

## The Concept of God in Rongmei Indigenous Religion: Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC)

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### ABSTRACT

*Each religion differs from others based on its conception of the nature of God. Some religions believe that there is only one God, monotheism, while other religions believe in polytheism, that there are multiple deities. This paper delves into the indigenous religious beliefs of the Rongmei people, a cognate group of the Zeliangrong Nagas community residing in Northeastern India. Specifically, it explores the concept of God within the Rongmei religion, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC). By examining the unique spiritual practices, cosmology, and the pantheon of deities in TRC, the study highlights the richness and complexity of Rongmei religious traditions. The research employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, literature review, and comparative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Rongmei concept of God. The findings emphasize the importance of preserving these cultural heritages amidst the pressures of modernization and globalization.*

**Keywords:** God, Indigenous, Religion, Rongmei, Tingkao Ragwang

### INTRODUCTION

The study of indigenous religious beliefs provides invaluable insights into the diverse ways human societies understand the divine, nature, and their place in the world. This paper focuses on the concept of God within the Rongmei religion, Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), an indigenous belief system of the Rongmei people. Rongmei is a subgroup of the Zeliangrong Nagas community, predominantly residing in the states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland in Northeastern India. They are also called Kabui by the other community of Manipur. By exploring their unique spiritual practices and cosmology, we aim to highlight the richness and complexity of Rongmei religious traditions, contribute to the broader field of indigenous studies, and underscore the importance of preserving these cultural heritages in the face of modernization and globalization.

In its early phase, the Rongmei traditional indigenous religion did not have a specific founder or an established name. However, there were several lawgivers, diviners, and prophets believed to convey divine messages to humanity. Their religious beliefs are conveyed through sacred oral traditions, passed down through generations via myths, rituals, folk music and dances, folktales, and folklore. Today, the Rongmei people continue to practice this traditional religion, now commonly

known as Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), which is characterized by a profound connection to nature, ancestral worship, and a pantheon of deities. This religion is considered primordial, having historically emerged and evolved from various customs and traditions since the beginning of the universe rather than being shaped by the colonial concept of animism. The elements of polytheism and henotheism are evident in the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak of the Rongmei indigenous religion.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork, literature review, and comparative analysis to comprehensively understand the Rongmei concept of God.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The concept of God**

One religion differs from the others primarily by the belief in the existence of a god or gods. The nature or idea of God plays a vital role within a religious tradition. Michael Peterson [et. al], discussed traditional theism's view of God in their book "Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion" (2003). According to this view, God is understood as a being worthy of worship who must be greater than all beings. There should be no other greater beings who would surpass God in any way. Here, too, God is regarded as a necessary and self-existing being, a being who depends on nothing but himself and whose non-existence, either past or future, is absolutely impossible. A theistic God is a personal God who is attributed with love, intelligence, creativity, moral goodness, etc. God is the creator of all things, who created everything that exists from nothing (*ex nihilo*) through his free will, and he is the sustainer of finite things whose existence is entirely dependent on him. God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), and morally good or omnibenevolent. The existence of God has neither beginning nor end; that God is eternal and everlasting. John H. Hick (1990) explained the Judaic-Christian concept of God in his book "Philosophy of Religion" explaining that God has conceived in the Judaic-Christian tradition as the infinite, eternal, uncreated, personal reality, who has created all that exists and who is revealed to human creatures as holy and loving.

From a metaphysical perspective, God has the attributes of unity, spirituality, omnipotence, eternity, immutability, and absoluteness. From a religious perspective, God is conceived as a person, creator, eternal, omnipotent, infinitely wise and good, transcendent-immanent, and holy (Masih Y., 1991). Different terms are used to describe the way different religions think about God. Deism refers to the idea of an absentee god who set the universe in motion long ago and left it alone thereafter (Hick John, 1990). Theism is the belief in God, while atheism is the belief that there is no God. Polytheism is the belief in many gods. Henotheism believes that there are many gods but restricts allegiance to one of them. Pantheism is the belief that God is identical to nature or the world as a

whole. Pantheism is the view that all things ultimately exist in God. Monotheism holds that there is only one Supreme Being who is personal and moral and expects a comprehensive and unqualified response from human creatures. Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak of traditional Rongmei religion is based on Polytheism, which is the belief that there is a multitude of personal gods or deities, which are usually assembled into a pantheon of gods, each ruling a different department of life.

### **Tingkao Ragwang (Supreme God)**

In the Rongmei indigenous religion, there is a belief in the existence of a supreme god who is viewed as the creator of the gods, the universe, humans, and all things in existence. His name is Tingkao Ragwang or Haipou Tingkao Ragwang. Tingkao Ragwang literally means "heavenly god," "God of heaven," or "lord of the universe" (Kamei Budha, 2016). The term "Haipou" translates to "Great Leader" or "Supreme Chief," indicating a position of ultimate authority and reverence. "Tingkao" means sky or heaven, and "Ragwang" means God or lord, emphasizing the deity's dominion over the celestial and natural realms.

Tingkao Ragwang is perceived as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent deity. The attributes and characteristics of Tingkao Ragwang are profound and multifaceted. Tingkao Ragwang is regarded as the creator of the universe, the earth, and all living beings. This deity not only initiated creation but also continues to sustain and oversee the natural order and balance of the world. Dr. Brown pointed out that the Kabui people believed in a supreme deity who was the creator of all things and whose nature was benevolent (Hudson T C, 1911). Tingkao Raguang exists eternally and has no beginning or end. He is the regulator of the universe, giver and source of life, giver of abundance and justice. No one but Him can give life (Kamei G, 2006). He is omnipotent, omniscient, and present everywhere. Birth and death are his creations; However, this law does not bind him. The devotees addressed him by various names such as Shamting Phenmeipu, Shomprai Guang, Pasumeipu-Padameipu (Creator and Ordainer), Businmeipu-Buchammeipu (giver of the soul), Tammeipu-Janmeipu, Dandikachek Panumeipu (Gonmei Lanbilung, 2011).

The deity serves as the ultimate moral authority, embodying principles of righteousness, justice, and truth. The teachings and stories associated with Tingkao Ragwang often emphasize virtues such as honesty, bravery, respect, and community solidarity. Furthermore, Tingkao Ragwang is seen as a protector and guardian, providing guidance, blessings, and protection from harm. Rituals and prayers frequently seek the deity's intervention to ensure the well-being and prosperity of individuals and the community.

Creation myths and stories play a crucial role in illustrating the significance and attributes of Haipou Tingkao Ragwang. These narratives, passed down through generations, form the core of Rongmei religious teachings and cultural heritage. According to Rongmei mythology, in the beginning, there was a vast void filled with darkness and chaos. Tingkao Ragwang, in an act of divine will, brought forth light and order, creating the heavens, the earth, and all living beings. It is also

believed that the existence of all creation is nothing other than the elements of God Himself. It has no specific shape or form. He can take on any form and power over the earth. All things on earth arise from his own body, which transforms into liquid forms and then into solid forms. The creation of the universe is depicted as a harmonious and deliberate act, reflecting the deity's omnipotence and wisdom. Another significant creation story involves the birth of humanity. Tingkao Ragwang fashioned the first humans from clay, imbuing them with life through divine breath “Ho So Lo” (Golmei D., 2021). This act symbolizes the intimate connection between the deity and human beings, emphasizing the sacredness of life and the divine origin of humanity. In Rongmei tradition, the first ancestors are often considered demigods or divine beings created directly by Tingkao Ragwang. These ancestors are believed to have received divine teachings and guidance from the deity, establishing the moral and ethical codes that govern Rongmei society. Stories about Tingkao Ragwang also highlight the establishment of natural laws and order. The deity is credited with creating the seasons, regulating the cycles of nature, and ensuring the fertility of the land, underscoring the deity's role in maintaining balance and harmony in the natural world.

#### **Raguang Naren Chanei (Pantheon of Seven Brothers Gods)**

In the Rongmei belief system, the supreme deity, Haipou Tingkao Ragwang, is said to reside in heaven. This supreme god created numerous other gods and goddesses to serve under him, each with specific roles and domains, such as the earth, sun, moon, mountains, rivers, fire, wind, and villages (Yanuo Asoso, 1982). These deities serve as intermediaries between Tingkao Ragwang and the people. One prominent myth involves the emergence of the pantheon of gods. According to this myth, the supreme deity created Didimpu, appointing him as the ruler of the lower realm's gods (Na Raguang) and entrusting him with earthly matters. Didimpu had a wife, Didimpui, a daughter named Kamadinliu and a sister named Charasinglangpui, but he lacked a son. He prayed to the supreme god for a son, and Tingkao Ragwang granted his prayer under the condition that no one should see Didimpu and his wife together in bed. If someone did, they would receive the blessing instead. Despite sending everyone away to fetch water, Charasinglangpui saw them together and consequently received eight eggs from the supreme deity, which she laid near the Agu (Barak) stream (Kamson Chaoba, 2009; Kamson Chaoba, 2015). Seven of these eggs hatched into gods, while the eighth egg remained unhatched and became the deity Dimei.

Charasinglangpui introduced her seven sons to their uncle, Didimpu. Didimpu then challenged them to various competitions, such as stone throwing, javelin throwing, pestle throwing, and wrestling, declaring that whoever defeated him would succeed him as Na Raguang. The youngest brother, with his mother's persuasion and aid, managed to marry Didimpu's daughter, Kamadinliu, and took the name Apouna or Paona. With his mother's help, Apouna won all the contests against his older brothers and eventually defeated Didimpu in a final wrestling match, ascending to the throne as

Na Raguang. Didimpu, defeated, retreated beneath the earth and became the King of the Underworld and Earthquakes (Banglanguang) (Kamei G., 2004).

The eldest brother, knowing of his mother's favoritism towards Apouna, rebelled and moved south to Bhuban Hill in east Cachar. Gangmumei Kamei noted that the worship of the pantheon of gods likely began in the later prehistoric period when the Zeliangrong people settled in the western hills of Manipur, southern Nagaland, and the eastern and northern Cachar hills (Kamei G., 2006). Tingkao Ragwang endowed the pantheon of the Seven Brothers with various powers and duties for the welfare of creation. The seven brothers and their roles are as follows:

- Raguang: After defeating his uncle, Apouna became Raguang, the king of all gods in the lower kingdom, responsible for earthly affairs, residing on Mount Koubru in northern Manipur.
- Buanchanu/Bisnu: The eldest brother, residing in sacred caves on Bhuban Hill, handles the affairs of humans, nature, animals, and other gods.
- Napsinmei (Laorang): Living on Napsinmei Hill, he manages crops and grains, ensuring food supply.
- Chonchai: Residing on Kasuakbut Hill, he is responsible for men's health.
- Charakilongmei: His abode is in Benna Thonglang village, where he is tasked with maintaining peace on earth.
- Koklou: At the top of Pongringlong Village in Mount Koubru, he manages the court of the gods.
- Karangong: Living in Puching (Khebuching) in Tamenglong, he is worshipped for health reasons.
- Dime: The unhatched egg that remained underground, forming a deity.

The followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak worship these pantheon gods during the Gaan-Ngai festival, known collectively as Raren Loumei, seeking their blessings and protection. The main reason for worshipping the Seven Brothers is to invoke blessings for their well-being and to prevent any difficulties, dangers, misfortunes, etc., that may befall them. They are considered the benefactors and protectors of humans.

#### **Other lower realm gods/deities**

*Kairao (Ancestor Worship)*: The souls or spirits of deceased ancestors act as divine beings for their relatives on earth (Gonmei L., 2011). The ancestors are known as Kairao. It is believed that when a person dies, the soul does not die but remains as a protector of that particular family or household. The living family performs a ritual ceremony by offering sacrifices and paying homage to their ancestors' souls to ensure the respective family's safety, prosperity, and well-being. The ancestor worship is known as Kairao Kalummei.

*Bambu (Village Deities)*: There is a traditional belief that a particular or special deity or spirit reigns in each individual village. They are believed to be guardians and protectors of the individual villages, to be worshiped or sometimes appeased. These are namely (i) Kaipi Bambu, who presides in the northern part of the village, and (ii) Kaiba Bambu, who presides in the southern part of the village.

*Shong (Nature Deities)*: Some elements of nature, such as water, fire, wind, and earth, are believed to be endowed with divine powers. These natural elements are therefore worshiped or propitiated in the form of the King of Fire (Maiguang), the King of Wind (Puanguang), the King of Water (Duiguang), the Mother Earth (Ditigmei), and the King of Earthquakes (Banglanguang).

The tradition of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak also includes propitiating lesser gods and evil spirits to avoid disturbances, a practice known as Rakheangmei (Kamei G., 2004). The gods of the lower realm regulate the universe and human affairs according to Tingkao Ragwang's will, and a divine hierarchy decides the life, death, fortune, and destiny of man.

The survival and strengthening of the Rongmei indigenous religion against the backdrop of widespread conversion to Christianity highlights the importance of adaptability, community solidarity, and strong leadership (Kamei, A., 2013). Through continuous reformation and education, the Rongmei people have managed to keep their religious traditions alive and thriving in the modern world.

#### **Importance and rational of the study**

The study of the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) within the Rongmei indigenous religion is of profound significance, both academically and culturally. In an era marked by rapid modernization and globalization, indigenous belief systems are increasingly under threat. The importance of this study is multifaceted, emphasizing the preservation of cultural heritage, contributing to the academic discourse on indigenous religions, and fostering a deeper understanding of the diverse ways human societies conceptualize the divine.

The study of the indigenous Rongmei religious concept of God has profound theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it enriches religious studies, anthropology, mythology, environmental studies, and comparative religion by showcasing a complex and multifaceted spiritual system that emphasizes creation, morality, protection, wisdom, and ecological harmony. Practically, it aids in cultural preservation, community empowerment, education, environmental conservation, and interfaith dialogue. It could be further study by employing interdisciplinary approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Rongmei religious worldview and its broader significance.

#### **Conclusion**

The study of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak provides valuable insights into the intricate and multifaceted nature of the Rongmei indigenous religion. The concept of Tingkao Ragwang as the supreme deity embodies the community's understanding of creation, moral authority, and the natural order. The pantheon of gods, including the Seven Brothers and various lesser deities, reflects a deeply rooted

connection to nature and ancestral worship. This exploration emphasizes the significance of maintaining and preserving Rongmei religious traditions, which are not only cultural treasures but also vital components of the community's identity. In the face of rapid modernization and globalization, it is crucial to protect and honor these Indigenous belief systems, ensuring that their rich heritage continues to thrive for future generations.

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