

Functions And Duties Of *Pei* Of The Traditional Rongmei Village In Religious Affairs

Dr Kamei Budha Kabui
Asst. Prof., Department of Tribal Studies
Manipur University of Culture
E-mail: budhakamei@gmail.com

&

Dr Oinam Ranjit Singh (Corresponding author)
Associate Professor, Department of History
Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, BTC, Assam
E-mail: ranjitoinam09@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to examine the functions and duties of *Pei* (council of elders) in the traditional Rongmei village of Manipur with special reference to religious affairs. Among the Rongmei, the social, cultural and political activities are confined to the village. A traditional Rongmei village is ruled by a *Pei*. The *Pei* is the supreme body comprising all the clans' heads of the village. However, women are not permitted to represent in the *Pei*. It is the responsibility and duty of the priest and elders of *Pei* to perform the religious rites and ceremonies related to the community and individual welfare. They perform the rituals of the festivals and great ritual sacrifices like *Maku Banru*, *Taraang*, *Matui* etc., observance of taboo and genna, lifecycle ceremonies of birth, marriage and death, worship of *Tingkao Ragwang* (The Supreme God), Rongmei pantheon gods and *Bamboo* (village presiding deity). It is the *Pei* which jealously guards the religious customs and traditions of the Rongmei people at the village level.

Keys words: *Manipur, Pei, Rongmei, Duties, Tingkao Rgawang, ceremonies, Banru*

Introduction

The Rongmeis are one of the natives of Manipur India belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. They also like other tribes have a long history and rich culture which handed down in oral tradition through the ages. The population of this group is found mainly in the Tamenglong and Noney districts of Manipur. These people are found scattered also in the neighbouring districts of Tamenglong District namely, Churachandpur District, Senapati District, Imphal West District, Imphal East District, Thoubal District and Bishnupur District. Outside the state of Manipur, they are found settling in Nagaland in its Paren District, and Kohima, and in Assam in its Haflong sub-division of Cachar District and Hailakandi District.

Materials and method

The study was based on interdisciplinary method of both history and social anthropology. The necessary data of the study have been collected from available primary and secondary sources and also from selected knowledgeable persons of the Rongmei community.

The Rongmeis of Manipur lived in the villages. Every Naga village has a village council, which is “the principal administrative, jural and penal body.”¹ A Rongmei village is administered by a *Pei*, a council of elders of the village. The *Pei* is not only a council of elders, but also the collective supreme body comprising all the clans’ heads. And the elders of the council are also collectively called *Peikhang Peiru* (a respectful term). Women are however, not allowed to represent in the *Pei* as it is a tradition that they are not given the right to represent in the *Pei*. Mangthoi Thaimei said that one of the most distinctive features of the public life of the Rongmei people is the “predominance of the elders in the village administration. Generally, no woman is given a place in the village administration, and in the same way, young men were of little importance in any customary deliberation in the village council.”²

It is the *Pei* that “wields real power in a village. The village council works as conciliator, mediator and arbitrator in disputes of all kinds. It also organizes religious worship, sacrifices and rituals in times of an epidemic; it also maintains order and peace in the village.”³ The *Pei* has elaborate functions and duties. The main functions of the *Pei* are administrative, military power, religious, and judicial. The legislative function of *Pei* is less as there are already well set of unwritten customary laws, which seldom require amendment. The decision given by the *Pei* which is the apex body of the village administration is final and last. No members of the village even the village chief (*Nampou*) can disobey the decision of the *Pei*. The neighbouring villages also have no right to interfere in the internal affairs and decision of the *Pei*.⁴ True, *Pei* is the guardian, custodian as well as the defender of the age old customs and traditions of the people.

Functions and duties of *Pei*

Pei is the authority over the whole religious affairs in the traditional Rongmei village. It is a well-known fact that without the *Pei* the Rongmei traditional religion cannot survive because *Pei* carefully guards and regulates the religious customs and practices. Rites and rituals are the important ingredients of the Rongmei traditional religion. The priest and elders of *Pei* are entrusted to perform the religious rites and ceremonies related to the community and individual welfare. The function of traditional religion is for the preservation and welfare of group or community whereas the positive religion stands for the salvation of individual.

Festivals and ceremonies

In a year, the Rongmei people celebrate nine festivals at the various stages of agricultural operations. The *Pei* decides the dates to commence and days of the festival based on the lunar calendar.⁵ These festivals are the rejoicing of the community expressed through prayer and thanks-giving to *Tingkao Ragwang* for His blessing of good harvest and welfare and protection against deace and hardship in the days to come. Now, most of the festivals commence on the 13th day of lunar month and prolong from one to two or five days. All the rites and rituals of the festivals are carried out by the elders of *Pei* with the chanting of hymns for wellbeing, prosperity (bountiful harvest) and peaceful co-existence. The Rongmei traditional religion is “sustained by their colorful festivals accompanied by religious rites and prayers, dance and music and feasting during different months of a year.”⁶ Besides, it is a compulsory duty and function of the elders of *Pei* to take part and supervise the ritual ceremonies like the *Taraang*, *Maku Banru*, *Matui*, *Mureng* etc. performed by the individual families and dormitories. It will not be proper to describe them in a secular as the Feast of Merit.

Observance of *Nuhmei* and *Neihmei*

Pei performs regular observance of *Nuhmei* (taboo) and *Neihmei* (gennas) as part of sanctification of the village. However, it is done with the advice of the village priest (*Taku*). The individual who violates the *Nuhmei* will be considered breaking the social customs and moral code. And the violator of *Nuhmei* will get divine retribution or human punishment.⁷ However, there is a purification ritual called *Thanthingpatmei thou* for atonement of sin (*Non*) and wrong doing by men towards men and god.⁸

Pei strictly enforces *Neihmei* in the village. The Western anthropologists had described *Neihmei* as genna. *Neihmei* is the collective form of worship of *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God by the whole village community or individual families abstaining from physical work on the occasion of the beginning of various agricultural operations. The objective of *Neihmei* is to avert misfortune or natural calamities and to restore prosperity of men.⁹ During *Neihmei*, no one is allowed to go beyond the village gate and no outsider inside the village. The period of observation is short. Everyone abstains from breaking *Neihmei* because of the fear of evil consequences flowing from the will of a divinity.¹⁰ In traditional Rongmei society, *Neihmei* for good paddy (*Napchang Lingpui Nei*) and crops (*Loidui Boumei Nei*), safety from rats and rodents (*Pu-Pok Mong Thingmei Nei*), pests and birds (*Thaoroi Mun Thingpui Nei*), animals and beasts (*Su-Jou Mun Thingpui Nei*) and genna for rich harvest (*Nap Thuipui Nei*) etc. are strictly observed for bountiful harvest (prosperity) of the village.¹¹ To break or violate it, is a taboo and treated as a serious punishable crime.¹² M. Horam says, among the Nagas, punishment meted out of the taboo breaker is mainly in the form of sacrifices of animals and other ceremonies to placate an angry supernatural power.¹³ Therefore, the *Pei* will see that the traditional laws, customs and usages are strictly followed by the people or not. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown observes, religious conditions such as “pollution, uncleanness, sinfulness can be removed or neutralized by socially prescribed or recognized procedures, such as lustration, penance, sacrifice, confession

and repentance. These expiatory rites are also considered to act either immediately or mediate through their effects on gods or spirits, depending upon whether the sin is regarded as acting in the one way or the other.”¹⁴ In addition to *Thanthingpatmei* ritual, the offender or taboo breaker is suggested to observe the ritual worship (*Pumkanmei*) for safety and protection or to avoid evil consequences. The closing of the village gates for high festivals has occasionally been the cause of deadly feuds among the Nagas.¹⁵

Lifecycle ceremonies

It is the responsibility of *Pei* to supervise the performances of lifecycle ceremonies of the birth (*Naponmei*), marriage (*Noushonmei*), and death (*Theimei*). Usually, birth ceremony known as *Najumgaimei* is performed on the fifth day by offering a cock (*Sangdai*) and a hen (*Sanglou*), ginger to *Tingkao Ragwang* and *Dampapui* for wellbeing of the child. It is carried out by a priest with the chanting of *Najumgaimei soi*. The priest predicts the future of the child by observing the legs of the victims. The cooked chicken is distributed among the elders of *Pei*; as custom the priest gets a long neck with head called *Loipi*. A proper name is also given for the child by the present elders of *Pei* because without a name a man cannot be counted as a member of the society. Generally, name is selected and given with due consideration after the names of the dead ancestors who were victorious head-hunters or of possessing amazing wealth. This ceremony recognises the existence of the child in the village and the responsibility of the parent to bring up the child.

In the lifecycle of an individual, marriage is an important social event as the couple with the consent of their parents and *Pei*'s elders begins a new stage of life. *Mhailakmei*, marriage ceremony is performed by an elder of *Pei* to recognise them as husband and wife. Death is the last crisis in the life cycle of an individual. Dead rituals such as ginger offering (*Gukashetkeimei*), offering of food and drink to the dead (*Pukpaomei*), making of seven food packets for the dead to eat and drink on his way to another world (*Theinapdom Nimmei*), bathing the dead (*Duiloumei*), dressing the dead (*Pheiban Pumei*), purification of the grave with fire (*Mhahamei*), etc. are directly or in some way supervised by the elders of *Pei* for safe passage of the dead to another world, to which they actually belong.

Worship of Supreme God (*Tingkao Ragwang*)

The *Pei* also decides on the sacrifices to be offered to *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Supreme God, the Rongmei pantheon gods and *Bambu*, presiding deities of the village.¹⁶ *Tingkao Ragwang* is worshiped by offering sacrifice such as a fowl or goat, ginger etc. for safety and protection of the whole village community. This is locally called *Kairong Pumkan*. However, such ritual worship is seldom performed.¹⁷ It is performed by a priest at the *Peikai* with the chanting of *Pumkan Soi*. The legs of the victim are examined in quest of good portent. The victim is cooked and consumed by the present elders of *Pei*. After the performance of the ritual

worship, the entire village community has felt relaxation from apprehensions and suspicions or from any kind of trouble or danger. Annually, every household of the village also performs the ritual worship known as *Tingkao Ragwang Jang Lamei* by sacrificing a big cock for wellbeing of the family members. Sometimes, they also perform *Kairongbuh Kaomei*, calling of soul with a big cock at the *Peikai* (house of *Pei*) invoking *Tingkao Ragwang* for safety and wellbeing of the village community.

Worship of Rongmei pantheon gods

Usually, on the *Rangpatmei* day of *Gaan-ngai* festival, they worship the Seven Brothers gods and presiding deities of the village, gods of different aspects of nature like the God of fire, wind etc., propitiation of evil spirits not to disturb men is performed by offering fowls, wine, water, ginger, egg etc. for wellbeing and prosperity of the village. It is carried out by a priest outside the Northern gate of the village, the seat of *Kaipi Bambu*, upper village deity with the chanting of relevant hymns.¹⁸ The individual who intends to become Shaman priest also performs *Raren Loumei*.¹⁹ A complete genna (*Neihmei*) is observed during the performance of the sacrifice. The chickens are cooked at the ritual place and consumed by the elders of *Pei*, old women and children who are not yet admitted in the dormitories. Adults are prohibited to eat the chicken. T. C. Hodson has stated that in Rongmei society food taboo are not rigidly imposed on either the very young or the old.²⁰ “Appointments and retirement of person, handing over of charges, etc. in connection with religious-cultural matters concerning the village is announced at this place. Such announcements which are believed to be made in front of the gods have strong customary sanctions behind them.”²¹ After the ritual ceremony, it is customary to fill up any vacant post of the village. The mode of selection is based on seniority of age. Then, the village elders return at the *Peikai* with a *Lilai Hoi*. At the *Peikai*, a priest holding a big pig cock and performs *Kairongbuh Kaomei* (calling of the soul) invoking *Tingkao Ragwang* to extend protection to the people of the village from death and danger and provide welfare to the village and its people. A piece of cooked chicken will be distributed to every household of the village.

Worship of village presiding deities (*Bambu*)

The Rongmei people live in the villages. Annually, after harvest they worship the *Bambu* by sacrificing a big pig for safety and wellbeing of the whole village community. It is usually performed in an auspicious day fixed by the *Pei*, village council. A priest on behalf of the village performs the ritual worship with the chanting of relevant hymn. The spleen of the pig is removed and observed by the present elders of *Pei* in search of good sign. The victim is cooked and consumed by the villagers including women and children.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the *Pei* is the highest body of the traditional Rongmei village, which performs various functions like administrative, military power, religious, and judicial. It also does organize religious worship, sacrifices and rituals from time to time for wellbeing and prosperity of the village community. The elders of the *Pei* perform the lifecycle ceremonies of an individual person from birth to death. It also maintains order and peace in the village. It carefully and jealously guards the religious customs and practices at the village level and thereby, the Rongmei traditional religion survives.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

-
- ¹ M. Rizvi, S. H. & Roy, Shibani. (2010). *Naga Tribe of North East India*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation. p.64.
 - ² Thaimei, Mangthoi.(1995). The Rongmeis in *Manipur: Past and Present*, Vol. III, (Naga and Kuki-Chin), Naorem Sanjaoba (Ed.). New Delhi: Mittal Publications, p. 406.
 - ³ Fuchs, Stephen. (1988). *The Korkus of the Vindhya Hills*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, p. 190
 - ⁴ Interview with Golmei Poudetchung, Banja of Langthabal Khoupum Pei, Imphal West, Manipur.
 - ⁵ Interview with Dingbulung Panmei, village school teacher of Pongshanmaimei village, Churachandpur District.
 - ⁶ Kamei, Gangmumei. (2004). *The Zeliangrong Nagas From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu*. Guwahati/Delhi: Spectrum Publication, p.274.
 - ⁷ Kamei, Gangmumei. (2005). *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak: The Primordial Religion of Zeliangrong*. Imphal, p. 18.
 - ⁸ Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. (2002). *Ringlon Khatni Theilon*, Imphal, pp.1-2.
 - ⁹ Dudek, Edward E. (2008). *Tribal Religious Beliefs of North East India with Special Emphasis on Nagaland and the Introduction and Effect of the Gospel*, Glove Serve Journal of Missions 2:12, ISSN 1943-6459, www.gloveservejournalofmissions.org] pp. 11-12; Makuga, G. (2007). *The Rongmei Customary Laws*. Dimapur, p.15.
 - ¹⁰ Malinowski, Bronislaw. (1982). *Magic, Science & Religion and Other Essays*. London: Souvenir Press(Educational & Academic) Ltd., p. 57.
 - ¹¹ Kamson, Chaoba. (2009). *Rah Pari*. Imphal, pp. 195-197.
 - ¹² Interview with Moirangchao Gondaimei, Langthabal Khoupum Pei, Imphal West, Manipur.
 - ¹³ Horam, M. (1988). *Nagas Old Ways and New Trends*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, p. 87.
 - ¹⁴ Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (1976). *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.207.

-
- ¹⁵ Elwin, Verrier (ed.). (1969). *Nagas in the Nineteen Century*. Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 428.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Chaoba Kamson, General Scy. TRCP, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.
- ¹⁷ The village priest predicts trouble or even death in the village.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Gangmei Amu, Banja of Langthabal Khoupum Pei, Imphal West, Manipur
- ¹⁹ Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. (2012). *Thoushumei Kashoi Kadam*(Rites and Rituals) Imphal, pp. 75-79.
- ²⁰ Hodson, T.C. (1996). *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 77.
- ²¹ *Gaan-Ngai Festivity among the Zeliangrongs of North East India*. (2012). Published by the State Level Gaan-Ngai Celebration Committee, Manipur, Imphal, pp. 16-17.