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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GAAN-NGAI FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Gaan-ngai is the biggest annual festival of the *Rongmei* who live in the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The *Gaan-ngai* festival commences on 13th day of Manipuri lunar month *Wakching* and lasts for five days. Worship of God (*Tingkao Ragwang*) through prayer and sacrifice for bountiful harvest and future prosperity of the community, love and peace among mankind is the main theme of the festival. Living dead of the family are also honoured. The social and cultural values, the aesthetic and creative senses are also expressed in the festival. Communal feast is usually a part of the festival which is tantamount of oath taking. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

The *Rongmei* are one of the natives of Manipur. Racially, they belong to Mongoloid stock and speak the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 2000: 477). Tradition says, the *Rongmei* ancestors originated from a cave recognized as *Mahou Taobei*; they moved to *Makhel* and to *Ramting Kabin*, and then to *Makuilongdi*, Senapati District of Manipur. From *Makuilongdi*, they migrated to the South. On the basis of traditions and linguistic history, it has been identified that the original homeland of the *Rongmei* and other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family was in South West China. As the *Rongmei* are "Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in South West China about 1000 B.C and migrated to their present habitat" (Kamei 2002: 24) through various routes in batches and at different periods. The present article attempts to delve into the *Gaan-ngai* festival of the *Rongmei* and its socio-cultural significance.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study has adopted inter-disciplinary method particularly the application of knowledge of both history and anthropology. The data have been collected from available primary and secondary sources and also from information collected from selected knowledgeable persons of the *Rongmei* community.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No scholar has so far studied the *Gaan-ngai* festival of the *Rongmei* people of Manipur in systematic way. Some local scholars, however, throw light on the *Rongmei* festivals in their respective works. However, still await a systematic examination and treatment on the subject matter. When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works and people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of God (*Tingkao Ragwang*) and honoring of the dead. The social and cultural values, the aesthetic and creative senses, their love of beauty and color are expressed in the *Gaan-ngai* festival. It is a festival for spreading good will, peace and preservation of cultural identity. Alessandro Falassi (1987) has described festival as "...a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, all members of a whole community, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and a sharing a worldview." Festivals are celebrated under different names, but their functions are essentially the same. They unite people in a common exercise, thus strengthening the bonds between the participants. Rituals of the festival are meant to ensure the prosperity and safety of the ethnic group or community. *Gaan-ngai* is the festival of lights and victory, victory over evil; (*Gaan* means light and *Ngai*, festival). Another version of *Gaan-ngai* is the festival of winter. *Gaan* also means winter and *Ngai*, festival. This festival is also described as a New Year festival as it marks the end of the year and beginning of the New Year according to

the traditional calendar. The New Year is marked by *Mhairapmei*, the making of new fire by friction of wood and bamboos. This festival begins on the 13th day of Manipuri lunar month *Wakching* every year and lasts for 5 days. It is mainly celebrated by the followers of *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (TRC) living in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The whole culture, religion and social life are interwoven in the performance of *Gaan-ngai*. It is a festival for spreading good will, peace and prosperity and preservation of cultural identity.

Area of celebration of *Gaan-ngai*

Gaan-ngai is a festival based on traditional religion (TRC). Majority of the Rongmei living in the western hills of Manipur do not celebrate *Gaan-ngai* as they have accepted Christianity. However, it is celebrated with full splendor and passion in the valley area where the traditional religion is alive. It is also observed by the followers of TRC inhabiting in Assam and Nagaland.

Gaan-ngai's Message

When the *Wakching* month arrives in the midst of cold gentle breeze, each and everyone remembers *Gaan-ngai* and its message of love and peace. We should cherish the message of *Gaan-ngai* to bring peace and harmony in the society. In the present day society, *Gaan-ngai*'s message of peace has a special relevance. The Scripture of TRC says, "Be truthful, love others, be good to others, good to the guests and please them. Such act of piety will atone hundred sins (Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak 2002: 36)."

Religious activities of *Gaan-ngai*

Gaan-ngai is a post harvest festival. After harvest, the granaries are full and people prepare to celebrate festivity, worship of the God (*Tingkao Ragwang*) and honoring of the living dead. The rites and rituals of the festival are given below:

Offering of ginger (*Guhcheng Phaimiei*)

The festival opens with *Guhcheng Phaimiei* at the abode of *Bambu* (village presiding deity) to avoid any untoward incidents during the festival. It is performed by an elder of *Pei* (village council) with relevant hymns. Ginger (*Guh*), is considered sacred and it is used in many rites, sacrifices and also towards off evil forces (*Rasi-Rarou*). It is believed that ginger represents the toes and fingers of the formless creator and Almighty God (*Tingkao Ragwang*).

Observation of pig spleen (*Gaukpaijaomei*)

In the morning of the first day, *Gaukpaijaomei* ceremony is performed at the courtyard of male's dormitory (*Khangchui*) sacrificing a big pig in the name of God. The spleen of the pig is removed and examined carefully for the sign of good and evil that is to come in the year. The portent is read as: if there is blemish on the spleen it is assumed as bad and there is nothing on it, is regarded as good sign.

Communal meal (*Jeigantumei*):

The above sacrificed animal is cooked and consumed by the members present at *Khangchui*. This is called *Jeigantumei*.

Jeigantumei is tantamount of oath taking. Before meal they cry *Naplahoi*.

Hoi procession (*Hoigammei*): This *Hoi* procession takes place on the first day. In the afternoon, every male of *Khangchui* wearing the best colorful varied shawls meant for their age, headgear and holding spears in their hands will march from one end of the village to another; it starts from *Khangchui* and return to the same place with *Rilai Hoi* after the sport competitions like long jump, throwing stone etc. at the *Daanshanpung*. It expresses the strength and unity of the village. In the Rongmei tradition, every important event starts and comes to an end with *Hoi*. *Hoi* is an important part of *Gaan-ngai* (Brown 2001:28) and the objective of *Hoi* procession is to renew the magical defense of the village community against natural and supernatural enemies.

Production of new fire (*Mhailapmei*): New fire is produced by wood and bamboos friction. The fire is either distributed to every household or several team of young men visit individual families to produce the new fire. It is believed that partaking of the foods cooked with the new fire will make them healthy, wealthy and wise; other significance is that the blessed influence of the fresh fire will last throughout the whole year (Frazer 1922:556-557).

Offering at the village gate (*Khunnummei*): This ceremony is performed in the afternoon of the third day called *Tuna-Gaan ngai*. In the ceremony, the owner of the village (*Nampou*), the chief functionary will go to the village gates and dig holes in which he offers an egg (*Loidui*) and iron pieces (*Tanchu*) with the chanting of relevant hymns. It is an affirmation that he is the descendent of the founder of the village and prays for the affirmation of his position and strength of the village. This has social and administrative significance.

Ritual of reaffirmation (*Raang pammei*): In the midnight of the third day, *Raang pammei* ceremony is observed as a symbol of reaffirmation of the strength and unity of the village against the elements and forces unfavorable to the village (Kamei 2004:80-81).

Calling of paddy (*Napkao*): On the first day, *Napkao* ceremony is performed in every household for bountiful harvest in the coming year. Offering of the best part of the killed animals or fowls i.e. the liver with rice and drink are made to goddess of wealth (*Kambuipui*), goddess of rice (*Charaipui*) and ancestors (*Kairao*) who live in the form of hearth stones. This is called *Napchanmei*. The ritual offering is carried out by the household mother as the deity of rice is female.

Village gate opening (*Raangpatmei*): The last day is called *Raangpatmei*, gate opening; (*Raang* means village gate and *Patmei*, to open). In olden days, the village gates were closed during the festival to secure from enemy attack or raid. On this day, a ceremony called *Raren Loumei*, worship of Seven Bothers Gods, presiding deities of the village, gods of different aspects of nature like the God of fire, wind etc., propitiation of evil spirits not to disturb men is performed by offering fowls, wine, water, ginger, egg etc. for 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*, upper village

deity (Kamei 2005:21). A complete genna known as *Neihmei* (prayer) is observed during the period of the sacrifice. The chickens are cooked and consumed by the elders of *Pei*, old women and children who are not yet admitted in the boys' and girls' dormitories. T.C Hodson (1996:77) has rightly stated that in Rongmei society food tabus are not rigidly imposed on either the very young or the old. *Raren Loumei* may be interpreted as a send off the deities because the members of *Khangchui* blew horns of the mithun at the *Daanshanpung* on the first day of *Wakching* month communicating to gods and men regarding the coming *Gaan-ngai* festival.

Calling of soul (*Buhkaomei*): After the completion of *Raren Loumei* ceremony, the village elders return at the house of village council (*Peikai*) with a *Hoi* procession where a priest holding a big cock and performs *Buhkaomei* invoking *Tingkao Ragwang* to extend protection to the people of the village from death and danger and provide welfare to the village and its people. The pieces of cooked chicken will be distributed to every household of the village.

Ritual farewell to the dead (*Thei-Kadime*)

Ritual farewell is given to those who died in the previous year in the form of parting meal provided by concerned family to his/her friends. It is believed that the departed soul does not leave the village until the parting meal is over. The grave is beautified and drinks and eatables are also placed on it as a way of sharing the meal with him or her (Das 1985:68). It may be interpreted as a farewell banquet— a send off one who is unwilling to go at the termination of which the deceased is formally but firmly shown the door (Hasting: 436). Therefore, *Gaan-ngai* is the festival of both the living and dead.

Libation of wine (*Joupan Keime*)

In the festival, every rite is concluded by offering of holy wine to Almighty God (*Tingkao Ragwang*), village presiding deity (*Bambu*), ancestors (*Kairao*) for well being and prosperity and propitiation of wine to evil spirits not to give trouble to men.

Cultural Activities

Festival competitions include various forms of contests such as drum beating, singing, dance etc. In *Gaan-ngai* festival, the boys and girls of the dormitories perform various types of dance and music.

Dance (*Laam*)

Usually, the unmarried boys and girls of the dormitories in colourful traditional attire actively take part in dancing and singing. The dances performed in the *Gaan-ngai* festival are known as *Chapa Laam*. They are *Khangbon Kadi Laam*, farewell dance to leader of the *Khangchui* (*Khangbon*), dance in honor of the dead (*Thei Kadi Laam*) *Tamchan Laam*, farewell dance to a bride (*Tuna Kadime Laam*), dance waving of sash (*Pazeime*), etc. All the festival dances are accompanied by relevant songs and musical instruments like drum, cymbals, gong etc.

Folk song (*Lu*)

The folk songs form the essence of the Rongmei culture. It is believed that song is divine origin. Men adopted the songs sung by gods. Their songs express their love, their hardship,

hope, frustration, victory etc. Festival songs are also known as *Chapa Lu*. In the festival, singing of song competition between girls and boys is performed at *Luchiu* at the night time and no song will be repeated by any singer. On the other hand some boys with spear in their hand will go around the village singing songs in praise of the might and courage of the people of the village. This is called *Kairong Lonmei* (guarding the village).

Drum beating (*Khong Baime*)

In addition, they perform beating of different types of traditional drum (*Khong*) and playing of harp (*Rah jaime*). The way of life of the people is expressed in the festival through dance and music.

Customary Activities

Rites of passage, in the form described by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), mark the transition from one life stage to the next. They may be given special relevance by being part of a festival event. These may include forms of initiation into age groups, such as childhood, youth, adulthood, and initiation into occupational, military, or religious groups.

- Admission of new members (boys and girls) to their respective dormitories.
- Promotion of boys and girls from minor to major status.
- Promotion from *khangbon* to *Gaanchang*, *Gaanchang* to *Banja* and filling up of vacant posts of *Pei*, village council. These posts are not given by resolution or appointment order but by songs, dances and cultural activities
- Newly married women are formally admitted to women institution (*Mathenmei Kaibang/Lakpui Kaibang*). They are responsible for the maintenance of peace in the village
- Families of the deceased offer gifts to the dormitories concerned in the name of the deceased.

Gaan-ngai also does serve as an annual gathering of the community.

Games and Sports

Festival usually includes rites of competition, which often constitute in the form of games. On the first day of the festival towards evening, at the village jumping ground (*Daanshanpung*), the young boys perform competition in stone throwing (*Taophamei*) and long jump (*Danchammei*) in the presence of the villagers. These competitions will be introduced by the owner of village (*Nampou*) with a sort of religious hymns for wellbeing and prosperity of the village. The winners of the competitions are not given prizes but they are required to pay fees (*Shon*) for declaring and acknowledging his power and ability. Stone throwing is believed to make the heavenly granary's door break. Long jump on the other hand is believed to make the swelling earth spread by the force of the jump which is equivalent to distribution of paddy for mankind. Therefore, the purpose of stone throwing and long jump during the *Gaan-ngai festival* is to get plentiful harvest.

Maintenance of good behavior

Discipline is sternly enforced by the leaders (*Khangbons*) of *Khangchui* for young boys. An act of issuance of whip

(*Thingngun Kadime*) is performed at the male's dormitory. The objective of issuance of whip is to teach boys to obey what the leaders say and to accomplish the works assigned to them. As a customary practice, an arrangement is made to beat the boys nominally exhorting to pay much attention to work. The girls' dormitory also follows the same rule. It clearly indicates the authority that the *Khangbons* have in *Khangchiu* and the respect that requires to be given to the *Khangbons*.

Peace and harmony

In the festival, worship of *Tingkao Ragwang* and communal meal (*Jeigantumei*) is performed to preserve and promote unity, love and brotherhood of the community.

Conclusion

Culture is the way of life of a social group; the group's total man-made environment, including all the material and non-material products of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next. The system of worship of *Tingkao Ragwang*, Rongmei pantheon gods, village presiding deities, goddess of paddy and ancestors are reflected in the festival. It is a unique cultural phenomenon, a form of aesthetic expression of the Rongmei traditional religion and philosophy. As a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, *Gaan-ngai* is the time of expression of artistic talents, physical strength through martial arts, dance and music. Socially, *Gaan-ngai* promotes peace and unity within the family system and the society as a whole. By participating in the festival, people settle disputes and misunderstandings. Thus, *Gaan-ngai* festival serves as an institution through which the Rongmei religion (TRC) and culture is sustained.

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