

The Women in Historical Context in Traditional Social System of the Rongmei of North East India

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Abstract: *The Rongmei society is based on kinship which is well-knit by clan. Being a patrilineal society, the descent is reckoned through the male line, and the surname of the father is passed on to the sons. The family property is transferred to the male line; and if there is no male issue, to the nearest male of the clan. But rich parents give immovable property like paddy fields to their daughters at the time of marriage in addition to jewelry, cloth, and other household items. However, women play a very important role in the economy and household activities. She is the only person who stood behind her husband in times of misery and happiness. As a wife, she took the burden of childbearing and rearing the off-springs. She is not permitted by custom to take part in village polity but tries to get her desire through her husband. In matters of religion, she performs the family rites but in propitiation rites performed outside the village gate, she is prohibited. She has complete freedom to choose her life partner. In short, Rongmei women have the freedom and privileges to take part in social, cultural, and religious activities. Now, with the entry of education in the Rongmei society, women have become more conscious of their rights and status, but they do not try to go away from the custom and traditions of their forefathers.*

Keywords: Rongmei women, status, village polity, economy, religious activities, property, education

The Rongmei is one of the natives of Northeast India, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family.¹ They also like other tribal communities have a long history and rich culture which is handed down in oral tradition through the ages. The population of this group is found mainly in the Tamenglong and Noney districts of Manipur. These people are found scattered also in the neighbouring districts of Tamenglong and Noney districts namely, Churachandpur District, Senapati District, Imphal West District, Imphal East District, Thoubal District, and Bishnupur District. Outside the state of

Manipur, they are found settling in Nagaland in its Parem District, and Kohima, and in Assam in its Haflong sub-division of Cachar District and Hailakandi District. The paper is a humble attempt to look into the status of Rongmei women in society.

The foundation of the Rongmei society is based on clan and kinship. They are divided into four exogamous clans namely, Kamei, Gangmei, Gonmei, and Longmei. These clans have been subdivided into lineages except the Longmei. Being a patrilineal society, the descent is reckoned through the male line only. The term status is a very elusive one. In sociological literature, the term status is used as a synonym for the role.² The Rongmei women have enjoyed a great deal of freedom. They have the right to marry, divorce, and choose the mates of their own choice. There is no restriction on women in social participation as they have not remained in four corners of the house. They can take part freely in eating and drinking with their male counterparts. The boys and girls of the dormitories like *Khangchu* (boys' dormitory) and *Luchu* (girls' dormitory) dance together during the times of festivals, great ritual sacrifices, and other social functions. Kinship refers to a set of human relationships and its prescriptions do not debar them. There is no difference in the observation of the birth ceremony of males and females as the rites and ceremonies are almost common to them.³

In a family, a woman enjoys a privileged position. The family and social system do not give burden her with additional prohibitions and impositions. However, she has some restrictions which are also applicable to men. For instance, the *Ralen Loume* ceremony is performed at the end of the annual *Gaanngai* festival. It is a worship of Seven Bothers Gods by offering fowls, wine, water, ginger, egg, etc. for the wellbeing of the whole village community. It is carried out by a priest outside the Northern gate of the village, the seat of *Kaipi Bambu*, the upper village deity. A complete *genna* known as *Neihmei* (prayer) is observed during the period of the sacrifice. The chickens are cooked at the ritual place and consumed by the elders of *Pei* (village council), old women, and children who are not yet enrolled in the dormitories of boys and girls. Adults (male and female) are prohibited from eating these chickens.⁴ In family interpersonal relations, the role of a woman is almost at the same level as her male counterpart. In the arena of competence, women are not left behind by men. However, they are considered unintelligent.

After marriage, a Rongmei girl becomes a wife by changing her clan to that of her husband. She becomes a member of the family as well as of the clan of her husband.⁵ She is a partner and friend of her husband. She gives up everything, her pleasure, and ambitions; relieves the tension of her husband, and maintains peace and order in the family. Thereby she creates a good environment for her husband to think more about the development and prosperity of the family. She is the source of inspiration to man for the high endeavour and worthy achievements in life. She stands by him in times of crisis and happiness. She shares his success and achievement. She is the person whom he looks upon for love, sympathy, understanding, comfort, and

recognition. She is the symbol of purity, faithfulness, and devotion to her husband.⁶

Rongmei woman as a wife enjoys ideal status almost in the same way as that of her husband and performs both social and biological functions. In the family, she performs the task of childbearing and the greater part of child-rearing. She is responsible for the child's habit of self-control, carefulness, industriousness, and honesty. She sets up the child's behaviour pattern during the most formative period of child development. She is thus responsible for the maintenance of utmost discipline in the family. She is the only teacher who transmits cultural heritage to the child. It is from the mother that the child learns the norms of society, the manner, moral code, and ideals. The mother, because of her intimate and sustained contact with the child, can discover and nurture the child's special traits aptitudes, and attitudes which subsequently play a vital role in shaping his/her personality.⁷

She is the person who cares for the well-being of the family members. She does organize the home and its activities in such a way that each member of the family has good food, adequate sleep, and sufficient recreation. She made the home a place of a quite comfortable and appropriate setting for the children through her talent. Besides, she cultivates taste in interior arrangement, so that the home does become an inviting peaceful, and cheerful place. She is the central personality of the home and the family circle. All the family members turn to her for sympathy, understanding, and recognition. She does devote her time, labour, and thought to the welfare and prosperity of the family members.⁸

The Rongmei people lived in the villages and their attachment to the village and village lands is very strong.⁹ The real political unit of the Rongmei is the village¹⁰ with its definite territory a well-knit social system and a religious organization.¹¹ Each Rongmei village is ruled by *Pei*, a council of elders. In the *Pei*, women have not been given any place. So they are totally out of the scene in this regard. However, they are not represented in the *Pei* but they are powerful and influential in getting their wishes through their husbands.¹² A widower is not allowed to become *Khunbu* (owner) of the village.

Women play a very important role in the Rongmei society, particularly in economic activities. In short, every aspect of economic activities falls in the hands of womenfolk. For instance, a woman's work includes different activities starting from household chores to the heavy work of agricultural activities. It is the normal duty of a woman to collect drinking water (*Dui*) from the water sources like ponds or springs or rivers, firewood (*Thing*) from the nearby woods, edible items like vegetables, roots, shoots, spices, and fruits either from jhum fields (cultivated) or forests (wild). In addition to this, she prepares the jhum fields by tilling or uprooting the soils with the help of a small spade called *Phuton* for the plantation of various crops at the same time (mixed cropping).¹³ The main duties of the menfolk are to fall down the trees of the thick forest; make them dry in the sun and burn them. Then, they collected all the remaining sticks, and wood together and burnt them into

ashes. After sowing the seeds, the women also must protect the seeds from birds and animals during the daytime till the seeds germinate. Moreover, they also take tender care to grow the plants nicely. They remove the unwanted plants in the field too. As stated above, the male members take part in clearing the jhum fields (*Laopuk*) and making fences to protect crops from wild animals. Above all, during harvesting time also women take a major part *i.e.* they use to reap, thrash and transport the harvested crops to the granary (*Sham*).¹⁴

As stated earlier, women use to collect water with bamboo tubes for their daily use such as for cooking, cleaning, bathing, washing, etc. Similarly, they collect the logs of firewood on their shoulders using their transporting baskets (*Kah*). After reaching home, they must cut the firewood logs into small pieces to dry in the sun and burn quickly. The same process is followed in the case of paddy. They help in transporting the harvested crops and store them in their granaries. Then, they also must let the paddy dry in the sun (bask) and husk or pound them in the early hour. They make it ready for cooking and also for brewing *Joungao*, rice beer. Rice beer is important in their socio-cultural life. Elderly men use to drink rice beer and it is also customary to offer it to the guests. Moreover, it is their routine work to maintain their family with food supplements and cash.¹⁵

Every woman in the family usually rears various domestic animals like pigs, fowls, etc. for the economic growth of the family. It is the right of the woman to sell or buy these domestic animals, thus men have no right over these domesticated animals. They can sell with the consent of the woman concerned. The woman takes all the possible responsibilities like feeding, taking care, looking after them, etc. rearing the animals. Sometimes, they are helped by their children. The Rongmei women are also good weavers. They weave different clothes for their use because the woman must supply the clothing of her family members by weaving. The woman who does not know about weaving is laughed at by the villagers. She is not appreciated by all. In the case of unmarried girls, people use to select the girl who has enough skill in all respects, and her *Man* (bride price) is also high. According to Rongmei custom and tradition, weaving is an inseparable work of economic activity assigned to every woman.¹⁶

The Rongmei indigenous religion *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (for short TRC) does not prohibit women's participation in various rituals, festivals, and ceremonies. The women have also been admitted to the religious order. It is seen in the annual festival of the *Ginki*, *Nanu-ngai* etc. Regarding the religious functions of society, some restrictions are imposed on women. They are not allowed to take part in some of the rituals of the family such as *Duikhangmei*, *Laokhangmei*, etc. which are usually observed outside the village gate.¹⁷ But on the day of the *Napkaodai* festival, the wife of *Napmupou* (in charge of agricultural rites) plants various seeds at a clear spot near the village gate with relevant hymns. The woman is, however, permitted to perform family rituals like *Napchan*, *Ginki*, etc.¹⁸ The Rongmei people perform *Ginkievery* year for abundant food grain. In the worship and entertainment of *Kangdailui* (goddess of food

grain), they offer special items of food such as *Nap* (rice), *Jankang* (dry meat), *Gan* (cooked curry), *Charungbung* (egg), and a wine cup made of banana leaf placing on a *Pantanglu* (winnowing fan). It is believed that *Kangdailu* is found in crabs, so even a tiny piece of crab is compulsory among the food items or if a crab is not found similar species are offered.¹⁹ This ritual is performed inside the house by the household mother with a prayer to the goddess. The offering procedure is simple and of short duration. The fifth day of the *Gaan-ngai* festival is known as *Napchan-Ngai*. On this day, a rite called *Napkao* (calling of the paddy) offering of pig and fowls is performed at their respective dormitories such as *Khangchu* and *Luchu* to restore the consumed and wasted rice during the festival invoking *Tingkao Ragwang* (Supreme God) and *Kangdailu* for the plentiful harvest in the coming year. The offering of the best part of the killed animal or fowl i.e. the liver with rice and drink is placed on the hearthstones. It is believed that *Kangdailu* (goddess of food grain), lives in the form of a hearthstone. The same offering is placed on the *Nashampantilai*, grain jar which is considered to be the core of all wealth. The ritual is carried out by the household mother. On the second day *Nanu Ngai*, in the early morning, an old woman of the village will bring water from the *Khundai* (village pond) for bathing the baby and cooking for ritual offerings. This water is locally recognized as *Kakhuudi* (sacred water).²⁰ In the evening, *Nanu Lam*, *Nanu* dance is performed by old women with relevant songs sung by the elderly men at every household of the child born in the preceding year.²¹ The main objective of the dance is the fertility of the villagers.

The main task of a woman in household management started with household chores. In respect of economic activities, all works falls on the womenfolk. For instance, they use to prepare meals and feed their family members. Before cooking, they usually pound the rice as it is their routine work. They also arrange the vegetables or any edible items (either roots or shoots or edible lichens and fungus) to prepare their daily curry. Thus, various types of curry are prepared from their collection from their kitchen gardens, jhum fields, and forests. Menfolk on the other hand supply the meat of wild animals that they hunted from the forests or fish caught from streams or rivers. The remaining necessary materials are taken care of by the women.²² Thus, the Rongmei women is very hard work. In all respects, they are indeed worthy of praise.

Inheritance is the practice of passing on property, titles, debts, and obligations upon the death of an individual. According to L. H. Morgan,²³ inheritance is the distribution of property among the cognate kindred. With descent in the male line, the children of a deceased would stand at the head of the cognate and very naturally receive the portion of the inheritance. Another scholar, Robert H. Lowie²⁴ opines that rule of inheritance is like the whole of property law reflecting the total ideology of a society. The law of inheritance indeed gives an unpleasant insight into the socio-economic and political formulation of any society. In the opinion of Kingsley Davis,²⁵ inheritance is an institution of kinship and a dominant pattern in the family organization in any society. In addition to the property of various kinds,

rights, and obligations, crafts and skills might be passed on by kinship roles. Succession to office, kinship, and to other social roles and statuses is also very often determined by kinship criteria.

In the traditional Rongmei society, the right of inheritance for women is limited. They can only inherit some moveable properties like jewellery, cloth, household items, etc. But if the parents are rich and they give items like paddy fields as a marriage gift to their daughters. Otherwise, they have no right to claim. Unlike the Garos, no daughters can inherit the property of the family.²⁶

On the other hand, a woman can inherit the property of her deceased husband. She has the right to distribute it among her children according to her will. If the husband has a second wife and the first wife does remain at her husband's house with or without her issue, she gets half of her husband's property otherwise she does not have any right to claim. If a husband divorces her wife without any faults/reasons, he returns the bridal gifts along with the woman to her parental family. He also has to pay *Mhasi*, a buffalo to her parents. Besides, the bride price called *Man* is not returned by the family of the woman. If the woman is divorced on the ground of adultery or of her fault, she has to return the *Man* (taken at the time of marriage) to the husband.²⁷

After observing the above facts, we can conclude that the Rongmei women enjoy a great deal of freedom. Being a patrilineal society, preference in the matter of inheritance is given to a male. The women have inherited property from the male. However, in the absence of a male issue in a family, the daughter has the right to inherit her parental property including immovable properties like a house, land, etc. Since residing in the hill areas and having a restricted working season, the Rongmei people work hard for their existence. The women contribute to agricultural and horticultural activities. This is an addition to their household chores including weaving. They have the freedom and privileges to take part in social, cultural, and religious activities. However, girls were never encouraged to education. So, they remained uneducated for a long time. Now, girls are taking up education and the number of school-going girls is increasing day by day. The outlook of the people has also been changed with the increase in educated persons in society. It is the Rongmei community that has produced a freedom fighter and religious leader like *Rani Gaidinliu*.²⁸

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