

## **The Ethno-Genesis of the Rongmei Nagas: A Study of Identity**

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper aims at studying the identity of the Rongmei tribe which is at the cross-road. The study traces the emergence of the historical writings and documentation of the tribe which originally was an oral based society.*

### **Key words:**

Oral history, integration, movement, migration.

### **Introduction**

Racially, the Rongmei Nagas belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid race who at the present day inhabit in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in the North-East India. Rongmei is a combination of two words 'RONG' and 'MEI' meaning 'SOUTH' and 'PEOPLE' respectively. Thus Rongmei stands for the southerners. The ancestral home of the Rongmei lies in the mountain ranges in the Tamenglong district of Manipur and adjacent mountainous areas of Nagaland and Assam. The Rongmei settlement area within the territory of Manipur is the southern portion of the vast tract of Zeliangrong<sup>ii</sup> Naga country and hence those who settling in the southern part of their habitat within Manipur call themselves the Rongmei (or Ruangmei), the southerners. Though Pan-Zeliangrong solidarity was established in the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, however different nomenclature still prevails as the tribe was/is identified with different names by the Indian Government and the respective State Governments. These variations are due to the undocumented rich folklore, myths and legends, songs and ballads; religious hymns and oral traditions which have passed down from generation to generation but remained unwritten or unable to produce into texts for a very long time. To Ajay Skaria<sup>iii</sup>, "with the emergence of the literate culture, oral traditions about the past are expected to be slowly forgotten, to be replaced by a literate historical culture". Therefore, history and geography have been cruel to the identity of the tribe. In trying to trace the ethnic origin of the Rongmeis and construct its identity, it is worth visiting the earlier works and the contemporary scholars who have attempted to write on the tribe. The historical accounts produced by many colonial writers, administrators and the western missionaries, though found many lapses but yet they are instrumental in analyzing their history, culture and society. Captain R.B.Pemberton, in his 'Report of the Eastern Frontier of British India' (1835) visited several villages of Zeme,

Rongmei and Puimei and used the term 'Koupooees' to mean the people. John Butler's 'Travels and Adventure in the Province of Assam' (1855) discusses his travelogue experiences on the hill tribes of the then Assam and the present day Manipur. But the pioneer work on the people living in Manipur was Col. William McCulloch's *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and the Surrounding Hill Tribes* published in 1859. However his use of Pemberton's term 'Koupooee' and the Puimei term of '*Songboo* and *Pooeeron*' as the two Subdivisions, of the tribe has left behind a trail of identity confusion. Otherwise his account reproduced elsewhere in this work is very important. He also referred to the 'Liangmeis' as 'Quoireng' which in his works clearly pointed out the three dialects of Rongmei (Songboo), Liangmei and Puimei (Pooeeron). In 1874, the *Statistical Account of Manipur* written by the distinguished British Political Agent, Dr.R.Brown continued to add more to the knowledge of the 'Zeme', 'Liangmei' and 'Rongmei' where he called 'Koupois' to mean the Zeliangrong tribe. He divided the tribe into three sub groups- *Songbu* (Rongmei), *Koireng* (Liangmei), and *Koupui* (Puimei). But the description given by McCulloch and Brown exclusively dealt with the Rongmei only. C.A Soppit was another officer who served in North Cachar Hills of Assam. He wrote a complete work entitled, *A Short Account of the Kachcha Naga (Empeo) Tribe in the North Cachar Hills* in 1885. He used the term *Empeo* to mean the Zeme. However, it did not have much circulation. In fact it was T.C. Hodson who was then Assistant Political Agent of Manipur and who later joined the London University as a Professor of Anthropology who wrote on the Kabui in his *Naga Tribes of Manipur* in 1911. The confused title of the tribe as *Koupooee* or *Koupui* was set to rest when he adopted the term 'Kabui' a name of the Rongmei and Puimei used by the Manipuris. Kabui was the term used in the ancient, medieval and modern history of Manipur. Dr. J.H.Hutton in his *The Angami Nagas* in 1929 used the term 'Kacha Naga' to cover the four subgroups- Zeme, Liangmai, Maruongmei (Rongmei) and Kabui, in which his classification was not accepted in official publications of the time. Robert Reid's *History of Areas Bordering Assam* published in 1942 gives an account of the Zeliangrong revolt (1930-1940) whom he described as the Rebellion of the 'Kabui' and 'Kacha Nagas'. Reid's history publicized the uprisings of Jadonang and Gaidinliu. Ursula Graham Bower's *Naga Path*, 1950 is a personal experience in the Zeme country and popularized the revolt of Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu. On the coming of Christianity, Namthiurei Mpamei's *The Great Awakening* (1970) was a landmark. He brought the history of Christian Proselytism of the Zemes, Liangmeis and the Rongmeis, generally referred to as the Zeliangrong tribe. G.Makuga's *An Introduction to Rongmei Naga*, 1993 was the first work on the Rongmei Nagas. However, the writings of R.Marulung like *Rongmei Wari Shingbun*, 1986; *Zeliangrong Wari Shingbun*, 1996; *Naga Dharma*; *Rongmei Kashoi Kadam*; and *Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei Luh* written in Manipuri and Rongmei have given accounts of the Zeliangrong religion, folklore and songs. Mangthoi Thaimai's *Bhuban Ching* (Bhuban Hills) is a compendium of the Rongmei folklore, history of Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu and development of the Zeliangrong religion. Asoso Yunuo's *Naga Struggle against the British under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu* is the first full scale account of the Zeliangrong uprisings. A.K.Nag's *Rani Gaidinliu: Joan of Arc*, 1975 is the first Indian account of Rani Gaidinliu. He also wrote *The Fifty years of Zeliangrong Movement*, 1977, and *Volume of Jadonang*, 1971. R.Constantine's *Manipur Maid of the Mountains*, 1980 devotes a chapter on Rani Gaidinliu. Gangmumei Kamei's bibliographical notes of Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu in *National Biography of India*,

1972 give a definitive biography of the two personalities of Zeliangrong rebellion. His *Jadonang: A Mystic Naga Rebel*, 1997 is a definitive biography or history of Jadonang and the Zeliangrong rebellion. His more recent work 'A History of the Zeliangrong Nagas: From Makhel to Rani Gainliu' (2004) is a very comprehensive and most remarkable one where history, culture and Identity of the Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei and Puimei are clearly given. Ragongning Gangmei's *Rongmei Folklore* and *Jadonang Liu* are good contributions on Rongmei culture and tradition. N.B.Pamei's *The Trails from Makui Longdi*, 2000, Shillong brings out the historical location tracing the roots of the Zeme, Liangmei and the Rongmei. Besides these writings there are Several doctoral theses and M.Phil Dissertations submitted to several Indian Universities. To mention some few, we have Tamphasana Rajkumari's thesis on a *Zeliangrong Movement* of Manipur University, 1998; Hunibou Newmai's *Zeliangrong Religion* from North Eastern Hill University, 1986 and so on. There are also several M.Phil dissertations that were written on the tribe. For instance, Thenbilung Kamei's *Social and Cultural life of the Zeliangrong* with special reference to the Rongmei Nagas, Manipur University, 1988; and N. Daimei's *The Ethno History of the Zeliangrong Naga*, Manipur University (1984) are worth mentioning.

### **The Rongmei Migration:**

The Rongmei means the people of the fallow lands and of the southern region (also referred as Ruangmei or Maruongmei). It is believed that the third son of Nguiba, Rembangbe (pronounced Nrengbangbe in Liangmai and Rembangbou in Zeme) led a large group from Makuilongdi towards the south. Later, they came to be known as Rongmei (some spells Ruangmei or Maruongmei). The migrants towards the South settled down for many generations at Kajinglong village. Many lineages trace their origin to Kajinglong, which was an important sub-centre of migration to the south. The settlement history of the Rongmei and Puimei villages points to Kajinglong as their home village. It was known as the place of conflict between men and spirits. Many legends witness the presence of such conflicts. Ultimately, man fought out and confiscated the clothes (Ra-Phei) and flower (Ra Mun) and subjugated them. From Kajinglong, people went out to many directions founding villages to the South of the Irang River, particularly Longjang (known to the Manipuris as Kabui Khullen) which was originally a Liangmai village, which accepted Puimei migrants.

Kajinglong was also well known for the evolution of the Kamei clans. However it is rooted in the legendary folktale where the Chief of Kajinglong known as Kamgong with seven sons tried to rescue his own single daughter called Duithoilu from a python. It was the youngest brother who hunted the python and brought to the village. The python vomited one magical gong from his stomach and was killed. From this incident of rescue of Duithoilu from the python grew up the seven lineages of the Kameis, which were equivalent to that of Pamei of the Liangmai with names given for particular brothers. It must be remembered that the movement of the migrating people was in small groups. The leaders of the colonizers usually consisted of two clans who founded the village and were joined by their relatives and kinsmen. Thus the villages of Rienglong, the present Tamenglong and others in the central Zeliangrong region were founded. Villages of Changdai, Keikao, Nungnang, Ganglon Namthan, Khaupum and Montha became quite popular and prosperous. They further pushed towards the South and established villages in this barren mountain ranges upto the confines of the Chin Hills and Changphai or Champhai in the present Mizoram. The historical texts of Manipur show that the village of

Nungnang existed as early as the first century A.D. The village of Tamenglong claimed that they were in existence since the first century. The Rongmeis further migrated to the East and West in Imphal Valley and Cachar Valley in the historical times.

### **Movements of the Tribe:**

Remarkable changes had taken place in the life of the people soon after their emergence from their legendary cave - Mahou- Taobei, which is on the south-western direction of Mao of the North District of Manipur. Though it is not without difficulty to give proper explanation regarding the real causes of the said changes, it may not be too unreasonable to presume that certain factors like influence of the new environment, pressure on the land, famine, drought, epidemics and blood-feuds, etc., might have certainly played a considerable part in it. Thus, if traditions are to be believed, then, there is no room for doubt that his people was led, a long way, by the new spirit of adventure as soon as they were out from the cave, and had exposed themselves for the first time, directly to the tempting influences of the new environment around them. Thus, following the whims of the more powerful and daring adventurers from amongst them, many of them started migrating, batch by batch, to distant hill ranges which attracted them most.

Usually man of the past ages used to migrate, in batches from one particular place to another or from one particular region to another in search of better amenities of life. Instances of such a peaceful migration are not very rare even in the present days. Thus in the recent past, quite a good number of people of the Rongmei tribe of the West District and the Kukis of the Tengenoupal district of Manipur had migrated to the new land named- "Bei-Kapning" -one of the most fertile belts in Nagaland. In the same way, the establishment of a new village at "Tong Long" referred to in one of our traditions<sup>20</sup> where Khemjunang the leader of the people, had killed large number of Mithuns on its inaugural function, also undoubtedly shows a peaceful migration of the people of those days.

In those ancient days, it also happened now and then, that sometimes man was compelled to move out of a particular place under the pressure of certain very unfavourable circumstances where life became risky due to repeated inter-village or inter-tribal feuds. Thus, Rongmei folksongs and folktales also give due illustrations regarding devastations of a large number of villages through the joint operations of these anti-social acts of foolery and valour of the past ages. In the same way, the sad story relating to the devastation of a village named "fazing-Long" in the West district of Manipur, is still remembered by many, as one of the most painful fire-side tales; while the small curvature lying between two small hillocks named 'Phen-Teng' still remains reminding the people of the two Rongmei villages-ruinely "Sangjee and Longjaang" of the West District of Manipur, regarding the foolhardiness of the past ages.

In view of such recurring dangers, it was a common practice of the Rongmei people of the past to establish their villages in such a manner and at such a part of the hills, where they must be in a comparatively better position to defend themselves successfully against such dangers of inter-village or inter-tribal feuds. They used to establish their villages only in that part of the hills which would afford them extra strategic advantages for their self-defence. Thus, in those days, when any hero or any powerful group had the freedom to make raids upon any other group, any time, the life of the villagers depended to a great extent, on such extra - strategic

advantages afforded by the topography of that particular place where the village stood. It is a fact that in the past ages inter-village or inter-tribal feuds did really cause terrible havocs to the life of the people as well as the stability of their villages much more than any other factors. In the present state of our knowledge it will be difficult for us' to give the real cause of the movements of the people of those days from one part of the hills to another, since such causes stood changing from people to people and from time to time, and from place to place. The same is the difficulty in ascertaining the exact date, chronology, etc. of their migration, although it is fact that for some reason or the other, they moved and moved from age to age and established villages at different places in different epochs.

Whatever might have been the real causes of their migration, this is a fact that the Rongmei people began loosening their solidarity as soon as they were out from their cave so much so that they started splitting and re-splitting themselves into a number of groups, which were found establishing villages in different hill ranges. As a result, large number of villages came into existence on several hill ranges. And it is a fact that the number of villages continued multiplying, year after year, spreading continuously, at the same time, in the southern direction, till at last, some of them came to the borders of the Lushai hills. Thus, names of Rongmei villages in that area namely Lam-Jang, Faina-Deeteng, Pei-Kasaothao, etc. still reminds us of the Rongmei settlement in southernmost borders of Manipur those days. But in course of time, when the Kuki incursions into that region became continuous and blood-feuds between the people became very frequent, some of them started moving northward again, and came back to the present day Khoumum and Nungba areas. Here also the situation for those people who were returning there from the south was not at all favourable and thus the traditional inter-village hostility of the past ages started flaring up there, now and then. Moreover, pressure on land also became very high with the influx of new immigrants into that region. Consequently, some of them moved eastward and began occupying same parts of the hill ranges lying to the West of the Imphal valley while some of them moved westward in search of cultivable lands and started settlements on those parts, of the hill ranges bordering Cachar. Very soon, the Rongmeis of the Eastern hill ranges facing the Imphal valley were tempted to migrate to the fertile valley, where people had a much easier means of livelihood and at the same time, life there, was comparatively secure. Instances of the Rongmei migration from the hills to the valley were not very few during the British rule also - both before and after the Kuki rebellion of 1917-1919, when there was no security for life in those areas. Migration from hills to the valley became all the more widespread and protracted during 1960s and 1970s also because of the hostile activities of the Naga underground movements.

Thus, migrations of the Rongmeis from the hills to the Manipur valley was due partly to the comparative economic' advantages of the valley and partly to the lack of security for life in the Manipur hills. It is a fact that those who had once come down from the hills, and had the real taste of the life in the valley-better economic advantages and security-had ceased to entertain any more thought of going back to the hills to face the real rigours of life there as before. It is a fact that migration of the Rongmei people from the hills to the valley as well as from the villages to the towns, becomes increasing in the present days because of better amenities of life available in those places.

## Migration to the Valley

Rongmei settlement in the valley had been slow but continuous in three successive periods of the history of Manipur - namely pre- British period, British period and post-British period. During the pre-British period, when Manipur was under the Meitei Rajas, the Rongmei settlement in the Manipur valley started from the days of Maharaja Garibaniwaj (1709-1749). According to the Meitei Puyas, the Rongmeis who had rendered helps to the Meitei Rajas in their war against the Burmese in 1934 were allowed to settle down on the Chingmeirong and Langthabal Hills. The present Rongmei village called Majorkhul also started during the days of Maharaja Chandrakirti in a very pitiable form of few houses only in the Inghkhon of Maisnam Samu Major, a very prominent army officer of the said Raja. It is said that some Rongmei people were employed by Samu Major in the Lallup village and soon known as 'Phoush-khun' that is "village of huskers". However, that name was changed into Majorkhul since the land for that village was originally given by Samu Major. During the early part of the twentieth century, the said Rongmei village was again shifted to another area of Imphal now known as the Gandhi Avenue by an order of Major Maxwell, the then Political Agent of Manipur. In this period, the villagers of Majorkhul had rendered a regular free service to the Imphal Civil Hospital. Many of them were also employed in the Bungalows of the European Sahebs - Political Agent, Engineering Officer, Medical Officer, Police Officer etc. on a nominal remuneration. Some of them were employed as Mallis, some as Pani-Walas, some as cooks, some as Bearers serving them in their lunch and dinners. And again in 1948, the site of this Rongmei village had again been shifted, for the third time, by an order of the Manipur State Legislative Council, to the northern side where the said village stands today.

Therefore it is said that the Meitei Rajas of those days employed the Rongmei people in several capacities - some employed in different Lallup services of the Rajas, some for husking paddy in the royal house, some for collecting and supplying fire woods, some in the Royal band party and others in several other works of life. Thus, the Rongmei people of those days were also rendering regular Lallup services to the Meitei Rajas of those days. This was, indeed, one way, though under certain compulsion, as to how the Rongmeis of the hills were brought nearer to the valley people and were made gradually acquainted with the new life styles of the valley people. In fact, the Rongmei villages in the valley did not come into existence all at once. It was indeed, the result of long and continuous process and today there are around 100 Rongmei villages in and around the Imphal city such as Keishamthong, Sangaiprou, Ragailong, Kakhulong, Namthanlong, Keikhu and so on. Generally the movements of the Rongmei people can be explained as:

- (1) Migration from the hills to valley,
- (2) Migration from the hills or villages to the cities or other commercial centres.

Migration from the hills to the valley, as shown above, was due to several causes; among them - economic factors, better job opportunities in the urban areas or commercial centres, and lack of security for life in the hills were among the most important causes. A large number of Rongmei people living on eastern hill ranges facing the Loktak lake had come down the valley and started establishing a Rongmei village named "Thienjang" in the Loktak project area. Many of them have employment opportunities under the Loktak project schemes. Some of them are getting facilities for trade and commerce in a small scale while still others have opportunities of

improving their economic conditions by taking up a more improved method of wet-cultivation there. Some of the Rongmei people from Mukten, Langteng, Daron, Juron, Charungkhoh, Sengai, etc. who were, at one time, living on the top and not-easily-accessible-part of the hills, have started coming down the valley. Many new villages are coming into existence in several parts of the Bishenpur area.

During the recent past when the Naga underground movements were very active in the hills of the West district of Manipur, life became very insecure for many; and consequently, many of them were compelled to leave their hearth and home. Some of them had migrated to some parts of Nagai and even. We find many new Rongmei immigrants from Manipur in many places of Nagaland like Dhobi Nala, Jaluke, Samjuram, Beikapning and other parts of Nagaland, while still others, to some places in the Cachar district of Assam. Some of the existing Rongmei villages - like Rajbari, Lagailong, Turung, Chingmeirong, Koirengei, Sagolband etc. which are in and around the greater capital of the state had also increased considerably, in their house-hold strength due to the influx of the immigrants from the hills. Besides, many new Rongmei villages having considerably big number of house-holds are also coming into existence in the said area.

### **The Zeliangrong Integration:**

It is interesting to note that the same group of people was known by different names - 'Rongmei' and 'Kabui'. Of the two, the first was the name generally used by the people of the tribe themselves to differentiate them from the people of other tribes or communities, while the second was the name used invariably by all other people to denote the people of this tribe. Thus "Kabui" was the only name used in the ancient and contemporary Manipuri literature (specially in their folksongs and folktales etc.) to denote this people. The same was the name used in all the then British Government's records also, like Administration Reports, Census Reports, etc. And in the same way, this name was invariably found having been used to denote people of this tribe in all the works-books, reports, articles, research papers etc. of the contemporary European writers who wrote something about this people. Thus, for the last several decades the said two names - 'Rongmei' and 'Kabui' had, at best, been used as synonymous terms so much so that, at least they, stand in their own way, for one and the same people.

The issue of integration of the Zeliangrong area into a single administrative unit was raised earlier by different Zeliangrong organizations and leaders including Rani Gaidinliu and K.Kalanlung. Here, we may recall Kalanlung's memorandum to then Prime Minister of India Mr.Lal Bahadur Shastri, on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1964. The Memorandum reads,

*“Our people have been scattered over three states because of political, historical and geographical factors. Though administratively separated, the three constituent tribes have glaring similarities in culture, religious custom and language. The demand for the self-rule of our people was always in the forefront..... It is the stand of the Zeliangrong people that we should all live in a common homeland with explicit rights to develop ourselves, to preserve our customs and religion, to develop our language and literature and to improve our standard of living and way of life”.*

Though the Government of India had rejected the demand for a Zeliangrong District in 1966, Rani Gaidinliu after the fading away of the Naga Integration Movement pressed the then Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi to consider the Zeliangrong integration issue. In a very comprehensive Memorandum on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1972, Rani Gaidinliu, after the award of the *Tamra Patra*, reiterated her demand for formation of a Zeliangrong Political Unit in the State of Nagaland. On the same day, the Zeliangrong organizations like the Zeliangrong Council, Zeliangrong Naga Union and Zeliangrong Association, Assam submitted a similar joint Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. However, Mrs. Gandhi pleaded her inability and assured that she would consult the Chief Ministers of the concerned States where the Zeliangrong areas are situated. In the year 1975, the Zeliangrong Naga Union convened the first Conference of the Zeliangrong leaders to have a fresh discussion on the Zeliangrong Political Unit. The matter was discussed again at the Second Conference of the Zeliangrong leaders in 1976. The third Conference of the Zeliangrong leaders of Manipur was held in October 1980 and discussed the question of the integration of the Zeliangrong areas into a political and administrative unit at Tamenglong. The outcome of this conference was the formation of “Zeliangrong People’s Convention” (ZPC) which became the supreme body of the people to deal with the issue of integration of all Zeliangrong areas into a political unit, a district, a Union Territory or a State. Rani Gaidinliu became the first President of ZPC. Under her leadership, a regular meeting was held and in the third meeting held at Laisong in North Cachar Hills on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1981, they adopted the official slogan “Zeliangrong Ringtelou” meaning “Long live Zeliangrong”. This third meeting also led to the drafting of the Declaration on the Zeliangrong Homeland.

In the post 1964 period, when the India-Naga Ceasefire was enforced, the Zeliangrong people were fully involved in the Naga National Movement on the demand of all Naga areas to be integrated under one political umbrella. However, the unfortunate circumstances such as lack of employment prospects in Nagaland had generated another crisis within the Naga brothers and sisters. The differentiation between indigenous Nagas and outside Nagas in Nagaland left the movement at standstill and as a consequent the Zeliangrong started asserting its independent and distinctive character. In the course of time, they have realized the bitter truth. Their identity as Zeliangrong were not legally recognize by any state even Manipur nor by the Government of India. This was a shocking for the Zeliangrong people at large. Prof. Gangmumei writes (2004:233), “Then, identifying with Naga identity is not enough. It is a great psychologically and socially disturbing reality that the Zeliangrong people have to face. Neither the Government of India, nor the Government of Assam or Manipur recognizes the ‘Zeliangrong Identity’. A big question has thus arisen “Who we are?” Zeliangrong youths have started a fresh search for roots of the Zeliangrong identity; common ancestry, cultural and social oneness and common history. Phizo and his philosophy have given an identity for all Nagas. Yet the Zeliangrong people are looking beyond Phizo to Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu and our ideas for (the roots of) our identity within the greater Nagas nationality. Jadonang’s relevance has been accepted and realized now. Zeliangrong people are asserting their identity, which may have several implications. The search for a homeland for the Zeliangrong people is a logical expression of the Zeliangrong psyche and it has become synonymous with Zeliangrong ethnic identity.” At the present the Zeliangrong society is a mixture of people having preferred to call different names



such as Kabui, Rongmei, Haomei and Zeliangrong with different faiths-Christians, Hindus and the worshippers of 'Tingkao Ragwang' (TRC).

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<sup>ii</sup> The term 'Zeliangrong' is a composite name of the cognate tribes of Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei, which was coined on 15 February 1947 at the First Zeliangrong Conference when Zeliangrong Council was formed in Imphal. The term is a combination of the prefixes of their respective ethnonym –Ze+Liang+Rongmei including Puimei.

<sup>iii</sup> Skaria, Ajay (1999) *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, p.21.

