present national law. It is found in the country the legal process and judicial procedures are very lengthy, time killer then expensive. Simialrly, very simple cases are also being delayed due to long legal procedures. That creates a burden to the victim and creates more difficulty. In this case customary legal practice is one remedy to solve the general dispute within a community which will be more reasonable and suitable for these features.

Community-based and practical
Cost-effective to parties and nation
Time saving
Fast process
Communal Ownership
Amicable
Easy verdict implementation
The burden of national expenditure will be decreased

In these above-mentioned reasons it can be assumed the *Yakthung* hearing system in the judicial process is very important and relevant which is more practicable and suitable in this contemporary time.

11. Conclusion

It is concluded that The Yakthung indigenous group has a long history of the civilization in Limbuwan. They developed Mundhum which is a set of history, events, stories, saying, experiences, experiments, science, imagination, psychology and so on. Based on the Mundhum jurisprudence the Yakthungba legal system has been established. So the main source of the Yakthungba law is Mundhum and Mundhum-based custom. Public acceptance was the main source of power to sanction the laws. As per their practices and tradition, they developed the customary legal practices in the Yakthung judicial system. They didn't have a written code or law till the end of their regime in Limbuwan. Everything depended on the oral form of practice. It is seen the Yakthung developed and practised various customary legal and judicial practices. Mediator, king, Khasenlomba, Khasenlonden, Thaksuba, and Chumlung, are some judicial institutions and instruments which played the main role in the Yakthung judicial administration. There were traditionally they had mainly two series of courts -upper and lower courts. In the judicial function, the hearing is the most important instrument of the Yakthung judicial system. It went through various stages such as - the date, Chumlung of the court, presentation of parties, examination of the party, their evidence and witness presentation and verdict. A hearing would be open, free and fair, parties were free to present their views and facts, nature and condition of the crime, condition of victims and offenders, a consensus of both parties especially offenders, criminal and civil cases are equally treated, the burden of proof went to claimer.

After hearing and observing the facts, the court would make the decision. The court mainly played the role of mediation. Directly the apology, labour, regret, corporal and physical punishment, financial punishment, exile, tit for tat, and imprisonment, death penalty were the nature of punishment. The cures are vital and indirect punishment. The Chumlung could play a role in the execution of the verdict. Such legal practices are very useful in contemporary times because it is community-based and practical, cost-effective to parties, time-saving. After all, fast process, communal ownership inherited, amicable and easy for verdict implementation, burden of national expenditure on the legal sector will be decreased. Simialrly, there would be discretionary power of a single judge, a transparent hearing system, immediate justice, consensus-based judicial system are the major features of the Yakthung hearing and judicial system. In this sense, it is relevant and should be recognized by the state for the concerned community.

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