

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE RONGMEI OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a humble attempt to examine the traditional institutions of the Rongmei and their functions. They lived in the village and the ways of life of the people operate around the village community, through the institutions like the bachelors' dormitory, the elder's house, the girls' dormitory, the married women forum, the old women forum, the village chief (Nampou) and village council (Pei). Family is the smallest unit of the society which takes the responsibility to bring up the child. Children are taught the value of life, the need to respect their elders, what to do and not to do, etc. When the children attained the period of teenagers will become the members of the concerned dormitory and it is compulsory for all the boys or girls to join it. In the dormitory all kinds of traditional practices and activities are taught to its young members. The boys guard the village during emergency of war, accidents, incidents, also in times of natural calamities like earthquakes, sickness, epidemic, etc. The girls' dormitory too looks after the welfare of the village by contributing voluntary services in the form of collecting firewood and water for the poor and deserted widows during the daytime. They have a village council locally called Pei headed by Nampou. He (Nampou) is the leader, advisor and protector of the village community. The decision taken in the Pei is finally approved by the Nampou. The Pei is the highest and supreme body of administration in the village. It also acts as the highest court in the village and settled cases (civil or criminal) based on the customary laws. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

Key words: Rongmei, Institution, Pei, Nampou, Kengjapui Kaibang, Taku

INTRODUCTION

The Rongmei are one of the natives of Northeast India. Racially, they belong to the Mongolian race and speak the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 2000:477). Though, not much work has so far been done about

them. The Rongmei have no written history in the past; their origin and history can only be constructed with the help of oral traditions. Oral testimony certainly does reflect more ancestral imagination than historical facts. But, one cannot totally dismiss it as it does form the raw material from which true history can be derived and which is known must be pierced together from racial memories, folktales, folk songs, myths, religious hymns, legends etc.

Tradition says, the Rongmei people originated from a cave recognized as *Mahou Taobei*; they moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin*, and then to *Makuilongdi*, Senapati District of Manipur. From this settlement (*Makuilongdi*), they migrated to different directions; the Rongmei to the South. Most of the Naga traditions point to *Makhel* as their original home and from *Makhel*, they migrated to different directions. On the basis of traditions and linguistic history, it had been identified that the original homeland of the Rongmei and other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family was in South West China. As the Nagas, the Meiteis and Kuki-Chin-Mizo are “Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in South West China about 1000 B.C and migrated to their present habitat” (North East) through various routes in batches and at different periods (Kamei, 2002:24). Today, the Rongmei people are found settling in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study has adopted interdisciplinary method particularly the application of knowledge both history and anthropology. The data are based on available sources of published works and also on information collected from knowledgeable persons of the Rongmei community.

RESULT AND DISCUSION

No scholar has so far been examined the traditional institutions of the Rongmei in systematic way based on the available sources. So, thorough investigation on the subject matter is still awaited. Traditional institutions of the Rongmei can be grouped under the following heads: a) the family (*Kaikhun*), b) the bachelors’ dormitory (*Khangchiu*), c) the elder’s house (*Ganchang Kaibang*), d) the girls’ dormitory (*Luchiu*), e) the married women forum (*Mathenmei Kaibang*), f) the old women forum (*Kengja Kaibang*), g) the village chief (*Nampou*) and village council (*Pei*), and h) the priest (*Tingku/Taku*).

FAMILY (KAIKHUN/TAMPI)

The family is the smallest unit in every social kinship system throughout the world. It is also the first informal centre of learning. It is the first main agency to introduce the child to his many social roles. It is often

said that family is “the first informal school where the child learns all the useful things required in order to lead an independent life by himself.” This is true for the Rongmei.

A family comes into existence with the marriage of a man and a woman. In other words, when a man marries and establishes an independent house of his own, his house is called *Kaikhun/Tampi* or his family (Pakynstein and Burman, 1961: 3). They will act together for the common good of the family so long as the members of a household live together under the same roof and they are expected to produce children, care for them, and help train them in the ways of their culture (Lexicon, 1983:15). The mother of the family plays the important role in running the household affairs (Horam, 1998: 61).

A child when he grown-up participates in the village life. Even as a boy he follows his father to sow, to weed, and to reap the harvest of the *jhum* with their traditional implements. He takes parts in the local handlooms. He also participates in rites and hunting expeditions. The girl learns cooking and weaving before she is mature. The child, in general, acquires all the needed knowledge before he begins life on his own.

The family is also an institute to impart informal education to the children. He learns to live in the society. Opportunity is given to him each day to observe family administration through a trained and experienced head of the family. He learns to respect his parents and elders. He learns to share, to play, to cooperate and to conduct himself before he is called upon to shoulder public responsibility. He cannot be selfish in such a family set-up, and corporate life of the most congenial type is cultivated. Educational activities and processes surround him from sunrise to dusk. He is thoroughly educated to carry on the religion, culture and traditions of his family before he leaves his parents to start a new home of his own.

Children look upon parents with great respect. They call their father *Apu* (father) and the mother *Apoi* (mother) and never mention the name as they consider it disrespectful to call their parents' name even after they have grown up and established their own home. Not only the parents, even the elders are shown respect.

All members of the family contributed in the welfare and maintenance of the family. Children, the girl child in particular, are very helpful in the domestic chores like carrying water, cooking food, washing and cleaning. Boys can also do all these work depending on how they are being trained or in a family where there are no not enough female members. Grandparents are always useful in looking after the babies.

Mealtime (*Naptumeigan*) is regarded as the best time for family discussion of any matters or topics because this is the only time where they are usually attending to one common thing in a day. Children are taught the value of life, the need to respect their elders, what to do and not to do, etc.

Being a patrilineal society, the father is the head (Horam, 1998: 60) and exercises authority over all members of the family, and the family is known by the surname of the father. T.C. Hodson (1996: 70) writes, the household is a true social unit, as is proved by the fact that the head of the family has to perform certain religious duties. In the past, joint family system consisting of grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brother and sister was a common practice. They believe that joint family system lead to harmonious family relationship (Panmei, 1985:43). With the modernizing trends family is becoming a nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children. Yet lineage, family and kinship ties are still very strong. Murdock rightly observes, “The family and most basic form (of family organization) called herewith the nuclear family consists of typically of a married man and woman and with their offspring, although in individual cases one or more different persons may reside with them. The nuclear family is the universal human grouping. Either as a whole prevailing form of family, or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strong functional group in every known society (Murdock, 1960:1-27).”

There are three types or forms of family viz. *Koukai*, extended family, *Bomkai*, nuclear family and *Maipuikai*, widow family. In *Koukkai*, the grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brother, and sister live together, they share common kitchen, property and work collectively for the common good of the family. In nuclear family, there are only parents with their children. The married couple does establish a family when their parents give permission to settle for their own. But, in some cases, they set up it in their own will without the consent of the parents. *Maipuikai* is a family, where the husband is no more and the family is looked after by her husband’s brothers. If proper care is not made available, the lineage/clan members should take care of her future by extending all possible help and care to the widow concerned.

BACHELORS’ DORMITORY (*KHANGCHIU*)

Khangchiu is an important institution of the Rongmei. It provides as a communal sleeping hall for the boys and other members of the dormitory. In olden days, it served as a military barrack for defense of the village. All the boys who attained the period of teenagers will become the members of this dormitory and it is compulsory for all the boys and male members to join it. It is a three-tier institution in which there are three different categories, namely *Gaanna* (*Shingkhang*), -unmarried boys, *Gaanpi* and *Khangbon*. The *Gaanna* forms the junior

most of the three grades and it consists of only unmarried men. The next higher grade is *Gaanpi* the members of which are of two different grades – senior and junior. The senior grade is known as *Gaanpi-Kaijipmei* where *Kaijipmei* sleeps in his house and the junior-grade is called *Gaanpi-Chaphongmei*. The junior is generally unmarried one and he represents the senior most of the unmarried young group, *Gaan*. *Gaanpi -Kaijipmei* consists of married men only. The next higher grade-*Khangbon* is the highest grade. Generally the members of this grade are all middle-aged men. According to the Rongmei customs and traditions, the *Khangbons* are the head of the organization of *Khangchiu*. Peace and prosperity of the said organization, therefore, depends entirely on the ability, efficiency and leadership of the *Khangbons*.

Unlike the Kukis, the *Kangchiu* is housed in a particular house usually with a rich and influential owner who has a big house. It is a public spirited act to offer his house as the *Khangchiu* (Kamei, 2004:254).

In the dormitory all kinds of traditional practices and activities such as warfare and art of fighting by the use of weapons, dance, music, and song are taught to its young members. They also receive training in the art of handicraft like basket making, wooden craft, carpentry, bamboo, cane and other embroidery works (Gonmei, 1980: 15). They act as a guard house for the defense of the village such warriors are known as *Riphen* (Kamei, 2004: 255). They also guard the village during emergency of war, accidents, incidents, also in times of natural calamities like earthquakes, sickness, epidemic, etc (Makuga, 1994: 23). Other social services extended by dormitory involve constructing paths, and clean ponds in and around the village. The dormitory also acts as a centre of cultural activities. The festivals and ceremonies for the village or individual are organized by the *Khangchiu*. It renders services for the individual's households or village council during the time of marriage and other social occasion. The youths of the dormitory take part in fishing, house building, hunting, and in the fields at the time of sowing seeds and harvesting (Rao, 1976: 137). The boys use to spend their time in the dormitory for doing different types of activities. They return to their houses only for taking foods or whenever they fall seriously ill (Bower, 1986: 82). The institution of *Khangchiu* still exists, but it functions only during festivals(Kumar, 2000:2458).

ELDER'S HOUSE (GANCHANG KAIBANG)

Above the *Khangchiu*, there is *Ganchang Kaibang*, the elder's house. The *Ganchang* is very important because those who have gone through the experiences of the gradation in the dormitory are promoted to *Ganchang*. The *Ganchangs* are also promoted to the *Banja* according to seniority of age and now they are the members of *Pei* and hold offices. They also perform the religious rites and ceremonies of the village. Since

ancient times, the *Banjas* have been acting as the highest authority in social, cultural, religious, and political affairs of the village. Thus, a Rongmei from his adolescent stage till the last of his life is to be a member of this or that social institution according to his age and he has to render his best services to the society for its well-being.

GIRLS' DORMITORY (*LUCHIU*)

Like the boys, the girls too have dormitory of their own. Unlike the *Khangchiu*, the category of membership of this dormitory is only the unmarried girls. They have two leaders called *Tunapi* who are the senior most from among the girls. In addition, two married men from the *Khangchiu* are entrusted to look after the affairs of the girls' dormitory. They are locally known as *Tuna Munshinmei*. The owner of the *Luchiu* and his wife will act as patriarch and matriarch of the *Luchiu*. In this place, the young girls are given informal education training like art of spinning, weaving, dance, music etc. The girls' dormitory looks after the welfare of the village by contributing voluntary services in the form of collecting firewood and water for the poor and deserted widows during the daytime. They are authorized to use their dormitory only at night time (Bower, 1986: 82). Now, the *Luchiu* functions only during festivals.

MARRIED WOMEN'S HOUSE (*MATHENMEI KAIBANG*)

Above the *Luchiu*, there is an institution called *Mathenmei Kaibang* (married women's house). This institution is also known as *Rakpui Kaibang*. After marriage, a woman inevitably becomes the member of *Mathenmei Kaibang* and the functions of the *Mathenmei* are limited. But, they perform some social functions during festivals and religious ceremonies. While the oldest woman is the head of the dormitory, *Lakpui Munsinmei*, the post of caretaker is the advisor and guide of this dormitory. In the *Gaan-Ngai* festival, songs are sung and cultural dances are performed in all respective houses of those women who get married within the year that is whosoever get married before this festival. In this dormitory, all the problems and welfare programmes of the womenfolk are discussed and solved by themselves. Besides, the womenfolk of this dormitory take very active part in maintaining peace and harmony in the society.

OLD WOMEN'S FORUM (*KENGJA KAIBANG*)

The senior members of *Mathenmei Kaibang* are generally promoted to the next social group of the old women i. e. *Kengja Kaibang*. They are assigned with ritual functions during births, deaths and religious ceremonies of the village (Kamei, 2004: 255). The ritual sacrifices like *Taroijaimai*, *Dampakhonmei*, *Punghunmei* etc. can be carried out by them. In the ear-piercing festival (*Nanu*), each of the child household will bring *Nanu*

Cha, gifts in the form of vegetable, cook rice, cook curry, local salt plates, etc. at the *Kengja Kaibang* and the gifts are distributed among the elderly people. At the *Kengja Kaibang*, the elders of *Pei* will sing traditional songs like *Rah Lu* and *Magen Lu*. The old women (*Kengjapui*) will perform *Nanu* dance for fertility in the village.

VILLAGE CHIEF (*NAMPOU*)

Gerontocracy with democratic principle is the form of the Rongmei village government. Village elders called *Banjas* are the administrators of the village. They have a village council locally called *Pei* headed by *Nampou*. He (*Nampou*) is the leader, advisor and protector of the village community (Parry, 1988:248). The chief must “protect the rights of his subjects, provide justice for the injured and oppressed, and punish wrongdoers (Schapera, 1963: 69).” The chief acts as a judge when any serious crime such as adultery, land disputes, murder etc. occurs in the village. The matter is brought to the *Pei* and any decision taken by the *Pei* is to be finally approved by the chief. Nothing of “public importance may be done without his knowledge and consent (Ibid).” In the same way, any other serious problems of the village like external threats to the security of the village. The village chief is to act as chief of the army in the defense of the village. This has indicated that the chief is powerful and final authority of the village administration. However, it may be stated that as the administration in Rongmei village is democratic in nature the chief does not have an absolute power, because any decision he has to be supported by the majority in the *Pei* and such decision is to be based on the customary laws. In other words, with all the “powers concentrated in his hand, however the village chief could not be a dictator as he was bound by various tribal customs and unwritten laws which were rigidly followed. The chief had no power (Shimray,1985:53)” to overrule village council (*Pei*). In fact, *Nampou*, owner of the village, is in theory the chief functionary of the *Pei*. The chief is understood to exercise his power within the law of the land, a view strikingly captures in the Tswana saying: “The law is blind, it eats even its owner (Roberts, 1985: 77).” There is a Naga saying: “No cock hurts the chickens and no chief speaks roughly.” John Butler opines, every Naga village has a nominal head or chief, “it is evident their chiefs have no absolute power over the people(Butler, 1978:145-146).” Unlike the Kuki who has strong chieftainship system, the Naga chief has relatively limited powers and while exercising his powers the village chief is checked by the village council (Rajkumari, 2012: 3). According to James Johstone, the Nagas are republicans, “their chiefs are elected and they are liable at any time to be displaced (Johnstone, 2002: 46).” In this connection, some local scholars compare the similarity of a Naga chief with leopard skin chief of Nuer of Southern Sudan, who has no “political authority his activities are concerned with settlement of blood-feuds and for a feud cannot be settled without his intervention and his political significance lies in this fact (Evan-Pritchards, 1969: 173).” The chief (*Nampou*) does not wear any emblem indicating his

power and status (Ravi and Roy, 2010:64). It is true that the Rongmei polity is run by a chief at the top of the hierarchy, but with limited power. He is finally responsible to the village elders.

VILLAGE COUNCIL (*PEI*)

Pei is the highest and supreme body of administration in the village. There are other functionaries who look after different departments of the village. Under such administrative system, all and sundry in the village is equal irrespective of his administrative positions. There is no class system of low or high in Rongmei society. In the distant past, *Pei* maintained independent relation with other villages. *Pei* is the highest court in the village; all civil or criminal cases brought to the *Pei* are tried under the guidance of the customary laws. Petition/complain is lodged verbally by giving a pot of wine or rice beer to the *Pei*. The elders of *Pei* are well conversant of customary laws and all the culprits are punished with customary fine in the form of livestock, wine etc. Justice is done without any partiality according to customary laws of the Rongmei. Oath and ordeal were also observed when there is no evidence/witness of the case. The religious activities of the village are under the supervision of the *Pei*, but *Pei* takes the advice of the priest. Other Naga tribes like the Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Poumei etc. also have the same village council headed by a hereditary chief which acts as the supreme administrative body and the court of justice guided by the customary laws. The chief and elders of the council belong to the privilege group in the society.

PRIEST (*TINGKU/TAKU*)

In traditional social hierarchy, priest (*Tingku*) is next to the village Chief (*Nampou*) and *Nampe*. So, the priest cannot be neglected in the traditional social set up. In the past, he was the religious head cum administrator of the village. The foundation of his power lies on the assumption that he has the power to control some natural calamities like draught, epidemic, storm etc. "He is the intermediary between gods and men (Tylor, 1988: 436)." But, *Pei* became powerful and he is now confined to the religious affairs of the village. The *Pei* acts on the advice of the *Tingku* (Kamei, 2004: 331). As a matter of fact, the priest is an indispensable person in day today life of the people. To become a priest (*Tingku*), one has to go a long years of apprenticeship, for one must combine in himself all the qualities of a sorcerer (person who is engaged in the art of black magic); a diviner or seer (person who can foretell the future); a witch doctor (person who can cure or defend by means of magic detect witches and sorcerers or reconcile infuriated spirits or demons); a prophet (person who speaks to the people on behalf of the supernatural power) etc. Generally, an elder who is well versed in the religious rites, ceremonies and sacrifices is selected as priest of the village (*Tingku*). His main function includes performance of all kinds of religious rites, sacrifices, healing of sickness, forecasting the future, announcement of village gennas/prohibitions (*Neihmei*) etc.

R. Brown (2011:28) says, each Rongmei village generally has “a priest who directs the sacrifices, and also acts the physician, performing sacrifices and incantations for the recovery of the sick. Their worship consists of offerings, omens, sacrifices and divination by examining the slaughter animals. Their priests are not held veneration, but do no other work; after a sacrifice the priest claims the carcass of the animal slain.” Common sacrificial livestock consists of fowl, pig, dog, goat, etc. In the past, when an epidemic (*Rapian Ripian Sime*) did occur in the village, the priest performs sacrifice and prayer to avoid from the diseases. This is called *Reithakmei*. Sometimes, he sanctifies the entire village with *Ten Mhaimit*, a kind of thatching grass to drive off the evil forces (*Rashi-Rarou*). As fee for his religious service to the community and individual family, a person of every household of the village would help him in cultivation of his field for one day in a year.

The office of *Taku* is not hereditary (Soppit, 1969:140). There is another junior or assistant priest called *Taku Kiakja* who performs the same duties of *Tingku* in his absence or at the demise of *Taku*. The qualification of *Taku Kiakja* is the same with that of the *Tingku*. After the death of *Taku*, he succeeds the office of *Taku*. Unlike the Rongmei, the priest (*Thempu/Siampu*) of the Kukis in addition to his religious function also performed judicial administration. Any intricate case, which the village chief-in-council could not decide, is often referred to the priest. In other words, in his secular functions, he is to decide those cases which the village chief-in-council could not come to a conclusion due to lack of evidences. In the past, many of the culprits disclosed their hidden crime for fear of the oath or ordeal and the cases were settled (Songate, 1999: 61). This transferring of case indicates that in the traditional society, the politics, religion and judiciary are interdependent.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Rongmei lived in the village; the ways of life of the people operate around the village community, through the various institutions. In *Khangchiu* and *Luchiu* informal education is given to the young boys and girls. Now, it is replaced by the school and it dies. The proper functioning of the institutions has gone, but one cannot out rightly conclude that the system has been totally died out from the present Zeliangrong society. They still exist, but they function only during festivals.

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