

A STUDY ON THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE RONGMEI

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to look into the origin and migration of the Rongmei on the basis of available sources. Tradition says, the Rongmei originated from a cave known as Mahou Taobei; they moved to Makhel and to Ramting Kabin, and then to Makuilongdi, Senapati District of Manipur. From Makuilongdi, they migrated to the South. Most of the Naga traditions point to Makhel as their original home and from Makhel, they migrated to different directions. According to another theory, the Rongmei people along with other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family migrated from South West China and entered into Northeast through various routes in batches and at different periods. They perhaps entered into Northeast India through Burma. Now, they are found in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

***Key words:** Rongmei, Makhel, Origin, Mahou Taobei, Tradition.*

INTRODUCTION

The Rongmei, one of the major tribes of Manipur are also known as Kabui. Rongmei mean people of the south or southerners; (*Rong* means south and *Mei* means people). Racially, they belong to Mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burman language. The origin of the word Kabui is still unknown. A local scholar wrote that the name Kabui is given by the Meiteis of Manipur to mean the Rongmei people and nothing is known clearly about the derivation of the word. The ancient chronicles of Manipur like *Cheitharol Kumbaba* refers to Kabui, Tangkhul and Anal as very ancient tribes of Manipur. *Poireiton Khunthokpa*, an ancient Meitei text dealing with the adventures and colonization of *Poireiton* has recorded that when the colonizer came to the hills of Manipur, the Tangkhul, Kabui and Anal tribes were already living there. The term Kabui is very old, however, the origin and meaning is still not known. The population of this ethnic group is found mainly in Tamenglong and Noney districts of Manipur. These people are found scattered also in the neighboring districts of Noney and Tamenglong,

namely Churachandpur District, Senapati District, Imphal West District, Imphal East District, Thoubal District and Bishnupur District. Here, an attempt is made to throw light on the origin, migration and settlement of the Rongmei based on the available sources.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The present study has adopted interdisciplinary method, particularly the application knowledge of both history and anthropology. The data are based on the available literary sources and also on information collected from well informed informants of the Rongmei community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Systematic study on the origin and migration of the Rongmei has not so far been conducted by any scholar on the basis of available sources. Still await a systematic treatment on the subject matter. The origin and migration of the Rongmei is based on the traditional folk songs, folk tales, legends and ritual hymns etc. A few British anthropologists and colonial officers also gave some accounts and information in this connection. Every tribe or community who inhabiting in different parts of the world used to claim at least a certain place or cave as the origin of human race, according to its own belief or legend(Makuga, 1994:5).

According to local myth, *Dampapui*, the Goddess created human being by the order of *Tingkao Ragwang* (Supreme God), who is the creator of all things of the universe (Brown, 2001:27). The creation of human being is cited in the ritual hymns recited on the ceremony of *Najum Gaimai*, which is usually performed on the fifth day of every child birth (Makuga, 1994:2). The tradition relates that *Tingkao Ragwang* summoned the Goddess *Dampapui* at His side and ordered her to create the human being by looking at His image which was reflected in the water and she did it accordingly. The man began to move at the moment when *Tingkao Ragwang* gave life. Then the Supreme God made a safe shelter for human beings and protected them from the wild beasts and other natural forces by keeping them inside the cave (New Standard Encyclopedia:184).

The concept of cave dwelling should not and cannot be treated literally, because it was usually used in all part of the world as the hiding place and a safe place for mankind before they could master the art of making a house for themselves. The earliest evidence of cave dwelling comes from a cave near Peking, China more than 300,000 year ago (Ibid). In Europe, it was widely used between 70,000 and 10,000 years ago.

In the beginning, man thus lived in cave. As the legend goes, man lived inside the cave called *Mahou Taobei* till that time when they emerged from the cave into the outside world. This mythical cave is said to be located at *Ramting Kabin*, a few kilometers away from *Oklong* village in Senapati District of Manipur (Marulung, 1996:100). Their faith in cave origin is also contained in a ritual recitation known as *Mhunoi* (Thenbilung, 1988:8); once upon a time, human being lived in a cave, the entrance of which was blocked by a huge stone slab. A mithun removed the stone with its horns (Luikham, 1993:42) and then, their ancestors came out of the cave. In due course of time, human beings became strong and wise enough, and *Tingkao Ragwang* instructed *Goichang* (mithun) to remove the stone slab which blocked the entrance of the cave. The animal did it accordingly and then, the human beings came out of the cave. The first man and woman who came out of the said cave were recognized as *Pokrei* and *Dichalu* (Marulung, 1996:100). They lived innocently as brother and sister in the jungle. It is said that one day an idea came to *Pokrei* (which is believed to be God's creation) that both of them should get married and have children, for which he asked the girl, *Dichalu* to address him as *Apou* (Uncle) instead of *Achai* (brother) as soon as she met him while coming round a raised earthen mound called *Pungbut* from the opposite direction so that she might become his wife. After going seven times round the *Pungbut*, *Dichalu* by the eighth round called him *Apou* as soon as she met him (Ibid). From that time the boy no longer treated her as his sister and presumed the girl belonged to a different clan. Since then, the marriage between boys and girls of same clans were prohibited among the Rongmei people (Budha, 2008:13). Thus, they were united and became first husband and wife on earth. As time passed, the couple was blessed with four sons namely: *Nguiba*, *Sagee*, *Aneiu-wa* and *Chatiu* (Thaime, 1995:379) and settled at *Makhel* which is situated in Senapati District. So, the original home of the Rongmei ancestors is believed to be at *Makhel*. The tribes like *Lotha*, *Maram* (Tiba, 2007:2), *Angami* (Hutton, 1969:7), *Chakeshang*, *Tangkhum* and *Sema* etc. have pointed to *Makhel* as the original place from where they dispersed themselves to other directions. *Gangmumei Kamei*(2002:7) mentioned that the *Zeliangrong* tribes (*Zemei*, *Lingmai* and *Rongmei*) have a tradition that they originated from a cave known as *Taobei*; they moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin* and then to *Makuilongdi* and from there they migrated to the South, west and the North.

According to *Tamphasana Rajkumari*, the *Zeliangrong* according to their legend preserved in religious hymns and folk songs originated from a mythical cave called *Taobei*. Subsequently, they move to *Makhel* and *Ramting Kabin* and then to *Makui Longdi*, from where they migrated to the South and North. Thus, *Makhel* at *Mao*, as for many other Naga tribes, forms an important point of dispersal in their migration to the frontier of western Manipur, Eastern Naga Hills and Barak valley (*Tamphasana*, 1988:1-2).

According to another theory, the Rongmei people along with other tribes of Indo-Burma areas came from China. According to some versions, the Tibeto-Burman group initially went to the west direction and thereafter sub-divided themselves into several groups (Golmei, 2004:15). It is said that the Mongoloid people moved into Burma in three different names and by different routes. Mou-Khmer races were the first people who migrated from China, Tibeto-Burman races were the second and finally, were the Tai-Chinese consisting of Shan, Siamese, Karen etc. (Singha, 1996:30).

The various ethnic groups of Southern Mongoloid, the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo Aryans and a section of Tai (Shan) had come to Manipur since pre-historic times. The ethnic groups of Manipur like, Meiteis, Kuki-chin and Nagas are believed to be the descendants of those migrating people (Devi, 1992:1). It has given a clear idea that the Rongmei people like other tribes came from two regions namely South-East Asia and Eastern Tibet or Western China. As the Rongmei are “Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in south west China before 1000 B.C. and migrated to eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into the Irrawaddy Valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and they returned southward and entered north east India through Manipur River, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present Habitat (Kamei, 2002:28-29).”

There are some reasons which led to the people to different places from *Makuilongdi*, a big village. The primary factors were economic (non-availability of enough land for cultivation) and internal differences among the ruling clan.

The theory of migration of the Rongmei people is also supported by their mythological and legendary accounts. One *Nguiba* was the chief of *Makuilongdi* village and who was the progenitor of Rongmei people. In due course of time, the population of the village increased tremendously and the numbering of households reached as many as 7777 (Panmei, 2001:11). The village became prosperous. At *Makuilongdi* the basic features of Zelianrong society such as lineage society, patrilineal social structure, social organization such as Chiefship, village Council, dormitories, village festivals, lineage structure have been developed (Kamei, 2002:10). According to Namthuibuiyang (2001:14), “*Makuilongdi* can be considered the cradle of the Rongmei culture and custom.” Ph. Gongchalung (2000:4-5) wrote, Rongmei people became prosperous, lived happily for many years at *Makuilongdi* and the people attained the zenith of their socio-political life.

One of the important reasons for their migration was due to the crisis of inheritance among the sons of *Nguiba*, the village chief. According to the legend- *Nguiba* married twice, because his first wife was thought to be incapable of bearing a son. His second wife gave birth to a male child named *Magangtabo*. Some years later, the

first wife also gave birth to a male child named *Kadingbou*. In due course of time, the second wife gave birth to another male child whose name was *Renbangbou* (Miri, 1991:18). *Nguiba* had three sons and when he became old, he could not make decision to whom he had to hand over his authority. So, there cropped up crisis in the family over the question as to who would inherit the authority or property of their father. So, to settle the matter *Nguiba* has sent his two sons, *Magangtubou* and *Kadingbou* to the place of their younger uncle who had resided somewhere in Northern Koubrou range. The issue was solved by their youngest uncle. Their uncle was very clever to deal with the matter and according to his judgment; *Kading* was given the right to inherit the position of his father (Miri, 1991:19). Succession by the youngest son was laid down at *Makuilongdi*. Thus, the question of succession was solved but this had created disunity among the members of the ruling clan. Being disappointed at the judgment of his uncle and father, *Namgang* along with his band of followers left *Makuilongdi* and went to Barak valley and settled at *Hereira* village, the first village of Zemei. The people who stayed back with *Kadi* at *Makuilongdi* came to be known as Liangmei. *Rembang* and his followers who moved southwards to a barren land were called Rongmei (Kabui). The ancestors of Rongmei moved to the south and settled at the western hills.

The Rongmei was the most adventurous and scattered group among the Zeliangrong. Rongmei means the people of the fallow lands and of the southern region. They moved towards the south and settled down for many generations at the village called *Kajinglong*. “*Kajinglong* was well known for the conflict between men and spirits. Many legends grew up among the Rongmeis about the contest between men and the spirits who disturbed the men. Men ultimately fought out and confiscated the clothes (*Ra-Phei*) and flower (*Ra-Mun*) and subjugated them (Kamei, 2004:37).” From the *Kajinglong* village, the Rongmei people did move out to different directions and they established villages to the South of the *Irang* River. Thus, villages like *Rienglong*, *Changdai*, *Kaikao*, *Nungnang*, *Ganglon Namthan*, *Khoupum*, *Montha* etc. were established and they became prosperous. Previously, the Rongmei people occupied sites to the south of their present homeland, Tamenglong, down as far as the *Changphai* or *Champhai* region of present Mizoram where they lived with Lushai as neighbours and where remains of ruined villages known as *Mirongmun* are still found, It is said that the legendary folk hero, *Gairemnang* did travel as far as Tidim in Myanmar where he founded a village called *Duidimlong* (Panmei. 2001:17)

CONCLUSION

After observing the above facts, it may come to conclude that the ancestors of Rongmei people along with other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family from their original home land South West China migrated to North East through various routes in batches and at different periods. It is probable that they entered into Manipur

through Burma. In Manipur, they first settled at Makhel and then, migrated to different directions. Now, the Rongmei people are found settled in three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

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