

Rongmei Outlook Towards Life, Death and the Afterlife

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Abstract

The Rongmei tribe, an indigenous Naga community from Northeast India, has a rich cultural and spiritual heritage that shapes their outlook on life, death, and the afterlife. Life for the Rongmei is deeply intertwined with nature and community, emphasising harmony with the environment and strong social bonds. Death is viewed as a natural part of the life cycle, and elaborate funeral rites are performed to honour the deceased and ensure their peaceful transition to the afterlife. The Rongmei believe in the continuation of the soul's journey after death, where it reunites with ancestors and the divine. Ancestral worship and rituals play a significant role in maintaining this connection. Despite the influence of Christianity, many Rongmei people strive to preserve their traditional beliefs and practices, often blending them with new religious influences. This study explores the Rongmei tribe's unique perspectives on life, death, and the afterlife, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation and syncretism in their spiritual practices.

Keywords: Afterlife, Beliefs, Death, Life, Practices, Traditions

Introduction

The Rongmei people, primarily residing in the hilly Tamenglong district of Manipur have a rich cultural and spiritual heritage that shapes their outlook on life, death, and the afterlife. They are known for their unique culture, language, and traditional lifestyle, with a strong emphasis on preserving their heritage. Celebrations involve vibrant festivals, traditional dances, and rituals, reflecting their rich cultural identity. Celebrated for their rich heritage, the Rongmei engage in vibrant festivals, traditional dances, and rituals, showcasing their distinct attire and intricate jewellery, which hold significant cultural value. These enthusiastic celebrations feature singing, dancing, and feasting, emphasising their deep cultural identity. Proud of their cultural heritage, the Rongmei actively work to preserve and promote their language, customs, and traditions. This study aims to understand their view towards life, death and the afterlife through the observation of their traditional beliefs and practices.

Literature Review

Research on the views of the Rongmei people on life, death, and the afterlife is quite limited. However, some scholars like Luthonliu Gangmei (2022) have examined their religion through creation tales and other myths. Panmei Peter (2017) discussed their basic concepts of God or gods and other religious practices. Meisuangdai Gonmei, Elizabeth Gangmei, and Smita Borgogoi (2021) highlighted the significance of their folklore, analysing how their stories reveal ways of living and thinking. Andrew Lathuipou Kamei (2013) studied the transformation of their indigenous religion due to the spread of

Christianity. He investigates their efforts to preserve their indigenous religion despite widespread Christian conversion in Northeast India. Remarkably, the Rongmei faith has survived and coexisted with new religious influences. Drawing from Christianity and other religions, the Rongmei maintain traditional beliefs and practices, balancing change and continuity in their religious and cultural life (Kamei, 2013). However, the philosophical outlook of the people towards life, death and the afterlife is not discussed by many.

Life

For the Rongmei, life is deeply intertwined with nature and community. They believe in living harmoniously with their environment and maintaining strong social bonds. Their traditional practices and rituals reflect a deep respect for the natural world and a sense of duty towards their community. Initially, the Rongmei people worshipped nature and its uncontrollable elements, venerating numerous gods, goddesses, deities, and spirits. Despite this, they believe in one supreme God, *Tingkao Raguangh*, revered as “the omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent creator of the Universe, gods, men and also all living beings” (Kamei, 2013, p.33).

Their view of life is deeply rooted in their connection to nature, community, and spirituality. The Rongmei people believe in living in harmony with nature. They see themselves as caretakers of the environment and have a deep respect for the natural world. This belief is reflected in their agricultural practices, rituals, and daily life. They believe in leading a balanced life, avoiding excesses, and maintaining harmony in all aspects of life.

Community and social bonds are very important to the people. Community is at the heart of Rongmei life. They place a strong emphasis on social bonds and communal living. Festivals, ceremonies, and communal activities are integral to their culture, fostering a sense of unity and belonging. They also hold their elders in high regard. Elders are seen as the keepers of wisdom and tradition, and their guidance is highly valued in the community. Respect for ancestral spirits is crucial in the Rongmei worldview. Ancestors are thought to maintain a presence and influence over the living, prompting various ceremonies to honour and seek their guidance. Their ongoing impact on descendants is a deeply held belief (Yelang, 2021).

Spirituality plays a significant role in the Rongmei worldview. They have a rich tradition of myths, legends, and rituals that connect them to their ancestors and the divine. Their traditional religion, which includes the worship of *Tingkao Raguangh*, the Supreme Being, is central to their spiritual life. In Rongmei indigenous religion, numerous spirits and deities are worshipped, each associated with specific beliefs. The people deeply connect with and revere nature, believing in spirits within natural elements like trees, rocks, rivers, mountains, and animals like *Mbiuh mbang ra* (forest spirit), *Dui ra* (water/river spirit), *Nraembang ra* (banyan tree spirit), and *Rambau ra* (forest spirit). These spirits are sacred, and the Rongmei perform rituals to honour, give thanks, and appease them to prevent harm (Pamei, 2020).

Death

Death is seen as a natural part of the life cycle. The Rongmei people have elaborate funeral rites and ceremonies to honour the deceased and ensure their peaceful transition to the afterlife. These rituals often involve the entire community and are marked by traditional songs, dances, and offerings. Their outlook on death is deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Death is viewed as a natural and inevitable part of the life cycle. The people accept it with a sense of peace and understanding.

Funerals among the Rongmei were once elaborate, with rituals differing slightly between villages. Common elements included:

1. Offerings and prayers to guide the soul through “*taruairam*,” the world of the dead.
2. Communal funeral feasts, where family and community members gathered to pay respects.
3. Dirges are sung, stories are told and dances are performed in honour of the deceased member.
4. Food, drinks, and weapons placed in the grave for nourishment and protection on the journey to rejoin ancestors.

Traditional Rongmei burial customs involve resting the deceased in designated cemeteries. Graves are aligned in specific directions, and family members offer gifts to honour the departed spirit. Items like spears, food, and wine are placed in the coffin to aid the deceased on their journey to the afterlife, where they will join their ancestors (John, Pamei, & Pamei, 2020).

Following a burial, the Rongmeis observe a mourning period, during which close family and relatives refrain from certain activities. This period can last several days to a few weeks. The community offers emotional and practical support, with neighbours, friends, and relatives visiting the family to provide condolences, assistance, and companionship in their grief.

They have elaborate funeral rites and ceremonies to honour the deceased. These rituals are designed to ensure the peaceful transition of the soul to the afterlife. The entire community often participates in these ceremonies, which include traditional songs, dances, and offerings. They believe in the continuation of the soul’s journey after death. The soul, known as “*bumaeng*” is thought to reunite with ancestors and the divine in the afterlife. This belief provides comfort and a sense of continuity for the living. They also believe that the spirits of their ancestors continue to watch over and guide the living.

Afterlife

The Rongmei believe in the afterlife where the soul, known as “*bumaeng*” continues its journey. According to their creation myth, the soul is a gift from the Supreme Being, Tingkao Raguangh, who breathes life into lifeless bodies made of clay. The people believe that he plays a central role in their spiritual life. The afterlife is seen as a realm where the soul can be closer to this divine presence. The afterlife is seen as a continuation of the soul’s existence, where it reunites with ancestors and the divine. The beliefs and practices of the people in matters related to death are deeply rooted in their cultural and religious traditions, marking it as a solemn event. Like many Naga tribes, they believe in the afterlife with both benevolent and malevolent spirits. The deceased’s spirit is believed to continue its journey through “*taruairam*,” or “the world of the dead” (Mathew, 2021).

The Rongmei tribe’s outlook on the afterlife is deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. They believe that the soul continues its journey after death. The afterlife is seen as a continuation of the soul’s existence, where it reunites with ancestors and the divine. In the afterlife, the soul is believed to reunite with ancestors. This connection to their forebears is a source of comfort and guidance for the living.

Ancestral worship and rituals are important practices that maintain this bond. To ensure a peaceful transition to the afterlife, the Rongmei perform elaborate funeral rites and ceremonies. These rituals involve the entire community and are marked by traditional songs, dances, and offerings. Memorial services or anniversary observances are common in their culture, providing opportunities to honour and remember the deceased. These events often include offerings, prayers, and cultural activities. The erection of memorial stones is crucial, with families refraining from celebrations until this ceremony is completed,

as part of respecting and honouring ancestral spirits (Mathew, 2021). Beeju (2014) added that the people “worshipped the spirit of their ancestors as protectors of their household and family as some brought good fortunes while some brought misfortune” (151).

The traditional beliefs of the Rongmei tribe do not have a clear concept of heaven and hell as seen in many organized religions. Instead, their spiritual beliefs focus on the journey of the soul and its connection to ancestors and the divine. The influence of Christianity has introduced Christian funeral practices and beliefs, sometimes replacing traditional customs (John, Pamei, & Pamei, 2020). G.J. Rongmei (2019) pointed out that the people after embracing Christianity “slowly became estranged from their traditional way of life; they were prohibited by their new adopted religion from taking part in the ritual and ceremonies practices which were associated with the worship of spirits” (35). Despite these modern influences, the Rongmei people continue to uphold their cultural traditions and death-related practices, emphasising their reverence for ancestors. This effort is crucial for preserving their cultural identity and heritage.

Conclusion

As with many indigenous communities around the world, the Rongmei people are adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world while striving to maintain their cultural heritage. Balancing traditional values with the demands of modern life can be a complex aspect of their worldview. With the arrival of Christianity, many indigenous practices have gradually diminished or some of them have completely disappeared as they are dimmed pagan. But there are some traditions which have withstood and Christianised themselves to accommodate one’s identity and maintain the newfound faith. The best example is that of the stone erection ceremony which is Christianised where the memorial tombstone is replaced by a monolith blessed by the ministers of the Church. While many Rongmei people have adopted Christianity, they often blend their traditional beliefs with Christian practices. This syncretism allows them to preserve their cultural heritage while embracing new religious influences.

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