

## **Adaptation, Change and Continuity: The Case of the Rongmei Indigenous Religion**

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The success of Christianity among the tribes of Northeast India presents few parallels in the history of religious conversions - a period when the entire tribes and communities within a span of hundred years abandoned their indigenous faith and converted to Christianity. Under such circumstance few indigenous primal religions of these numerous tribes have been able to withstand the mass exodus to Christianity. As a result the twentieth century witnessed the demise of most indigenous religions and their replacement by Christianity in the region. However, few indigenous religions have managed to survive and coexist with Christianity. This paper attempts to shed some insights into the efforts of the Rongmei Nagas in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam to preserve and propagate their indigenous religion often drawing influences and inspirations from Christianity and other religions to help preserve their indigenous faith.

**Keywords:** Indigenous religion, Primal religion, Primordial religion, Tingkao Ragwang Chap-riak, Monotheism, Organised religion.

### **Introduction**

“The beginning of all religion is unknown and dateless and is not a phenomenon of recent emergence. The institution of religion is universal which is found in all societies from past and present. Though not uniform among different communities, it is the earliest and the deepest interest of human beings. Man does not only have his biological, economic and social needs but also have religious needs that make him restless even beyond the satisfaction of his basic physical needs”.<sup>1</sup> Religion is an integral part of all human societies be it a primitive tribal society or complex modern society. It exist in the most rudimentary form in tribal societies with just a few followers to the most complex of hierarchies as we see in today’s organised religions like the Roman Catholic Church with over a billion followers. “Religion is a social phenomenon and as such is a continual reciprocal, interactive relationship with other social phenomenon” (Johnstone 1992: 1).

Religion has been man’s constant companion which not only comforts him but also

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reassures him that a better life is possible in the next world if not in this world. Argument persists as to whether it is society that defines religion or is it the other way round. But such debate without a doubt brings us to the conclusion that human beings invariably had religion since time immemorial.

### **Tribal Religion as Primordial Religion**

Religion in tribal societies is based on the understanding of the world around them. There is no definitive being that can be named as the founder of tribal religion. It is historical and its origin is shrouded in numerous mythical folk lores and narratives of individuals who have been witnesses to God. Tribal religions usually have no names. Social anthropologist E.B. Taylor (1929) refers to tribal religion as “Animism”, which he defines as the belief in “Supernatural beings”. The terminology of animism became very prominent and most tribal religions including those practiced by the tribals in the Northeast were listed as “Animism” by Britishers in their census reports. However, the term has never been free of contestation and it has drawn increasing criticism for its over-simplistic understanding of tribal religion from many anthropologists. In recent decades the term “Primal Religion” has been proposed in lieu of Animism.

Primal religion is a condition that not only has existed prior to all later systems of religious faith, not to mention all more elaborate institutions there from, but also something innate lying beneath other forms of religious experience. In the words of Gillian Mary Bediako, in agreement with Andrew Walls: “Primal also means basic or elemental, the fundamental substratum of all religious experience, continuing to varying degrees in all later religious traditions”, and as such, it consists of ingredients for “human understanding of the Transcendent and the world, essential and valid religious insights that may be built upon or suppressed, but not superseded” (Frykenberg, 2008).

The central proposition in the use of the word “primal” being that primal religions are those that are universal and have existed prior to historical world religions such as Christianity, Islam, etc. Primal religions are characterised by historicity, localised area of influence, the centrality of well developed oral narrative traditions and ritualistic practices aimed at propitiation of various gods, goddesses, and spirits, accompanied usually by the enactment of the “rites of passage”.<sup>2</sup>

On careful examination the overwhelming majority of the tribal religions of the Nagas, Kuki-Chin ethnic groups would fall under the category of primal religion. However, Gangumei Kamei proposes the term “Primordial religion” which would be more appropriate instead of the term “primal religion”. To him “Primordial religion” means a religion with primordial existence, existed since the beginning of time. “Primordiality is basic to any religion which is based on a myth of creation which ascribes to the Supreme Being as the Creator of the Universe, men and all living beings... On the empirical level, an overview of the indigenous religions of the major tribal communities of north east India shows that they have a common feature of polytheism with a strong belief in the Supreme God, the Creator and the Almighty God” (Kamei 2006: 15). Gangumei Kamei lists certain essential characteristics of primordial religion as the belief in a Supreme God along with belief in the existence of many other gods and deities who are responsible for various aspects of everyday lives of men in this world. Further, primordial

religion also entails ancestor worship, belief in the presence of souls with strong emphasis on its redemption and salvation as well as the concept of a Heaven, the abode of the gods. In this context, as mentioned above, the indigenous religion of the tribes in the Northeast can be categorised as “Primordial Religion”.

The introduction of Christianity to the tribals in Northeast India by the Britishers signaled the decline and subsequent demise of many tribal religions in the region. Amongst the few that have survived, the recent trend is towards the establishment of an organised religion<sup>3</sup> and the case of the Rongmei indigenous religion is no different. The ensuing section delineates the account of the Rongmeis and their efforts at protecting, safeguarding and propagation of their indigenous religion.

### **The Rongmei**

The Rongmei tribe is one of the sub-tribes of Zeliangrong tribe.<sup>4</sup> The Rongmeis are also known as “Kabui” in Manipur. They inhabit Tamenglong district, certain parts of Churachandpur district and the Imphal valley along with certain pockets in Dimapur district of Nagaland and Silchar area in Assam. As per the 2001 Census, their population in Manipur is 82,386 comprising 11.1% of the total Scheduled Tribe population in the state. “The main occupation of the Rongmei is agriculture, and they practice both jhum (shifting cultivation) and terrace farming. They are also involved in other supplementary occupations like animal rearing, weaving, carpentry, small scale business, plantation of tea, cotton, chillies, hunting, fishing and collecting different products from the village is also practiced. However, slowly and gradually many people have started getting employment in different departments of the government as well as the private sector irrespective of sex” (Rongmei & Kapoor, 2005: 111).

“The whole village is governed by the village council (*Pei*). The governing system is purely democratic though the *Numpou* (founder of the village) has an authority of traditional hereditary rights in the village. The members of the Council are selected from each clan known as *Meikhin* to represent in the *Pei* of the village. The highest court of the village is known as *Shungbam* and the *Pei* is responsible for any case and problem that arises in the village” (Pamei 1996: 29). As with the other tribal groups in the region, the establishment of district administration, Christianity, modern development initiatives, English education, etc. has eroded some of the strengths and powers of the traditional political and governance system. However, they still hold sway over vast aspects of Rongmei society.

### **Rongmei Indigenous Religion**

#### *The Pantheon*

The Rongmeis believe and worship numerous spirits with *Tingkao Ragwang* being the centre of their belief system.<sup>5</sup> *Tingkao Ragwang* is acknowledged as the omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent creator of the Universe, gods, men and also all living beings. The supreme deity *Tingkao Ragwang* is also believed to have created *Kanerellung*, meaning god of the hills, to guide the people for better morals. The supreme God also created another god *Didampu*, an emissary from heaven to earth. *Didampu* was also the ruler of

the human world known as the lower realm. In due course of time, *Didampu* abdicated his rule over humans and made his nephew *Ragwang* as the ruler of the lower realm. The Rongmei religion also involves the worship of natural elements like water, fire, earth, air as they are believed to be endowed with divine powers and hence they had to be worshipped in order to bring about favorable influences.

#### *Mode of worship*

*Neihmei* is the most common and a vital mode of worship among the Rongmeis, which can either be offered by individuals or as a form of community worship. *Neihmei* is observed to secure a bountiful harvest, to avoid events considered unnatural like still-birth, death on delivery and also to prevent the occurrence of natural calamities. *Ra-Kalummei* is the second mode of worship; it can be translated as the worship of the Supreme God and other Deities venerated by people. The third mode of worship *Ra khaangmei* is the third form of worship which is done to satiate the lower deities so that they do not disturb the humans during the course of their daily lives.

There also exists the concept of worshipping the village deities such as *Bambu* and *Shong* by offering holy wine during the performance of religious rites to ensure the welfare and safety of the village. Ancestor worship is known as *Kairao Kulumei* and is done to ensure the safety and prosperity of the family, and as a mark of respect the ancestor is offered wine at every religious ceremony. There is also the worship of other important deities such as *Ran Kaomei* or the calling or worship of wealth; *Bu-Kaomei*, the calling of the soul; *Nap Kaomei*, the calling or worship of paddy and *Dampa Khonmei*, the calling of the goddess of creation. During the last century there has also been the introduction of a place of worship called the *Kalum Kai* or Prayer Hall on the lines of what was done by the pioneering Rongmei religious reformer Haipou Jadonang<sup>6</sup> in the late 1920s.

#### *The Concept of Soul, Sin, Death and Heaven*

As per the creation myth of the Rongmeis, the soul called *Bu* was a gift from the Supreme Being *Tingkao Ragwang* who breathes life into two lifeless bodies made of clay. "Since the soul comes out of *Tingkao Ragwang*, the soul is presumed to be holy. However, as the soul resides in the body of man, it is subjected to good or bad effect of the action, thought and mind of the physical man. The soul enjoys or suffers the effect of the good or bad action of the man he lives in" (Kamei, 2000: 12). The ultimate aim of the soul is to return to Heaven, known as *Tingkao Kaidai* or *Tingkao Ragwang Kandi* in the Rongmei dialect. Sin or *Non* as is called by the Rongmeis, is the result of humans breaking the social and moral code of the village which entails divine wrath and punishment for the soul either in this world or after death.

Heaven is known as *Tingkao Kandi* or *Tingkao Ragwang Kandi* the abode of the Supreme God *Tingkao Ragwang*. The ultimate goal of all individuals is to enter Heaven and only those free from sins would be given entry into Heaven, a place free from the pain and misery of the earthly world and where only eternal happiness reign. "It is strongly believed that performers of ceremonies, feasts and rites dedicated to *Tingkao Ragwang* like *Ragaidai*, *Bamjou Kime*, *Ragai-jeison*, *Muleng*, *Banru* and *Tarrang* based on char-

ity to men, God and living being will go to heaven” (Kamei, 2000: 13). The observance of certain activities like offerings sacrifices to *Tingkao Ragwang*, charity, virtues like truth politeness, honesty and not being judgmental, not committing adultery or incest are believed to help the person enter heaven.

After the death of the individual, the soul travels to *Taroiram*, the land of the dead. Based on the actions of their life on earth, *Taroigwang*, the King of the dead would pass a judgment on who would be sent to Heaven and those who would be sent back to be reborn. Rebirth could be in the form of human or lower life forms like animals or even plants, but this rebirth happens only after suitable punishment has been meted out to the erring soul. For the souls whose sins and evil doings are beyond redemption are sent to *Thuntadijang*, a stage of degenerated existence which is as good as extinction. However, it is interesting to note that the concept of a place of eternal suffering commonly understood as ‘hell’ is nonexistent in the Zeliangrong religion.

### *The Priesthood*

The priests are known as the *Mhus* and the chief priests called *Tingku* and their help is sought by the elders of the village for performing various rites and supervise the festivals. The *Mhus* also act as the medium between gods and men transmitting messages from the gods. They also act as Seers whose opinions were sought to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of men.

The Rongmei indigenous religion is inherently a polytheistic religion. However, recent trends suggest that the overall drive is towards a monotheistic religion as can be seen from the increasing importance attributed to the Supreme God *Tingkao Ragwang*. The next section will attempt at identifying the measures undertaken to ensure the survival of the indigenous religion in opposition to the trend towards conversion to Christianity.

### **Adaptation, Change and Continuity**

The Rongmeis first contact with Christian missionaries was in Imphal valley where there are a significant number of Rongmei villages. Kamei Namrijinpou was the first Christian convert among the Rongmeis. He was converted in the year 1914 and was subsequently baptized the following year by U.M. Fox. The first church in Rongmei area was set up at Tamenglong village in 1920 but it was only in 1923 that the second Rongmei was converted to Christianity. Over the decades that followed India’s independence, Christianity grew ever stronger with thousands of people converting in the great revival of the late 1970s in Tamenglong District. As of today 80 percent of the Rongme’s are Christian with the Rongmei Naga Baptist Association (RNBA), emerging as the apex body of the tribe and affiliated to the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC).

However, against the overwhelming odds when most tribal religions have disappeared through conversion to Christianity, the Rongmei indigenous religion has managed to survive and hold its own against Christianity. The indigenous religion has emerged stronger in the wake of religious reformation and reorganisation to better suit the present day circumstances. Two phases of religious revival and reformation have occurred

amongst the Rongmeis. The first was led by the charismatic Naga rebel and freedom fighter Haipou Jadonang, and the second phase was the revival moment in the early 1990s which culminated in the formation of an apex indigenous religious body, the Zeliangrong Religious Council (ZRC). I have drawn the conclusion based on in-depth interviews with indigenous religious leaders from the ZRC, village religious leaders, village elders as well as early converts to Christianity during field work in four villages of Khoupum Valley, Tamenglong District and Imphal in May 2010. The conclusions drawn have also been substantiated with secondary data source from various regional publications on the indigenous religious reform movement.

Much before Christianity posed a direct threat to the survival and continuity, the indigenous religion was descending into an abyss of ritualism, sacrifices and orthodoxy wherein the performance of sacrifices was taking precedence over the propitiation of the Supreme God. "Religion had become the performance of innumerable sacrifices and observance of *gennas* for the birth of a child, a piglet, puppy, hatching of chicken, a crow or kite sitting over the roof, a dog climbing on low roofs, burning of a house by the fire, earthquake, a still-born child" (Kamei, 2009: 26). With so much focus on the performance of sacrifice, there was distinct sense of alienation among the ordinary Rongmeis as it was only the rich among the Rongmeis who were able to follow the indigenous religion.<sup>7</sup>

Haipou Jadonang observed this trend and was determined to bring about reforms and get rid of all the unnecessary elements that had crept into the religious system. What helped in his reformation efforts was his fame as a spiritual healer and stories of his association with God Bisnu (also known as *Didampu* or *Banglagwang*). Many of his followers were beginning to refer to him as the Messiah prophesied in the stories of the community who would deliver them from bondage and worldly sufferings. The first innovation that he brought about was through the construction of *Ra Kai* or the 'House of God', a practice so far unseen in the indigenous religion. This could perhaps be the result of Jadonang's varied travels, where he was exposed to the concept of a prayer hall, as with Christianity, although he claimed that it was the God Bisnu who ordered him to construct the Prayer Halls for those who could not go on the pilgrimage to Bhuvan Hills (Cachar, Assam).

It was Jadonang who singled out the concept of the worship of Supreme God, *Tingkao Ragwang*, over the other gods as being of paramount importance thus signaling the shift towards monotheism against the formerly polytheistic nature of the indigenous religion. He also introduced the practice of construction of a pulpit inside the prayer hall where the priest or elders would stand and preach while the followers sit either on chairs or tables; such form of worship was hitherto unknown among the Rongmeis. Since a majority of the existing hymns were in Liangmei dialect which few Rongmei understood, he also composed numerous hymns in the Rongmei dialect which are now known as *Jadonang lu* (songs of Jadonang). Further he instructed his followers to join hands and face east whenever they prayed and utter *Ragwang* (God). One might note the influences of the Christian mode of worship along with traces of Hinduism in the changes that were brought forth by Jadonang. He would have been well acquainted about such practices of other religions via his numerous visits to Cachar in Assam.

However, more than these innovations, perhaps the most important contribution of Jadonang as a religious reformer lies in his role in the abolition of the numerous *Numei* and *Nehmei* or the *taboos* and *gennas*. The observance of numerous *taboos* and *gennas* had crippled the indigenous religion rendering it nothing more than offerings and sacrifices of animals for the appeasement of various deities and the complete disassociation from the worship of Supreme God. The practices that he rendered as non-taboos include the birth of a stillborn child, the death of a woman five days after delivery, injury from a *Dao* (hunting knife) or Spear, the first rains and hailstorms of the year and various others irrational practices. However, the religious reformation of Jadonang was short lived as he was executed by the British in 1931 on trumped up charges of murder.

Notwithstanding Jadonang's efforts at reformation of the indigenous religion, in the ensuing decades especially the 1970s saw thousands of Rongmeis converted to Christianity. However, despite his early death Jadonang religious reformation had sparked a renewed interest among the followers of the indigenous religion and his efforts marked the genesis of the shift towards the evolution of an organised religion with an apex religious body. The second phase of the movement took shape in the form of the establishment of an apex religious body on the lines of other organised religion to govern and direct all practices linked to the indigenous religion. The formation of the *Zeliangrong Chapriak Phom* or Zeliangrong Religious Council (ZRC) in 1994 at Imphal, Manipur marks the formal shift towards this effort with emphasis on philosophical and theological refinement of the indigenous religion.

With the formation of the ZRC all matters related to the indigenous religion were placed under the preview of the ZRC and it was tasked with standardising the practices of the indigenous religion, its promotion and propagation among the people. The concept of an apex religious body is an alien concept among the Rongmeis. Formerly all religious affairs for most part were managed at the village level through village institutions like the *Pei Kai*. With the establishment of the ZRC for the first time religious authority was relocated to a body outside the village. The core agenda of the ZRC was popularising the worship and propitiation of the Supreme God *Tingkao Ragwang* over the other deities. This was also reflected by naming of the hitherto unnamed indigenous religion as *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC), where *Chapriak* in the phrase means religion. The credence for the worship of Supreme God over other deities is perhaps indicative of a shift towards monotheism.

The next foremost task at hand was the propagation of the TRC, as it was now known among the general populace. However, since there were many variants of the indigenous religion differing from region to region, the need for standardisation of practices acceptable to all was deemed vital before any attempt at propagation of TRC. The first step in this direction was the publication of the standardised "Rites of Passage" also known as *Ringlon* and *Theilon*. A committee to examine the varied *Ringlon* and *Theilon* was formed to prepare a report for standardising the rites of passage. Its report so submitted was approved by the Ecclesiastical Council of the ZRC and a standardised *Ringlon and Theilon* was published and copies of it were circulated to all the villages across Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. The documentation of theology, philosophy, religious practices and its subsequent dissemination signify a transition from "oral culture" to

“written culture” especially in matters concerning religious practices. Similar practices have also been documented among the followers of the Donyi Polo in Arunachal Pradesh after the formation of the *Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang* in 1986.

People were also trained and deputed to go to many of the Rongmei villages across the states of Manipur, Assam and Nagaland to spread the message and philosophy of TRC reminding people that they have their own religion and there was no need for conversion. Similar other publications like hymns, ways of performing rituals, sacrifices pertaining to TRC was commissioned, published and distributed among the people by the ZRC. This improved the visibility of the religion and thus many individuals formerly unaware of their own indigenous religion were provided with information which essentially explained the intricacies of the religion and thus conversions to Christianity was prevented to a certain extent.

Since the onus of propitiation and worship is on the supreme being *Tinkao Ragwang*, expensive rituals and sacrifices associated with the worship of other lesser gods and deities declined and in some cases were eliminated. The reorientation of worship towards one Supreme God provided economic relief to a certain extent to many of the poor families who were unable to partake in some of the expensive rituals and sacrifices. Other important measures undertaken to propagate and entrench TRC among the Rongmei populace includes the construction of *Kalum Kai* or “Prayer House” for community worship on the lines of what Jadonang had built in the late 1920s. This was necessary to revive and foster the sense of community and solidarity among the people. Prayer services were held every Sunday and each day of the full moon. A dress code was also evolved for those attending this religious service. Women wear a white wrap-around called *Langknou Phesuai* and the men are to wear only white clothes whenever they attend any of the service. The mode of worship in the *Kalum Kai* closely mirrored the Judeo-Christian worship form with praise and worship followed by the delivery of religious message by a pre-appointed speaker. Twelve *Kalum Kais* had been built and were in use for worship services till June 2010 with new ones being planned as and when funds permit.

The formation of the ZRC has revitalised the indigenous religion and renewed the faith among the followers. It has also been influenced by and has drawn inspirations from established practices of organised religions like Christianity, Hinduism, etc. The changing socio-economic condition of the Rongmeis has also played a key role in the changes that we see today as the indigenous religion seeks to maintain its relevance. About 15,000<sup>8</sup> people primarily in Manipur, and certain pockets of Assam and Nagaland claim to be followers of TRC today. It is not a small achievement considering that most indigenous religion across the North-east has all but disappeared. The *Seng Khasi Movement* in Meghalaya, *The Heraka Movement* in North Cachar Hills, Assam among the Zeme Nagas and the *Donyi Polo Movement* among the Tani ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh are the notable few indigenous religions which have managed to retain their followers through a mix of religious reformation and shift towards a form of organised religion.

### Closing Remarks

The continuity of the indigenous religions have been made possible through a mix of

influences drawn from the practices of established world religions, religious syncretism and also reformation with established religious practices a fascinating sociological experiment in the making perhaps in sync with many other such movements across the world. However, in the myriad of issues concerning ethnicity, identity, territoriality, corruption, sovereignty, autonomy, illegal immigration, under development etc. that besets the tribals of the North-eastern states not much mention is made of the various indigenous religious revival and reformation movements in literature except by those who are actively involved in this process or are researching and documenting these transitions. However, the merit of such movements is paid more attention in the academia as such attempts represent an immediately visible and viable change attempted by societal institutions to stay relevant. A transformation of formerly denounced archaic religions to an organised religions and their efforts to stay relevant in a rapidly changing context where Judeo-Christian worldview has come to dominate all aspects of life, can be seen as an attempt to reclaim some of their former preeminence among the tribes. These religious revivalist movements also raised questions on a much debated issue, i.e. cultural preservation among the tribes in the wake of religious conversion. For the stalwarts of these movements religion and culture are inseparable and for culture to survive indigenous religion must be preserved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rao 1990, cited in Rongmei & Kapoor, 2005, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> The Rites of Passage is socialisation theory proposed by Arnold van Gennep in his influential book *Les rites de Passage* first published in 1909. The rites of passage is marked by the performance of certain rituals and ceremonies by various communities to commemorate or initiate the entry of an individual or groups to certain stages during the course of a human life span. For example ceremonies and rituals performed at child birth, puberty, youth, marriage, death, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Organised religions are understood as one with a definite single world view, a standardised system of worship and related practices with a hierarchical organisation, an apex body that regulates and organises the religion.

<sup>4</sup> Zeliangrong is an acronym formed by joining the names of four kindred tribes viz. Zemei, Liangmaei, Rongmei and Puimei. This acronym was first coined on 15 February 1947 in Imphal.

<sup>5</sup> Although the indigenous religion of the Zemes, Liangmei and Rongmeis are essentially the same with regional variations, for this paper my reference point is the religion as practiced by the Rongmeis and hence the use of the term Rongmei and not the larger generic term Zeliangrong. However, please note that currently the indigenous religion is now being moderated and governed by a single apex religious body of the three sub tribe. In addition to this the Zemes mainly in Assam have their own religious association “The Heraka Association” which strictly advocates monotheism in the form of worship of the Supreme God *Tingwang* also known as *Tingkao Ragwang* to the Rongmeis. The Heraka Association is also a part of the Jadonang legacy. Rani Gaidinliu the Chief exponent of the Heraka religion was a close follower, disciple and spiritual heir of Jadonang.

<sup>6</sup> Haipou Jadonang was born in 1905 at Kambiron village, Tamenglong District, Manipur. He was a revered mystical healer, religious reformer and an eminent freedom fighter of the Rongmeis. He is well known as the leader of the 1928 rebellion against the British in Manipur which was aimed at the establishment of a Naga Raj by overthrowing the Britishers.

<sup>7</sup> To a great extent the ambivalence of the indigenous religion with its demanding malevolent Gods alienated many people. Numerous animal sacrifices were demanded to appease the spirits. In contrast to this was the benevolent Christian God who made no demands of ritual sacrifices. The lure of Christianity was thus hard to ignore added to this was the English education which was increasingly recognised as a gateway to a better life. The result was the gradual conversion to Christianity which increased even more in post independent India. However, conversion to Christianity cannot be reduced to only this factor. We also have to examine the unique affinity existing between Christianity and many of the existing indigenous religion which has help in this transition and conversion to Christianity.

<sup>8</sup> Figure cited by the Mr. Chaoba Kamson, General Secretary of the ZRC. TRC had in 2010 commissioned a census to determine the exact number of TRC followers.

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