

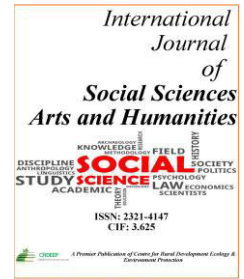
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## Review Paper

# Understanding the Reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak

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### ABSTRACT

The Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) is a social, religious, and cultural reform movement of the traditionalist Rongmei community. This movement tries to address the underlying problems and issues faced by the traditional religion in the Rongmei community. The absence of rigid codified philosophical and cosmological narrative in the traditional religion of the Rongmei people has allowed room for interpretations and reforms by the reformers. The reforms of TRC is also greatly influenced by the earlier reforms of Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu that emerged in colonial and post-colonial period in the Zeliangrong society. The reforms of TRC has also used the components of identity movement as seen earlier in the reforms of Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu, to first reform and recast itself and secondly it also tries to contest the other competing entities, religion, discourse and narrative to reassert itself as the exclusive authority and entity over social religious and cultural matter in Rongmei community. This movement presents a critical narrative on the discourse that stereotypes tribal religion as animistic, inferior, and primitive. Another, issue that comes to the foreground from this movement is the question of cultural nationalism and its associated identity politics in India and its influence in the peripheral society. Incidentally, the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak which focuses on religious and identity issues find confluence and convergence in the cultural nationalism and identity politics. These movements are expressed and exhibited in the forms of cultural, literary societies, and the formation of new faiths involving recording and codification of myths, legends, folklore, and other cultural components. Recovery of traditions and history become the primary component of these reforms.

### Introduction

Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak is a socio-religious and cultural reform movement of the Rongmei people. Rongmei is a Naga tribe living in the adjoining states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Rongmei is also regarded as one of the kindred tribes of Zeliangrong. The Zeliangrong has four sub-kindred tribes, namely, the Rongmei, Liangmai, Zeme, and Puimei.<sup>1</sup> The common attributes of these tribes are located in their narrative of common ancestry, the narrative of common origin, and the manifestation of common social, cultural, and traditional legacies. According to the popular narrative of these communities, variations and fragmentation happened when these tribes dispersed from their ancestral domain (village) called Makuilongdi.<sup>2</sup> The distinctive divergences between these tribes happened during this post migration period. And consequently, these kindred tribes' narrative about their religion, gods, cosmology, social, cultural, traditional, and creation stories manifest analogous as well as dissimilar points.

Among the kindred tribes of Zeliangrong, majority of the Liangmei have accepted Christianity. The Zeme and the Rongmei still have followers of traditional religion. The traditional religion of the Zeliangrong can be further subdivided into Heraka, *Paupaise*, *Paupai Chapriak* (now TRC), and *Champa*. Heraka and Paupaise are followed by sections of Zemes while sections of Rongmei practice *Paupai Chapriak*, but this has become the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. A handful of Rongmei people also follow a faith called *Champa* which is quite similar to the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. This reform evokes and generates certain questions for the Rongmei community and the larger society. And therefore, it is pertinent to locate and analyze this movement from the perspective of a larger social, religious and political environment to properly understand the dynamics of this movement. This movement also generates concerns about the issues of religion itself. This movement tries to resolve the underlying problems and

<sup>1</sup>NamthuibuiyangPamei, *The Trial from Makuilongdi: The Continuing Saga of the Zeliangrong People* (Tamenglong: Published by Girono Charitable Foundation, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 1-28.

issues faced by the traditional religion in the Rongmei community. This movement also affirms the narratives that contest the western and colonial narratives on the tribals in Northeast India. This movement presents a critical narrative on the discourse that stereotypes tribal religion as animistic, inferior, and primitive. Another, issue that comes to the foreground from this movement is the question of cultural nationalism and its associated identity politics in India. Incidentally, the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak also focus on religious and identity issues.

The reform of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak posed certain questions and concerns for the peripheral society as well as for the nation. These concerns are equally important for both the Rongmei society and the State because this movement emerged as a religious reform movement equally influenced by both the local specific factors and also by the larger regional and national conditions, having implications both for the local community and also for the larger collective society.

#### **Factors that shape the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak movement:**

This reform is influenced and affected by two broad movements. The first movement is manifested at the local level, in the forms of social, cultural, and religious reforms movement of the indigenous people in India. The second kind of movement is exhibited in the form of a broad cultural and religious revival movement that comes to the foreground at the national level. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, (RSS) and its affiliated groups Hindutva movement, are an example of the second type.

#### **The socio-religious reform movement in Northeast India**

The indigenous community also regarded as the native people generate a narrative, which involves self-representation of the native culture and community producing a shift from the hermeneutic enclosure of the community within a specific textual mode to interaction with colonialism, leaving open the possibility of writing themselves by divesting the foreign elements. The attempts to translate the indigenous culture within the whole of the colonial or dominant culture are reversed in indigenous self-representation, as it not only lays claims on the specific historical and cultural resources but also presents an irreducible interior. Indigenous ethnography stands apart from the mode of appropriation in colonial ethnography. It stands outside the paradigm of ethnographic representation and thereby allows the past cultural resources to come to the foreground. It produces a narrative of presentation and not re-presentation.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of the religious reform movement dwelling on the revitalization of indigenous culture, traditions, and religious practices has become a recurring phenomenon in North East India. These reforms have manifested a leader-oriented movement. The primary role and link between the reforms and the community are undertaken by these leaders. The elite and the religious leaders were also the first to realize the need to preserve their identity and culture.

Another aspect of these reforms is the use of social, cultural, and religious identity for deriving broad social, religious, and political goals. In most of the indigenous movement around the globe, the right to self-determination, political autonomy, and control of natural resources forms an important aspect but, forging of religious and cultural identity using components of past indigenous culture and traditions forms an important aspect of the indigenous movement in northeast India. These movements are often expressed and exhibited in the forms of cultural, literary societies, and the formation of new faiths involving recording and codification of myths, legends, folklore, and other cultural components. Recovery of traditions and history become the primary component of these reforms.

According to Gangmumei Kamei, these reform movements are an introspective response to meet the threat and challenge to the indigenous culture and religion and identity from religion that originated outside India. The indigenous religions establish community-level religious authorities which traditionally were in the hands of village-level authorities and functionaries. These religions are also given a name with a distinct identity, with a well-explained theology and philosophy. Emphasis on the existence and worship of Supreme God also gain predominance, which in due course time introduce monotheism in these religions. These reforms also abolished obnoxious taboos and practices. The journey of the soul from the land of death to heaven after death and the question of salvation and heaven are also accounted in the new philosophy and theology. Moral codes are also given so that the followers of these religions a bearer of truth and happiness. The reforms also take note of the importance of communion between God and men, and as such, efforts were given for strengthening the channel of communication between God and man. These movements are led by a highly educated elite from the community, who uses the components of culture and literature to contribute towards the expansion of the faith and movement. International and national recognition, from organizations like the International Association for Religious Freedom, Oxford, and the United Religion Initiative, San Francisco was also sought and was obtained.<sup>4</sup> The thrust in the cultural politics of the tribals of Northeast India is to resist the onslaught of cultural homogenization by way of self-representation and maintenance of traditional community institutions.<sup>5</sup> Recent movements like the Donyi-Polo, and Heraka, emerge as resistance to such processes of homogenization. The participation of Hmars and Lushais in traditional festivals like Butukhuong lawn Chai poukut, Min kut or Chapcharkut and Zeliangrong celebrating the Gaan-Ngai/Hegarty n'gi brings back a renewed sense of tribal identity. Even though religious converts do not participate in rituals associated with such cultural festivals, they are organized every year. The celebration takes a secular character on most occasions going beyond the religious chores/essence. This internal secularization is also a part of the cultural positioning of the tribals in self-conscious acceptance of something better.

<sup>3</sup> Prasenjit Briswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life World's in North-East India: An Analysis*(New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), p.97.

<sup>4</sup>Gangmumei Kamei, *Essays on Primordial Religion*(New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2006), pp.45&46.

<sup>5</sup>Op. Cit., Prasenjit Briswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, 2008, p.102.

## Janjati and Sanatana Dharma

Similarly, at the broader national level, there is the formation and culmination of social, religious, and cultural movements in India. These movements are classified as Janjatis' movement. The narrative of the Sanatana Dharma, also considered as the philosophical and cosmological framework of this movement has located the Janjatis movement as a historic revitalization movement, exhibited in the traditional faith and culture of people; who for centuries had practiced and lived in mountains and valleys of this region. This movement also stresses the need for the preservation and promotion of such eternal religion and culture.

This is the excerpt of the tenets of Sanatana Dharma given by the Janjatis Faith and Culture Protection Forum;

- i. *Belief in the Supreme God, known by different names, who is the creator of the universe, who is benevolent and protector of living being through many gods and goddesses. He is Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent.*
- ii. *It practice polytheism, belief in the existence of many Gods and deities who are assigned by the Heavenly God to look after the different aspects of the world, nature and humans.*
- iii. *Belief in the concept of heaven, the abode of God and the life after death represented by the land of dead where man's soul goes after death.*
- iv. *Belief in the worship of the deities presiding over the village and places to act as the guardian deities of men in these villages.*
- v. *Belief in the concept of ancestor worship and in the concept of the rebirth of human soul.*
- vi. *Worship of God's and propitiation of lower deities.*
- vii. *Belief in the concept of sin, as deviation or violation of the religious moral and social customs and norm and retribution by God for the same.*
- viii. *Belief in the performance of rites of passage relating to birth membership of social institutions, marriage and death.*
- ix. *Belief in the redemption and salvation of soul in heaven for good doers and retribution by the divine for bad doers.*
- x. *Belief in the performance of festivals, ceremonies and rituals and other forms of religious and cultural expressions of the worship of the divine.*
- xi. *Culture and religion are inseparable.*<sup>6</sup>

According to Aurobindo Gosh, Sanatan Dharma is the eternal religion, the universal religion that embraces all others and differentiates it from the narrow sectarian faith, that stresses on certain prescriptions, rituals, and dogmas.<sup>7</sup> However, Gosh did not advocate nationalism, based on the lofty idea of Sanatana Dharma; either with the idea of the nation based on a social contract or with the romantic folk nationalism of the later German type. He also differs from the Savarkar model of nationalism which advocates India as ethnic Hindus. For Gosh, Sanatana Dharma is a non-exclusive way.<sup>8</sup>

The narrative and model of Sanatana Dharma has turn out to be an engaging and open platform for the indigenous religions of India because it attempts to bring convergence of different indigenous faiths on the principle of these broad universal components of Sanatana Dharma. The movement has also expanded the horizon of indigenous religions in Northeast India. The indigenous religions in Northeast India, including the faith of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, now see and locate themselves as a part of this indomitable and larger indigenous social, religious, and cultural civilization. However, the question that remains unstated in these narratives is the question of their political agenda. The followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak also did not diverge much on the issue of their political aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

## Resurgence of Religion

Another, factor that has aided the social, cultural, and religious reforms in India, is the resurgence of religion that came around in the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s. For Sylvie Guichard the wide assumption prevailing in this period about the decline of religion due to the process of modernization and secularization taking place in the newly independent countries requires a relook, because quite contrary to the popular belief about the decline of religion, the resurgence of religion was more dominant. For some thinkers like Apter, Deutsch, Kautsky, and Smith, societies have become more secular because of modernization. While modernizing themselves, these societies were to become secular. And it was expected that institutions founded on secular principles would replace traditional institutions rooted in religion. Modernization was also supposed to make the state and political society the basis of individual allegiance. The intra and interstate conflicts fuelled by religious arguments that broke out in the late 1970s, however, led to the debunking of this assumption propounded by theories of modernization. The resurgence of religion both in the former colonies and the West became the focus of studies.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, the resurgence of religion constitutes an important aspect of nationalism; the movements whose discourse links together the nation, state, and religion. According to Sylvie Guichard, numerous religious nationalist movements emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, mostly in ex-colonies, following changes in their social structure. He added that the

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<sup>6</sup>Janjatis Faith and Culture Protection Forum, workshop on "Philosophy and Spirituality of Eternal/Primordial and Culture of the Janjatis People of North East India" October, 2010, Guwahati, pp.2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Takashi Shogimen, Cary J. Nedermam, (eds)., *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), p. 215.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Gaidon Kamei, active political worker of Rongmei community, on 10/5/2017 at his residence at Namdunlong.

<sup>10</sup>Sylvie Guichard, *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India*(New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), 2010, p.15.

principal causes advanced to explain this phenomenon are the disruption of traditional solidarities (resulting in social and cultural fragmentation) due to modernization, continued struggle against state-imposed secularization, and additionally, people's unfulfilled and disappointed expectations of gaining political freedom, economic prosperity or social justice after decolonization.<sup>11</sup> Guichard further describes how this gave rise to a feeling of lack of individual achievement and consequently resulting in the loss of confidence, in the type of state advocated by secular nationalism. Religious movements then proposed an alternative political and social organization reintegrating individuals into community systems based on religion. Guichard added that the failure of the western secular model, generally advocated by the decolonized countries' former rulers, has encouraged the development of religious nationalism and enabled it to find a vast audience.<sup>12</sup>

According to Juergensmeyer, religious-nationalist movements not only reject the Western secular model of state and society but also consider its acceptance as a symbol of Western domination. However, Western countries are not the prime target of these nationalist movements. The core of the conflict is often, located within the society that patronizes different narratives about their nation and society. The goal of religious-nationalist movements continues to be first and foremost the regeneration of their nation.<sup>13</sup>

Another reason for the resurgence of religion is the stereotypical representation of tribal people and their society from the prism of the colonial and western perspectives. For the tribals, the stereotyped representation of their socio-cultural and religion as an animistic society not only displaced and misrepresented their true character but also further weakened their resolve and quest for equality and justice. For instance, In the administrative and ethnographic reports generated by the then British Government of India, the term "animism" was used to describe the religion of the tribal and indigenous communities. This policy persisted even in the census of India report of 1901 for the North East, and the Government of Assam published anthropological monographs from 1906 onwards. Powerful writings that described the tribal religion as animism include the works done on Khasis by P.T.R. Gurdon, the Garos by A. Mayflair, the Meitheis by T.C.Hudson, the Lushai Kuki Clans by John Shakespeare, the Sema Nagas by J.H. Hutton, the Angami Nagas by J.H. Hutton, the Ao Nagas by J.P. Mills, the Lothas Nagas by J.P.Mills, the Thadou-Kukis by William Shaw, the Lushai by A.C. Mc Call, and the Lakhers by P.N. Perry.<sup>14</sup>

For Gangmumei Kamei this resurgence of religion across the indigenous people of Northeast India is considered as a renaissance movement for the revitalization of indigenous faith and culture. He also attributed the need to preserve the identity and culture of these people from the threat of Christianity as the reason for such reforms.<sup>15</sup>

The resurgence of religion thus presents some unsettling relationship between religion and the larger socio-political environment. Critical appraisal of the Rightist discourse and their opinions on modernization, secularism, including the narrative of western and colonial narrative in conjunction with the analysis on the growth of socio-religious reform movements in Northeast India indicate a resurgence of religion in the public domain. This also exhibits the role of the State and the extent of religious components in the discourse of State.

### **Tribals and their Religion**

The Rongmei community is classified as a 'scheduled tribe' by the constitution of India. The location of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak as a 'tribal' religion has implications for both the faith and other communities. Incidentally, most of the religions found in this region are classified as 'tribal' religions. The people of North East India are categorized as 'Tribals', 'Indigenous', or 'Adivasi' by the colonial and the post-colonial system and the state for administrative convenience and political expediency.<sup>16</sup> K.S. Singh said, that 'tribes in India is an administrative concept, which means the communities are scheduled (classified) as tribes under the Constitution.'<sup>17</sup>The hold of religion in these societies is pervasive and quite strong. However, with the advent of modern period, the inclination for increased interaction across different cultures and traditions became predominant, and consequently new cultural forces and value system, some with exclusive aspirations and patterns captured and dominated the space enjoyed by these tribal societies. Examples of such cultures and forces are colonial and western enterprises, groups such as Christians, Hindus, and other entities including state and non-state actors also affected these religions.

### **Tribal Religion**

The narrative undertaken by the faith of TRC has used the narrative of 'tribal' religion, to recast and revitalize the traditional faith of the Rongmei people. Certain components and elements in the theories of tribal religion have been prioritized and brought to the foreground by the reforms of TRC. It would be difficult to bring about this reform unless the faith of TRC has used some of these components in their reform movement. For instance, the use of myths, mythologies, folk songs, and reliance on cultural and traditional components, has enabled the faith of TRC the resources and needed components to build and formulate a coherent philosophical and cosmological narrative. Despite the absence of written scriptures and written records or historical accounts, the use of oral traditions along with the cultural and traditional components mentioned above has provided the reforms of TRC and the faith with the much-needed cultural and religious resources. However, there is a problem in defining the term 'Tribal

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, Guichard, 2010.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>14</sup>Op. Cit., Kamei, 2006, p.12.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>16</sup>B.K Roy Burman, *Indigenous and Tribal People: Gathering Mist and New Horizon* (Mittal Publications: New Delhi, 1994), pp.1-3.

<sup>17</sup>K.S.Singh, ed., *Tribal Movements in India – Vol-I*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1982), p. X.

Religion', because tribal people did not constitute an analogous group, but they are a set of distinct groups of people. Guha, classified the tribals of India into three racial stocks, viz, (i) Negrito, (ii) Proto-Australoids, and (iii) Mongoloids.<sup>18</sup> However, Behera prefers to use the term 'Tribal Religion' in a generic sense to include all religious traditions of Known tribes world over in general and in India in particular.<sup>19</sup>

Religion permeates all aspects of life in tribal societies, it is a community religion. One distinctive character of tribal religion is that it doesn't have sacred scripture or scriptures like other established religions. The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, minds and these are transmitted across generations through oral tradition, using the mechanism of folklore, myths, legends, songs and ballads, and religious hymns.<sup>20</sup> Tribal religion does not have a historical founder(s) or reformer(s). Their religion instead centered on the earth/creation narrative. In the tribal world view, one cannot make a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. There is a sense of cosmic oneness. In other words, all things are seen to fundamentally share the same nature and same interaction with each other, rocks, forest, trees, beast and serpents, the living and the dead, and first ancestors are all one.<sup>21</sup>

The narrative of Zeliangrong traditional religion described their religion as a part of historical process and tradition that has been handed down orally using myths, folklores, rites, rituals, customs, and traditions.<sup>22</sup> The absence of written scripture or founder, however, has given scope for representation of the Zeliangrong traditional religion by outsiders and authorities. Tribal religion, in many ways, has been interpreted by anthropologists, Christian missionaries, and scholars of comparative theology as 'animism'.

Religion is a dynamic concept, Behera contended that religion does not exist in absolute terms over space and time, but it changes from one phase to another. She recounts the transformation of E.B. Taylor's Animism to monotheism or monolatry of Andrew Lang in its evolutionary process.<sup>23</sup> Andrew Lang theorized that the primitive tribes believed in a high god, a creator of the universe, and often a legislator of a moral order as found among the tribes who had been explored both by the Christian missionaries and anthropologists. He believed in the existence of primordial monotheism. Wilhelm in his 'Origin of the Idea of God' discovered high gods among the primitive religion and confirm Andrew Lang's primordial monotheism. In his words, "tribe have a memory of a high god, a benign creator, a father-god who is no longer worshiped because that God is not feared".<sup>24</sup>

The narrative and available literature of the traditional religion of the Zeliangrong talks about the idea of gods and God. The recent narrative and dominant literature of this community bring to the fore, the concept of Tingkao Ragwang (Sky God) as the Supreme God.<sup>25</sup> The concept of 'Supreme God' became the dominant narrative of the past reform movements and the present Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak movement. The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak gave the name of the faith, derived from its God, Tingkao Ragwang, who is now regarded as the Supreme God upon whom rested all the philosophical and cosmological foundation of the faith. The reform of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has also brought the faith towards a doctrinaire religious model, by introducing elements and components of an organized religious order, from oral-based tradition and loosely organized model. The whole edifice and foundation of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak's reform are based on the principle of Supreme God and the restoration of this relationship between the Supreme God and the community.<sup>26</sup>

The present reform exhibit pattern for transformation from the outlook of animistic tribal religion to a highly developed tribal religious order. The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has located/placed the religion of the Rongmei speaking Zeliangrong people at par with other organized and universal religion of the world. The location of the traditional Rongmei (Zeliangrong) religion as tribal religion has also made itself amenable for interaction with other narratives and discourse. One such discourse is the narrative of 'Janjati'.<sup>27</sup>

### **Tribal Religion versus other Culture and Religion**

The interaction and interface of tribal religion with other cultures and religions that came as a part of historical cum modern cultural and political process has contributed to a range of social and political outcomes. Incidentally, it has been the focus and priority of many studies. The present reform of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak is also a product and outcome of this cultural and historical process. The narrative of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak locates their movement as a protest movement against the incursion of alien social, cultural, and political components in their society. The influence of dominant culture and religion on minority communities is a general phenomenon in every society, but the difference is only in degree, and the extent of influence varies from society to society. Apart from Christianity and Hinduism, there is no other religious community that is engaged in the

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<sup>18</sup>B.S. Guha, "The Racial Affinities of People of India", Census of India, 1931, Vol-I, Part III B, XXIX 116, Shimla quoted in M.C Behera, 2000.

<sup>19</sup>M.C.Behera, (ed.), *Tribal Religion: Change and Continuity*, (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2000)p. 4.

<sup>20</sup>Gangmumei Kamei, *A History of the Zeliangrong Nagas: From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2004), p.19.

<sup>21</sup>Op. Cit., Behera, 2000.

<sup>22</sup>Op. Cit., Kamei, 2004.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., Behera, 2000, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup>Op. Cit., Kamei, 2006, pp.9-11.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 2004.

<sup>26</sup>ChaobaKamson, *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak: Ra Pari*, (Imphal: Author, 2009).

<sup>27</sup>Janjatis Faith and Culture Protection Forum, workshop on 'Philosophy and Spirituality of Eternal/Primordial and Culture of the Janjatis People of North East India' October, 2010, Guwahati, pp.2-3.

work of proselytizing in North East India. As a result, there is a polarization between these two dominant religious groups, each accusing and blaming one another of destroying and endangering the indigenous faith and belief system in the region. Furquan Ameen Siddiqui brings out the deeply embedded tussle for religious ascendancy between the Christians and RSS in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Christianity, there is direct conversion and the converts generally cease to perform the traditional rituals, sacrifices, faith, and practices. In this way, they are identifiable and have a separate religious identity. On the other hand, Hindu does not go for direct conversion but tacitly influence the people to assimilate their religious belief to the Hindu fold. Whatever the case may be, both religions are alien to the indigenous people of North-East India.

Elwin opined that it was hard to approach the subject of tribal religion with complete objectivity. In his words, “The Hindu, despite himself, considers whether the tribal religions cannot in some way be brought within the all-embracing tolerance of Hinduism; the Christian cannot help regarding them as rivals to his universal faith; the agnostic looks on all religions, tribal as well as others as bound to collapse before the spread of scientific knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> The focus of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak on the threat of Christian to the indigenous faith of the Rongmei people is based on the spread of this faith among the Rongmei, because as Elwin has observed, both Hinduism and Christianity wants to further spread their influence and domain in North East India, and unlike Hinduism, Christianity is gaining more space and followers in the Rongmei community. Except for a few villages, most of the Rongmei villages in the hills of Manipur have accepted Christianity. Even in Nagaland, a major section of the Rongmei villages are Christians. Some, Rongmei villages in NC Hills and the Jiribam district have some followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak.

Despite, the fact that Christianity began its world civilizing mission long before, it is only by the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the missionary enterprise had enveloped much of the globe and had brought Christian values, traditions, assumptions, and teachings to hundreds of indigenous groups. Most of the efforts were typically directed at densely populated areas, including slave-holding regions of Central Asia, South America, China, and Africa. Most often, in this enterprise, there was a symbiotic relationship between the Imperial governments and the Churches in their endeavours to reach the indigenous people in distant regions. The colonial British administration initially did not encourage the work of Christian missionaries in the tribal areas. The British in fact, wanted the tribal’s to retain their traditional and cultural traditions. However, from 1831 and continuously by 1841, the mission work was carried out by the missionaries in the region. The Christian missionaries, including Catholics and Protestants, were the pioneers in the work of education, extending social services like medical care. Among the Protestants, the Baptist missionaries are prominent in the region, apart from Revival Church and Pentecostal Church. Their work of proselytization brought about a massive change in the social and religious spheres.<sup>30</sup>

K.S. Singh said that there was a “phenomenal rise of Christianity in all North-eastern states during 1961-71 decade”.<sup>31</sup> This according to Singh was due to the representation of Christianity as a symbol of tribal identity, and as a marker of status in all the states, however, this trend had not reached Arunachal Pradesh. For Singh, this is part of the cultural aspect of political developments that have gripped the region, with demands ranging from the formation of state or demand for more autonomy, as enshrined in the fifth and sixth schedule of the Constitution of India.<sup>32</sup> Hinduism being a dominant religious community in India also undoubtedly influenced almost every minority religious community directly or indirectly made some impacts on the tribal’s but failed to leave any lasting impact due to the conservative nature of Hinduism.<sup>33</sup> Hinduism is also engaged in the work of proselytization in North East India. Hindu organizations such as Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Missions, Sharda Missions, and Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas are worth mentioning. Like Christian missionaries, they also extended their valuable services in the field of education and health care. However, there are also other organizations with their committed agents and workers who are tasked to spread or assimilate Hindu elements into the indigenous faith and belief system of the people in the region. Some of these organizations include RasthyaSyamsevak Sangh, Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Kalyan Ashram, Narita Kalyan Kendra, DurgaVahini, Mahesh BrahmaKumari Vishva Vidhyalay, and Shanti Kunj Ashram.<sup>34</sup> Professor, R.K. Narendra Singh, while assessing the religious profile of Manipur stated that:-

*Religious composition and its growth rate have intensely been changing in Manipur. Composition of Hindu population is reducing faster than it had in the previous decades, and Hindu is no more majority religion in Manipur. As it has lowest decadal growth rate of 18.56% and consequently in very near future, it turns to minority. On the contrary, composition of Christian population is growing faster from the last six decades and now it is par with Hindu population. In the next decades it is certain that Christian religion becomes the majority religious community in the state as the present decadal growth rate is 59.85%. For the present decade, the composition of Muslim population is third in rank with a decadal growth rate of 25.61%. However, he did not specify the exact cause for such rise of Christian population in the state, but he did not ruled out factors like diverse demographic components like immigration and in-migration; variation of fertility, mortality and morbidity levels amongst the*

<sup>28</sup>Furquan Ameen Siddiqui, “Sowing saffron in the north east”, (Hindustan times, Saturday, Aug, 11, 2018), e-paper (<http://paper.hindustantimes.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>)

<sup>29</sup> Verrier Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA (Itanagar: Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2006), pp. 214-15.

<sup>30</sup>T.B.Subba, Joseph Puthenpurakal, Shaji Joseph Puykunnel, eds. *Christianity and Change in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing House, 2009).

<sup>31</sup>K.S.Singh, ed., *Tribal Movements in India – Vol-I* (New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1982), p. XII.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>D.K.Bora, “Traditional Nishing Religion and the Change”, in Behera, M.C., (ed.), *Tribal Religion: Change and Continuity*, (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2000) p.174.

<sup>34</sup>NabamTadarRikam, *Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005), p.138.

religious communities in the state or other man-made episode like Craft-resist domination through either enhancing population or proselytizing religions or both.<sup>35</sup>

Amid these dominant cultures, traditionalist Zeliangrong religion strives to retain its unique identity and space. However, the role of Christianity that focuses on conversion has caught the attention of this faith. The followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak have also exhibited their displeasure with the Christians for displacing and destabilizing the culture and traditions of the community. Incidentally, many followers of the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak religion perceive the influence of Hindus as harmonious and not threatening and believe in a mutual existence of both faiths.<sup>36</sup>

The faith of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak shows concern with the rising number of Christians in their community. And as a part of its larger philosophical and cosmological narrative and also to contain the spread of Christianity and other cultures among the Rongmei society, the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has brought changes in their outlook and position and directs its attention to reverse the spread of Christianity in the Rongmei villages. Issues like conversion, cultural invasion, became the concern for the faith of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. Religion has become an identity and a mechanism to protect the Rongmei people.<sup>37</sup> Such preposition has put the Christians and Islam as alien entities and components. Such arrangement and narrative also imply contestations between the faith of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak and other alien faiths and cultures. The Islam factor is not much emphasized by the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak because; the case of Rongmei people converting to Islam is negligible to date.

### Principal figures in the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak:

In the context of Zeliangrong society today, and specifically for the TRC, the leaders from the past reform movements in Zeliangrong society led by Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu gave directions and insights for the reforms of TRC.

### Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu

Zeliangrong Nagas have witnessed two major reforms movements in the past and these are the Zadonang and Heraka movement.<sup>38</sup> These movements exhibited a pattern of protest against the colonial enterprise. The movement of Zadonang, for instance, was directed against the British subjugative rule.<sup>39</sup> Gangmumei Kamei mentioned that the “British conquest of the Zeliangrong people was completed with their annexation of North Cachar in 1854, the establishment of Naga Hills District in 1866 and the conquest of Manipur in 1891.”<sup>40</sup> The planting of Kukis in Zeliangrong lands by the British had left a huge problem for the Zeliangrong people even today.<sup>41</sup> The Kukis settlements were established as a buffer between the British subjects and the Angami Nagas and Lushais.<sup>42</sup> As part of a British Forward Policy in 1857, The Kukis were assigned land free of rent for 10 years and after 25 years to any Kukis who would like to settle to the east of the North Kachar Hills beyond the Langgin river. The Kukis took this offer and many settlements came up, in addition to the seven Kukis villages with a few thousand Kukis populations.<sup>43</sup>

The movement of Zadonang and Heraka, in addition to its political objective, was launched to protect and preserve the traditional religion and society from the onslaught of Christian conversion.<sup>44</sup> According to Asoyo Yonuo, the reform movement of Zadonang and Gaidinliu was aimed at creating some sort of “religious nationalism” for the Zeliangrong people.<sup>45</sup> However, the colonial ruler had tried to locate this movement and cast this movement in a very disparaging sense, and attempted to dispel the political nature of the movement by describing it as “ruffians”, a “hub of a money-spinning God racket” or “mob action of every crook and gangster”.<sup>46</sup> For K.S. Singh, the Zeliangrong movement of Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu started as a religious movement but later on took the nature of the political movement.<sup>47</sup> For Arkotong Longkumer, the connection between the Zadonang movement and the one led by Rani Gaidinliu is “tenuous because the ‘Zadonang movement’ as we know it, exists largely in the pages of colonial reports, while the Heraka movement has dispersed into two geographical regions, reflecting different sets of conditions that have influenced and perpetuated its existence.”<sup>48</sup> Gangmumei Kamei also said, “Zadonang’s role was the preparatory phase and real action came during the phase of Gaidinliu.”<sup>49</sup> One common aspect of these movements is the components of religion, which

<sup>35</sup> RK Narendra Singh, “Religious Profile of Manipur: Impact study”, Sangai Express: Imphal, May, 05, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with elders of TRC faith from Ragailong, Namdunlong, Sawombung and Sairem villages on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Chaoba Kamson, *The Zeliangrong Social System and Culture* (Imphal: Published by Jashillu Kamson & Ringsokmei Kamson, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Khwairakpam Premjit Singh, “Challenging Colonialism: Historical Background of a Female Zeliangrong Rebel in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Indian Historical Review* 39(2) 273–291 © 2012 ICHR Sage Publications

<sup>39</sup> Arkotong Longkumer, *Reforms, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement of North East India* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), pp.48-49.

<sup>40</sup> Op. Cit., Kamei, 2004, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 73

<sup>42</sup> Asoyo Yonuo, *Nagas struggle against the British rule under Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu 1925-1947* (Kohima: Leno Printing Press, 1982), p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Op. Cit, Kamei, 2004, p. 284.

<sup>45</sup> Arkotong Longkumer, “Where Do I Belong?: Evolving Reform and Identity Amongst the Zeme Heraka of North” Cachar Hills, Assam, India (University of Edinburgh: Phd Thesis, 2008), p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> D.P. Mukherjee, P. Gupta and N.K. Das, *The Zeliangrong or Haomei Movement*, in K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol- 1, (New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1982), p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol- 1, (New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1982), p. XIII.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Longkumer, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Kamei, 2004, p. 156.



empowered and brought changes in the Zeliangrong society. Interestingly, the Heraka movement which survived the post-independence period had left a legacy, of a religious movement that encompassed territorial ambitions for its people and a quest for revival and reforms in philosophical and cosmological order in Zeliangrong society.

According to John Thomas, Zadonang had initiated a cosmological realignment of the Zeliangrong religion and had overturned the injustice that was there among the gods. The reversal of this injustice was extended to the social, religious, and political needs of his time. In other words, Zadonang had used religion to bring social and political justice for his people. John Thomas thus said that “An implicit injustice was read into how the youngest brother assumed the position of Ragwang; it had to be corrected so that the foundations of the new religion and kingdom may be built on the restoration of justice”.<sup>50</sup> Zadonang thus introduced the elements of justice in the Zeliangrong society using the components of cosmological narrative.

The two reform movements of Zadonang and Gaidinliu have often been regarded as a source of authority and a point of reference for the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak reforms. In this aspect, one can also see continuity in the anti-colonial position adopted by the Zadonang and Heraka in the outlook of the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. The Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has adopted this anti-colonial outlook, now to counter the Christian and western model.<sup>51</sup> The Zadonang and Heraka movement also gave an idea about the essence of identity politics to the people of Zeliangrong. The first attempt for the creation of distinctive Zeliangrong Identity, emerged during the religious reform movement of Zadonang and Gaidinliu, as they attempted to counter the displacement of the indigenous religion, culture, and polity by the colonial power. An identity that can contest or match the western culture was thus imagined and constructed by Zadonang during his fight against British Rule.<sup>52</sup> Zadonang had presented a vision of the “*Makaam Gwangdi*” (Ideal kingdom), a realm of free people, free from foreign domination; and ruled by a divinely revealed new socio-religious order.<sup>53</sup> The *Makaam Gwangdi* was seen as an alternative model and a state of new socio, religious and political, emancipated identity, for the Zeliangrong people; which gave the Zeliangrong people the basis and reason to stand up against the colonial ruler. Kamei Gangmumei stated that “Zadonang was enjoined by God to reform the superstitious and genne-ridden religion of his people. He was directed by God in his dreams to carry out His directive. Zadonang started his healing and religious activities...”.<sup>54</sup>

The reform movement of Gaidinliu with her Heraka movement also brought about many changes in Zeliangrong society. She reformed the ritual and sacrifice-ridden traditions of the Zeme Nagas that formerly, appease small Gods and deities. It was replaced by a coherent and organized socio-religious order, that derives its ultimate authority from *Tingwang* (Supreme God). Heraka also institutionalized the loosely organized religious traditions of the Zeme Nagas into a monotheistic religious order. The resurgence of Heraka also led to a contest for dominance between the adherents of Heraka and the Christians who converted Zemes in Nagaland and Assam. Heraka remains as one of the popular faith of the Zeme in Assam, and Nagaland to this day.

In short, the Zadonang and Heraka movement of Rani Gaidinliu has brought certain unique components to the foreground, and these have been successfully replicated by the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. Some of these unique attributes include, protest against the dominant order for self-preservation, the quest for formation and preservation of identity, the dynamics of religion in social-cultural, and political discourse, etc. and these will be discussed in details in the fourth chapter, where reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak will be discussed in details.

### **The character of TRC Reforms:**

For Jones, the three basic components of the socio-religious reforms movement are the society, religious authority, and the organizational structure that sustains the movement.<sup>55</sup> Unlike other organized religions, the traditional religion of the Rongmei has no written and codified scriptures, it has no centralized religious authority or organizational structure, except for village authorities that oversee and control the religious activities of villagers. No differentiation between secular and religious spheres exist either, but there is a sense of cosmic oneness, where everything is governed by the cosmic laws of the divine authority. The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak departing from its oral traditions shift towards organized religious order and lean towards a rational improvement from the traditional *Paupei Chapriak* belief system. Kenneth Jones while discussing the socio-religious reform movement in India during the colonial period said, “The term ‘socio’ implies an attempt to reorder society in the areas of social behavior, custom, structure or control. A movement may have sought to reshape any one of these components or combination of them”.<sup>56</sup> Jones also views ‘religious’ reforms as

*The type of authority used to legitimize a given ideology and its accompanying program. This authority was based on scripture that was no longer considered to be properly observed, on a reinterpretation of doctrines, or scriptural sources arising from the codification of a new religious leader’s message. At times different types of authority were combined to legitimize a particular programme. The teaching of an individual, once adopted by his disciples, was standardized, codified, and transformed into an ideology, that is, a structured explanation of the present in terms of past events. Such formulae also outlined a path towards the*

<sup>50</sup>John Thomas, “Sending out the spears: Zeliangrong movement, Naga Club and a nation in the making”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49, 3 (2012), SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC, p. 415

<sup>51</sup>Op. Cit., Kamson, 2015.

<sup>52</sup>Op. Cit., Thomas, 2012, p.417.

<sup>53</sup>Arkotong Longkumer, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement of Northeast India* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p.173

<sup>54</sup>Op. Cit., Kamei, 2004, p. 148.

<sup>55</sup>Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>56</sup>Op. Cit., Jones, p.1



purified future, either for an individual or for the society at large. Here the 'movement refers to an aggregate of individuals united in the message. Such a movement might be loosely organized, especially during the lifetime of its founder, but if it was to last beyond his death, his disciple needed to create and sustain a formal organizational structure. In short, a socio-religious movement advocated modification in social behavior, justified such advocacy by one or another form of religious authority, and then built an organizational structure it maintained over time.<sup>57</sup>

The reform of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak exhibit the following characters, viz., (i) Structural reforms (ii) Philosophical and Cosmological changes (iii) Theme and approach (iv) Existential context (v) Formation of identity (vi) Building of alliance.

**The Characters of the TRC reform are given below:**

*(a) Structural aspects*

The reform of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has transformed the traditional religion of the Rongmei into an organized body by instituting the Zeliangrong Religious Council, (Zeliangrong RachapriakPhom) in 1994.<sup>58</sup> This religious body now compiles and publishes the religious books, philosophies, hymns, and becomes the guardian and authority of this faith. The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak have configured their oral-based traditional, religious, and cultural activities and practices into written and codified forms as their sacred books, such books were further used as a religious authority and aided the reforms and revitalization movement. They also traced the legitimacy of the present reform from the past reform of Zadonang, Gaidinliu, and other mythical figures.<sup>59</sup> These will become clear in the organizational structures and philosophical position adopted by the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, as they exhibit and bring to fore the components of earlier reforms mentioned above. The narrative of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak Reforms also projects the current reforms as an attempt to connect, the fractured link between the ancient (primordial belief system, including the reforms of Zadonang and Rani Gaidinliu), socio-religious cultural order with the *Paupei Chapriak* faith.

*(b) Philosophical aspects*

The cosmological narratives of the traditional Zeliangrong religion are polytheistic,<sup>60</sup> and it is against such belief system that the reforms of Heraka tried to change, and subsequently, monotheistic elements were introduced.<sup>61</sup> The first monotheistic model in the Zeliangrong traditional religion was seen among the Zemes in Assam and Nagaland areas. This model is named Heraka by Rani Gaidinliu, and it connotes an idea of purity.<sup>62</sup> Another, monotheistic model seen among the Zeliangrong traditional faith is the belief system of Champa. However, the latter is localized and confined to just a handful of followers in one village called Khoupum Chingkha in the Imphal West district of Manipur. The faith of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak continues to adhere to the polytheistic model though the reforms and the changes manifest inclination towards monotheism. The practice and adoption of Kalum Kai to worship the Tingkao Ragwang is one example of this inclination.

*(c) Theme and approach*

The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak also emphasized a revivalist theme, in which religious components that preserve and protect the social-religious and cultural components of the community are brought to the center. Unlike, the Heraka which exhibits a drastic and abrupt break from its traditional faith (*Paupeise*), the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak try to establish a cordial link with the *Paupei Chapriak*, which is the traditional faith of the Rongmei people. Chaoba Kamson, the General Secretary of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak claimed that the new religious order is an improvement of the *Paupei Chapriak*, (past traditional religion of the Rongmei).<sup>63</sup>

*(d) Existential context*

The need for such reforms is generated and prompted by certain factors and contexts. The early reform of Rani Gaidinliu in Zeme areas, for instance, was to a large extent caused by the problems of colonial rule, the issue of Kukisimmigration, and the debilitating economic issue brought to the fore by the combined effects of colonial apathy and Kukis problem. There is also the issue of other dominant cultures and religion, which is the form of Christianity, has deeply influenced a major section of the Zeliangrong population.<sup>64</sup> The reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, to a large extent, are prompted by the surge of Christianity and its missionary activities in the traditional domain and space of the *Paupei Chapriak*. Another factor, that necessitates the need for reforms and the formation of common religious authority is the factor of threat and constraints faced by the followers of this faith from other entities.<sup>65</sup>

*(e) Identity*

Another concern of this faith is the question of their identity. The need to recast their identity was felt due to the threat of their faith from other social, cultural, religious, and political entities. The narrative of 'identity' put up by Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has become a dynamic tool and mechanism to recast the prevailing social, religious, and cultural positions of this faith. It not only enables the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak to reassert itself but also equipped them with the resources to respond against the

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 2

<sup>58</sup>Op. Cit., Kamson, 2015, p. 148.

<sup>59</sup>Op. Cit., Kamson, 2009, p.40.

<sup>60</sup>Op. Cit., Kamei, 2004.

<sup>61</sup>Op. Cit., Longkumer, 2016.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Op. Cit., Kamson, 2015, pp. 290-291.

<sup>64</sup>Op. Cit., Longkumer, 2016.

<sup>65</sup>Op. Cit., Kamson, 2015.

dominant social religious order. These aspects will be seen when the reforms of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak use its traditional components to claim exclusive domains over the cultural and traditional components of the Zeliangrong society. This also brought another aspect, an equally important component for this faith. And that is the claims of indignity and organic unity of indigenous faiths and cultures in India.

The traditional religion of the Rongmei (Zeliangrong) is a loosely organized oral-based tradition, where folklores, myths, rituals, customs, and traditions give direction and shape to the discourse of this religion. The narrative by the leaders and protagonist of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak has located themselves as an indigenous tribal religion of India.<sup>66</sup>

*(f) Building of cultural alliance*

The narrative of identity generated by the reforms has become a tool for generating exclusive claims over the social, cultural, and religious components of the Zeliangrong society. Use of such identity both at the local and tribe-specific level and also at the regional and national level produce a certain pattern. Such discourse of identity formation at the larger regional and national level was popularized under the banner of the Janjati faith.

Similarly, at the national level, there is a manifestation of broad identity construction and emphasis for power using cultural components and religious symbols. There is frequent use of nation and state components such as nationalism to build and recast its exclusive socio-religious, political model for the nation. The RSS and its right-wing political parties have liberally used the components of nationalism, reframed, and redefined the whole discourse of social, cultural, and political discourse in the country.

The model projected at the national level by the Right-wing groups involves a radical shift in the social, cultural, and political discourse in the country and as such the whole components of State, nation, nationalism, identity, etc., require discussion to understand this model. Likewise, the reforms of TRC have also capitalized on the unique character of tribal religion and its components to build and strengthened its reforms; and as such, all these concepts and components will be discussed below.

**Conclusion**

The TRC movement emerged as an indigenous religious reform movement to defend and uplift the unique and distinct social, religious, and cultural attributes of the Rongmei people. It is also interested in revitalizing the internal cosmological and philosophical components of their traditional religion. It also defended its traditional religion from the narrative and discourse that trivialized and devalue tribal religions as animistic and primitive.

The reform manifest re-visitation of the past socio-cultural and religious practice so that it can generate a revitalized new socio-cultural and religious order. However, while attempting to bring the past socio-cultural and religious components in the new model, a pattern of contest also emerges. Here, the contest is mainly directed against the colonial and western narrative (including Christians and other religions). This contest also introduces the components of identity and its associated identity politics in the Rongmei society.

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<sup>66</sup> Op. Cit., Kamei, 2006.

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