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The Rites of Identity
Understanding the Customary Practices
among the Rongmei Christians

Kamei Samson,
Assistant Professor,
Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute
Uttar Pradesh



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The Rites of Identity

Understanding the Customary Practices among the Rongmei Christians*

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to theorise the phenomenon of ethnic-specific customary practices among the Rongmei Christians. It substantiates the existing theories on rites by Arnold van Gennep¹ and Victor Turner.² The theories of Gennep and Turner, however, do not directly deal with the identity concerns of a group in the contexts of rites and rituals. Beyond the theories on rites of passage and the theories on liminality and communitas, this paper examines the issues of identity within the phenomenon of the practices of customary rituals among the Christians who had earlier condemned the cultures of their ancestors.³ It presents the various events of the 1990s to explain the changes witnessed among the Rongmei Christians in Manipur and Nagaland that were marked by cultural atavism. This cultural atavism gave rise to a diverse understanding of rites, rituals and other customary practices of the Rongmei people. While the Rongmei Christians seek to view culture as being divorced from religion, the non-Christians see nothing save religion in every aspect of their lives. For the Rongmei Christians, culture is a mix of both religious and secular affairs and so they believe in following and enjoying Rongmei culture, judiciously avoiding the ancestral belief systems, as they believe in the former's secular culture. The basic proposition of the paper is that the Rongmei Christians follow their ancestral rites, rituals and other customary practices exclusive of the associated religious significance, primarily to reclaim their Rongmei identity which remains irrelevant within Christianity due to its emphasis on a personal relationship with God.⁴

Keywords: Religion, customary practice, rites of passage, rituals, Christianity, Rongmei.

*This paper is a revised version of a webinar 'The Rites of Identity: Understanding the Customary Practices among the Rongmei Christians' conducted on 12 March 2021 at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

¹*The Rites of Passage.*

²*The Ritual Process.*

³ It was during the 1990s that the author would often hear Christians saying that tribal ancestors have no place in heaven as they worshipped evil spirits. Even Catholic priests and nuns preached in this manner in the church. They firmly advocated for exemplary lives by followers of the Catholic denomination to salvage the condemned souls of the non-Christians and Christians of other denominations. In church and in Sunday Schools, it was preached that only Catholics are saved from the eternal fire of hell.

⁴ Ammerman et al., 2019, pp. 121-145. As Christianity emphasises a personal relationship with God, the prominence of cultures, tongues, races, places, etc., which are crucial in social identity, have been grievously rendered irrelevant for very long. This may also be partly attributed to the early phase of Christianity under the influence of Western missionaries who come from societies with a high degree of individualism. The Rongmei Christians are beginning to experience a sense of incompleteness of their self and social identity without the cultures they once condemned.

Introduction

Customary practices reflect the code of moral and social conduct, with religious beliefs in the code of interpersonal and intergroup behaviours. Customary practices may also include traditions that are religiously codified through shared meanings and not necessarily through uniform institutionalisation across an ancestral or ethnic group. Customary practices are believed to be representative of the will of the Supreme Divine.

There were wide-ranging customary practices among the Nagas. Some of these practices included headhunting, observation of *genna*⁵ and religious adherence to one's totem and clan exogamy. Except for the first, the other customary practices are still extant.

Upon conversion to Christianity, the churches usually discouraged the continuance of customary practices which were formerly trademarks of one's pre-Christian identity. Conversion to Christianity heralds a new category of identity commonly perceived to be the antithesis of ancestral or cultural identity. This comes at a heavy cost in the form of debilitation of the tribal customary beliefs and practices, even if some of them have nothing to do with the newfound Christian theologies. Thus, even tribal names are relinquished. The new dimension of their identity shaded by Christian teachings and beliefs induces them to regroup themselves into a new category. This enables them to be meaningfully conscious of themselves as Christians and experience a sense of inflated self-respect. This is so because, upon acceptance of Christianity, a certain degree of stigma is ascribed to non-Christian beliefs. Christianity is invariably accepted by its adherents to be superior to all other belief systems as its theology claims to be *the only true* religion and path to salvation.⁶

However, stigmatisation and condemnation of almost everything in the tribal customary practices seems to have taken a new turn in Manipur and Nagaland towards the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁷ The period is witness to significant political developments in the lands of the Nagas, of which many tribals in Manipur form a part. The benign twenty-first century was built upon the dynamics of the 1990s. The first ceasefire signed between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) in 1997 played a major role in heralding a new phase in the social, cultural, economic and political landscape, especially in Manipur and Nagaland. It heralded an era of greater participation of people in political affairs. It gave a new lease of life to the politics and cultures of the people. The economic landscape in the tribal areas also underwent a major change with the starting of several national and international development projects. B.G. Gokhale referred to the economic incentives being used as responses to deal with the political unrest among the tribals, especially in the Naga Hills,⁸ even during the heydays of the Naga

⁵Genna is originally an Angami term *kenna*, meaning to worship. It is widely used by anthropologists to refer to a form of worship in which the whole community is involved.

⁶This has been the preaching the author experienced since the 1980s. This methodology of preaching seems to have been consciously undertoned since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Archbishop of Manipur, Dominic Lumon, said, 'We are not eager to baptise' (Samson, 2022, p. 160).

⁷Based on the lived experiences of the author. Various political upheavals towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century brought about several changes in the lives of even the apolitical villagers. Being a member of a Catholic church, the author witnessed new developments in Church activities and outreach programmes in which the non-Christians were perceived and treated more friendly and as equals.

⁸1961, p. 36.

movement in the 1950s. What *Saam*, *Dand* and *Bhed* could not do in the last fifty years was beginning to be executed primarily by *Daam* from 1997. The global economic liberalisation and the Kautilyan economic manoeuvre of the Indian state gradually but phenomenally changed the political, economic and social landscapes in Nagaland and Manipur.

What stood out as the consequence of the 1997 ceasefire agreement was the active participation of the tribal people in political and economic activities. The revival of the Manipur Hill Areas Autonomous District Council through elections in which people actively participated changed the political landscape in the tribal areas of Manipur. With the coming of relatively peaceful eras, according to the author's personal view,—based on the analysis of the historic moment of meeting between two important persons and the impact of such meeting—there was a resurgence of a quest for one's root or origin of identity. There emerged a felt need even among the non-state armed groups to reclaim and salvage their ancestral identity. Their political struggle immensely needed the revitalisation of their ancestral cultural identity to enhance the legitimacy of the political struggle by presenting it on global platforms as a people's movement. Reclamation of their ancestral identity would be a rejuvenation of their collective belief in primordial freedom. This can strengthen their solidarity around and legitimacy of their struggle for the right of self-determination. Besides this, the growing number of theologians among the Baptist churches who moved out of India for training or for taking up the role of pastors of churches across the globe also created a situation in which they had to look for their ancestral cultures. Many spoke of instances when foreigners were inquisitive and inquired about their Rongmei culture.

The year 1994 also witnessed a *grand meeting* between Thuingaleng Muivah (General-Secretary of NSCN-IM) and Professor Gangmumei Kamei (prominent tribal leader) at Geneva during a conference on the rights of indigenous peoples in which the former apologised for the appallingly brutal torture meted out to the Rongmei people who were merely celebrating a festival that included the drinking of locally brewed wine.⁹ Such an apology from the armed group leader certainly acted as a deterrent against any future occurrence of such an incident. It is believed that the Church leaders received the news of such an apology.

The late 1990s also marked the end of the Kuki-Naga ethnic clash that began in the early 1990s. The new era gave space for the struggles for tribe-specific linguistic demands. Several tribal languages were included in the school education curricula. The end of the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict also allowed smaller tribal groups to assert their distinct tribal identities without the need to get associated with either the Naga or the Kuki groups for protection as done earlier. Kom,¹⁰ Anal, Hmar, Zou and Paite are a few examples of such tribal identity assertions distinct from the constricting binaries of collective Naga and Kuki identities.

Another factor that decidedly influenced the resurgence of the voice of tribal cultural spirits among the tribal Christians was the better and more effective implementation of the government welfare schemes during a relatively peaceful era. As there are provisions for

⁹This is based on an interview with Poujailung (name changed) from Khoupum in Tamenglong district of Manipur.

¹⁰Thus, Alex Akhup, belonging to the Kom tribe, in his article *The Lived Reality of Koms (Komrem)* in Manipur unequivocally stated: "Politically and ethnically speaking they are not Kukis nor Nagas" (p. 8). This also induced the Kom churches and the cadres of armed groups belonging to the Kom tribe to look for their distinct tribal identity which is rooted in their cultural identity.

welfare schemes based on tribal identity, the need to trace one's pool of cultural wealth was seriously felt. Even leaders of Churches began to get involved in the identity politics of their respective tribes. The bloody Kuki-Naga conflict proved the Christian brotherhood to be a Utopia which is easily incinerated by the temporal conflagration of ethnic violence. They now identify more readily with their tribe-based church than their faith-based denomination.¹¹

It is observed that there is a resurgence of customary practices among tribal Christians.¹² *Nouthanmei* (marriage proposal), *Pouphaan Baanmei* (wearing or acceptance of a shawl by a maternal uncle before the wedding of a bride), *Potsumei* (gifts to sisters), *Jang Pangu Kokmei* (cleansing rite on the fifth day of death), the law of inheritance, law of succession, parting wish at burial are some of the customary practices adopted and adapted in the process of social identification with the Rongmei identity by the Rongmei Christians. We find such parallels in other communities too.

Customary practices among the collective life of the Christian communities: A review

Grace Davie writes about a large number of latent members of the Church gradually turning towards the church only for rites of passage.¹³ The teachings of Christianity are no longer found to be very attractive among many Christians. There is a significant decline in religiosity among British Christians along with a decline in belief in Christianity. Grace Davie observes that British Christians turn to Church for rituals "to mark the turning points in life: birth, marriage and, most of all, death".¹⁴ It is only in the rites of passage they remain Christians.

Walker and Balk write about how the Creek Christians follow customary rituals of death. The Creek Christians, like their ancestors and fellow people of the Creek tribe, organise a wake service the night before the day of the burial, and not leaving the body unguarded until burial. Following Creek tribal traditions, they bury the personal belongings of the dead along with food items in the casket. The grave is dug by hand. During the burial, each present near the grave throws a handful of earth into the grave to mark what is termed as a "farewell handshake".¹⁵ The grave is thus completely covered with earth by hand and not by shovel. A customary practice of building a house over the grave is also followed. Such an elaborate arrangement for burying personal materials alongside the dead is rooted in their belief in a world after death. Such rituals may be accepted by the Christians merely because of their

¹¹Samson, 2019, pp. 221–237.

¹²This is based on the lived experiences and observations made by the author. The author was part of some of the customary practices. The author was witness to the presentation of a shawl by his cousin before her marriage to his father who was bedridden. This was a customary practice called *Pouphaan Baanmei*. The families of the author's cousin as well as the author are both Christians. After the author's father passed away the customary rite of *Jang Pangu Kokmei* was also observed without the customary religious rituals. The rite of *Noujaime* or elopement is also widely practised by many Christians. However, the ritual of *Loiphai Daan Jaomei* or examining whether the right limb of a rooster is over the left limb after having been ritualistically sacrificed to the Supreme God is not practised by the Rongmei Christians who elope. But the customary practice of *Mongjam Thanmei* or to confirm the will or consent of the eloping girl is mandatory even among the Rongmei Christians including the author himself.

¹³Davie, 1990, pp. 455-469.

¹⁴Ibid., p.457.

¹⁵Walker and Balk, 2007, p. 633.

“social and ethical dimensions” while not accepting their religious significance.¹⁶ A similar propensity to segregate religious essence from the moral and social significance of rituals is observed among Christians in Nagaland. Reverend Dr Zehlou Keyho, General Secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Churches Association thinks that for the Naga Christians leaving the ancestral religion does not result in forfeiting the Naga culture.¹⁷

Rituals are sometimes performed to reaffirm and consolidate the social status of a group. The works of L.T. Om Prakash and John Joseph Kennedy¹⁸ reveal how the Hindu Nadars in a South Indian village use rituals to enhance and symbolically express their superior status within the Hindu community. In Kerala, the Jacobite Syrian Christians continue to organise ritualised family gatherings annually to “proclaim the artificially cultivated upper-caste identity and lineage”.¹⁹ Syrian Christians dip gold into honey before giving it to a newborn infant and observe those rituals which the Hindus perform as part of their rituals at birth, marriage and death.²⁰ The caste system, one of the crucial customary laws, is strictly adhered to by Syrian Christians. According to Bipin Sebastian, the Syrian Christians continue to follow endogamy and do not intermarry with Dalit Christians.²¹ The Syrian Christian marriage ceremonial pattern is “very close to the tradition of other native Keralite culture.”²² According to Varghese, as part of the marriage ceremony, the Syrian Christians offer gifts to the master of the bridegroom, who was the first person to teach him to read and write.²³ The Christian bridegroom also undergoes a customary haircut and shaving before the marriage ceremony. Similar phenomena prevail among the Christians in Punjab. The Punjabi Christians are “caste-like” and have still not been emancipated from the shackles of the traditional caste hierarchy.²⁴ While many Christians in tribal villages of Manipur and Nagaland leave their traditional village institutions, the Punjabi Christians are known to continue their association with the village Panchayat. The Punjabi Christians sing psalms in Punjabi tunes, leave their footwear outside the churches, sit on the floor and also continue to wear turbans. Thus, one can witness the indigenisation of Christianity in Punjab.

What emerges from the existing literature is the trend in the incorporation of customary practices within the collective life of the Christian community. While some do so

¹⁶Bae and van der Merwe, 2008, p. 1299.

¹⁷Kallol Dey, “In Christian Nagaland, indigenous religion of pre-Christian Nagas withstands test of time,” *The Indian Express*, last updated January 7, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/nagaland/in-christian-nagaland-indigenous-religion-of-pre-christian-nagas-withstand-test-of-time-5010777/#:~:text=The%20septuagenarian%20holds%20on%20to,advent%20of%20Christianity%20in%20Nagaland.&text=The%20Rongmei%20and%20Zeliang%20Nagas,of%20Nagaland%20have%20accepted%20Christianity>.

¹⁸Prakash and Kennedy, 2021, pp. 171–186.

¹⁹TA Ameerudheen, *Scroll*, “Is the caste system deep-rooted among Christians in India? A Kerala bishop stirs up a hornet’s nest,” last updated April 20, 2018. Accessed November 3, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/876000/is-the-caste-system-deep-rooted-among-christians-in-india-a-kerala-bishop-stirs-up-a-hornets-nest>.

²⁰*Time*, “Religion: St. Thomas in India,” last updated January 12, 1953. Accessed November 13, 2021, content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,817710,00.html.

²¹Bipin Sebastian, *The Wire*, “Why Christo-Racist Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Rhetoric are Gaining Ground in Kerala,” last updated February 26, 2021. Accessed October 3, 2021, <https://thewire.in/religion/kerala-syrian-christians-caste-anti-muslim-rhetoric>.

²²Varghese, 2005, p. 43.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 34–58.

²⁴Webster, 1990, p. 35.

to reclaim and consolidate their traditional privileges earmarked for them because of their caste, some do so to cater to their needs for belonging to their linguistic and ethnic group and for self-esteem. Social identity plays a crucial role in customary practices among Christians. Christianity, which shares its roots with the Jewish culture²⁵ and is universal, offers no scope for cultural elements to be collectively identified by its members across ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups.

The author aims to follow the methods of Victor Turner while approaching the issues to be taken up in this paper. Victor Turner says, "The social world is a world in becoming, not a world in being".²⁶ It connotes the ever-changing nature of the social world that includes culture. Culture is a dynamic reality and does not settle for any argument for absolute primordiality. According to W.H. Auden, Turner sees society as continuously "flowing" like a "dangerous tide...that never stops or dies".²⁷ Customary practices by Christians are also akin to the never-ceasing tide of social phenomenon. This paper seeks to put this phenomenon into perspective by drawing it within the theoretical framework of rites of identity discussed in the subsequent section of the paper.

Adopting an ethnographic approach, data was collected primarily through in-depth interviews and participant observation within the research context. The facts and information also include those collected for the author's doctoral thesis and postdoctoral work. The author's lived experience also forms an important part of the research inputs. The data were also collected from oral traditions and oral histories of the Rongmei people primarily from Rongmei villages in Manipur valley and a few villages in the hills.

Rites

Rites are conventionally believed to be religious. They are considered to be sacred and their performances in the form of rituals are often rare. The rarity of rituals also contributes to the sense of purity and solemnity of both the rites and the corresponding rituals. Therefore, they demand from the participants and people around such performances a certain solemn code of conduct. Ritual is thus, "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technical routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers."²⁸ The element of mysticism also adds an aura of reverence and awe around rituals. Simply speaking, ritual is a phenomenon of transcendental aura in which a feeling of detachment from the mundane and the temporal world is experienced. Thus, according to Arnold van Gennep, rituals allow a movement across different social spaces and help people to meaningfully organise their shared social roles.²⁹ Rituals add to the mysticism of the rites.

Rituals are capable of causing phenomena and thus there are cultural and social changes as a result of rituals.³⁰ Rituals also manifest in social structures and cause certain

²⁵ According to the Bible, Jesus went through the rites of passage of the Jewish culture. The Rongmei Christians cannot identify with the Jewish culture. While Christianity reassures their spiritual self their collective social and cultural selves remain in a state of anomie and this renders their spiritual self incomplete and meaningless.

²⁶ Turner, 1974, p. 24.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁸ Turner, 1967, p. 19.

²⁹ Gennep, 1960.

³⁰ Grimes, 2000.

functions while subordinating the symbols and concepts to practical ends.³¹ Thus, rituals have a strong performative capacity to allow coordinated and meaningful interactions. The emphasis of religious rites is on the potential to bring about a more enduring change in the lives of the people involved in the rituals. Such rites are broadly termed by Arnold van Gennep as the rites of passage.³² They transfer an individual from one stage of life to the other stage of life. Such rites lead to a drastic change in the interpersonal relationship between the individual and the people in the community.

Ritual and Beliefs

The author concerns himself with religious rituals which require a set of beliefs that give meaning to ritual. Beliefs are a crucial component of rituals. It is said that “beliefs could exist without rituals; rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs”.³³ It is beliefs that give meaning to the performance of rituals. For Emile Durkheim, it is “[o]nly after having defined the belief can we define the rite”.³⁴ Belief is the key to an understanding of rituals.

Performance of ritual depends on a belief on the part of the performer of the ritual. In the absence of beliefs, a ritual can be like any other mundane activity. It hinges on the state of belief of the performer.³⁵ Thus, the rites of passage are “nothing but our belief”³⁶ in rituals. However, there are tendencies among Christians to separate religious significance from rites so that they can be part of certain rituals typical of their community. Writing in the context of ancestor worship, which Christians tend to view from a social and ethical standpoint alone, Choon Sup Bae & P J van der Merwe write:

Some anthropologists and Catholic scholars have asserted that the social and ethical dimensions of the rituals can be separated from the religious connotations attached to ancestor veneration. The reason for this has to do with a specific missionary approach—that of assimilation and accommodation. However, in my view ancestor worship must be seen as a whole and therefore the social functions and ethical motivations intrinsic to these practices cannot be isolated from the religious elements.³⁷

A complete meaning or essence of rituals without the belief component of rituals cannot be claimed. Rituals are not merely performative. Its essence is to be located in its associated beliefs. Beliefs are the inviolable intrinsic nature of rituals that ultimately contribute to the meaning of rites. It is the meaning or belief that the social significance of the ritual is built upon.

³¹Malinowski, 1925; Gennep, 1960.

³²Gennep, 1960.

³³Shils, 1968, p. 736, cited in Bell, 1992, p. 19.

³⁴Durkheim, 1995, p. 34.

³⁵Lan, 2018, pp. 1-14.

³⁶Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷Bae and Merwe, 2008, p. 1299.

The Rites of Identity

The author seeks to explain the emerging phenomenon of Rongmei Christians associating with customary practices or rituals. This is done with their conscious action of segregating the intrinsic nature of those rituals, conventionally perceived to be inviolable, toward fulfilling their needs for belonging to their ancestral identity. Therefore, the performances of certain customary rituals by the Rongmei Christians are merely to embrace their ancestral identity. This social identification with their ancestral identity is perceived to be ritualistically possible only if they can delineate the religious or belief dimension of the rites. Such a process of alienation of the religious significance of the rites from the rituals is immensely exigent as it is binding on them to simultaneously remain Christian and Rongmei. It requires conscious repression of the dialectic of Christian and Rongmei identities. It is a calculated cultural atavism. Therefore, the performance of the customary rituals by the Rongmei Christians is to identify with the Rongmei identity.

There is a clear divorce of practice from its essence. There also exists a separation of perceived religious rituals from the rites. Kamei Samson, in the context of social change among the Rongmei community in Manipur valley, says, "The essence of culture may be located in the core of the culture and the practice without essence of the culture may be found in the periphery of the culture".³⁸ According to T.K. Oommen, it is the change in the core of a culture that can transform the culture of the people.³⁹ The Rongmei Christians, by detaching themselves from the core or the essence of the culture or customary rites, seek to keep their Christian identity unchanged while liberally and consciously manipulating the ritual dimension of their customary rites to remain attached to their Rongmei identity. Kamei Samson further observed that the "Christians prefer to view their role of practising the culture without the essence as reclamation and preservation of culture".⁴⁰ On the contrary, the "traditionalists see disrespect in cultural practices without their essence."⁴¹ The essence or religious significance is the basis of cultural practice".⁴²

The Rongmei People

It is hard to come across a large number of historical texts on the Rongmei people. Besides *The Trail from Makuilungdi: The Continuing Saga of the Zeliangrong People* by Namthiubuiyang Pamei (2001) and *A History of the Zeliangrong Nagas: From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu* by Gangmumei Kamei (2004) perhaps there are no readable historical works of the Rongmei people.

What is spoken about the Rongmei people is what has been believed through the ages. Oral traditions overwhelm the major source of their past accounts. The oral traditions and oral histories of the Rongmei people are like any other form of history which are "a

³⁸Samson, 2015, p. 360.

³⁹Oommen, 2009, pp. 3–14.

⁴⁰Samson, 2015, p. 371.

⁴¹Many of the elders belonging to non-Christian groups expressed unhappiness with Rongmei Christians ignoring the religious dimension of rites of passage or other customary practices.

⁴²Samson, 2015, p. 371.

conjectural reconstruction of the early stages from the phenomena as they exist today”.⁴³ As it is conjectural, it allows for many other conjectures churning the history of Rongmei into what Panikkar calls *History as a Site of Struggle* (2013) and also renders the Rongmei culture (in the words of Panikkar) *Culture as a Site of Struggle* (2009). There are conflicting narratives about their past among them. Even their prevalent culture is witnessed to be transformed and they are attempted to be justified through diverse conjectural narratives of their past.

According to myth, the Rongmei people were created by a god (*Dampapu*) and a goddess (*Dampapui*) as commanded by God, *Apou Ragang*. It was *Apou Ragang* who gave life to humans who had form but no life. *Apou Ragang* kept these humans hidden in a cave to protect them from wild animals and evil spirits. They were brought out of the cave by the god *Apou Ragang* once they became mature adults. It is believed that a horn of a divine mithun (*Bos frontalis*) pushed the flat boulder covering the cave and the humans came out of the cave wearing traditional attires given by God. The material and the texture of the traditional attires also had the power to ward off evil spirits and keep them safe and warm.

Another set of folktales of the Rongmei people is replete with accounts of migrations. These are in the form of oral traditions as no major migration is known to have occurred in the recent past. A migration story offered by Dindai Gangmei is of particular interest. According to him, the Rongmei people migrated from the Fujian Province of China.⁴⁴ Fujian, according to Dindai, was earlier known as Minhow until 725 A.D. It was renamed Minhow under the Tang Dynasty. He says that Minhow is known to the Rongmei people as Mahow. The Rongmei people were also part of those groups that escaped forced labour during the construction of the Great Wall of China. According to him, the Rongmei people were known to have begun to flee under the rule of Qin Shihuang in 221 B.C. Gangmumei Kamei, in a conversation with the author sometime in 2012,⁴⁵ said that the Rongmei people were already settled in the southern hills of Manipur before the Christian era. Gonmei Lanbilung Kabui talked about some tools found in Tharon Cave located in the Tamenglong district of Manipur which he correlated with those of the Hoa Bi Hian culture of Vietnam known to have flourished about 7000-8000 B.C.⁴⁶ The search aeological findings pointed to a possibility of the presence of the Rongmei people in the southwestern parts of Manipur since then. Such narratives including the migration stories are widely believed to be true even by the Rongmei Christians. Interestingly, they also believe in the *Dampapu* and *Dampapui* tales. They also believe in the tales of *Didimpu* and *Didimpui*, the god and goddess respectively, who created the other heavenly bodies and other living and non-living creatures in the world.

Beliefs of Rongmei People

The Rongmei people believe in the Supreme Being called *Tingkao Ragwang*. It simply means heavenly God. He is also identified by other names: *Apou Ragang*, *Pasupadammeipu*, *Apou Ragang Samtingphenmei* and *Haipou Ragang*. The belief systems of the Zeliangrong⁴⁷ people may be classified into Pupou Chap, Heraka, Tingkao Ragwang Kariak (TRK) and

⁴³Macdonell, 1914, p. 230.

⁴⁴Gangmei, 2008.

⁴⁵It was part of author's fieldwork for doctoral thesis.

⁴⁶Kabui, 2018, p. 3.

⁴⁷Zeliangrong is a portmanteau word formed by the first syllables of the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei people.

TingkaoRagwangChapriak (TRC). They all believe in the world after death. Therefore, they make elaborate arrangements for the soul of the dead with material items for use in the afterworld. Surajit Chandra Sinha says the tribals have no sense of heaven or hell.⁴⁸ This observation needs a serious rethinking given the many instances among several tribal communities preparing for the world of death during the funeral rite. The belief in the world of death (not hell) or heaven among the tribal people is widespread.

Religion forms a very crucial component in the life of the Rongmei people. Religion guides the interpersonal relationship with people of their community and other communities. For the Rongmei people, “Religion is the system of worship of God by men with a code of moral, spiritual and social behaviour in dealing with God and society”.⁴⁹ It is an “aspect of culture heritage and social solidarity” [sic].⁵⁰ Religion is also social as it concerns them all.

Among the Rongmei, it is popularly said that “Loss of religion is loss of culture; loss of culture is loss of identity”.⁵¹ The origin of this saying is attributed to Rani Gaidinliu. For the Rongmei people, there is intrinsic connectivity between religion, culture and identity. One is meaningless without the other. Rituals are therefore not merely solemn collective actions. They are belief-driven and performative cultural practices whose essence is nurtured and sustained by the social identity of a cultural and ancestral group.

Rongmei Festivals

Popular festivals of the Rongmei people are *Nanuh*, *Gaan-Ngai* and *Lih-Ngai*. *Nanuh* is celebrated in the name of newborn infants. This festival is marked by the piercing of the earlobes of the infant. The ritual is intended to send a message of the need to procreate and multiply the human population as part of the fulfilment of the will of God.⁵² The bleeding during the piercing of the earlobes is intended to send out a ritualistically sanctified metaphorical message of coition for procreation. On this day, all the village elders, both men and women, gather and sing songs that contain sexually explicit terms.⁵³ Another festival *Gan-Ngai* is celebrated to bid farewell to the departed soul. *Lih-Ngai* is a festival for the living in which the almighty God is thanked for giving and sustaining life. All these festivals are parts of rites of passage and they are essentially accompanied by religious rituals.

According to Lanbilung Gonmei, festivals of the Rongmei are not without religious fervour, as they involve collective or individual worship of God.⁵⁴ The essence of the cultural

⁴⁸1959, cited in Sarkar, 2012, p. 2.

⁴⁹Kamei, 2012, p. 13.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 17.

⁵¹These words are popularised by the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) religious group. These words were often found by the author while collecting data at Imphal in Manipur under the NMML Fellowship programme. These were found to be used as a commandment to check the followers of TRC from being converted to Christianity. The author learnt about this ‘edict’ from Abuan Kamei of Luangkao (Manipur) who was the personal assistant of Rani Gaidinliu for twelve years. The author met him at Kohima (Nagaland) in 2012 during fieldwork.

⁵²This account is based on an interaction with Rajenlung Barnic Gangmei who is pursuing PhD in IIT Guwahati, Assam.

⁵³This information was provided by Dr Senganglu Thamei. She has collected voluminous data on Zeliangrong folklores as part of her research.

⁵⁴Gonmei, 2012, p. 274.

festivals of the Zeliangrong people is to be located in the “religious worship to the Supreme God”.⁵⁵ One cannot look at the significance of the Rongmei festivals without delving into the religious dimensions of the festivals. Therefore, festivals are religious affairs. Without religious affairs, they are merely gaiety. Rongmei Christians seem to choose to consciously ignore this perspective in their participation in the festivals.

The New Era

On the 22nd of February 1994, a Naga armed group barged into some villages at Khoupum in the Tamenglong district of Manipur and interrupted the *Nanuh* festival celebrations.⁵⁶ The villagers were brutally beaten and humiliated; their religious sentiments were hurt. Men were forced to compete to drink festive wine. Whoever stopped drinking was mercilessly thrashed. They were gathered on open ground and forced to dance in the rain the whole night. Whoever stopped dancing was struck with the butt of a gun. Earlier during the day, as the perpetrators of this heinous crime barged into one of the houses, a woman who had recently given birth died of shock. The villagers were even told that non-Christians cannot stay in Nagaland.⁵⁷ Professor Gangmumei Kamei, a prominent leader of the Zeliangrong, during his visit to Geneva to attend a meeting of the United Nations Organisation in 1994, brought up this incident with the leader of the concerned Naga armed group.

This conversation between the two leaders in Geneva was marked by an unconditional verbal apology from the leader of the Naga armed group. It is also said that the Naga armed group was also made to pay a fine according to the customary law of the Rongmei people in the form of a fully grown pig traditionally called *gakkupangu*. Thus, the Christian-influenced armed group gracefully accepted the ancestral customary law of their fellow Nagas who were not Christian and it exhibited and proved its changing stance on the ancestral cultures of the Nagas. What also followed the aforesaid attack was the formation of a religious council of the Zeliangrong people of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Thus, for the first time in history, an inter-village religious organisation was created for the Nagas. One also witnessed a gradual cessation of interference with the religious life of the non-Christians by the Naga Christians. It also opened possibilities for Christians to establish a new relationship with their fellow Nagas who are not Christians.

The year 1997 was crucial again in the history of the Nagas as a ceasefire was signed between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah). It heralded an era of village life for the Naga armed recruits. This new development allowed them to experience the cultures which their forefathers had bequeathed them which the foreign Christian missionaries and their fellow Naga Christians condemned as unsophisticated.

The 1990s was also important in understanding the changes evolving among the Nagas because of the vibrant electoral politics witnessed in the hills. Violence and

⁵⁵All Zeliangrong Students' Union, 2009, p. 41.

⁵⁶The following account is based on author's fieldwork at Khoupum. The incident was verified by the author during a meeting with one of the senior members of the said armed group in Dimapur (Nagaland). The senior member regretted that such an unfortunate incident took place. According to him, the armed group was led by a low-ranking officer.

⁵⁷Here, Nagaland does not refer to the Indian state of Nagaland. Nagaland refers to *Nagalim* or the land of the Nagas. The Nagas collectively identify with Nagalim as their homeland. The political movement for the external right of self-determination of the Nagas is towards this Nagalim.

favouritism were not alien to electoral politics in the Naga-inhabited areas. This contributed to Naga identity politics relevant within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Identity, which for the non-Christians is intrinsically married to culture, was now emerging as an indispensable vocabulary across the Naga tribes. Among the common Naga populace, tribe-specific and linguistic-specific identity politics began to overwhelm the larger Naga politics that ushered in external agencies for the right to self-determination. Naga cultures, both material and in practice i.e. customary practices, are now embraced by both the Naga armed groups as well as Naga Christians. However, the religious flavour of the Naga cultures is distanced by both groups.

The Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s also made it possible for the Nagas across religious groups to find a common platform for solidarity and cooperation. Many Naga youths settled in Manipur valley voluntarily guarded the Naga villages in the hills.⁵⁸ They risked their lives to protect the Nagas in the hills despite a bitter past over religion and culture. The Nagas in Manipur valley are predominantly Rongmei, of whom, a large population is non-Christian. Despite being non-Christian, they volunteered to help their fellow Nagas in the hills who were mostly Christians. Money, food and clothes were mobilised by the Nagas in Manipur valley to help the Nagas who were victims of violence during the Kuki-Naga conflict in the hills. The author clearly remembers the night when the Nagas in the Imphal valley prepared to attack the Kukis settled in the valley. This was a reaction to the arson and killing of Nagas in the hills that day.⁵⁹ Thus, the Kuki-Naga conflict in the hills acted as a catalyst for the Nagas across religious groups to bury their religious differences and come to a shared platform marked by shared cultural and linguistic identities. It facilitated new and meaningful interactions between the Christian and non-Christian Nagas. The predominantly Christian Nagas in the hills also seemed to realise the importance of the non-Christian Nagas in the valley. The cultures and religions of the non-Christian Nagas thus gradually began to earn respect and recognition.

Rongmei Christians and the Rituals

Birth is the first stage of human life. It is marked by rituals for the well-being of the foetus in the womb and also the pregnant woman. The Rongmeis believe that the foetus can be harmed

⁵⁸Many Rongmei adult males from the author's village in Imphal (Manipur) too left for the hills to help the Nagas residing in the hills. The author still remembers how some of the volunteers came back home and shared their experiences of remaining awake several nights guarding the Naga villages with unsophisticated weapons. This contributed to reaffirming the collective feeling of Naga brotherhood. Again in 2001, during the protests against the ceasefire with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), many Nagas including the Rongmei fled to the hills. There were several unreported instances of threats issued against the Nagas settled in Manipur valley to leave Manipur and go to Nagaland. This happened usually at night, especially in villages in the peripheries of Manipur valley. In one of the Rongmei villages in the valley the author visited, he was told that loudspeakers were used to threaten the villagers to leave Manipur and stones were pelted at night. The author also witnessed such stone pelting at night during the protests against the Indo-Naga ceasefire in 2001. The author's family also fled to the Senapati district of Manipur which is close to the state of Nagaland. This escape of the Nagas from Manipur valley to the hills again helped further consolidation of the Naga fraternity and change towards a better and deeper understanding between different linguistic and religious groups.

⁵⁹The attack against the Kukis in Manipur valley did not occur as the angry Nagas of the Imphal valley were pacified and they returned home. However, the location of a Kuki village next to the author's village made the author and his neighbours fearful of attacks at night. They all gathered in the house of the author's paternal uncle. Thus, the Nagas in Manipur valley, for the first time in the 1990s, felt pain and fear despite being separated from the other Nagas by languages, cultures, religions and physical distances.

by an evil power. The husband of a pregnant woman is advised not to kill any animal as it could bring harm to the unborn child. Such a man does not go to the house of a deceased for a 'wake' at night.⁶⁰ An evil spirit is believed to accompany the one who goes for a wake and ultimately harms the foetus. A pregnant woman is advised to always cover her head while moving out of her house. This is due to a belief in the fontanelle as the point of the passage of breath of life. The foetus could be harmed by harming the pregnant woman. All these beliefs and practices continue to be followed by the Rongmei Christians including the author's family.

On the day of the *Nanuh* festival, the family of the newly born child brings various food items for the elders of the village. This ritual is known as *Tamcha Puanmei*. It is now becoming common among the Rongmei Christians to emulate such a practice.⁶¹ *Nanuh* is patterned after the feast of Epiphany which is celebrated by Christians to mark the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple. Offering black rice to elders is a common part of *Tamcha Puanmei* which is now a part of the Rongmei Christian feast of Epiphany. Some Christians use the term *Tamcha Puanmei* while bringing offerings to the church. However, such a usage of the term is widely disapproved by some elders of the church who believe that it is a deviation from Christian doctrines.⁶² They prefer to identify it merely as offerings and not *Tamcha Puanmei*. However, the relation between the *Nanuh* festival and the feast of Epiphany is already established.

Marriage is a crucial stage of life in most religions. It marks the end and beginning of two different stages of life. It includes rites of separation, transition and incorporation.⁶³ Rongmei Christians believe that marriage must always be Holy. Elopement, in contrast, is despised and stigmatised and is preached as a "jungle marriage". This means that it is considered a barbaric sexual union. A term that covers both love marriage and arranged marriage is *Khaamthan Suan*. *Khaam* is derived from *khaam-me* meaning stopping or blocking or refraining. Thus, a woman is prevented from being married to any other man. She is prevented from continuing with her maiden life in public. She is considered to have begun to bear the responsibility of protecting the prestige of her groom-to-be and his family. The term *than* of *Khaamthan* means clean, pure or holy which also indicates the virginities of the potential groom and the bride. It also means "having asked for". As the elders of the potential groom ask for the hand of the girl in marriage she is *Thanloumei Pu* or a girl who has already been asked and ritualistically confirmed by a rite of *Nouthanmei* (*Nou*- wife; *thanmei*- proposing or asking) for marriage.

The eldest maternal uncle of the bride is a very important person in the life of the Rongmei girl. The eldest *Kapoubung* (maternal uncle) customarily receives a shawl from the

⁶⁰When the author's wife was pregnant, she would constantly ask the author not to go for *wakes* at night (watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died). When someone dies, the village authority would mandate each male adult of a family to attend a 'wake' in the house of the bereaving family. It is customarily practised even by the Rongmei Christians. In the past, sometime until the 1990s, the village authority would exact a monetary fine of Rs. 5 from the family that failed to send an adult member for the wake.

⁶¹This was witnessed by the author in his village Catholic church after Christmas celebrations. However, the term *Nanuh* was not used, but some elders used the term *tamcha* or sacrificial eatables to be ritualised and consumed by the community in gratitude to God for the blessed infant.

⁶²This was witnessed in the Catholic church of which the author is a member.

⁶³Genep, 1960.

bride-to-be as a gift on the day of the wedding. This act of receiving the shawl is known as *PouphaanBaanmei*. It is believed that in the world of death, the maternal uncle will help his niece to undertake the journey without any trouble. Such a gift is a way of consolidating their relationship to ensure protection in the world of death. It also endows the maternal uncle with a responsibility to look after his married niece in times of trouble. Thus, the ritual of *Pouphaan Baanmei* during the rite of marriage has both social and religious significance.

The ritual practice of *Muangjam Thanmei* is still common among the Rongmei Christians despite elopement. *Muangjam Thanmei* simply means asking to ascertain the consent of the girl who had eloped. An affirmative reply from the girl must follow blessings from her family members and relatives. If the girl informs her family members and relatives that she was coerced, a heavy penalty is imposed upon the family of the boy who forced her to elope. In some rare instances, it even leads to the killing of the boy.

On the death of a person, not only the family members but also the entire village grieves over the irreparable loss. The entire village observes 'genna' (community worship) for which the ritual of cleansing the village is undertaken. No major work within or outside the village is undertaken by its members. This is a way of sharing grief and showing respect to the departed soul. The Christians who co-habit with non-Christian Rongmeiare a part of such a cleansing rite too.

Among the non-Christians, before burial, the dead body is given a ritualistic bath and then dressed in the traditional attires. Occasionally, the Rongmei Christians have been found to dress the body in traditional attire. The Rongmei Christians, similar to non-Christians, help the soul of the dead with worldly materials as preparation for its journey into the next world; wait for the return of the messenger who has carried the unfortunate news to relatives and friends; not bury the dead till all the messengers have returned; and take special care in offering food to the grave diggers which should make them feel contented which is taken as a sign of peace for the departed soul. On the fifth day beginning from the day of the death, a ritual to mark the final parting is performed. The upper part of the grave is dug out and hardened. The grave is also designed to raise by about a foot. The grave is decorated and food is offered to the departed soul. This time also the grave diggers are accorded the same respect. A final prayer for the dead is held. All the above ritualistic traditions followed by the Rongmei Christians in the presence of a priest or a pastor are the marked features of the rite of final parting.

Another important rite the Rongmei Christians follow is *Potsumei*, gifting to the sister – only a married woman. In this, the religious rituals are not followed, only the ritual of a materialistic gift is followed.

All these customary practices are followed even by prominent Rongmei Christians. They consider such practices as valid ways of Christian life because of being members of the Rongmei community. Such practices are now hardly questioned in the churches. Thus, the rites of passage and other customary practices, which are intrinsically laced with religious beliefs, are reformed or adapted into Christianity by purging them of the religious elements and they become Rongmei Christians' rites of Rongmei identity.

Two Strands of Culture

Two concepts emerge from the ancestral rites adapted by the Rongmei Christians for Rongmei identity:purgatorial culture and divorced culture.Both concepts are crucial in

understanding the spirit of atavism among the Rongmei Christians who reclaim their cultural identity sans ancestral religious identity.

Purgatorial culture

The culture that is accepted by the Rongmei Christians is perceived to help them purge the sins—condemning the culture of their people—committed by them or their ancestors. The acceptance of the culture of their people within the Christian community is tinged with a sense of guilt resulting from repentance from condemnatory acts and thoughts in their past that were directed against their culture. They attempt to grant their conscience a sense of relief and emancipate their self-esteem from a torturous sense of guilt. It is purgatorial because what they call “culture” is not fully culture, due to the absence of the essence of the culture. Their so-called secular culture is merely a means to placate the condemned culture and heal their embittered feeling of guilt. It is a state of liminality⁶⁴ as the Rongmei Christians are neither fully into the Christian world nor the Rongmei world.

Divorced culture

The author prefers to view culture as a way of life governed by a belief in the will of the Supreme Being. The kind of culture that is found among Christians is divorced from the essence of the culture that is, the belief system. Every aspect of culture is rooted in its belief system. Therefore, it can be said that religion is the basis of culture because belief is a part of religion. Thus, the tribal Christians who are liberally accepting the secular aspects of culture are irrational from the standpoint of the ancestral religious groups whose everyday life is given meaning only through their religious beliefs.

Conclusion

The rites of the identity of the Rongmei Christians have wider scope in the theoretical discourse on culture, religion, identity and their inter-relationships. The Rongmei Christians undoubtedly identify themselves as Rongmei, besides their Christian religious identity. They are of the view that the religious elements of their Rongmei culture do not penetrate their Christian religious affairs.

The resurgence among the Rongmei Christians of identifying with the Rongmei community may also be seen in the context of violent feuds between the Kukis and the Nagas who are mostly Christians. There exists a faint admiration for the teachings of Christianity among the Nagas. The Rongmei Christians are beginning to find their ancestral culture practised for generations promotes their self-esteem. With the emerging contextualisation of Christian theologies in which the cultures of the people are accepted and allowed to be practised, the Rongmei Christians are beginning to enjoy the possibility of embracing both Christian religious identity and Rongmei cultures without anomie. They systematically earmark certain customary rituals of their ancestral rites of passage to allow them to enjoy their Rongmei identity which is not found within Christianity. These rites of passage and other customary rituals sans religious essence are the rites of identity.

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⁶⁴Turner, 1977.

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