

# Rongmei Naga

The **Rongmei** are one of the major indigenous communities a part of the Naga tribes of North-East India. The Rongmei Naga are a scheduled tribe under the Constitution of India.<sup>[3]</sup> The Rongmei have a rich culture, customs and traditions. They share similarity with their kindred tribes of Zeme, Liangmai and Inpui which together are known as Zeliangrong.

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## History

Rongmei were earlier known as Kabui along with Inpui tribe. Rongmei is a combination of two words RONG and MEI meaning SOUTH and PEOPLE respectively. The Rongmei settlement area happens to be the southern portion of the vast tract of Zeliangrong country and hence those who settling in the southern part of their habitat call themselves Rongmei meaning southerners.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Migration Theory

### Makhel

Makhel is believed by several Naga tribes like Angami, Chakhesang , Mao, Maram, Pochury, Poumai, Rengma, Thangal, Zeliangrong, etc. to be a village of their origin and a point of dispersal in their migration to their respective habitats. The history of Makhel as an ancient village of migration has been collaborated by the stone megalith of dispersion, Tamraratu in the present Mao village of Makhel.

## Rongmei

### Kabui



Artiste from Song & Drama Division Kolkata, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting performing Rongmei dance

### Total population

150,000 approx. (2011)<sup>[1][2]</sup>

### Regions with significant populations

Northeast India

### Languages

Rongmei language

### Religion

Christianity and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak

### Related ethnic groups

Zeme, Liangmai, Inpui, Other Naga people

T.C Hodson wrote in 1911, “At Makhel is to be seen a stone now erect which Marks the place from which the common ancestor (of the Nagas) emerged from the earth. Makhel is regarded as the centre from where the migration took place “. The first Man at Makhel had three sons Alpha, Tutuwa, and Khepio. The brothers for unknown reasons decided to depart from Makhel and constructed a Megalith as the place of their dispersal. Legends tell that the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people are descendants of the inhabitants Makhel. They also left the place in course of time. Ramting Kabin(First village of Zeliangrong)

From Makhel the ancestors of the Zeliangrong people went westward and took temporary shelter at Ramting Kabin. Ramting Kabin means “Old squeezed land”( Ram = land/village, Ting = Old and Kabin = squeezed). The ancestor of the Zeliangrong people moved across the densely forested western spur of the Mt. Essau. According to the Zeme legend they left Makhel and settled at Nrimrengdi, then to Ramting Kabin. Ramting Kabin is near Chawang Phungning.

### **Chawang Phungning**

From Ramting Kabin they went to Chawang Phungning which is also called Gwang Phungning. The concept of Chawang or Gwang means king or chief was developed at Chawang Phungning. There are many references to the prosperity of Chawang Phungning in many ritual hymns. From this place some of the migrants took towards the North-East and arrived at Makuilongdi. Chawang Phungning is identified with present village of Oklong in north Manipur.

### **Makuilongdi: A cradle of Zeliangrong Culture**

The Zeliangrong ancestors ultimately came to occupy Makuilongdi or Nkuilongdi meaning “Big round mountain”. Nothing is known about Makuilongdi before the zeliangrong migration. Many Liangmai lineages traced the origin from Chawang Phungning which was the main village of a cluster of villages which came to be known as Makuilongdi. Since the migrating people came in groups, they must have established separate settlements. Chawang Phungning was a main settlement and the settlers from this village built up Makuilongdi. These were perhaps cluster of villages or settlements under the jurisdiction of Makuilongdi that was adjacent to Chawang Phungning. The land, forest and water available at the new sites in the rounded great mountains provided enough sustenance to the people. The ancestors of Zeliangrong lived at Makuilongdi for many generations. The village became prosperous with enough land for shifting cultivation, which produced surplus food grains. From a small village it had become a cluster of small hamlets and settlements, which were established for organizing shifting cultivation, as they were quite distant from the original village. The territorial extension of Makuilongdi was far and wide. At Makuilongdi a polity was developed under a chief. Religious beliefs and social customs developed and flourished. Clans and lineages also grew up. Several migration teams were sent out to establish new villages in different directions. The people depend their lives on forest product as well and this led them to migrate from place to place in search of food, shelter and fertility of land.

### **Exodus from Makuilongdi**

According to legends, the sudden mass exodus from Makuilongdi occurred after a divine warning for violating the law of nature and regular social life of the village. They devoted to the performance of Tarang ki/kai ceremonial house rituals and celebrations in a single year without any break forgetting their lunar calendar of the agricultural cycle and indulging in enjoyment and merry making. Suddenly cicada insects flew into the village and in their shrill voice announced to the people that the lunar year had come to an end. The people were shocked and horrified and made quick exodus out of Makuilongdi towards different directions.

Makuilongdi was the cradle of Zeliangrong Culture. There was a well knit society based on shifting agriculture and with a well organized polity. They spoke a language a kin to the present Liangmai dialect. At Makuilongdi two major clans, Pamei and Newmei emerged as indicated by the two stones megaliths namely Pamei stone and newmei stone. However, there are references to several lineages or families that traced direct descendants from Makuilongdi. They are the sub-lineages of both Pamei and Newmei clans.

Some scholars opined that the exodus from Makuilongdi could be due to the great pressure on agricultural lands as a result of the increasing population. Differences also cropped up over the succession to the office of the chief. Other reasons besides the causes mentioned above could have also prompted the exodus from makuilongdi.

### **The Rongmei Migration**

The third son of Nguiba, Rembangbe (pronounced Nriengbangbe in Zeme, Rengbangbou in Liangmai) led a large group of people from Makuilongdi towards the South. They came to be known as Marongmei or Rongmei, dwellers of the fallow lands and of the Southern region. This group was the most adventurous and scattered groups.

The migrants settled down at Kajinglong at present a Liangmai village, for many generations. Many lineages of the Rongmei section trace their origin to Kajinglong, which was another sub-centre of Zeliangrong migration to the Southern region. The settlement history of many Rongmei and Puimei villages points to Kajinglong as their original native village. These adventurous groups went out of Kajinglong and founded many villages that are still occupied by their descendants in the trans-IRANG basin in the present Tamenglong District of Manipur. The movement of the migrating people was in small groups. Each group consisted of mostly two clans who founded the villages.

Later on they were joined by the relatives and clansmen. The migration of the Rongmei continued for many centuries and they moved up to the confines of Chin Hills and Mizoram in Tuivai(Duigai) valley. The Rongmei migrated both to the East and West of the Barak and IRANG basin and even to the Cachar and Imphal Valley.

### **Festival**

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The Gaan-Ngai festival (post-harvest festival) is celebrated annually between December and January. It follows the lunar calendar and is celebrated on the 13th day of the *Wakching* or *Gaan Ngai buh*. It is celebrated to worship the Supreme God Haipou Tingkao Ragwang. Among Naga tribes, they are known for colorful dances and traditional attire.

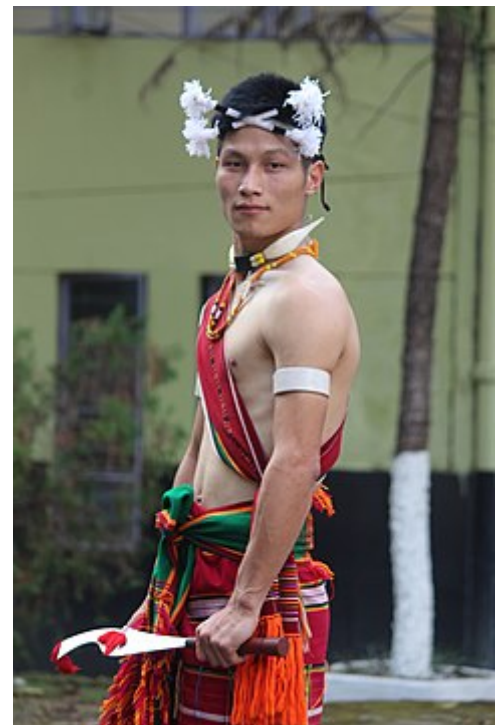
### **Geographical Distribution**

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The Rongmeis are mostly concentrated in the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in Northeast India. Their ancestral land falls in Tamenglong district (including Noney district) and its contiguous hill slope in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Over time, some Rongmei have also settled in adjacent plains/valley region.

### **Manipur**

In Manipur, most of the Rongmei village/urban colonies are located in 2 district i.e. Tamenglong district and Noney district, where they make up the dominant community. Its settlements are also spread across contiguous areas like Jiribam; Kangvai subdivision of Churachandpur; Kangchup geljang and Bungte chiru subdivisions of Kangpokpi district and Tadubi subdivision of Senapati District.



Rongmei boy

There are also large Rongmei villages/urban colonies in Imphal East district, Imphal West district, Bishnupur district and Thoubal district.

## Assam

In Assam, there are around 35-42 villages/urban colonies mostly in Cachar district and few in Dima Hasao District, Karbi Anglong District and Hailakandi District .

## Nagaland

In Nagaland, The Rongmeis are concentrated in Dimapur, Jalukie and Kohima. Most of the Rongmei settlements in Dimapur and Kohima are under urban areas.

The term *Rongmei* means "the southerners" and refers to the traditional Rongmei settlement south of the Zeliangrong<sup>[5]</sup> Naga.

## Clans

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The major clans are Gonmei, Kamei, Gangmei and Rwangmei or Longmei. Every clan has a totem which is a symbol or emblem of a clan or family and it is a food taboos either an animal or bird, or tree or plants. The totems of these clans are Roingao bird of Gonmei, Ahuina (green pigeon) of Kamei, Tiger of Gangmei and white pumpkin/dog of Rwangmei. Each major clan is subdivided into a number of lineages. The lineage is a socially binding and an intermediary unit in between family and clan.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Gonmei/Golmei clan is subdivided into lineages like
  - Gonthangmei
  - Gondaimei
  - Remmei/Riamei,
  - Meiringmei,
  - Dangmei,
  - Panmei/Palmei and
  - Thaimei
- Kamei clan has
  - Pamei
  - Phaomei,
  - Siangongmei,
  - Ngaomei,
  - Khandangmei
  - Malangmei,
  - Kamson and
  - Daimei.
- Gangmei clan also has lineages such as
  - Kamang Gangmei,
  - Pheiga Gangmei,
  - Sidou Gangmei,

- Jukhao Gangmei,
- Goijaichang Gangmei,
- Taokhondai Gangmei and
- Pongring Gangmei.

But in the case of the Rwangmei clan there is no lineage. Gonmei/Newmei and Kamei/Pamei clan is believe to be the older clan in Rongmei, just as Newmai and Pamai is in Liangmai, Newme/Hau and Pame/Heu is in Zeme. Marriages within the same clan or sub clan of Zeliangrong is often discouraged.

## Rebellion

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Rongmei territory was conquered by the British in the nineteenth century. In 1891, they imposed a house tax on the people of Tamenglong. The Rongmei refused to pay any tax from 1891-1894. In response, C.L. Crawford, Assistant Political Agent of Manipur, used force to collect the tax from the Tamenglong hills in 1894. Four years of defiance by the Rongmei and its consequences aroused national consciousness among the Rongmei.<sup>[7]</sup> Eventually, under the leadership of Haipou Jadonang<sup>[8]</sup> and his successor Rani Gaidinliu,<sup>[9]</sup> the Rongmei rebelled against British rule in the 1930s. This rebellion gave momentum to and garnered support for the vision of *Naga Raj*. The government of India recognized Rani Gaidinliu as the most prominent freedom fighter from the Northeast India region.

## Economy

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The Rongmei are agriculturists. Jhum cultivation is especially common. Artisans are skilled in bamboo, wood, blacksmith, and pottery works. Bamboo baskets, mats, shields, etc., are manufactured in abundance.

## Notable People

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- Alana Golmei, Social Activist.
- Grace Dangmei, Footballer.
- Gaikhangam Gangmei, former Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur.
- Gangmumei Kamei, Historian.
- Haipou Jadonang, Political leader and founded Heraka religious movement.
- Jiangam Kamei, Singer, Songwriter.
- Meijinlung Kamson, former Union Minister of State.
- Rani Gaidinliu, Freedom fighter and Padma Bhusan awardee.
- Rachunliu G. Kamei, specializes in the amphibians of India.<sup>[10]</sup>

## See also

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- Hill tribes of Northeast India
- Nagaland
- Peren
- Tamenglong
- Zeliangrong
- List of Naga tribes

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