

# Creation and Origin Myths and Legends of the Rongmei (Kabui)

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## Abstract

Many societies and cultures have their own myths and legends of origin or creation which explain how the world came to be and that they considered them to be true accounts of their distant past. Likewise, Rongmei tribe is also rich in myths, legends, folktales, folksongs, etc. which were orally passes down through generations to generations. There are no forms of any written literatures and therefore the Rongmei tribes, like most of the other tribes, depends on the orally passed down stories or myths to give account for their ancient past. The paper is an attempt to explore some of the cosmogony, etiological and historical myths and legends of the origin and creation of the Rongmeis. The sources of this paper are based on both primary and secondary sources available and also from interviewing with some elders of Rongmei villages.

**Keywords:** Rongmei, Myth, Legend, Tingkao Raguang.

## 1. Introduction

The Rongmeis are one of the indigenous Zeliangrong Naga tribes who live in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland of Northeastern India. They are also called “Kabui” by the Meiteis and other tribes of Manipur. However, the origin of the term “Kabui” is unknown or unclear to other people and to the Rongmeis themselves. But the term “Rongmei” is based on the geographical

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location of where Rongmei people reside. The term 'Rong' means 'south' and the term 'mei' means 'people', thus, Rongmei meaning 'people of the south' or 'southerner'. The Rongmei people have their own histories which are rich in cultural heritage and religion through myths, folktales, folksongs, legends, etc. which are orally passed down through generations. They also have a large collection of hymns and traditions on the stories in regard to the creation of everything.

The term creation refers to the beginning of things, whether by the will and act of a transcendent being, by emanation from some ultimate source, or in any other way (Charles H. Long<sup>n.d.</sup>). A creation myth is a supernatural mytho-religious story or explanation that describes the beginnings of humanity, earth, life and the universe, usually as a deliberate act of "creation" by one or more deities. Myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. According to Y. Masih, "in ancient time the mythical thinking was the rule, so naturally they looked upon the whole world as governed and controlled by a personal Being" (Y. Masih, 2017, p. 191). C. Lima Imchen stated that all the Nagas have their own versions of origin myth, but the general ideas behind the stories are similar which is that their myths are essentially characterized for the social institutions and actions of their belief systems (C. Lima. Imchen, 2015, p.120). The myths are manifested through oral narratives in the form of stories or ballads which are recounted in every ceremony, festivals, and gatherings of all sorts. Indranil Dey, in his book "*The Primordial songs of the Rongmeis and the Dimasas of Barak Valley*", stated that the world of the Rongmeis' myths, legends and folklore is one which has deep respect for the natural elements along with supernatural power and their consciousness and reaction of them (Indranil Dey, 2015, p. 43). There are many types of myth such as etiological myths, psychological myths and historical myths. However, we will discuss here based on the etiological and historical form of myths and legends of Rongmeis' origin.

## 2. Cosmogony (Creation of the Universe)

The word “*cosmogony*” is derived from the combination of two Greek terms ‘*kosmos*’ and ‘*genesis*’. ‘*Kosmos*’ refers to the order of the universe and ‘*genesis*’ means the coming into being. Thus, cosmogony has to do with myths, stories, or theories regarding the creation of the universe as an order. Cosmogony has to do with founding myths and the origin and the creation of the gods and cosmos, and how the world came into existence (Terje Oestigaard, n.d. p.76). It is a scientific or mythical account of the origin of the universe. The first attempt of a philosophical cosmogony was made by Thales of Miletus.

According to the Rongmei traditional legends and stories, it is believed that, a Supreme Being, called *Tingkao Raguang* or *Tinguang*, was the creator of the universe, the gods, man and animals. According to their belief there was nothing in the very beginning, but only *Tingkao Raguang*. The universe and all the things in it were created in the will of *Tingkao Raguang*. In regard to this, Gangmumei Kamei, in his book, “*The history of the Zeliangrong Nagas from Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu*”, stated that the God created the *tingpuk* ( the sky), the sun, the moon, and the stars, the planets and all the celestial bodies. These heavenly bodies were arranged into seven layers: twilight zone, the cloud realm, the land of the moon, the sun, the planet, the stars and the heaven (the abode of the Supreme God). He also created the layer of the Earth, a country known as *Chingliangbut* was created for the gods, different layers of the water kingdom, over water, below water, surface (*duitang*), under water (*duibang*), *Ahanga* or *Lunghana*, then the land of the dead (*Taroilam*) and *Banglaguangdi* (the land of the god of earthquakes) (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, p. 24). In time, it came to the mind of *Tingkao Raguang* the need to create the universe, so he transformed himself into a liquid and then to a mud form and finally to a sand like form which were distributed to all the places and created a universe, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, etc. (Dandina Golmei, 2021).

Here we can see the similarity with the concept of Judaic-Christian tradition of "*creation ex nihilo*" which means creation out of nothingness. According to John Hick, the term 'creation', here means far more than fashioning or designing new forms from an already given material i.e., as a builder makes a house or a sculptor make a statue, but it is the summoning of a universe into existence when otherwise there was only God (John Hick, 2015, p. 9).

### 3. Creation of Earth

The Supreme God, Tingkao Raguang, also created a deity named Didimpu and directed to create the earth. With the blessings of Tingkao Raguang, a deity Didimpu first created the earth taking water which looked like a yolk of egg. The created egg yolk- liked-moist earth was dried up with the heat of fire and air. Tingkao Raguang further advised Didimpu that the surface of the created earth would not be used by him but only by one who would always remember and offer holy wine to Him regularly would settle there, living like a blooming flower. Didimpu think that the created earth was not enough for the habitation and therefore further creation of the earth was necessary. For this reason, he asked the help of another god, Agonpu. Agonpu, who disguised himself as an earthworm, dipped into water and excreted and thus form a heap of earth. Didimpu leveled the heap of the earth for expansion and beautification. Since the god Didimpu created the earth, he is also known as Didampu (Chaoba Kamson, 2015, pp. 35-36).

In another myth on the creation of the earth, it is believed that the Supreme God authorized the two heavenly beings called '*Newmeiduan* and *Newlotiap*' to make the earth suitable for habitation for all the livings beings. As commanded, the two deities set out in the form of a crows and then took the form of two giant frogs, trying out ways and means in a mid of raging ocean water, to fulfill the mission. They saw a giant earthworm, coiling around the clay mound (*Mungham*) above a dwarf plant called '*Chakhunghang*', and asked him to excrete out soil or mud to create the earth. Wanting to see his own work, the giant earthworm started encircling himself around the earth. He saw his own tail and thought that there was

another creature like him and begun chasing it around ceaselessly making the earth spinning (Grace Darling, 2009, pp. 122-123).

Again, Gangmumei Kamei stated that the creation of the earth is narrated in a hymn chanted in the worship of earth, known as the "*Dichuk*". According to this narration, Tingkao Raguang directed a god named Didampu and a goddess named Didampui, to create the earth. With the help of the supreme God's advised, they command the earthworm to excrete a sod of earth in the form of an egg which was kept hanging by a string from the space. Then a rat broke the string and let the sod of earth fell on the water. The earthworm and Tingthinpui, an amphibious insect, which burrows underground and flies gradually, enlarged the egg size sod of clay into the earth (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, pp. 24-25).

#### 4. Creation of Man

According to Rongmei traditional believes, man was created by another god, named Dampapui, by the orders of the Supreme God, who is the creator of all things and whose nature is benevolent (R. Brown, 1874, p. 27). The creation of man is mentioned in one of the ritual hymns recited on the occasion of "*Nazumgaimei khatni nasankanmei*", which is a ritual naming ceremony usually performed on the fifth day of every child's birth (Lamalu Thaimai, 2002). After creating the earth and all the things in it, Tingkao Raguang bore the thought of creating human beings who could remembers Him, who could rule the world in His place and who could make offerings to Him (Kamei Buddha Kabui, 2016, p. 127). He advised the two deities, Dampapu and Dampapui, to create a man. As ordered, they created a man, firstly, in the form of a fish (*khagak*) which was rejected by Tingkao Raguang, followed by a toad and a monkey which are rejected again. Therefore, the fish was set free in the water, the frog on the earth and monkey in the woods. The God was disappointed by the creation of the two deities, so He showed His image and ordered them to create a man in the likeness of his image. As directed, the two deities created man and woman with the clay of the earth (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, p. 25). Again, the created human was lifeless and could not move the

limbs. So, the two deities approached Tingkao Raguang for help and He breathed life-soul "*Ho so lo*" to the man and woman. The created human beings (Homei or Homanseina) started sneezing and thus came to live (Lungaibi Solomon Dangmei, 2016, p. 3).

There is also another story of creation of man narrated by Rongmeis elders. The story goes like this: "the god, Didimpu, after creating the earth and all the other livings and nonliving things in it, as ordained by the God, he became arrogant and stop giving reverence to the Supreme God. So, the God decided to create another being that could remember him and appreciate his creation. Thus, God ordered the two deities named *Sudimpui* and *Sudimpu* respectively, to create human beings. After creating different prototypes of man and seeking help from Tingkao Raguang, who advised them to create in his image from *Chonliangbut* or *Kalaluangbut*, *Sudimpui* and *Sudimpu* finally succeeded in their creation. The first man and woman, named *Tingkabi* and *Kajimik*, respectively were thus, created. From the teardrops of the first man and woman, there came a 120 (*miranphaikhatchui*) human of their kinds. These humans were warned by God not to cross their abode. However, they want to start exploring outside of their abode. They started roaming around the earth and met the double sun and moon called '*munnei* and *munbu*' respectively. By these sun and moon, their body became weak and helpless. They went to seek help or advised from *Tingpureangsonang* or *Mucharakhandimujungpu*, who was a benevolent benefactor and mediator of all gods, men and other living creatures. *Tingpureangsonang* invited them to dwell together with all gods of lower realm (*chara*) in his divine dormitory, and learn from him the way of living. In the dormitory, a feud broke out between the gods and man. Both the groups were killing each other. Man started complaining to *tingpureangsonang*, the patriarch (head) of the dormitory, to separate them from all the gods." (Lungnihai Rongmei, 2021).

It is believed that the first created human doesn't have complete organs on their body and they were living only by smelling balls of rice. They started demanding *Sudimpu* and *Sudimpui* to create

whole organs a human could possess. Thus, the two deities, with the blessing of Tingkao Raguang, created a man with complete organs. They were named *Tangpu* and *Tangpui* respectively. Sudimpu and Sudimpui were also called as *Dampapu* and *Dampapui* respectively, meaning that they had created a perfect complete human being. It is also believed that some of the man after separation from the divine dormitory refused to live on the earth and were fled to the stars.

## 5. Boiling of Eyes

On hearing the demands from gods and man, *Tingpureangsonang* agreed to separate them from the dormitory. He calls all the gods and man for a meeting and decided to boil their eye balls. Man volunteers to be the first one to boil. While boiling, *Tingpureangsonang* asked the man whether he still sees the gods, man tried to act strong and always response yes. Thus, the eyes of a man were boiled to the point where he could no more sees the gods. After that, all the animals, which were going to follows man, were also done the same. Among them, a goat's eyeballs were boiled longest. A dog pretends not seeing the gods and so boiled its eyes the shortest. Thus, only dogs are believed to have the ability to see the gods or spirits to these days.

Before the dispersal, *Tingpureangsonang* advised the man that man would no longer sees the gods and they should work and toil their body for their food. He also advised the gods to depend on the food offers by man (Chaoba Kamson, 2009, p. 105).

## 6. Origin and Migration

An origin myth is a myth that describes the origin of some feature of the natural or social world. It is the stories we tell to explain how things came to be and that every culture has them. The origin and migration of Rongmei people is examined through their narrations of myths, legends, traditional hymns, etc. In one of the stories, Rongmeis are believed to be originated from a mythical cave called "*Mahou Taobhei*". According to this legend, the Supreme God

created a man named *Pokrei* or *Dirannang* and a woman named *Dichalu* and they were kept inside the cave. The legends, rituals hymns and traditions of Rongmeis referred to their coming out of a hole or a cave, *Mahou Taobhei*, which is believed to be located at Ramting Kabin, now Senapati district of Manipur.

It is mentioned in one of the rituals hymns the "*Munsoi*" (a ceremony to ward off the evils), that man came out of the *taobhei* (cave) when the mithun (*Guai Chang*) pushed out the stone slab at the mouth of the cave, at the order of the God, Tingkao Raguang. The *Mithun* got a blessing from God that his two horns would be adorned with the colors of gold and silver and his legs be adorned with stripes of black and white, and also that he be exempted from the performance of any duty, except being offered to God during the ceremonial sacrifices performed by men (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, p. 29).

When *Pokrei* and *Dichalu* came out of the cave, they saw the light and found the birds, fowls, animals, and plant. It is believed that the cave '*Mahou Taobhei*' in the myth of Rongmei maybe referring to a stone slab called '*Chatiu*' which is located near a deep gorge between two hills of a place called Ramting Kabin, a place about 10 kms away from Oklong village in Senapati District, Manipur (All Zeliangrong Students Union (AMN), 2009, p. 12). The gorge is deep and dark that the stars cannot be seen properly. The term "*Ramting kabin*", literally means, the "*old squeezed land*" where "*Ram*" means the land or village and "*Ting*" means old and "*Kabin*" means squeezed. It is also said that "*Mahou Taobhei*" is none other than the place or the organs of the human beings where they gave birth (Lungaibi S. Dangmei, 2016, p. 38).

As time goes by, the first man and woman God created, felt the need to marry and multiply the human race, but they belong to the same maker and family. With no option to choose the partner from different clans, they decided to circle the termites' mound (*pungbut*) in opposite direction and pretend themselves as people from other clans when they meet each other and wish "*Apou*" (a

kinship term use by women to address the man of other clans who are elder to them) by the woman, in place of “*Achai*” which means brother (Gonmei Meithuanlungpou Sabastians, 2015, p. 52). After circling seven times round the *pungbut*, by the eight rounds, Dichalu addressed her brother Pokrei “*Apou*” and from that moment, they got married and become first husband and wife on earth. As time passed by, they begot children who were thought to be the first settlers at Makhel.

## 7. Makhel

Makhel, now in Mao village, Manipur, is believed by several Naga tribes such as Angamis, Lothas, Semas, Mao, Poumei, Tangkhul, etc. to be a village of their origin and a point of dispersal in their migration to their respective habitats, Zeliangrong also being among one of them (All Zeliangrong Students Union (ANM), 2009, p. 12) After they had lived there for several years, they felt the need to change their location as the present place could no longer hold their populations growth. So, they search for a better and bigger area of fertile and suitable land for them (Dr. Ng. Ngalengnam, 2005, p. 162). They erected megaliths at Makhel in memory of their having dispersed from there to various directions such as to the frontier of western Manipur, Eastern Naga Hills and Barak Valley (Kamei Buddha Kabui, 2016, pp. 18-19). Even now the erected Megaliths are very much remained intact.

The history of Makhel as an ancient village of migration has been collaborated by the megalith of dispersal, “*Tamraratu*” (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, p. 30) or “*Tatmarabu*” (*tat ntampatmei taosom*) (Lungaibi Solomon Dangmei, 2016, p. 37), in the present Mao village of Makhel. T.C. Hudson also wrote in his book “*Naga tribes of Manipur*” that “At Makhel is to be seen a stone, now erect, which marks the place from which the common ancestors emerged from the earth. Maikel is regarded as the centre from which migrations took place” (T.C Hudson, 2020, p.13).

## 8. Chawangphungning/ Guangphungning

Some of the ancestors who dispersed from Makhel searching for new places are believed to be *Roukang/ Roukaeng*, *Maziangmei* and *Makime/ Making*. Maziangmei went to northeastern side. Makime, while searching for his lost pig, found a beautiful place and decided to live there. He named the place Gokbunglong, now this place name is called Yaingangpokpi or Oknaopokpi. Roukang, on the other hand, settled in a place called Chawangphungning (Lungaibi Solomon Dangmei, 2016, p. 37). Some of the villages where the Nagas descendent of Roukang had settled are Guangphungning, Makuilongdi, Mariamkhundi, Kuaklou/ Koubru, Longren, Daluan, Rengdingzaeng, Ningthi, Gokbunglong, Tazinglong, Ragangphaiba, Loiching Namdai, Zeining, and Kiangra/ Kangra.

The concept of *Chawang* or *Gwang* which means king or chief was developed during their stay in Chawangphungning. The word '*chawang*' means 'king/ chief' and '*phungning*' means 'plots/ plain' area. An elder who led the people in the migration and settlement is believed to be made the chief. After living for a long period of time, the number of populations increases and life became quite problematic (Dr. Ng. Ngallengnam, 2015, p. 163). Eventually some of them left the place and moved westward.

## 9. Makuilongdi

Makuilongdi is believed to be established and developed by the Zeliangrong people. They were the first one to be settled in the place. From Chawangphungning, some of the migrants moved towards northeast and established a village Makuilongdi/ Nkuilongdi, '*Makui*' mean round and '*longdi*' mean big hill/ mountain, meaning big round hill. Makuilongdi was once the cradle of Zeliangrong people. The land of this place was fertile enough for cultivation which produced surplus of food. As the number of people grows with time, they expand their habitation making a cluster of smaller villages under the jurisdiction of Makuilongdi.

The basic feature of Zeliangrong society such as lineage society, patrilineal social structure, social organization such as chieftainship, village council (*pei*), dormitories systems, village festivals, religious beliefs, social customs, etc. were believed to be developed from Makuilongdi. Political system was also developed under the leadership of the village chief. The people were believed to have enjoyed long and peaceful lives, attaining the peak of their socio-cultural life (Pamei Namthiubuiyang, 2001, p. 14). It is said that the number of households in Makuilongdi reached as many as 250 with the population of 7777 (Lungaibi Solomon Dangmei, 2016, p. 39). Kamei Buddha stated that “Makuilongdi became more or less the Jerusalem of the ancestors of the Kabuis because; it is from there that they began to expose themselves to others” (Kamei Buddha Kabui, 2016, p. 20).

According to legends, the people in Makuilongdi were living their best days of their lives because of the surplus productions of food, indulging in enjoyment and merry making, forgetting even their lunar calendar of the agricultural cycles. They were believed to build 30 *taraengkai*, a ceremonial house, performing rituals and celebrations in a single year without taking a break. To their surprise, cicada, an insect, flew to the villages and in their shrill voice, told the people of the end of the lunar year, making the people shocked and terrified which were supposed to be a divine warning for violating the law of nature and regular social life of the village (All Zeliangrong Students’ Union (ANM), 2009, p. 14). Thus, a quick and sudden exodus occurred in Makuilongdi making one of the reasons for migrations.

According to another legend, Nguiba who was the chief of the Makuilongdi had two wives for the first wife was incapable of bearing him a son. His second wife first bore a son named Namgong/ Ramsing (Lungaibi Solomon Dangmei, 2016, p. 39). Then the first wife also gave birth to a son named Kading. The second wife again gave birth to her second son called Rembang/ Rambangbou (Kamei Buddha Kabui, 2016, p. 20). Nguiba, in his old age, was faced with a dilemma of choosing his successors out

of his two sons Namgong and Kading respectively. Thus, arised a family crisis on the issue of succession. Nguiba consulted his younger brother, Chatiu/ Chatiuwang, who lived in Bianna, Koubru range, who advised him by an intelligent stratagem to choose the younger son, Kading also being the son of the first wife. Being disappointed at the judgment, the elder son Namgong left the Makuilongdi and started a new village. Zeme are believed to be the descendants of Namgong who follows the plain of the Barak River. The original inhabitants of Makuilongdi who remained at their village under the chieftainship of Kading, the second son of Nguiba, came to be known as the Liangmei. Whiles the third son, Rembangbe, also led a large group of people and migrated towards the south searching for fallow or uncultivated lands. They came to be known as *Maruangmei* or *Rongmei* meaning, the southerners.

Some of the possible causes of migration from Makuilongdi are:

- \* Mythical beliefs of the divine wrath and warning for violating the law of nature and social disciplines of the village.
- \* Over population and far distance from village to field due to practice of shifting cultivation.
- \* Non-availability of cultivatable lands.
- \* Differences/ faction/ crisis over the succession to the hereditary chieftainship.

The Rongmeis were believed to be the most adventurous and scattered group among the Zeliangrong Nagas. From Makuilongdi, they migrated and settled at Kajinglong for many generations (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, pp. 37-38). According to Gangmumei Kamei, Rongmei trace their origin to Kajinglong which was an important sub-centre of migration to the south. Kajinglong also believed to be well known for the conflict between men and spirits. From Kajinglong, again groups of Rongmeis moved further south to the Irang River. Villages like Nrianglong, Chengdai, Kaikao, Nungnang, Gangluan Namthan, Khoupum and Montha were

founded and become quite popular and prosperous. New villages also further established in the barren mountain confines of the Chin Hills and Changphai or Champhai in the present Mizoram.

Today, Rongmeis are found settling in different places of Northeast India. The largest group of this tribe is found in the Tamenglong District of Manipur (Kamei Buddha Kabui, 2016, p. 24). Some of the places where Rongmeis are found settling now includes Tamenglong, Churachanpur, Senapati, Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal and Bishnupur Districts on Manipur. They are also found settling in Paren and Kohima Districts of Nagaland and in Halflong sub-division of Cachar and Hilakandi Districts of Assam respectively.

## 10. Conclusion

From the above study, we may, thus, come to have some knowledge on how the myths of Rongmeis tries to explain some of the metaphysical questions based on creation myth about the origins and beginning of things. The myth of Rongmei, like most of the other cultures, is in oral narrative form passes from one generation to another, therefore, it tends to have multiple versions of it. In the case of creation or origin myth in Rongmei tradition, there is a notion of primordial Supreme God called Tingkao Raguang who was the passive creator. Tingkao Raguang created some gods like Didimpu, Didimpui, Dampapu, Dampapui, etc. as his subordinates and ordered them to create the universe and all the things in it in His will. The Rongmei also have a pre-historical myth about their origin which point to their coming out of a hole or a cave called "*Mahou Taobhei*" at Ramting Kabin, which is also believed to be none other than a place where human gave birth. According to some elders, Rongmeis (Homei) were created by God in a very special and unique ways. They are even stronger and more powerful than the lower realm gods that Didimpu had created. Their historical myths and legends are somewhat supported by some archaeological evidences like a megalith, ruined villages, etc.

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