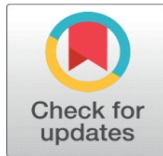
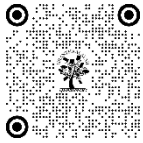


THE EVOLUTION OF ZELIANGRONG NAGAS IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The Zeliangrong Nagas constitute a major portion of the indigenous tribes of Manipur. The term "Zeliangrong" is a composite name of the cognate tribes of Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei, which was coined on 15 February, 1947 at the first Zeliangrong Conference when the Zeliangrong Council was established at Imphal. The term is an acronym of the prefixes of the respective three tribes- 'Ze' from Zeme, 'Liang' from Laingmei and 'Rong' from Rongmei. The basis of the naming consists of the common ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural origin of the kindred tribes. The original homeland and the migration of Zeliangrong Nagas have not been fully studied. There are two views, one view suggesting that they might have migrated from foreign lands, and the other view insisting that they were all settled in places where they are now since the beginning of human being.

Keywords: Migration, Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei

1. INTRODUCTION

The Zeliangrong Nagas are the indigenous tribes of Manipur, living in the state since ancient time onwards. Besides Manipur, Zeliangrong people are also settled in Assam and Nagaland, and the total population of Zeliangrong in these three states, i.e., Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, according to 2011 census, is estimated to be about 4.5 lakhs. The lands of Zeliangrong cover a compact and contiguous area of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, namely "Tamenglong district, Western Sadar Hills, Mao West, Loktak Project Area of Manipur State, Haflong Subdivision of North Cachar Hills district of Assam and Peren Subdivision of Kohima District of Nagaland state. The total geographical area of Zeliangrong habitat covers nearly 12,000 square kilometres.

On 15 February 1947, a meeting was held at Keishamthong, Imphal, which was attended by the cognate tribes of Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei. It was in this meeting that the term "Zeliangrong" was coined. The term "Zeliangrong" is an acronym of the prefixes of the three tribes-Ze from Zeme, Liang from Liangmai and Rong from Rongmei. The main reason behind the formation of such a composite term was to strengthen their oneness through a common origin, to promote unity and harmony, also to preserve and further promote their culture. The meeting of 15 February 1947 resolved to form a "Zeliangrong Council," with the object of furthering the overall economic, social and political advancement of the Zeliangrong community. According to Gangmumei Kamei, the basis or rational behind the

combination of the three prefixes of the three sub-ethnic group is their belief in their “common ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural origin of the kindred tribes.” He further observed: “Actually, cognate groups speaking different dialects ethnically belong to one community. Zeliangrong people are a community speaking four dialects and each group is more a dialect rather than a separate tribe.”

Apart from Zeliangrong Council, the Kabui Naga Association - which was set up in 1946 after replacing Kabui Samiti formed in March 1934 - was changed to Manipur Zeliangrong Union (MZU) in 1947 and to Zeliangrong Naga Union (ZNU) in 1960 and to Zeliangrong Union (ZU) in 1995.

Origin and Migration

The history of the origin of the Zeliangrong people has been handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition, in the form of myths, legends, folks-songs, folk-tales, religious hymns, etc. Jenpui Kamei says: “We do not have an authentic and scientific account of the origin of the Zeliangrong people. But the traditions recorded in the hymns and legends of the people mentioned about the cosmogony or the myth of the creation of the universe, man and animals.” Prof. Gangmumei Kamei also asserted: “The history of the ancient Zeliangrong people is oral tradition handed down through generations.”

According to the traditional Zeliangrong folk-tales, the Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang, created a God named Didampu and Goddess Didampui (Dampapui) to create the earth, and the Supreme God further advised the two deities, Didampu and Didampui to create a man, a fish, a toad and a monkey. The fish was freed into the water, the toad on the land, and the monkey in the forest. The Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang, showed His image to the two Deities so that they could create man and woman after the likeness of His image. The two deities created a man and a woman with the clay and the Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang, gave life to the two bodies.

The two Deities also created plants, animals, birds and insects. About the creation of man, R. Brown referred to Zeliangrong folk-tales which said that man was created by the Goddess Dampapui under the instruction of the Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang.

It may be observed that there are two broad schools of thought about the origin of the ethnic people of Manipur. One school of thought generally refers the origin of the ethnic people of Manipur to some regions or places outside Manipur. The basic argument of this school is that the ethnic people of Manipur are migrated from outside. The other school, or the other hand, maintains that the ethnic people of Manipur have been living in Manipur “since the beginning of human beings.”

Some regions of China have been suggested by the scholars as the possible places from where some ethnic communities of Manipur had migrated. Wahengbam Ibohal Singh opined : “The Kabuis are supposed to be a cognate tribe of Kabow, Kachin, Karen, etc., whose ancestral home was the ancient Teru state of Southern China.” According to Gangmumei Kamei “Many Naga traditions point to Makhel in North Manipur as their homeland and a point of migration during their migration from South West China to Burma and Southeast Asia, and then North ward movement back to Manipur, then to northern Manipur before branching out to their respective tribal habitats,” and he further stresses: “It is believed that the southwestern region of ancient China including Yunnan was inhabited by the non-Han Chinese ethnic groups” and “the Nagas, the Meiteis, Kachin and Kukis-Chins must have lived in this region of China, and migrated to northeast India via Burma and South East Asia, in batches and at different periods.”

In support of this viewpoint, Prof. Gangmumei Kamei observes: “The Zeliangrong people used “sea coast objects” like shells, cowries and conchshells in their cultural usages, hinting at their habitation in western islands of South East Asia.” According to Dindai Gangmei the Rongmei migrated from the Fujian province of China and further explained that Fujian was earlier known as Minhow or Mahow until 725 A.D. He also claimed that the Rongmei joined the groups who fled from the forced labours during the construction of the Great Wall of China, which began in the 15th century B.C. The Rongmei began to flee under the rule of Qin Shihuang in 221 B.C. Ramkhum Pamei asserted that the Naga families all over the North-East were from one stock of race that migrated either from China or Vietnam through Burma.

It has also suggested that the Mongoloid people entered Burma in three different waves and by different routes. The first people who migrated from China were the Mon-Khmer races, second wave was the Tibeto-Burman races and the third wave was that of the Tai-Chinese consisting of Shan, Siamese Karen, etc. The various ethnic groups belonging to Southern Mongoloid, the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo-Aryans and a sizable section of Tai (Shan) came to Manipur from pre-historic times. The ethnic groups of Manipur namely, Meiteis, Nagas, Kuki-Chin and other communities are believed to be the descendants of those migrating people.

But, quite contrary to the views mentioned as above, Marulung Remei claimed that Zemei, Liangmei, Puimei, Maram Mao, Paomata Thangal, Tangkhul, Angami Naga, Lushei, and Meitei were not migrated from foreign lands. According to him they were all settled in places where they are now "since the beginning of human being."

Mahau Taobhui

The origin and migration of the Zeliangrong Nagas is based on the traditional legends, folk-tales and folk-songs, etc. Gangmumei Kamei has said that the origin of the Zeliangrong people "is surrounded in mystery and myth." He also has said that history of the Zeliangrong people "is oral tradition handed down through generations." Every tribe or community living in different countries used to claim at least a certain place or cave as the origin of human race, according to their own belief or legend. According to legends, the Zeliangrong people are believed to have lived and originated from a mythical hole or cave called Mahau Taobhui located at Rimting Kabin in a place with "a deep gorge between two hills," about ten kilometers away from Oklong village in Senapati district of Manipur. According to legends, mankind came out of the Mahau Taobhui when the mithun (Guaichang) pushed open the stone slab at the mouth of the cave at Ramting Kabin Pokrei (Dirannang) was the first man who came out of the cave and Dichalu was the first woman who came out of the cave.

Pokrei and Dichalu were described as "brother and sister." Pokrei planned to start a family and asked Dichalu to call him "Apou" (uncle/brother-in-law/cousin) in place of "Achai" (brother). He asked Dichalu to go around an anthill (Pungbut) seven times. Accordingly, Dichalu went around the anthill seven times and addressed Pokrei, out of forgetfulness, as "Achai" (Brother). On persistent prompting of Pokrei, Dichalu succeeded in addressing him as "Apou" and they became husband and wife. Thus, after sometime, God blessed them with four sons—Nguiba, Shagi, Anewang and Chaitu, and they first settled at Makhel, a Mao village in the present Senapati district of Manipur.

Makhel

Makhel carries a significant meaning in the history of migration and settlement of the Zeliangrong Nagas. Makhel is considered a place where all the Naga tribes lived together before a major dispersal took place. Gangmumei Kamei writes, "The Southern Naga tribes had traversed centuries to arrive at Makhel which is believed to be a village of their origin and a point of dispersal in the phase of their migration to their respective present habitat," and further saying that "the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people were also among those Naga tribes." The historicity of Makhel as an ancient village of the migration of some of the tribes has been collaborated by the megalith of dispersal, Tamrasatu, in the Mao village of Makhel.

About the significance of Makhel, T.C. Hodson, who was the Assistant Political Agent in Manipur and who visited the megalith and got it restored wrote that at Makhel, a stone was erected to mark the place from which the common ancestor of the Nagas emerged from the earth, and Makhel was "regarded as the centre from where the migration took place". The Nagas who settled at Makhel were the ancestors of the Angami, Chakhesang, Zeliangrong, Sema, Lotha, Satroumei, Maram, Tangkhul, and Poumei tribes.

Ramting Kabin

From Makhel, the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people migrated westward and took a temporary shelter at Ramting Kabin. Ramting Kabin is Liangmei word which means "old squeezed land." Ram means land or village, Ting means old and Kabin means squeezed). The life depicted in the myths in respect of Ramting Kabin was a developed kinship-based society in which the idea or concept of marriage was known.

We may not be able to really know what caused the migration from Makhel. As Gangmumei Kamei says: "We are not fully aware of the reason of migration from Makhel." But the possible reasons for migration from Makhel to Ramting Kabin could be due to some factors. According to legend, Ramting Kabin may have been safe from wild beasts, but it was not a good spot for human habitation because the environment was suffocating and there was little movement in the air.

As discussed earlier, Ramting Kabin was a village in "a deep gorge between two hills." It (Ramting Kabin) was like a cave with only one entrance, which could be the reason why some of the people claimed that the Zeliangrong came out of the cave. The Zeliangrong people must have also taken shelter at Ramting Kabin to avoid raids from the enemies or natural calamities.

Chawang Phungning

From Ramting Kabin they went southward and settled at Chawang Phungning, also known as Guang Phungning. Chawang or Guang means king or chief, and Phungning means flat area or site. Spending many years at Chawang Phungning, "a rudimentary form of chieftainship" or Chawang or Guang, meaning "king or chief," emerged at Chawang Phungning. An elder who led the people in the migration and settlement at the new site was made the chief. The chief was given the best location for settlement and was tasked with governing the settlement. They referred to him as Chawang or Guang, meaning ruler or chief. Frequent references made to Chawang Phungning or Guang Phungning in many hymns and legends led to the development of their songs, incantation and ritual hymns to God. Under the supervision of the elders, lands were divided among the clans. People set up their houses and began activities. The chief of the village decided to celebrate and make merry to mark the creation of their village. The forefathers of Zeliangrong were thought to have lived at Chawang Phungning for many generations. As their population grew, social contact among them became more difficult, and moreover there was variation among them in practices of social customs, belief systems, and festivals.

Makuilongdi

From Chawang Phungning the ancestors of the Zeliangrong migrated westward and ultimately arrived at Makuilongdi or Nkuilongdi, meaning round big mountain. Nothing is known about this village before the Zeliangrong migration. Among the migrating people, the ancestors of the Maram and Tangkul were also there as indicated by the tales of migration from Makuilongdi. Makuilongdi is a combination of three Liangmei words, "Makui" which means circle, "Long" means hill or mountain, and "Di" means large. Thus Makuilongdi literally means "large circular hill or mountain." It has been asserted that in Zeliangrong dialect the distinction between hill and mountain is not found to be practical. They merely differentiate them based on their relative height and size.

There are two views among the Zeliangrong people about the place Makuilongdi. Some elders believe that Makuilongdi is a single village settled by Zeliangrong ancestors and some still have an idea of Makuilongdi as a cluster of villages. The origin of lineages of Zeliangrong is traced from Chawang Phungning which was the main village of a cluster of villages represented by Makuilongdi. It is believed that Chawang Phungning was the main settlement and the settlers spread out to different areas and built Makuilongdi.

Makuilongdi has been known by names like Chawang Phungning or Guang Phungning. Many Liangmei lineages trace their migration from Guang Phungning, which according to them was the main village of the cluster of villages commonly known as Makuilongdi, and many Rongmei hymns refer to the prosperous village of Guang Phungning. Gangmumei Kamei has asserted that since the migrating people came in groups, they must have established separate settlements. Even Chawang Phungning or Guang Phungning was the original settlement out of which Makuilongdi was developed. There was cluster of villages or settlements under the jurisdiction of Makuilongdi.

At Makuilongdi, the land, forests, water resources and the rounded great mountain provided enough sustenance, help and hospitality to the people. The ancestors of the Zeliangrong lived in this place for many generations. With enough land for agriculture, enough food production and adopting of shifting cultivation, Makuilongdi became quite prosperous. It is said that Makuilongdi was the "cradle of Zeliangrong culture." From a village it (Makuilongdi) had become a cluster of smaller hamlets and settlements. According to tradition, thirty ceremonies of ornamented ritual houses, locally referred to as Tarangkai was performed at Makuilongdi in a single year. Performance of such costly ceremonies reflected the plentiful harvests in the village and a surplus in food production. The ceremonies to be performed by the rich individuals were carried out by the community through the institutions of the village, village council and dormitories. The ancestors of Zeliangrong people at Makuilongdi lived a rich and joyous life. The village became very populous. It was believed that the number of houses reached 7777 before further dispersal and the areas of the settlement in the village were divided into the north, south, east, and west.

At Makuilongdi, a political system was developed under a chief, Nguiba, who was a descendant from Pokrei (Dinarang). The religion of the people was worship of God through the great sacrifices and propitiation of Gods. They also developed the customary rites for the establishment of new villages. The tools and implements such as dao, spear and the iron hoe were used for agriculture and house construction. Gangmumei Kamei says: The basic features of Zeliangrong society such as lineage society, patrilineal social structure, social organization such as chieftainship, village council, dormitories, village's festivals, and dances have been developed at Makuilongdi.

Migration from Makuilongdi

There are three main reasons which worked behind the migration of the Zeliangrong people to different places from Makuilongdi. First, according to legend, the migration from Makuilongdi was caused by the sudden exodus of people at the divine warning of violating the law of nature and social discipline of the village by indulging in the performance of thirty sacrificial house construction (Tarangkai) in a single year without any break forgetting their lunar calendar & agriculture rites and devoted to enjoyment and merry making. Suddenly, insects flew to the village and in their shrill voice, told the people of the end of the lunar year. The people of Makuilongdi were shocked and terrified and made an exodus out of Makuilongdi towards different directions.

The second reason for migration of Zeliangrong people from Makuilongdi was due to overpopulation and non-availability of enough cultivable lands, and thirdly, the exodus from Makuilongdi was caused by the differences on the issue of succession to the hereditary chieftainship among the sons of Nguiba, the village chief. According to folklore, Nguiba was forced to marry a second wife due to his first wife's inability to have male children. His second wife gave birth two sons named, first, Namgong or Mangangtabou and, after a few years, Rembangbou, the second. Meanwhile, his first wife had a son named Kading or Kadingbou.

A family problem arose between Namgong and Kading on the issue of who would inherit their father's land. Nguiba, in his old age was faced with dilemma of choosing his successor out of his two sons. He consulted his youngest brother, Chaitu, the chief of Lungphou, who advised him to choose the younger son, Kading. Being disappointed at the judgement of his uncle and father, the elder son, Namgong left Makuilongdi and started a new village named Hereira, which is regarded as the first village. The original inhabitants of Makuilongdi remained at their village under the Chieftainship of Kading, the second son of Nguiba. The population became smaller and they remained at Makuilongdi and became to be known as Liangmai – the northerners, while those who followed Namgong (Mangangtabou) became to be known as Zeme. The third son of Nguiba, Rembangbe (pronounced Nrengbangbe in Liangmai and Rembangbou in Zeme), led a large group from Makuilongdi towards the South. They became to be known as Rongmei or Kabui or Marongmei, which means southerners.

Gangmumei Kamei stressed that within the broad Naga constellation, there are several tribal identity process. Under the banner of Zeliangrong, various social, religious, cultural, youth and students organisations were named. The Zemi, Liangmei, Rongmei and Puime also started Zeliangrong movement to forge unity and promote integration among these cognate tribes, and according to him “a Zaliangrong identity has now been formed.”

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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