
Primordial Religion of the Rongmei Naga Tribe of Northeast India: Continuity and Change

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ABSTRACT

The pattern of belief or religion of the Rongmei tribe in the early pre-historic period was believed to be animistic; they believed in the existence of a soul or spirit and supernatural beings expressed through the nature of worship, natural phenomena, and supernatural power. In the early part of the 20th century, the arrival of colonial rule and Christian missionaries witnessed a mass exodus to Christianity, abandoning their indigenous faith and beliefs. During this period, socio-religious reformers like Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu started a movement for the revival of long-inherited religious practices, culture, and tradition, through which their primordial religion became more organized and gained momentum against the Christian missionaries through revitalization, reformation, and reorganization. While most of the tribal religions in Manipur have lost their significance and disappeared with the rapid spread of Christianity, the primordial religion of the Rongmeis has continued to survive and flourish till today. This paper attempts to examine the insights of indigenous or primordial religion and the role of religious reformers in revitalizing the primordial religion to preserve and propagate it in the wake of the widespread adoption of Christianity by Christian missionaries and colonialist administrators.

Introduction

The earliest form, pattern, and practice of primitive societies and tribal religions are found in the form of animism. Animism believed in one omniscient and omnipotent supreme God and many other subordinate gods and spirits ruling over human beings, animals, the sun, the moon, stars, hills, mountains, rivers, and forests. Asoso Yonuo (1982:33) supported the views of the western scholars in terming the religion of Nagas as an animist, where sacrifices and appeasement are offered to gods and

spirits for their blessings. Primordial religion means a religion with a primordial existence since the beginning of time and eternity and has been practiced and followed by them since the creation of the earth. It is based on a myth of creation that ascribes to the Supreme Being as the creator of the universe, men, and all living beings. The primordial religion believes in the Supreme God, the creator of the universe, and many gods of lower realms and deities who look after the various aspects of the world.

The Rongmeis are the indigenous Naga tribe living in the Indian states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Ethnically and linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of southern Mongolia. Their religion can be understood as polytheism; they worship many gods and deities, gods and goddesses of the pantheon, deities presiding over the villages. Polytheism was an essential element or nature of the Rongmei primordial religion from the very beginning, and their religion was not an animistic cult. Based on the observation of their beliefs, sacrifices, and rituals, their religion was a blend or mixture of animism and polytheism. Besides the Supreme God, they worship many subordinate gods and deities and believe spirits rule over humans, animals, the sun, the moon, mountains, rivers, and forests. They also, at the same time, worship different gods for the propitiation of their sickness and also believe in the existence of spirits, and they attempt to appease and pacify them by making sacrifices, observing *gennas* (prohibition), and propitiating spirits. They believed that all misfortunes were attributed to the malignant influence of evil spirits. Religion plays an agent of cohesion among community members and regulates every individual's behaviour and attitudes. It also gives importance to *Nuhmei* (Taboo) and *Neihmei* (prohibition), with strict observance and adherence. *Gennas* were performed to appease the spirits and ensure prosperity, abundance, harvest, peace, and harmony in the family and village.

The objective of the study

The primary objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the primordial religious beliefs of the Rongmei Naga tribe
2. To analyze the reformation and revitalization movements to preserve the primordial religion.
3. To study the impact of Christianity on traditional religion and society.
4. To analyze the change and continuity in socio-religious aspects of society.

Methodology

It is inevitable to rely on oral traditions to study the primordial religion of the Rongmeis, the transition to Christianity, and various phases of religious reformation and revitalization due to insufficient documentation and unwritten history. The present study relies on oral traditions and culture provided by various village elders, village priests, and religions. The present study used historical and analytical methods to explore the various socio-political, cultural, and religious aspects of society. The study used both primary and secondary sources. Unstructured interviews were conducted with traditional priests, religious leaders, and village elders who possessed a wide range of knowledge on indigenous religious beliefs and faith. Secondary sources include books, seminar proceedings, journals, and newspaper articles.

Primordial Religion of the Rongmei

The primitive culture of the Rongmei society is embodied in beliefs, customary laws, morals, and values. They have great respect for their rich cultural heritage, customs, and traditions, and they have a strong sense of past myths, legends, and traditions preserved in their hymns, folk songs, dances, and oral traditions. The origin of their religion is not derived from an intellectual philosophy but from a primordial experience of uncertainty and dependence, an experience that persists in the world. Their primordial religion is believed to have existed for time immemorial with no founder, no name, no central authority, and no organization. Moreover, there are no religious texts, scriptures, philosophical concepts, or deeply rooted philosophy.

The philosophical foundation of the Rongmeis' religion was the cosmic view, moral and social values, and attitude towards God, man, life, and death, which evolved through the ages (Kamei, 2006: 70). People worship the Supreme God by performing rites of passage, rites, rituals, and sacrifices for a good harvest, prosperity, health, and fortune. Apart from the Supreme God, they worship many gods of lower realms and deities who look after the various aspects of nature, the world, and human beings. The local deities protect the villagers from sickness, suffering, misfortunes, and calamities. Though there was always a religious community with great attachment to their culture and tradition, there was no common or collective religious authority at the community level. The traditional religion of the Rongmeis was not an organized religion because there was no such common platform of authority that could regulate and control religious affairs at the community level except in the village (Chaoba Kamson, 2015:31). Their traditional religion has historically evolved and is based on various customs and traditions from the past. The religion has no founder, but some lawgivers, prophets, and diviners revealed God's message to man

and society (Kamei, 2006: 65). Essentially, their religion is polytheism, and there is an element of Henotheism as there is a belief and worship of one Supreme God out of many gods.

The primordial religion of the Rongmeis centred on the remuneration of numerous deities and spirits who were patrons of villages or places of considerable significance and were often associated with animal and plant creation. The gods of the lower realms supervise the regulation of the universe and human world according to the wishes of the Supreme God. The gods and deities decide the life and death, fortune, and destiny of man. They also believed in the rebirth and reincarnation of the human soul. They also practice worship of the spirits of the dead ancestors for the protection and welfare of the family. They also believed in the concept of life after death and good-doers will go to heaven after their deaths and for wrongdoers who have committed a crime, the violators of religious and moral code will punish them in the land of the dead (*Taruailam*). They also believed in the atonement of sin or wrongdoing by God through an appropriate mode of worship and offering.

Supreme God (*Tingkao Ragwang*)

The Rongmeis believed in the Supreme God, the creator of all the universe, man, and all living beings. In primordial religious belief, there was a Supreme God, *Tingkao Ragwang*, the eternal and heavenly creator, sustainer of the world, and upholder of justice. People believe in one supreme God who is the creator of the universe, life, earth, and all living creatures. Their religious foundation is based on the fundamental belief in one supreme God, deeply rooted in the people's cultural heritage, customs, and tradition. The Rongmeis believe in one supreme God who is benevolent and is the creature of all things (Brown, 1874:27), and the relationship between the supreme God and man was one of love and veneration, not fear.

Worship of the spirits of ancestors (*Kairao Kalumei*)

One of the significant features of their religion is the worship of the spirits of ancestors called *Kairao Kalumei*. The spirits of the ancestors are called *Kairao*. They worship the spirits of the ancestors for getting help for prosperity, begetting children, begetting fortune, and averting misfortune and crises in the family (Kamei, 2004: 270). They offered sacrifices and propitiated spirits to cure diseases and sickness and ward off untoward happenings and incidents. It is believed that the spirits of the departed souls of the family's ancestors influence the lives of the present generation. The Rongmeis worship the

spirits of their ancestors, performing ritual ceremonies and worship known as *Kairao Thousumei*. It is family worship, penance, repentance, and an apology towards the ancestors. *Kairao Thousumei* is a systematic form of ritual activity where a pig is killed and offered to the ancestors. The pig's spleen was examined to interpret the omen and foretell the family's future fortune. They believe that the spirits of dead ancestors are immortal and can influence the lives of the living, and they punish violators of custom. His special place was the hearthstones, where the libation of wine and the offering of rice were performed, as were the blood sacrifices of pigs, chickens, dogs, and mithuns. However, the ancestor is not worshipped as a deity or god but as an honor for the living dead.

Worship of Village Deities (*Shuang or Bambu*)

The Rongmeis worship the deities presiding over the village as guardians and spirit protectors. These deities are guardians and protectors of the villages and are to be worshipped or sometimes propitiated. They are generally described as *Shuang* or *Bambu*, and each village has a specific name for the deity. Village deities were worshipped during various festivals, such as *Gaan-Ngai* (post-harvest), *Rih-Ngai* (war victory), and *Tun-Ngai* (monsoon festival), by a village priest in the morning. Individuals or families also worship to ensure his journey leaves his home within or outside the state for a long period of time.

Role of a Priest (*Amuh*)

The most important religious functionary was the priest, whose primary functions were to serve as diviner and presenter of sacrifices, read omens, and communicate with the spirit in a trance. It is said to believe that God reveals his message and directives to the people through the priest. He invoked God's blessing for a rich harvest, good health, prosperity, and an abundance of livestock in the village. The priest offers sacrifices to escape unfortunate incidents, such as disease and scarcity of food (*Koukangmei*). The priest also used a spell to cast out devils or spirits from the sick person. The priest also offered sacrifices to appease the gods and protect the villagers from misfortune. He also foretells future events and predicts the possible occurrence of any disasters and calamities in the village and the priest performed various rites and rituals to sanctify the village on a periodic basis.

The priest offered offerings and sacrifices on the whole community's behalf at the time of harvest or calamity. He also acts as a divine healer and herbalist healer, preparing concoctions of plants. He is said

to have been imparted to the primeval *Mhu* (priest) in mystical times. He acts as a mediator between God and man. In consultation with the village chief, the village priest proclaimed the *gennas* (prohibition) and fixed the date for all religious activities. The priest offers ritual ceremonies and sacrifices to deities and gods for the recovery and healing of sickness and prolongs life as deeply rooted in their belief in faith. The priest acts as a medium of communication between man and God and acts as a seer, giving advice and sharing opinions to ensure the village's safety.

Revival of traditional religion in the colonial period

A socio-religious movement for the revitalization of indigenous religion and beliefs began among the Rongmei society of North East India with the arrival of colonial rule and Christian missionaries propagating the Christian faith and gospel message of Jesus Christ. This movement was initiated to preserve, protect, and strengthen the long-inherited religious beliefs and practices, culture, and tradition of the indigenous people against the alien religion and faith. The Christian missionaries condemned the traditional religious faith and practices. They describe the tribal as savages, devil worshippers, heathens, pagan worshippers of wild spirits, and animists (Kamei, 2006: 47). Jadonang began a reformist and revival movement of the traditional religion when colonial rule and subsequent Christian missionaries began spreading Christianity among the Rongmeis in the hills district of Manipur. His revivalism took a radical change in abolishing many less important ritual ceremonies, sacrifices, taboos, and *gennas* (prohibition) to make the traditional religion simpler and more rational.

Arrival of Christianity

Christian missionaries like William Pettigrew, U.M. Fox, and G.C. Crozier set foot in the tribal districts of Manipur to spread the gospel of Christianity in the early twentieth century and started mission schools to provide free education and impart the teachings of Christianity. With the initiatives of the British Government and missionaries, many schools and churches began to function in Rongmeis-inhabited areas. These schools began to replace the traditional informal education of *Morung* (dormitories), and people began to abandon the old religious beliefs and practices. People who have converted to Christianity worship in the church and no longer perform traditional religious rites and rituals and abandoned religious festivals began to celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter with pomp and gaiety.

Why people adopted Christianity?

The religious and social life of the Rongmeis was full of superstitions and fears; moreover, propitiation of spirits and sacrifices were often costly. They embraced the new religion despite the old religion being well organized, fascinating, delightful, and glorious. They are very much indebted to the missionaries for promoting western education, enlightenment, medical services, and the end of superstitions and inter-village feuds. Western education and enlightenment through education have removed the evils of superstitions and practices, giving Christianity supremacy over traditional customs and beliefs. The primordial religion had become too attached to numerous sacrifices and observances of *gennas* for the birth of a child, piglets, chicken hatching, a dog climbing low roofs, and earthquakes (Kamei, 2009: 26). As religious practices focused excessively on performances of sacrifices to appease gods and spirits, only the rich could afford them. The absence of a common religious organization took advantage of it, and the Christian missionaries made the devotees of indigenous faith convert to their religion through temptation, giving free education and free health services.

Heraka Movement

During colonial rule, social-religious reformers such as Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu contributed remarkable religious reforms to revitalize indigenous religion and the beliefs of the forefathers to meet the onslaught of Christian missionaries. A sense of solidarity amongst the Zeliangrong (a cognate tribe of Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei) began with the initiation of a religious cult called *Heraka* by Jadonang in 1925. With the rapid spread of Christianity and western education at this juncture, Jadonang, believed to possess spiritual and healing powers, started his religious cult called *Heraka*, which means "not impure". He began preaching to redefine traditional religions, founded temples, and started hymns and discourses to unite the Zeliangrong community to protect culture, tradition, and identity. Under these circumstances, Jadonang gave attention to the revitalization and reformation of animism and the reform religion known as the *Heraka* movement. The main objective of the Jadonang-Rani Gaidinliu and *Heraka* movements is to revitalize and reform their traditional religion and beliefs in the wake of the increasing spread of Christianity, integrate Zeliangrong brothers, and struggle for freedom against colonial suppression and exploitation of British colonial rule.

Jadonang was born and grew up as a mystic healer and diviner, and he is said to have inspired God Bisnu of the Bhuban Hills of Cachar in Assam to carry out social and religious activities. He went on

pilgrimage to the holy caves of God Bisnu to seek advice and inspiration from him. He became very popular as a healer, diviner, and religious leader. He was regarded as the Messiah of the *Zeliangrong* people, who would liberate the people from the yoke of suffering and bondage of British rule. As per divine revelation, Jadonang announced the abolition of many evils in social and religious practices. He constructed temples for *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God, installed images of God, and composed hymns and ritual dances for the worship of *Tingkao Rawang*. He also discarded many traditional and expensive rites and rituals, such as bride prices and feasts. Although the worship of many gods and goddesses continued, Jadonang himself gave more importance to a monotheistic cult or belief in one God. In his new cult, he initiated the construction of temples as a place of both worship and religious discourse and introduced hymns in the people's language.

Continuity and Change

The British colonial powers and Christian missionaries romanticized the tradition and religion of Rongmeis as heathen, barbaric, savage, and ignorant, destroying the tradition and culture, and they are held responsible for the decline of indigenous religion and the adoption of Christianity. The Christian missionaries had a more profound impact on the beliefs and ways of life of the Rongmeis than the administrators. The missionaries banned folk songs, cultural and religious festivals, *gennas* and rituals, going to *Morungs* (dormitories), rice beer, and local culture and costumes, and considered them part of heathen religious practices. The missionaries acted against Rongmeis culture and tradition and were termed heathen, savage, and uncivilized. This caused immense destruction to many social and religious institutions. The Rongmeis suffered an immense social and cultural loss; their folk songs, dances, festivals, and social activities were considered part of the animistic society and purposely undermined. With the advent of Christianity, the new converts began to abandon their traditional festivals and gradually lose their significance. Christian festivals substitute for the social, religious, and cultural importance of these festivals. Today, people observe Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, and New Year celebrations. A smaller section of society, especially in the valley district of Manipur, still observes and celebrates these festivals with pomp and gaiety. Christian missionaries played a significant role in dismantling the head-hunting practice by bringing peace and reconciliation between inter-clan and inter-village rivalries.

With the arrival of Christianity among the Rongmei, the indigenous religion felt the need to reorganize and name a cult after their religion. They began to enhance and redefine traditional religious beliefs and

practices, systematize the people's worship, rites, and rituals, inherit the indigenous religious and ideals, and maintain religious identity and solidarity among the Rongmei non-Christians. Due to heavy suppression and harassment from hill-based undergrounds, a public meeting was held under the initiative of Prof. Gangmumei Kamei, who formed the organization "Zeliangrong Custom and Religion Protection Committee", on April 7, 1991 (Chaoba Kamson: 2015:126). A historic conference was held in 1994, attended by various religious diviners, village elders, religious activities, and priests living in Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. After extensive discussion, the conference resolved to establish a common religious authority named the Zeliangrong Religious Council. The conference resolved to name the religion after the name of the Supreme God, christen it *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC), and construct the *Kalum Kai* (House of Worship) for its believers, which would further strengthen and revive the traditional religion and defend them from further converting to the Christian faith.

The followers of *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC) believe in the Supreme God, the creator of the universe, gods, deities, and human beings. They also believe in a soul, sin, heaven, life after death, and the propitiation of lower deities. The followers believe in the concept of sin (Nuan) as deviation and violation of religious, moral, and social customs and norms. They also believe in the soul's redemption in heaven for good doers and retribution by God for evildoers. *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* was named after *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God's heavenly abode and the creator of the universe. He is the beginning, the end, and timeless, and he represents the past, present, and future. One of the most remarkable events was the Conference of 1994, which led to the establishment of the apex religious authority known as the Zeliangrong Religious Council and the declaration of *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* as an indigenous religion, which was solemnized by the rituals of *Lougai Karikmei* (iron hoe) swearing in God's name. The council goes further by publishing a text on rites of passage known as *Ringlon* and *Theilon* and compiling hymns and prayer books.

Conclusion

The Rongmeis religion in Northeast India faced a decline due to the spread of Christianity by British colonial powers and Christian missionaries. This period witnessed a rise in the reformation and revitalization of indigenous religions to preserve, protect, and propagate indigenous faith and belief in the wake of the spread of Christianity through colonial administrators and missionaries. Despite the onslaught of the alien religion, the religion of Rongmeis has survived through the reformation and revitalization of indigenous religions. Religious reformers like Jadonang and Gaidinliu devoted their

lives to preserving traditional beliefs. The formation of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) allowed the Rongmeis to preserve their ancestors' religion and prevent further conversion to Christianity. This continuity and survival of primordial religion were made possible through revivalism, reformation, and a shift towards a form of well-organized religion.

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