

Origin and Migration of Rongmei (Kabui): A Naga Tribe of Manipur.

Gaidimlung Phaomei

Research Scholar, Department of History, Panjab University,
Chandigarh.160014.

Abstract: *The paper portrays the origin and migration of Rongmei (Kabui). Due to the absence of written documents and records, the origin and migration of Rongmei was based on their oral traditions, folk-tales, folk-songs etc. Some accounts and information were also given by a few British Anthropologists and administrative officers. According to their belief or legend every tribes or community living in different countries claimed at least a certain place or cave as the origin of human race. Historians also expressed divergent views about the origin home of the Rongmei.*

Keywords: Zeliangrong, Mahou Toubai, Makhel, Makuilongdi, Nguiba, China.

INTRODUCTION

The Rongmeis are an indigenous Naga tribe living in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in North-East India. They were divided when the official boundaries were set by the Government of India (Arunkumar, Hangjabam, mangang, Kipgen, Kiranbala, 2012:779). Originally, they shared the same history and traditions with the kindred tribes of the Zeliangrong i.e., Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei. But due to dialect differences these kindred or cognate groups have adopted their own separate identities today. Indeed the term “Rongmei” has a very strong bearing on geographical direction. Thus “Rong” means “south or southern” region and “Mei” means “Men”. Thus Rongmei stand for the southerners, why this name “Rongmei”(meaning southerner) should stand for one and only group of people of the so-called “Rongmei” area, whose population consisted not only Rongmei people but also the people of many other tribes. It is fact that the name “Rongmei” is not of recent birth, but is one long standing, which is as old as the people themselves. Thus, it was most probably, because of the fact that in those remote past the Rongmeis, was the only people originally living in these solitary hill ranges, and the other groups of people who are found living in that region at present, were immigrants in that area in some later periods only. As a result, the said name “Rongmei” was wishfully applied as an honorific epithet in respect of this people, and in course of time, this very name became the real name of the tribe (Kamei, 2008:102-103). The ancestral home of the Rongmei lies in the mountain ranges in the Tamenglong sub division of Manipur and adjacent mountainous areas of Nagaland and Assam. In present day literature, the word “kabui” has been commonly used within and outside Manipur, and the name Rongmei is less known to the other communities. The Rongmei tribe was jointly called Kabui tribe in Manipur (Sen, 1996:50). They mainly inhabited in Tamenglong district of Manipur (Arunkumar et al, 2012:779-783). They also settled in every corner of eastern and western regions of Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. Rongmei tribe have their different and distinctive socio-cultural, traditional and linguistic variant and also genetic identity. According to the writings of ancient ethnographers of as early as British era, they are one of the twenty two tribal communities who belonged to the Manipur state. Today Rongmei tribe have been enlisted as one of the twenty nine tribes of the Constitution of India (Ibid: 65).

ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF RONGMEI

The origin and migration of the people of Rongmei is shrouded in obscurity due to the absence of written documents and records. However, it may be mentioned that their oral traditions, folk-tales, folk-songs etc. give some hints on their origin (Pamei, 1985). Some accounts and information were also given by a few British Anthropologists and administrative officers. Every tribes and community living in different countries 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). The Rongmei claim their origin from a mythical cave called “Mahou Taobei” and is said to be located at Ramting Kabin, a place about 10 km North of the Liangmei village of Oklong in North Manipur. They believed that men and animals, animals and birds, after creation, as desired by the Supreme God, were sheltered in a cave. According to legends, the entrance of the cave which was sealed by a huge stone slab was removed by a Bull (Mithun) with its horn and then their ancestors came out of the cave (Kamei, 2004:29). The three sub-tribes namely Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei shared a common belief that they originally emerged out of a cave (Kabui, 2008:12). The first man who came out of the cave was called “Pokrei” and the woman was called “Dichalu”. (According to another legend, the man named was “Dirannang”) (Kamei, 2004:29). They lived in the jungle and one day Pokrei asked the girl to address him as Apou (uncle) in place of Achaibung (brother) as soon as she met him while coming round a raised earthen mound (pungbut) from the opposite direction. At the seventh time of going round the mound the girl addressed him as uncle as soon as she met him. From that time, the boy no longer treated her as his sister and presumed the girl as if belonged to a different clan. Since then the marriage between boys and girls of the same clan or same blood relationship is prohibited among the Zeliangrong tribe. Thus, after sometime they got married and became husband and wife (Marulung, 1996:100). As time passed, they got children who first settled at Makhel. So, the original home of the

Zeliangrong ancestors are presumed to be at Makhel. Most of the Nagas tribes such as Angami, Sema, Lothal, Maram, Tagkhul and Rengma tribe, etc. point to Makhel as the original place from where they dispersed themselves to other directions (Golmei, 2004:14-15). Gangmumei Kamei says from a mythical cave (Mahou Toubai), they moved to Makhel and to Ramting Kabin and to Chawang Phungning and then to Makuilongdi and from there they migrated to the south, west and the north. Thus, Makhel is an important point of dispersal in their migration to the frontier of western Manipur, Eastern Naga Hills and Barak valley areas (Tamphasana, 1998:1-2).

According to various versions, the ancestors of the Zeliangrong lived at Makhel. The history of Makhel as an ancient village of the migration of some of the tribes has been collaborated by the megalith of dispersal, Tamraratu in the present Mao Village of Makhel in Manipur (Kamei, 2004:30). At Makhel is to be seen a stone, now erect, which marks the place from which the common ancestors emerged from the earth. Makhel is regarded as the centre from which migrations took place (Hudson, 1911:13).

From Makhel, the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people went towards westward and temporary settled at Ramting Kabin. They continued their migration across the densely forested western spur of Mt. Essau (Kamei, 2004:32). N.B. Panmei describes the life at Ramting kabin, “Ramting kabin may have safe from the wild beasts, but it was not suitable for human settlement and it is said, in that place, people hardly

saw stars. Imaginatively, Ramting Kabin, therefore, was like a cave with a single gate. This may be the reason why some said the Zeliangrong people came out of a cave (Kamei, 2008:33-64).

After taking shelter at Ramting Kabin, they continued their migration and settled at Chawang Phungning, which is also known as Guang-Phungning. Many years must have been spent at Chawang Phungning where the concept of Chawang or Guang meaning king or chief was developed in a rudimentary form. From this place, they proceeded westward and ultimately arrived at Makuilongdi. Finally, the moving colonizers came to occupy Makuilongdi or Nkuilongdi near the present Oklong village in Mao west. Makuilongdi literally means 'round big mountain'. There was cluster of villages under the jurisdiction of Makuilongdi. The land, forests and water available at the new site and the rounded mountain provided enough sustenance to the people. The ancestors of the Zeliangrong lived in this place for many generations. Makuilongdi became quite prosperous with enough land for agriculture. Therefore the people had also adopted the shifting agriculture. The extent of Makuilongdi was far and wide. In course of time the households reaches the incredible number of 7777 and people enjoyed a long peaceful and attained the zenith of their socio-cultural life before further dispersal (Kabui, 2008:14).

There are various factors which worked behind the migration of the Zeliangrong people to different places from Makuilongdi. The first factor was due to the non-availability of enough land for cultivation (Kamei, 2004:34). Thus, economic compulsion might have been the cause for dispersal from Makuilongdi. The second factor was internal differences or disputes among the ruling clan or failure of maintaining their religious life. Social norms too acted as one of the factors leading to their migration (Golmei, 2004:16). Gangmumei Kamei stated that the basic features of Zeliangrong society such as lineage society, patrilineal social structure, social organization such as chief ship, village's council, dormitories village's festivals, dances and lineage structure have been developed at Makuilongdi (Kamei, 2004:14-37).

The theory of migration of the Zeliangrong people and their chieftainship is also support by their mythological and legendary accounts. One "Nguiba" the chief of the village at Makuilongdi was their progenitor. According to legend, Nguiba had married twice because his first wife was thought to be incapable of bearing a son. His second wife gave birth to a male child called "Namgang" or "Magangtubo". After some years, the first wife also gave birth to a son named "Kadi" or "Kadingbou". The second wife gave birth to another son called "Rembangbou". When Nguiba became old, he could not decide to whom he had to hand over his property. So, to solved the matter he sent his sons, Namgang and Kadingbou to their youngest uncle, Chatiu who lived somewhere in Northern Koubru range. Their uncle was very clever to deal with the matter and according to his judgement; "Kadingbou" the second son of Nguiba was given the right to inherit the property of his father. Thus, the question of inheritance was solved but it created disunity among the members of the ruling clan in the village. Nguiba's eldest son Namgang became very disappointed after his failure to inherit his father property, he left his parent and went out to establish a new village, name Hereira which is regarded as the first Zemei village. The original inhabitants of Makuilongdi remained at their village under the Chieftainship of Kadingbou, the second son of Nguiba. So, they came to be known as Liangmei – the northerners. The third son of Nguiba, Rembangbou led a large group from Makuilongdi towards the south. They came to be known as Rongmei. This group was the most adventurous

and scattered group. 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. According to Gangmumei Kamei, "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." From the Kajinglong village, the Rongmei people moved out to different directions and they founded villages to the South of the Irang River. Thus, villages like Rienglong, Changdai, Kaikao, Nunngang, Ganglon Namthan, Khoupum, Montha etc. were founded and they became quite popular and prosperous. Formerly, 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, Mirong or Milong being the Lushai word for the Rongmei. Even today some of the Rongmeis live in the Mizo capital of Aizwal (Kamei: 2004:37-38).

According to another theory, Zeliangrong Nagas, like other tribes of Indo-Burma areas are said to have originated from China. According to some versions, the Tibeto-Burman group initially moved towards the west and later sub-divided themselves into several groups. It is said that the Mongoloid people entered Burma in three different waves and by different routes. The first people who migrated from China were the Mon-Khmer races, second wave was the Tibeto-Burman races and the third wave was that of the Tai-Chinese consisting of Shan, Siamese, Karen, etc. The various ethnic groups belonging to southern Mongoloid, the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo-Aryans and a sizable section of Tai (Shan) came to Manipur from pre-historic times. The ethnic groups of Manipur namely, Meities, Nagas, Kuki-Chin and other communities are believed to be the descendants of those migrating people (Golmei, 2004:15). Dindai Gangmei also state that the Rongmei migrated from the Fujian Province of China. He explained that Fujian was earlier known as Minhow or Mahow until 725 A.D. He claimed that migration began from Mahow Taubhei and then travelled through Vietnam and Cambodia Sarawak along the shore of South China sea and then entered Chiangmai in Thailand, treaded through a tract of land between Shan state and Karen state in Myanmar, and Yunan Province and then finally at Makhel in Manipur. He also claimed that the Rongmei joined the groups who fled from the forced labour during the construction of the Great Wall of China (Gangmei, 2008:1-5). B. S Guha says, ethnically, the Rongmei belong to Mongoloid, a group of the southern mongoloids who migrated southwards across the Himalayas in the pre-historic period to Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Most of the Naga traditions point to Makhel in North Manipur as their homeland. Makhel was a point of migration during their migration from South West China to Burma (Myanmar) and island southeast Asia, and then North ward movement back to Manipur, then to north Manipur before branching out to their respective tribal habitats (cited in Budha Kamei, 2015). B. Pemberton wrote, "The Muneepoorees (Meiteis) of the present day are the descendants from a Tartar colony of China" (Pemberton, 1835:36). It is a well known historical fact that Manipur is one of the routes between South Asia and South East Asia and Central Asia. Various ethnic groups belonging to southern Mongoloid group, the Tibeto-Burmans, and a sizable section of Tai (Shans) came to Manipur from pre-historic times down to the present

day. The present ethnic groups of Manipur, viz., the Meiteis, the Nagas, and the Kuki-Chins are the descendants of those migrating people.

CONCLUSION

The above theories indicate that the Nagas might have migrated from different places to the present habitat. However their legends points to different direction and the Rongmei too had their own mythical version of origin. It may come to the conclusion that the Zeliangrong people along with other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family from their original home land South West China or North 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 Zeliangrong people are found settling in three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

REFERENCES

- Arunkumar, M.C., Shukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam, Pebam Nganthoiba Mangnang, Jennifer Kipgen, Pukhrambam Kiranbal 2012. *The Tribes of Manipur*. Volume 3, New Delhi.
- Gangmei, Dindai 2008. *Mahow Toubhei (Rongmei Migration)*. Imphal,
- Golmei, Alana 2004. *The Zeliangrong Nagas in Manipur: A Socio-Political Party*. Ph.D. thesis submitted to Manipur University, Imphal.
- Hudson, T.C 1991. *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*. Delhi, B.R. Publishing. (1911 London).
- Kamei, Aphun 2008. *The Kabui Nagas of Manipur: A study of Identity and Identify Crisis*. Ph.D. thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- Kamei, Budha 2015. *Origin, Migration and Settlement: The Zeliangrong of NE*. <http://e-pao.net>.
- Kamei, Budha Kabui 2008. *Historical Traditions – Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Rongmei Tribe*. Ph.D. thesis submitted to Manipur University, Imphal.
- Kamei, Gangmumei 2004. *The History of Zeliangrong Nagas from Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu*. Gauhati, Spectrum Publications.
- Makuga, G 1994. *Introduction to the Rongmei Nagas*. Imphal.
- Pamei, Dichamang 1985. *Liberty to Captives*. AZBCC Platinum Jubilee Publication, Tamenglong, Manipur.
- Pemberton, Captain R. Boileau 1835. *Report of the Eastern Frontier of British India*. Government of India, Calcutta.
- Sen, Sipra 1996. *Tribes and Castes of Manipur*. New Delhi, Mittal Publications.
- Tamphasana, Rajkumari 1998. *Zeliangrong Naga Movement (1927-1980): A Study in some Aspects of Ethnic Process in North-East India*. Ph.D. thesis submitted to Manipur University, Imphal.

Address for communication: Gaidimlung Phaomei, Hostel No.5, Block 4, Room No.32, Panjab University, Chandigarh. *Email Id:* gaidim007@gmail.com.