

The Dynamic of Religious Pluralism and Cultural Identity in Rongmei Naga (Kabui) Society

Happyson Gangmei¹, Dr. Silas Gangmei²

¹Research Scholar, Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong, Meghalaya

²Assistant Professor, Sociology Programme, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Assam down town University- Guwahati, Assam

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ABSTRACT

The Rongmei Naga (Kabui) society stand at a crucial juncture of cultural negotiation between Rongmei Christian and Rongmei Indigenous Faiths (Kabui) on their cultural authenticity and legitimacy. This intricate dialectic on culture by both the community reflect religious pluralism and manifest a profound societal dynamism over cultural identity. Through comprehensive synthesizing of secondary material, the paper accentuates how religious pluralism precipitate cultural identity tension and identity crisis. And it argues this is not to be seen as destructive fragmentation but a process of cultural reconfiguration. Nevertheless, this cultural contestation within the communities of Rongmei Nagas (Kabui) should be mutually resolved through inter-faith dialogue, as cultural identity transcends religious demarcation and holistically belong to the collective consciousness of the society.

Key Words: Rongmei (Kabui), Religious Pluralism, Cultural Identity, Societal Dynamic, Inter-faith dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic intersection of religious pluralism and cultural identity has become increasingly relevant in our contemporary society, as societies grapple with religious pluralism. Every individual born into the society have an intrinsic cultural identity associated with the society. This intrinsic convergence of an individual and cultural identity in Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society is undergoing a significance transformation amidst the evolving dynamic of religious pluralism. This transition into complex, modern multifaceted spiritual ecosystem raises fundamental questions on the authenticity of one's cultural identity. Pierre Bourdieu concept of 'religious field' aptly illustrated that religious pluralism creates a dynamic competition in society to established authenticity, authority and influence over other. And this claim for authenticity by different religious groups aims to accumulate cultural capital for maintaining and enhancing the social position within the 'field of power' (Bourdieu, 1991) [1]. The Rongmei (Kabui) contemporary society is constructing their identity based on two fundamentally distinct claims. The Rongmei (Kabui) that profess indigenous faith claims the authenticity through fidelity and continuity of their indigenous religious practice as their original sources, while the Rongmei Christian asserts the legitimation of their identity through preservation and promotion of their material culture and linguistic heritage.

Theoretical Framework

The dynamic of religious pluralism and cultural identity in Rongmei Naga (Kabui) society can be systematically examine through multi-theoretical lens that integrate Pierre Bourdieu notion of cultural capital and religious field, Clifford Geertz thick and thin understanding of culture, Berger and Luckmann's concept of social construction of reality, and Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. These theoretical perspectives elucidate the competing religious and cultural claim for authenticity within same social universe of Rongmei Naga (Kabui) society. The concept of Pierre Bourdieu 'cultural capital' illuminates the competition between

Rongmei Christian and Rongmei traditionist (Kabui) in embodies, institutionalized and objectified form over non-economic resources such as knowledge, values, belief and symbolic items. Both compete for authenticity and legitimacy by positioning their practices either as makers of modernity (Rongmei Christian) or guardianship of ancestral heritage (Rongmei Kabui).

Clifford Geertz's distinction on thick and thin description of culture sharpens this analysis by engaging how cultural identity and religion interact, evolved and transformed. The Rongmei (Kabui of indigenous faith) claim religion, social and material dimension are inseparable aspect of their cosmology- thick description of culture, whereas Rongmei Christian reflected more on 'thin' understanding of culture that separates culture from original traditional religious belief. Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction of reality underscore cultural identity as dynamic that is not to be misunderstood as static element. It needs to be renewed, redefine, modified and revive according to the rationale of the modern society. Thus, Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a framework for dialogical engagement oriented toward mutual understanding which emphasized dialogue is free of coercion, all participant has equal opportunities, rational argument prevails over domination. This enable both Rongmei Christian and Rongmei Kabui to articulate their grievances, negotiate rationally and resolved their conundrum over cultural identity. Synthesizing these theoretical approaches, it highlighted authenticity and legitimacy is neither fixed nor monopolized by one group but should continuously shaped through dialogue, contestation and cultural creativity.

Origin and migration of the Rongmei Naga tribe

The mythical oral legend narrates, the Rongmei ancestors came out from a cave called *Mahou Taobhei* (literally it referred to stone boulder). As narrated in the folktale a *Mithun* (type of bovine) pushed open the stone boulder and from which a man name *Pokrei* and a woman *Dichalu* came out. After a certain ritual *Pokrei* and *Dichalu* became couple and gave birth to three sons and one daughter. The Rongmei traces its ancestral descendant from Chief *Nguiba* of *Makuilongdi* the grandson of *Pokrei* (*Pokrei-Kanjiyang-Phaibang-Nguiba*). The folktale of many Nagas tribe referred *Makhel* as the living symbol of common origin. At present, *Makhel* is to be seen a stone now erected which marks the place from which the common ancestors (of the Nagas) emerged from the earth (Hodson, 1911) [5]. The ancestors of *Rongmei* migrated from *Makhel* to *Ramting Kabin* and from *Ramting Kabin* they moved to *Chawangphungning* (*Guangpuning*) and from this place they moved westward and settled down in *Makuilongdi* Village (Kamei, 2004). A well-organized village system was established from *Makuilongdi*. As indicated from the name of the megalith stone hive it was believed that *Pamei* and *Newmei* clan systems evolved viz. *Pamei tao* (*Pamei megalith stone*) and *Newmeitao* (*Newmei megalith stone*). Later a major dispersal took place and the third son of Chief *Nguiba*, *Rembangbe* went migrating toward the south fallow land and came to be known as *Marongmei* or *Rongmei* (southerners).

The concept of tribe appears during the British Colonial period, Western anthropologists like Risely, Elwin, and Grierson defined tribe from the light of aboriginals, while G. S. Ghurye defined Indian tribes as backward Hindus and some scholars identified them by the term Adivasi (Desai, 1978) [6]. The Indian Constitution defined Schedule Tribe in article 366 (25) as geographically isolated settling in remote inhospitable forest or hill, backward socially and economically, having distinctive culture and traits, shyness of contact with outsiders (deemed under Article 342 of Indian Constitution). The Rongmei Naga was initially recognized as Kabui tribe of Manipur (referring to both Rongmei and Inpui/Puimei community) in 1956 under the Constitution of India, later as per the Constitution Order (Amendment) Act, 2011 (No. 2 of 2012) dated 8th January, 2012 the Rongmei is separately recognized as one of the Scheduled tribes of Manipur (The Gazette of India) [3]. They belong to Mongoloid race speaking Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 1987) [2].

Religious Pluralism and Cultural Authenticity: Traditional Paradigms and Rongmei Chistian identity

Religious pluralism and cultural authenticity present a fundamental paradox that challenges the conventional understanding of the concept. Culture and Religion for many Indian Tribal communities share a symbiotic and inseparable bond challenging conventional understanding that culture and religion are distinct entities. However religious pluralism in Indian context reflects the concept of secularism enshrined in the constitutional framework that accommodates religious diversity. And as cultural identity is always been constructed through social

interaction, cultural authenticity is not to be viewed as a static property of any particular religious tradition (Longhofer, et al. 2016) [7]. This highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage as a means of safeguarding not only cultural identity but also the spiritual and social cohesion of the communities.

The Rongmei (Kabui) maintained cultural identity through traditional religious practices. *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC)*, *Heraka*, *Poupei Chapriak* were some few traditional religious groups in Rongmei Kabui community (Longkumer, 2008) [8]. They all belief *Tingwang* (Supreme God) as the supreme benevolent deity. They asserted, traditional religious practices represent the original authentic cultural expression of the people and emphasized in holistic functional integration that encompassed the entire way of life. They argue religion as a cultural expression which imbued social values and identity. The erosion of cultural practices, whether through the adoption of foreign religions (Christianity) or the rejection of traditional ways of life, poses a significant threat to the survival of these unique cultural-religious syntheses.

The Rongmei Christians often reinterpret traditional cultural practices through a Christian lens, that culture, as an inborn and deeply ingrained aspect of human existence, is inextricably tied to one's ethnic and social origins. Baptist Protestant, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Seven-day Adventist were the prominent Christian denomination followed by the Rongmei Nagas. They believe culture is a repository of collective memory, values, and practices that define a community's way of life. And consider religion, as a system of beliefs and practices, that can be adopted, adapted, or transformed, but culture remains an enduring marker of identity that transcends religious affiliations. They constructed the legitimacy of their cultural identity through preserving and maintaining of material cultural and promotion of linguistic tradition.

The Rongmei Naga (Kabui) community is experiencing a profound cultural and religious transformation, marked by the co-existence of Rongmei Christianity and Rongmei Indigenous Faiths. This dual religious identity has led to a dialectical tension over cultural authenticity and legitimacy. This reflects a broader struggle over cultural capital as Bourdieu would contend (Robbins, 2005) [9]. Yet assertion of *Kabui* identity by Indigenous faith signified what James Scott term "hidden transcripts" that resist the cultural domination, refuse conversion and create an alternative source of cultural identity against hegemonic narrative and growing influence of Christianity (Scott, 1990; Gramsci, 2020).

Material and Non-material Culture: The Battle Ground for Authenticity.

Material and non-material culture is integral, in the process of constructing identity. The Rongmei (Kabui) Naga Community's material and non-material culture provide a very intriguing insight into their cultural dynamic and heritage. Both the communities, Rongmei Kabui traditionist and Rongmei Christian claim the authenticity of their cultural identity through different approach in their preservation and innovation of their material and non-material cultural. As per the ethnographic definition, culture is an entire way of life, that include knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom an any other capabilities acquire by man as a member of a society (Edles, 2002; Tylor, 1871) [12, 13].

Material culture are artifact, objects or things of physical aspect while non-materials culture includes idea, thought, belief and value that give meaning to the material culture. Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society has a rich material culture, as Colonel McCulloch the political agent of Manipur has pointed out the construction of the housing pattern was well adapted to the climate, like *Taraeng Kai* (Grand sacrificial house) are well decorated and made with excellent qualities of wood, bamboo to withstand 30-40 years and thatch roof for 10-12 years without repair (Hudson; 1911) [14]. They inherited rich cultural costume, attire, dress and ornament designed for specific age group, personalities, male and female, and for specific occasion. *Sineiphei/Seneipheipong*-shawls of simple design is for kid of walking age, *Inthem Phei/Them Phei* – shawl stripes designed is for an age group of 5-9 years old, *Mareipan* Shawl is for an adolescence, *Pheingao* Shawl is for a senior youth, *Langmu Pheingao*, shawl is for an early old age of 50 years, *Koukhram Pheingao*, shawl for a middle old age of 70 years, *Masinphei* shawl is for an elder of 80 years above, *Chingkhong-Phei* decorated shawl is wear by a prominent personality of higher status individual. All these mention shawls are mostly associated for men (Devi, 2007) [15].

McCullon accounted that Rongmei (Kabui) Nagas are fond of costume and ornament, their costumes were made from wood, bamboo, Mithun horn, elephant tusk, conch shell, bird feather, copper or metal or semi-precious stone. In related to food and drink, beverages prepared from rice are commonly consumed and it has a very significance association with various rituals, rites and events. The Rongmei (Kabui) Naga are closely associated with the nature, in all their activities from agriculture, hunting, fishing, festivals and feasts, they reflect their deep connection with the nature (Hudson, 1911) [14]. This material culture showcases their rich cultural heritage, craftsmanship and symbolic expression of their non material culture that shaped their identity.

The non-material cultural values, norms, customs, practices, and belief form a corner stone of any society. The patriarchal forms of Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society defines the nature of family and kinship practices. The religious belief and practices, believed to have been inherited from the divine teacher *Tingpu Rengsonnang* (a head dormitory patriarch of God) guided and regulated the social conduct (Kamei, 2008) [16]. Moreover, they worship the Supreme God –*Tingkao Ragwang*, deities and goddesses of the village and worship even their ancestors. The elders in Village Council (*Thoubei/Pei*), act as a supreme body in regulating the social conduct and maintaining law and order in the village (Bower, 1954) [17]. Every festival and feast are worship with gratefulness invoking the blessing of Supreme God. They celebrate with folk songs and folk dances, feasting and merrymaking.

All these festival, feast, folksong and folkdance deeply connect with the nature. The cycle of agriculture is based on the cultivation season, folk songs and dance reflect the sound and movement of insect, animals or birds. The manner of giving justice through oath and ordeal are pronounced swearing thunderbolt, lighting or biting tiger teeth, swear by pronouncing - if found guilty to die by unnatural death (Jangailu, 2013) [18]. The belief and practice system of Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society drastically changed in the 19th century after the introduction of Christianity by William Pettigrew, a missionary from American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS). The spread of Christianity became very rampant through various welfare services (education, health care services, relief items etc.) provided by the mission Churches. The Rongmei Christian converts began to see the traditional belief practice as superstitious, denounced *genna* (strict social conduct that prohibited any social activities particularly during significant event) and authority of *Toubei/Pei* (Village council). Abandoning of traditional custom, norm and belief system by the Rongmei Christian Convert began to develop a sour relationship between the new convert (Rongmei Christian) and old faith (Rongmei Kabui).

Tension and negotiation on the claim for cultural authenticity within the Rongmei (Kabui) Naga community is becoming a new normal. Clifford Geertz understanding of culture as ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ allow us to appreciate how cultural identity and religion interact, evolved and transformed (Geertz, 1973) [19]. The Rongmei (Kabui of indigenous faith) claim religion, social and material dimension are inseparable where their cosmology from agricultural rite to decision making through village council, carried a layer of historical, spiritual and symbolic meaning interwoven in moral and sacred order. Whereas Rongmei Christian reflected more on ‘thin’ understanding of culture that separates culture from original traditional religious belief. Yet within a Rongmei Christian community especially among the educated group, thick understanding of culture is emerging parallelly. They uphold traditional kinship values, translated the Christian scripture and hymn to Rongmei vernacular language, uphold cultural costume and attire dearly, and reinterpreted traditional moral values in the teaching of Christian theology.

Interestingly even in the Indigenous primal religion of Rongmei Kabui, in their resistant struggle to preserve and propagate indigenous religious belief, they often draw their inspiration and selectively incorporated Christian element into their indigenous religious practices (Kamei, 2013) [20]. Both the group engages in maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to the changing circumstances. This reveals what Berger and Luckman term ‘the social construction of reality’ that continues to construct meaningful cultural identities even in the face of profound religious transformation (Berger, 2016) [21]. Thereby both the group should avoid confronting for legitimacy within the single cultural context, as this can result to the ‘zero-sum game’ where validation of one religious tradition can necessitate the delegitimization of the other (Weber, 2019) [22].



Tarengkai (Grand Sacrificial House) & *Tingkao Ragwang Kalum Kai* (TRC Worship Temple)

Source: 1. Ruangmei Today (30th August 2018), Facebook account.
<https://www.facebook.com/100063726346556/posts/1816141878492803/?mibextid=rS40aB7S9Ucbxw>

Source: 2. Ramakrishna Mission Imphal, Manipur (2nd January 2023), Uchiwa Khul Mayang Imphal.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/rkmimphal/albums/72177720304916225/>

Table

Cultural Claim	Rongmei Christian	Rongmei Kabui
Material	Church building (Grand Devotional house), Cultural costume, Attire, dress and Ornament reflecting more toward mundane profane world.	<i>Taraeng Kai</i> (Grand sacrificial house), cultural costume, attire, dress and ornament reflecting deep reverence for sacred belief, <i>Morung</i> (Youth Dormitory), and various items of cultural heritage.
Non-Material	Folk song in gospel lyric, Folk dance, Folktale, Victory cry, Village Council, Totem, Language, Norms and Values in synch with Christian code, Customary law that fulfil within Christian ethics (justice,	Folk song, Folk dance, Folktale, Ritual, Oath and ordeal, Ritual taboo (genna), Ancestral worship, Victory Cry, Village Council, Totem, language, Honoring historic event of prominent figure,

	discipline, marriage, property inheritance), Honoring historic event of prominent figure.	Customary law and various Traditional festival and feast.
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Policy Implication to Mutually Resolved Cultural Identity Conundrum

The Rongmei (Kabui) Naga Society stands at the crucial juncture of navigating and negotiating cultural identity that was infused by Christian conversion, religious hybridization and modernization driven social changes. In this scenario inter-faith dialogue emerge as a crucial mechanism that will eventually foster innovation and resilience enabling the Rongmei/Kabui society to maintain cultural identity while embracing changes. The Habermas insight from ‘Communicative action theory’ and concept of ‘Ideal Speech Situation’ can create an authentic opportunity for mutual understanding with each other to reach genuine consensus (Habermas, 1987) [23].

To facilitate a meaningful and productive engagement between Rongmei (Kabui) traditionalist and Rongmei Christian converts, a carefully designed mechanism should be adopted. Inter-religious engagement model developed by the World Council of Churches can be considered. The model is grounded in mutual process of dialogue, understanding, respect and cooperation recognizing religious pluralism as a reality that cannot be erased. It upholds all religious tradition as equal and seeks to find shared ethical concern that transcends theological boundaries. It suggested the integration of bottom-up and top-down strategies to effectively promote capacity building through interfaith and inter-generational dialogue (Pratt, 2010) [24].

Creation of village level dialogue council, cultural heritage committee and inter-generation dialogue program to promote cultural preservation, to engage in festival-feast celebration and to monitor community development projects are some few bottom-up approaches. These will ensure accommodation of religious diversity within unified cultural identity and bridge religious divide while fostering commitment to cultural preservation and community development. Few top-down strategies can include education institution, to play a crucial role in resolving religious tension by imparting inclusive curriculum on cultural relevant education and foster critical thinking on religion and cultural identity. Moreover, educational institution can develop formal partnership with community to promote inter-religious understanding, preserve and promote cultural identity. Economic development strategies between Rongmei Kabui traditionist and Rongmei Christian convert should encourage creating collaborative engagement while preserving cultural practices and values. Civil societies and frontal organizations should effectively monitor the progress of inter-faith dialogue, promptly address crisis before it escalates and coordinate with State and Centre Administration for financial assistance and policy framework to promote and preserve the indigenous culture.

Mizo of Mizoram and Khasi of Meghalaya has demonstrated by semantic reframing – redefining of ritual as culture, and Church leaders endorse indigenous festivals as heritage rather than strictly link to religion, thereby allowing mutual coexistence without compromising doctrinal commitments. Moreover, in many tribal societies of Africa, Christianity coexists with ancestral veneration. The Interfaith Council play a significant role in mediating disputes, create guideline, resolved conflict and facilitate peaceful coexistence. Few prominent councils were Nigeria’s Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), Nigeria’s Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), African Union’s Interfaith Dialogue Forum (AU-IFDF). These demonstrated dialogue and inclusive councils transform culture and religious tensions into platform for reconciliation and share identity by promoting mutual respect and moving toward cooperative pluralism (Gusha, 2022) [25].

CONCLUSION

Societies that shut out all innovation become atrophied and lifeless in course of time (Beteilie, 2002) [26]. Giddens pointed out that tradition is a ‘living past’ representing the present and future, and it continues to renew, redefine, modified and revive according to the rationale of the modern society (Giddens, 2013) [27]. The cultural identity of Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society has always been constructed through the creative appropriation from diverse influences. The ability to manage religious pluralism while maintain cultural coherence becomes increasingly crucial for society stability and individual well-being. Religious pluralism in the Rongmei (Kabui) contemporary society has witness an internal division on their claim for the culture legitimacy and authenticity.

This internal tension and crisis should not be seen as destructive fragmentation but it should be seen as a process of cultural reconfiguration stated by Giddens. Both the communities (Rongmei Kabui Traditionist and Rongmei Christian) has demonstrated a remarkable strength of creativity in constructing cultural identity through their common cultural heritage. Any internal division and confrontation within the single cultural context to claim cultural authenticity should be avoided or mutually resolved through Inter-faith dialogue. The Rongmei (Kabui) Naga society has demonstrated innovation and resilience in the face of profound religious transformation, revealing a remarkable capacity to construct and maintain cultural identity meaningful while embracing change.

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