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PARADOXICAL NATURE OF ZELIANGRONG IDENTITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF RECOGNITION FOR CONSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS

Kamei Samson

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Introduction

Zeliangrong is a collective nomenclature of four different communities formed by the first syllables of the names of three groups- Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. However, the nomenclature Zeliangrong is believed to encompass four groups- Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui, believed to be cognate groups. They are settled in North-Eastern region of India in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Despite explicit variations in their present dialects and cultures, their collective identity as ‘Zeliangrong’ is still endorsed by significant size of Zeliangrong people. Narratives of common origin and same ancestor are believed to be true. Thus, group identity, despite differences among the constituent groups, in the words of N. Jayaram, “...has to do more with imagined commonalities even among people who may not be personally acquainted...than with face-to-face interactions among people living in physical contiguity. Of course, face-to-face interaction can solidify and reinforce community identity” (2009, p. 395, cited in Jayaram, 2012, p. 46). More than the similarities in their cultures and dialects, it is their common belief in common ancestor that binds the Zeliangrong constituent groups.

It has been noted that the collective Zeliangrong identity that endorsed the collective origin of the four groups begin to be questioned by all the four groups with changing political scenarios and increased need for Constitutional benefits through Constitutional recognition of the constituent groups in different states of India.

Lands and peoples

The lands of Zeliangrong comprise a compact and contiguous area in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. They are “Tamenglong district, Western Sardar Hills, Mao West, Loktak Project Area of Manipur State, the Haflong Subdivision of North Cachar Hills district of Assam and the Peren subdivision of Kohima district of Nagaland state” (Kamei, 2004, p. 2; see Pamei, 1996). The total geographical area of Zeliangrong lands is nearly twelve thousand square kilometres (Kamei, 2004; Pamei, 1996; Longmei, 1995, cited in Newmei, 2010, p. 202). They are also settled in Dimapur district and Kohima district of Nagaland. It is difficult to provide a definite size of Zeliangrong population. However, according to Babul Roy, the rounded estimations of Zeliangrong population based on the 2001 Census are 8,000 persons, mostly Zeme, in North Cachar Hills district, now named Dima Hasao district (Assam) and about 1,25,000 and 70,000 in Manipur and Nagaland respectively (2013). Also among the Zeliangrong, about 99% in Nagaland and 95% in Manipur have embraced different denominations of Christianity (Roy, 2013). The website, *Makaam Foundation*, claimed that the total population of Zeliangrong in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland according to 2011 Census stands approximately at 4.5 lakhs¹. In ‘Tribes of Manipur: A Brief History’, K.S. Thokchom claimed that the population of Christians among Zeliangrong is 85% (2011).

All the four groups of Zeliangrong have “a patrilineal society with two Moeties or major clans namely, the Pamei and Newmei” (Kamei, 2009, p. 11; see Pamei, 1996). The two clans are further divided into several sub-clans thus facilitating inter-clan marriage. Same clan marriage is forbidden and such couples are ostracised from the village. Ethnically and linguistically, Tibeto-Burman of southern Mongoloid is the group to which Zeliangrong groups belong. The Zeliangrong people have an Indo-Mongoloid appearance (Kamei, 2004; Sen, 1987).

Several conflicting myths, legends and oral traditions account for the origin and course of migration of the Zeliangrong peoples. Some Zeliangrong peoples also link their origin to China. Some elders believe that Zeliangrong people came from Yunan province of China. Also according to Dindai Gangmei, the Rongmei migrated from the Fujian Province of China (2008). He explained that Fujian was earlier known as Minhow until 725 A.D. when it was rechristened under Tang Dynasty. He also claimed that Minhow was known as Mahow by the Rongmei.

Zeliangrong present habitat is also believed to be their original place and thus claimed to be indigenous people of the land. Nevertheless, their origin is shrouded with myths and legends. Despite the mythical nature of their origin, the oral narratives are indispensable in understanding their social formation and their believed origin. Andre Beteille rightly noted that "...it is impossible to disentangle history from mythology in the available accounts of migration" (1998, p. 189). The migration narratives of Zeliangrong are fraught with myths. Some of them explain partially while some cover from their origin to their present.

Zeliangrong people were believed to have settled at different places. Of all the different places they settled, Makuilungdi was most prominent. It was believed that Zeliangrong culture evolved at Makuilungdi.

- Makuilungdi

Makuilongdi or Makuilungdi is a Liangmai name for a place believed to be settled together by the Zeliangrong people before they came to be known as Zeliangrong. Makuilungdi is traced to Senapati district of Manipur. Makuilongdi is a combination of three words- *Makui*, *Long* and *Di*. In Liangmai, *Makui* literally means circle; *Long* means range of hill/ mountain; and *Di* means large. Thus, Makuilongdi literally means 'large circular hill'.

After a long course of migration, the Zeliangrong ancestors finally found a new place at Makuilongdi or Nkuilongdi (*nkui* meaning 'round' in Liangmai and *longdi* means "big hill") (Pamei, 2001). Villages are believed to have prospered at Makuilungdi. As the people found a settlement where they can invest time and energy for settled agriculture a new form of life emerged at Makuilungdi. People were settled in hamlets and they had intense interaction due to long settlement and thus they gradually developed their distinct culture and shared common dialect. Some believed that the Liangmai dialect was the common language spoken at Makuilungdi before they further migrated to different places. Though Namthiubuiyang Pamei claimed that "...it will not be wrong to say that they spoke Liangmai in Makuilungdi before they parted" (2001, p. 15), it is still refuted by others from within Zeliangrong people. At Makuilongdi a polity was developed under a chief. At Makuilungdi, religious beliefs and social customs emerged, developed and flourished. Clans and lineages also grew up. Several migration teams were sent out to establish new villages in different directions. Makuilungdi is also considered to be "the cradle of Zeliangrong culture" (Kamei, 2004, p. 35).

Exodus from Makuilongdi

At Makuilongdi a well knit society based on shifting agriculture was established. There was a well-organised polity with chief as the head of the village. At Makuilongdi two major clans were believed to have existed. They were Pamei and Newmei (Pamei, 1996). This was indicated by the presence of two stone megaliths namely Pamei Stone and Newmei Stone. However, references to several lineages or families that traced direct descendants from Makuilongdi are also found. They are believed to be the sub-lineages of both Pamei and Newmei clans. The narratives of migration from Makuilongdi are another area which is shrouded with dilemmas among Zeliangrong people. Prosperity scaled unimaginable height at Makuilongdi. The number of houses was believed to have reached 7777 (Pamei, 1996; Remmei, 1996; Pamei, 2001; Dihsinriamang, 2007; Newmei, 2010). Tasongwi Newmei claimed that the people settled in Makuilongdi were known as *Hamai*, and Newmei further speculated that they probably spoke a common dialect now spoken by the Liangmai people (2010).

According to Gangmumei Kamei, the first son of Nguiba, the chief of Makuilongdi, was Namgong. Namgong was the son from the second wife of Nguiba. Kading was the second son of Nguiba, but he was the first son from the first wife of Nguiba. When the issue of succession came, Nguiba was advised by his brother Chatiu to let Kading succeed (Kamei, 2004). This made Namgong to leave Makuilongdi and settle in a new village called Hereira. The Zeme group are believed to be descended from Namgong. As they settled in the 'frontier or periphery' or "Zena" or "Nzie" in their dialect, they came to be known as Zeme or Nzieme (Kamei, 2004). Tasongwi Newmei claimed that the Zeme was called so because they settled in the valley or plain (2010). The name 'Zemei' was derived from the terms *Ramzengning* or *Azengning* meaning valley (Newmei, 2010). The second son of Nguiba who is the first son of first wife remained at Makuilongdi and succeeded his father. He and his descendants came to be known as the Liangmai or northerners (Pamei, 1996; Kamei, 2004; Newmei, 2010) by those who left Makuilongdi (Newmei, 2010). According to Tasongwi Newmei, those who stayed back in Makuilongdi lived in different sectors or *kyliang* and the settler of *kyliang* came to be identified as *kyliang khatmai*: *kyliang* means a sector; *khat* means one; *mai* means people (2010). Rembangbe, the third son of Nguiba migrated towards south of Makuilongdi and came to be known as Maruongmei or Marongmei or Rongmei (Pamei, 1996; Kamei, 2004; Newmei, 2010).

Rembangbe was the second son from the second wife. The origin of the Inpui group is not accounted in the narrative of migration from Makuilongdi by non-Inpui writers. However,

Namthiubuiyang Pamei expressed the possibility of speculating the Inpui group to be “a mixture of Liangmais, Rongmeis and others” (2011, p. 19). Tasongwi Newmei claimed that the Inpui are “believed to have separated from the Liangmai” (2010, p. 204). Their origin is not traced to Makuilungdi. Also Ramkhun Pamei’s account on migration from Makuilungdi did not have any concrete statement that said that the Inpui migrated from Makuilungdi. However, Ramkhun Pamei, apart from the account of migration of the Zeme and Rongmei ancestors and about the continued settlement of Liangmai ancestors at Makuilungdi, claimed that the son of Chief of Makuilungdi migrated to Koubru hill range for settlement (1996). He did not specify the name of the descendants of the son of Chief of Makuilungdi who lived at Koubru. Also, Ramkhun Pamei in his migration story did not mention the Inpui even once though he claimed that the Inpui is also one of the Zeliangrong group. If the Zeme ancestor and the Rongmei ancestor left Makuilungdi, but did not settle in Koubru, and the Liangmai stayed back at Makuilungdi, the son of the Chief of Makuilungdi who went to Koubru must be the Inpui ancestor.

Contested ‘Zeliangrong’ identity

The name ‘Zeliangrong’ was coined on 15th February, 1947 (Kamei, 2004; Pamei, 2001) by combining the three prefixes of the three sub-ethnic groups Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei as Ze+Liang+Rong (Sen, 1987; Roy, 2013). The rationale behind the combination of the three prefixes of the three sub-ethnic groups is their belief in their “common ethnic, linguistic, social and cultural origin of the kindred tribes” (Kamei, 2004, p. 11; see Pamei, 1996). The objectives of the formation of a collective identity under the name ‘Zeliangrong’ was “to develop and promote their common interest in political unity, economic upliftment, educational progress and cultural improvement etc.” (Pamei, 1996, p. 40). The notion of the collective nomenclature ‘Zeliangrong’ did not seem to have existed until 1947. Thus, aspiration for development after the independence of India was one of the reasons for the emergence of collective nomenclature, ‘Zeliangrong’.

According to All Zeliangrong Students Union (Assam, Manipur & Nagaland) (2009), the Anthropological Survey of India during the time of the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had accepted the validity of the concept of ‘Zeliangrong’ as an ethno-cultural entity. Also Dr G.A. Grierson, in his linguistic survey of India Vol. III, Part II, classified the Zeliangrong under Tibeto-Burman linguistic group (cited in All Zeliangrong Students Union, 2009). Zeliangrong as a tribe was not known to have been accepted by the Government of India.

The All Zeliangrong Students' Union (Assam, Manipur and Nagaland) is one of the bodies that strongly voiced for recognition of 'Zeliangrong' as Scheduled Tribe. The students' body does acknowledge the existence of variations in the present cultures and dialects of Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui. However, the common belief of the four groups in common origin was the strong justification for attempt to form Zeliangrong as a tribe and get it recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. The call for a united 'Zeliangrong' may also be looked at as an ethnic process based on the theory that "unity of language can be used as a badge of political or 'national' solidarity" (Leach, 2004, pp. 47-48). Strong opposition came from the Inpui group who do not accept 'Zeliangrong' as an inclusive nomenclature (Kamei, 2004). In fact, the problem with the nomenclature 'Zeliangrong' is self evident from the absence of the name Inpui. These unresolved debates have led to a separate recognition of the constituent groups of Zeliangrong as distinct Scheduled Tribes in January, 2012 in Manipur.

Several names- Hamei, Haomei, Makam, Agaengmei, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Inpui, Kabui, Kacha Naga and Zeliangrong are used to identify the Zeliangrong and its constituent groups. Some of the names are not accepted by the Zeliangrong people who are identified by the rejected names. Such situation prevailed in Burma when the British carried out census to enumerate the people they had 'inherited through conquest' (Scott, 2010, p. 238). The problem of the British, according to James C. Scott, was the names used by 'outsiders' to identify the "tribal" not known to the "tribal" and some names were derogatory and 'generic in a geographical sense' (Scott, 2010, p. 238).

Officially, the name 'Zeliangrong' has not been used in any of the governmental transaction of India or the respective State governments where Zeliangrong people are settled. As J.J. Roy Burman pointed out, in Indian Census data the names of the tribes are used and not the category (2008). As Zeliangrong is still not recognised as a tribe but a collective name of a conglomeration of four tribes, it is officially not considered. They were known to the British by different names to suit their administrative work. The four sub-ethnic groups are divided and known differently in three States of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Officially, in Assam they are known by separate names as Jeme and Rongmei (Kamei, 2004; Newmei, 2010; see Pamei, 1996). J.H. Hutton, summarising the account of Mr. Crace of Haflong about the village lands given to the 'Nruongmai' (Rongmei) by Naga King, identified the Rongmei as Kacha Naga (1986). In Manipur, officially, they are known as Kacha Naga to refer to Zeme and Liangmai, and Kabui to refer to Rongmei and Puimei (Inpui). This is beside the new recognition of Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui in 2012 as Scheduled Tribes. In

Nagaland, officially, they are known as Zeliang to refer only to Zeme and Liangmai and excluding the Rongmei (Yonuo, 1982; Newmei, 2010). The Rongmei were excluded from Nagaland as the name Kabui for Rongmei was opposed by Rongmei officers (Kamei, 2004). However, the Deputy Commissioner of Kohima had already appointed 'Shri. G. Geidinlung Rongmei' as Nagaland state Government employee and posted in the office of Block Development officer, T.D. Block, Peren and used 'Rongmei' in his name in an appointment letter issued by Extra Assistant Commissioner for Deputy Commissioner, Kohima district on 31st March, 1966. Only those Rongmei settled in Nagaland prior to 1963 are recognised as Scheduled Tribe of Nagaland since the year 2012.

Amidst a plethora of debates on the nature of Zeliangrong, proponents of Zeliangrong as a single tribe may find solace in the words of Prof. Gangmumei Kamei (2004, p. 15) who claimed that 'One is convinced to accord a single community status to the Zeliangrong whose common identity is based on the following identifying features:

- (i) Common Ethnic Origin.
- (ii) Similar Historical Past.
- (iii) Common Linguistic roots.
- (iv) Common Kinship and social structure.
- (v) Common cultural pattern."

He further claimed "Zeliangrong fits conceptually perfectly well to a 'Tribe' being a social group having a common origin, occupying a definite territory, speaking the same language or dialects, possessing homogenous cultural heritage with a unified social organisation" (Kamei, 2004, p. 16). Considering the claimed common origins and same ancestor, one might endorse the peoples within Zeliangrong as a tribe; however, the nomenclature 'Zeliangrong' remains a self-evident non-inclusive name in view of the Inpui.

Zeliangrong peoples' multiple identities

In India, the Constitution does not have definition of a tribe (Kumar, 2002, p. 20) or Scheduled Tribe. Even the Article 342 that deals with Scheduled Tribes does not prescribe criteria essential for according Scheduled Tribe status to tribes (Kumar, 2002, p. 250). The Article merely deals with the process of declaration of tribe or tribes as Scheduled Tribes by the President of India. However, political pressures and administrative factors have come into play in claiming Scheduled Tribes status in various parts of the country. This is manifest

clearly in the case of Zeliangrong groups. Some Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui communities of Manipur in North-East region of India on 9th January, 2012 were deeply elated as the aforesaid communities were accorded the Schedule Tribe statuses in Manipur. The people representing Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui were, in fact, already recognised as Schedule Tribes under different names and had been enjoying the Constitutional benefits by virtue of their earlier Scheduled Tribe statuses in Manipur.

In Manipur, the Zeme and the Liangmai were already collectively scheduled as Kacha Naga, and the Rongmei and the Inpui were already collectively recognised as Kabui. However, what needs to be critically examined here is the approach of the Government of India in granting two distinct recognitions for each of the four tribes without any change in the Constitutional benefits as expected by some individuals from the said tribes. Behind this aura of festivity of recognitions of Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui as Scheduled Tribes, there were deeply rooted dilemmas among them concerning their own identities which were overlooked in pursuit of their miscalculated or exaggerated Constitutional benefits.

Depending heavily on oral traditions, various claims of their origin have been tremendously weakened and rendered with contradictions. The step of the authority in granting Scheduled Tribes status to Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui without comprehensive understanding of their conflicting narratives of origins of their identities and diverse names of their groups had, in fact, aggravated the dilemmas of their identities as the four communities in Manipur that were known by two different names- Kacha Naga (Zeme and Liangmai) and Kabui (Rongmei and Inpui) are now known by six different names- Kacha Naga, Kabui, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui.

While in Nagaland the effort to get the Rongmei recognised as Scheduled Tribe had recently, though partially, found success in the year 2012, Kabui and Inpui are less known in Nagaland. The case of Zeliangrong identity in Nagaland will be examined in detail in the subsequent part of this paper. Some young Zeliang youths of Nagaland do not even know that the Inpui are part of Zeliangrong group. Ramkhun Pamei claimed that the Inpui were settled only in nine villages of Manipur (1996; see Newmei, 2010). There is no knowledge of Inpui villages in Nagaland and Assam.

Identity

The dynamic nature of Zeliangrong collective identity necessitates a brief exposition on the concept of identity. The sense of belongingness to a group based on beliefs in common origin, shared belief systems, same language and common cultural practices expresses the idea of identity. According to Manuel Castells, identity is “the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes that is/ are given priority over other sources of meaning” (1997, p. 6, cited in Jayaram, 2012, p. 45). Identity is not a single attribute of one’s life. A person might have several qualities or attributes that give him or her, an identity represented by him or her. It may be illogical to attempt to describe the identity of a person by highlighting merely a section of his or her set of attributes. Amin Maalouf averred that “[i]dentity can’t be compartmentalised” and one does not have “several identities”, but just one which comprises several “components in a mixture” (2012, p. 2). Amin Maalouf also cautioned against subscribing to multi-identities at a time. According to him, facing marginalisation is the result of an attempt to carry or flaunt several identities (2012).

Culture is part of a social life that undergoes changes in certain aspects. The dynamic nature of culture is thus bound to have a resultant dynamic identity of the group. Identity refers to attachments people have to a particular group, ways of life, culture, sets of beliefs, or practices that play major role in self-conception or self-understanding. Such understanding of an identity is still relevant irrespective of the class and social background of people in a group. Shared culture in the past and the present, despite some variations is one of social platforms on which a collective identity is realised or reaffirmed. Identity is, according to Avigail Eisenberg, a way in which individuals or groups come to understand their positions in a social context (2009). Thus, identity is viewed as a result of conscious thought process and mass acquiescence on prescribed ways of life. The primordial element is absent in the words of Avigail Eisenberg. It will not be completely true to claim that primordial characteristics of identity had waned away gradually despite the fact that identity has acquired “an ideological instrument” as its nature (Jayaram, 2004, p. 135). It may not be a sweeping truth, but ‘Rongmei’ has come to be used mostly for those Rongmei people in the hill who are closer to Naga political issue and Christianity. ‘Kabui’ is used mostly by those Kabuis who are in Manipur valley. They are mostly traditionalists and are alleged to have shown lukewarm attitude towards the Naga political issue. Thus, the Rongmei and Kabui identities are relative and they are sometime defined in reference to other people i.e. Nagas and Meiteis respectively. Christianity is one of the factors that brought detribalisation among

the Zeliangrong. Detribalisation, in the words of Murkot Ramunny, is not a natural process of evolution, but a detachment from the past by infusing a sense of inferiority among the tribals by being ashamed of their culture and religion (1989, p. 60). Some Kabui Christians in Manipur valley are found to dislike the name Kabui and prefer to call themselves as Rongmei.

Different narratives of different identities of Zeliangrong groups

There are various versions that account for the origin of Zeliangrong peoples. In all the various accounts one common thread is the tracing of their common origin with other Nagas before the settlement of a group (Zeliangrong) at a place called Makuilungdi in present Senapati district of Manipur. The narratives were also found to be aimed towards forging unity of the groups of Zeliangrong. Makhel or Makhen is a place in Senapati district of Manipur. Makhel is believed to be and widely accepted as one of the common places of settlement by Nagas. It is believed that from Makhel, a group of people went to Makuilungdi and they later came to be known as Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei after migrating further from Makuilungdi (Kamei, 2004). As mentioned earlier, some of the names used to identify the groups of Zeliangrong are *Haomei*, *Makam*, *Agangmei* and *Kabui*. *Agangmei* is hardly used now. It means people from the surrounding.

- *Haomei*

Hao is one unofficial term used to refer to hill and tribal people in Manipur. Here, hill and tribal are used synonymously because there is a significant size of tribal people in the valley who were originally from the hill, and the Meitei people make no distinction between the hill tribal and the valley tribal when the term *hao* is used. The Meitei people call all the tribes of the hills as “Haow” (Brown, 1874) or “Haos” (Yonuo, 1982). However, often, when Zeliangrong people use the term *hao* they refer only to themselves, including other Nagas both in hill and valley and not the Kukis.

It is believed that a couple by the names Pokrei (man) and Dichalu (woman) lived at *Ramting Kabin* [Puakrey or Pokrei, according to Dihsinriamang was the son of Kaamagangc (2007) who was the second son of Nguiba]. They were both known as ‘*Hannah*’ meaning ‘*Ramei*’ in Rongmei dialect. ‘*Ramei*’ means ‘God’s people’ (*Ra-* God, *mei-* human being/ people). In course of time, *Hannah* got corrupt into ‘*Hamei*’ which further got corrupt and the term ‘*Haomei*’ came into being. From *Ramting Kabin* they migrated to *Makhel* which is believed

to be one of the common places of settlement of the Nagas in the course of their migration. Thus, according to this account, ‘*Hannah*’ applies to all the Nagas. However, the unsuitability of application of the term ‘*Hannah*’ or ‘*Hamei*’ or ‘*Haomei*’ to all the Nagas or hill people still remains. This is so because the term ‘*Hao*’ also refers to Kukis by the Meiteis. However, so far, there is no account in any oral tradition claiming the common settlement of the Kukis and the Nagas at *Ramting Kabin* or *Makhel*. The Kukis had a completely different migratory story from different place. Thus, the narrative of the origin of the term *Hao* tracing its origin to *Ramting Kabin* and the use of the term ‘*Hao*’ to refer to the entire hill and tribal people both need serious re-examination.

The position of Rani Gaidinliu, a pioneer of Zeliangrong homeland movement, on the name *Haomei* may give more reasons to reflect both by those who oppose and those who support *Haomei* as the name of their people. According to Abuan Kamei², Rani Gaidinliu once told one of the members of ZPC at New Delhi, “*Aniu Haomei the, taki aniu Zeliangrong mei jat le*” (we are *Haomei*, but Zeliangrong is our community). Here, according to Abuan Kamei, *Haomei* was used to mean human beings in Rongmei dialect. Thus, Abuan Kamei rephrased the statement of Rani Gaidinliu as ‘we are *Haomei*/ human beings, but Zeliangrong is our community’. Based on the etymological and traditional use, the term *haomei* may be understood as “people of the God as well as cultured peoples” (Mukherjee, Gupta & Das, 1982, p. 71). It also means “ourselves” (Meijinlung, 1976, cited in Mukherjee, Gupta & Das, 1982). Samson Remmei (former President of All Zeliangrong Students Union) once wrote:

“While the struggle for recognition [of Zeliangrong as Scheduled Tribe] was in progress, some Zeliangrong leaders without the consent of the Zeliangrong public tried to rename the Zeliangrong tribe as *Haomei*/ *Hamei*. The people are totally against the renaming of the tribe as *Haomei*/ *Hamei* because it is the name given by the Meitei to all the hill dwelling people of Manipur in derogatory sense” (1995, p. 19, cited in Newmei, 2010, p. 209).

- *Makam*

The name *Makam* is believed to have been given by God. Another theory of the origin of the name *Makam* is the second son of Nguiba whose name was Kamagang. Kamagang is believed to be the first descendants of Rongmei group. *Makam* is also believed to be a corrupt term from Kamagang. Thus, *Makam* is also believed to refer only to Rongmei. This is in contradiction with what Gangmumei Kamei claimed. According to him, *Makam* means

“Zeliangrong or the Nagas” (2004, p. 150). Another theory is that *Makam* is used to refer to all those group of people “who partake from the wooden platter” (Pamei, 2006, p. 24). Another theory is that the name *Makaamei* refers to the descendants of Makaameilu (female) who once lived in the legendary Zeliangrong ancestral village, Makuilongdi (Makaam Foundation³).

Haomei as a name referring to human beings or people and not to name of a specific tribe appears to have greater credibility considering the practice among the tribal communities. Verrier Elwin observed a common practice among the tribes in India where they identify themselves ‘simply as *people*’. He said, “It is common throughout India for tribesmen to call themselves by words meaning ‘man’, an attractive habit which suggests that they look on themselves simply as people, free of communal or caste associations” (2009, p. 317).

Sometime Zeliangrong people call themselves as hao-makam. The use of ‘*hao-makam*’ is a deviation from the general replies observed by R. Woodthorp who contended that “A Naga when asked who he is, generally replies that he is of such and such a village” (1881, pp. 52-53, cited in Misra, 1998, p. 3276) . Charles Chasie also claimed that the Nagas identified themselves with the name of their tribes and villages (2005). Emphasis was on the name of the village in identifying oneself or others. However, neither *hao* nor *makam* is a name of a village or place. They are believed to refer to people.

- ***Kabui***

Until the Gazette notification of 9th January, 2012 of the Union Government of India, the Rongmei and the Inpui were collectively recognised under one Scheduled Tribe, Kabui. They are also now separately identified as Rongmei and Inpui while still retaining their old name *Kabui*. R. Brown categorised three groups of Kowpoi into Sungbu, Koiveng and Kowpoi (1874). The categorisation is very absurd. Though Sungbu identifies the Rongmei group (AZSU, 2009) and Kowpoi identifies the Inpui (AZSU, 2009), the name Koiveng is ambiguous. Also Inpui claim that *Kabui* must be used to identify only the Inpui excluding the Rongmei because, as Rani Gaidinliu claimed, *Kabui* originally referred to ‘Mpu’ which was distorted as *Kabui* (Mukherjee, Gupta & Das, 1982). D.P. Mukherjee, P. Gupta and N.K. Das gave a more distorted account of *Kabui* when they claimed that *Kabui* comprised the Zeme, the Liangmei and the Rongmei (1982). Zeme and Liangmai were never known as *Kabui*. They were erroneously known as Kacha Naga. According to Colonel W. McCulloch, the *Kabui* tribe was divided into “Songboo and Pooeron” (1859, cited in Hodson, 1911, p. 75).

Here the name Pooeeron cannot be a name of a tribe. 'Pooeeron' was probably referring to Puimei or Inpui tribe. 'Pooeeron' is most likely to be a misnomer of a village Puiuan in Manipur. Ramkhun Pamei also made similar claim that the Rongmeis were 'mistakenly' identified as *Kabui* from Kaupui (1996). And he preferred to call *Kabui* an "adulterated name" (1996, p. 58). Could "Koiveng" of R. Brown be a misnomer of Liangmai? Also, the categorisation of three groups under the same name Kowpoi is a reason for further dilemmas. This needs to be researched before it is confused with another tribe known as Koireng in Manipur.

According to All Zeliangrong Students' Union (2009), *Kabui* is a Meitei term mentioned in the royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, since the First A.D., long before the arrival of the British. However, in Inpui Tribe Recognition Souvenir (2012), the Inpui claimed that the name "Kabui" comes from the name 'Inpui' people who lived in Haochong area of Manipur. The Inpui and Rongmei people had similarities in culture, beliefs, dialect and lived closely. Presumably, due to this fact the British administrators clubbed them together under the common nomenclature 'Kabui', it is believed.

Wangkhemcha Chingtamlen presented a very interesting narrative of the origin of the term *Kabui* and the *Kabui* people. He claimed that,

"Mr. Poujairung Thaimai (*Kabui*), a *Kabui* sociologist and scholar says that the word 'Koubru' is a *Kabui* word etymologically, a Sandang (mithun) is known as *Kabui* in ancient *Kabui* dialect, Luwa means a village in ancient *Kabui* dialect also. Koubru was a *Kabui* village in the ancient time and was known as *Kabui* Luwa because of the fact that the area was a grazing area of the *Kabui* (Sandang). Koubru was called *Kabui* Luwa originally, in course of time it became *Kabui*Lu dropping the last syllable 'wa', from *Kabuilu* it became *Kabuiru* when the Hindu Kings since 18th century imposed 35 alphabets of the Hindu and indigenous peoples of Kangleipak began to use 'r' in place of 'L', from *Kabuiru* it became the present word Koubru lastly. In this way the present *Kabui* Community claim Koubru was their original home village" (2010, p. 29).

The large section of *Kabui* in Imphal wishes to retain the name *Kabui*. Some of them cite reservation benefits and some bank on historical relations shared with the Meitei people as reasons for retaining the name *Kabui*. Some of them feel that they might lose the benefits from the governments if they forsake the name *Kabui*. While some feel that their history

recorded under the name *Kabui* will be lost if Rongmei is used in place of *Kabui*. And this will also mean severing their relationship with the Meitei people. Writing about the Kabui, T.C. Hodson claimed that there were number of small Kabui villages in Manipur valley whose condition he described as “a semi-servile” (1911, p. 5). In the context of High Court of Madras striking down a provision of reservation in educational institutions, the former Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru maintained that certain special provisions were needed to undo the injustices against some communities “socially, educationally and economically”(Mehta & Patel, 1991, p. 23-24). Despite years of reservation for the Scheduled Tribes and significant changes among the tribals there seem to be a need for more attitudinal changes towards the tribals.

The passion for the name Kabui remains. This contradicted Gangmumei Kabui who once prophesised that the controversy associated with names like Kacha Naga and Kabui “will have a natural death” (1982, p. 62). He may still be partly correct considering the name Kacha Naga disliked by the Zeme and the Liangmai, but not in the case of Kabui.

Nature of ‘Zeliangrong’ debated

Before one attempts to understand the nature of Zeliangrong identity it may be of use to bring two concepts- *ethnicity* and *ancestry* (Eller, 1999, p. 10)- into discussion and see their differences in brief. This is so because there is both ethnicity and ancestry in Zeliangrong identity narratives. Ethnicity is defined by DeVos as “subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups” (1975, p. 16, cited in Eller, 1999, p. 8). Within Zeliangrong identity debates common culture and common language have been often cited as rationale for collective Zeliangrong identity. Even Makuilungdi, where they were believed to have settled together had been considered as the cradle of Zeliangrong culture. This is despite the fact that they acknowledge and appreciate the prevailing differences in their cultures and dialects. They also identify themselves as different tribes with belief in same ancestor thus drawing the process of ancestry where “one or more societies” trace their origin to a single family history (Eller, 1999, p. 10). Thus, *there is ancestry within Zeliangrong ethnicity*. It has been observed that beside Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui, three other groups i.e. Thangal, Maram and Kaorang were also embraced within Zeliangrong collective identity (Pamei, 2001). However, these later three groups do not share common ancestor with the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui. The dialectical nature of Zeliangrong identity in which common ancestry is accepted and negated, and its

ethnicity endorsed based on belief in shared cultural origin and contested based on prevailing cultural differences are simultaneous facts. Zeliangrong ethnicity reflects Max Weber's view on ethnic group who viewed it as "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists" (1968, p. 389, cited in Eller, 1999, p. 12). There are elements of 'subjective belief', 'common descent' and 'memories of...migration' within Zeliangrong ethnicity and ancestry.

Is Zeliangrong a tribe or a group of tribes? Ragongning Gangmei claimed that Zeliangrong is an organisation. He stated, "Zeliangrong is not a nation nor a tribe. Zeliangrong is an organization of Inpui, Liangmai, Ruangmei and Zeme. It is a union, a federation of four tribes" (n.d., p. 2). It is "a tribe-based organization" (Gangmei, n.d., p. 3). Those in Manipur valley who identify themselves as *Kabui* wish to retain the name and avoid using the name Rongmei. They claim that the names- Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei were derived from names of cardinal directions and the areas settled by them (see Newmei, 2010). Differences of opinions exist even among those who claim Zeliangrong to be an organisation. Some prefer *Kabui* while some wish to be known as *Haomei*. Following many other Zeliangrong, Tasongwi Newmei claimed that "Zeliangrong Nagas are a single people" (2010, p. 209). The claim of Ragongning about the organisational nature of Zeliangrong needs further deliberation. The justification brought before the then S.D.O, C.S. Booth, by the Kabui and Kacha Naga for being inseparable was being "brothers from the same parentage" (Pamei, 2001, p. 44). It was with this justification that they first formed an organisation Kabui Samiti, a conglomeration of the Kabui (Rongmei and Inpui) and Kacha Naga (Zeme and Liangmai) as advised by the said S.D.O. (Pamei, 2001). The same justification was invoked when the nomenclature 'Zeliangrong' was coined in 1947 at Keishamthong and an organisation 'Zeliangrong Council' was also formed (Pamei, 2001; Kamei, 2004) for enhancing their economic, social, educational and political advancement (Pamei, 2001; Kamei, 2004). One needs to distinctly identify the justification for the formation of 'Zeliangrong' and the objectives of 'Zeliangrong Council'. Zeliangrong refers to the people and Zeliangrong Council is the organisation. 'Zeliangrong' may not be confused for 'Zeliangrong Council'.

Note that even among those who claimed Zeliangrong to be an organisation and not a tribe, there are many who endorsed the common origin of the four groups of Zeliangrong. This reflects the observation of Jasvir Singh that 'A political community requires a sense of

common belonging (a widely shared feeling among its citizens that they all are the members of a single community) to form a more or less cohesive “we” and share a collective identity’ (2008, p. 6). The questions that need to be constantly posed by the Zeliangrong groups are: for what purpose and at whose and what cost? These are relevant questions considering the numerically smaller group, Inpui, already raising voices of dissatisfaction and discrimination within Zeliangrong.

Grievances of the Inpui community

The grievances of the Inpui people have been often cited as one of the factors for the fission of the collective Zeliangrong identity. The grievances of the Inpui people may be analysed taking relative deprivation as theoretical framework. Aberle (1966, cited in Rao, 1984, p. 4) viewed relative deprivation as “a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and actuality”. Similarly, Ted Gurr (1970, cited in Rao, 1984, p. 4) opined relative deprivation as a gap between expectations and perceived capabilities to achieve something. The feeling of deprivation is relative and the whole population of a group may not feel or experience the same degree of deprivation (Wilson, 1973). According to Ram Ahuja, it is the contradiction in the conditions of life at present and the life a group believe can attain if they were given ‘proper opportunities and legitimate means’ (1997, p. 143). Do all the members of a deprived group come forth to address the shared grievances and clamour for the cherished goals? “...in reality very few of the most deprived groups actually engaged in protest” (Smith & Fetner, 2007, p. 14). Relative deprivation is a description of a set of ideas and attitudes which may or may not be widely shared by people exposed to the same objective conditions and which may vary in intensity and strength (Wilson, 1973). Such understanding of relative deprivation is apt to be juxtaposed against the sense of deprivation experienced by the Inpui within Zeliangrong collective identity. The Inpui despite expressed grievances in terms of Constitutional benefits still endorse common ancestral and cultural origin with Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. They feel that they have not enjoyed their legitimate share from the Constitutional benefits.

Inpui have officially left Zeliangrong (Newmei, 2010). Who are they and why did some Zeliangrong (Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei) people embrace them within the ambit of ‘Zeliangrong’ people still remains a matter of confusion. It was on 15th February, 1947 that the nomenclature ‘Zeliangrong’ was coined to reignite the collective fraternity of the Zeme, the Liangmai and the Rongmei in the presence of Inpui representatives (Rajkumari, 2012).

Why did some Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei not accept the Inpui to be one of the descendants of their common ancestor? P. Binodini Devi claimed that Inpui “are culturally and ethnically organized from the Rongmei and Liangmei” (2006, p. 30) thus leaving the scope of a primordial distinct identity of the Inpui.

According to Hunibo Newmai, Inpui had its origin in Liangmai and they were separated not long ago (Pamei, 2001). Inpui were called ‘*Kabui Anouba*’ in Manipur (Pamei, 2001). ‘*Anouba*’ is a Meitei term meaning ‘new’. Thus, the Inpui were known as ‘new Kabui’. However, the Liangmai were not known as Kabui at any point of time in Manipur. Liangmai are clubbed under Kacha Naga. Kabui is used to refer only to the Rongmei and the Inpui though the Inpui claimed that Kabui refers originally only to Inpui and should always mean only the Inpui. Thus, the claims of Hunibo and Pamei suggest faintly that the Inpui did not have a primordial distinct identity. Also according to some Inpui people the name Kabui originally referred to Inpui. Going by the literal meaning of the word ‘new’ and following a simple logic, if the Inpui were known as ‘new Kabui’ then there should have been another community known by the name Kabui prior to ‘new Kabui’. How the Inpui people were came to be known as *Kabui Anouba* or ‘new Kabui’ if they were the original Kabui is another mystery.

On 1 April 2005, Zeliangrong people at Tamenglong (Headquarter of Tamenglong district of Manipur) expressed their desire for a ‘Zeliangrong country’ by placing lighted candles on a map representing Zeliangrong Region. However, the ‘Puimeis’ did not participate in the programme (Singh, 2011). Some Inpui people whom the author interacted alleged that the dominant group in Zeliangrong community, referring to the Rongmei group, have been misappropriating reservation benefits and certain other benefits of schemes from the governments, and the Inpui people could not tolerate this fact any longer. They do not wish to be clubbed together with the Rongmei under the tribe ‘Kabui’. There is a sense of relative deprivation among the Inpui. The Inpui people claimed that separate Constitutional recognition will facilitate better accessibility to more benefits of reservation and acquiring other schemes from the governments. The aspiration of the Inpui reflected the view of Haroobhai Mehta and Hasmukh Patel who relied on reservation as the “surest way” to bring the deprived castes to the level of the upper caste (1991, p. 35; also see Kumar, 2002, p. 26). Of the three kinds of inequalities- economic, social and political- in societies mentioned by Max Weber in his *Social and Economic Organisation*, the Inpui people emphasised on the economic inequality. The economic inequality as discussed by Max Weber pertains to

property relations and one's calibre to use skills in a market (1947, cited in Bains 1994, p. 2). The Inpui are found to be more concerned with their due privileges in reservation shares. The Inpui people may find solace in their attempt to project their distinct identity and their claim for equitable share in reservations and other benefits as a distinct community in the words of Avigail Eisenberg who stated:

“...claims which are made for resources, entitlements, power, or opportunities on the basis of what is important to a group's identity, that is, to its self-understanding and distinctive way of life, have a legitimate place in public decision making and that public institutions need better guidance to assess such claims fairly” (2009, p. 3).

It was observed that most of the grievances pertain to individual benefits from the government. It was primarily relative deprivations of reservation benefits. One of the suggestions proffered in the 1952 Scheduled Tribes Conference in the development aspects of the tribals was to emphasise on roads and communications (Mukhopadhyay 1989, p. 18). This suggestion seemed to have not been valued by the tribal in their race for individual advancement. Development at the level of the community in terms of infrastructures were not given due seriousness. Benefits in job reservations, shares from the schemes through their elected representatives and some personal monetary favours were often cited. Individualism, which was rare in tribal community, has been internalised. The more stark fact is that, the Zeliangrong people hardly dwelt on their collective land rights, when interviewed at individual level. All that matter most to them was Constitutional benefits for individuals. The sense of belonging to collective Zeliangrong identity was found to be weaning away with greater needs for Constitutional benefits.

Inpui community did make series of requests to include their community's name in the nomenclature 'Zeliangrong'. The requests were not turned down by Zeliangrong leaders. They were asked to 'wait'. However, the requests were not materialised and they felt deprived of their identity despite being a Zeliangrong. Avigail Eisenberg aptly pointed out that the avoidance of claims concerning identity aggravates the problems of the minorities (2009). Such attitude of the majority will engender desire among the minority to engage in “higher stakes political activity and higher risk decision making” (2009, p. 3). The negligence of the Zeme, the Liangmai and the Rongmei towards the concern of the Inpui regarding their name in the nomenclature was pointed out as one of the reasons for separation of the Inpui

from the Zeliangrong. Beside this, the dominance of the Rongmei had been also pointed out as another factor for the fission.

There is a need to locate the problem of Zeliangrong identity not merely at the Zeliangrong level. The structural loopholes need to be identified that hinder a solution to Zeliangrong identity problem. Bringing back to mind the allegations made by the Inpui people about misappropriation of reservation benefits and schemes, perhaps fair distribution of resources will contain individual or group from seeking special entitlement to salvage their identity (Eisenberg, 2009).

Constitutional Recognition of Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui as Scheduled Tribes of Manipur

The hope of better life can infuse immense adaptability among human beings. The ability to interpret the past to suit the present is one such ability. The belief in common origin and common ancestor were dismissed by some individuals who dreamt of better accessibility to benefits from the government through recognition of their tribes as Scheduled Tribes. Interpretation of the past to shape the course of future in favour of the group is not a new phenomenon.

The Government of India issued a Gazette notification on 9th January, 2012 declaring the Zeme, the Liangmai, the Rongmei and the Inpui as Scheduled Tribes of Manipur. Going through the report of the 'United Tribe Recognition and Modification Demand Committee, Manipur' it was found that the demand for grant of Scheduled Tribe statuses to Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui were based on the differences in their origins, cultures and dialects⁴. Kacha Naga, in fact, is not liked by all the Liangmai and the Zeme. This seems to be clear among all the Zeme and the Liangmai. Kabui is desired to be retained by some section from Manipur valley as it is already a recognised name.

True, there were conflicts in the past amongst the Zeliangrong groups even before the coining of the name 'Zeliangrong', but they were competitions for survival and honour and not for division. Despite the past conflicts they expressed desire to share common identity. Belief in common origin and common ancestor and unique root of culture (Pamei, 1996) and even common language were the factors that materialised a unified Zeliangrong. The conflicts in contemporary time are found to be far from competitions, but they are assuming features of divisions. Several individuals in Zeliangrong community now attempt to justify the need for

divisions. Today variations in dialects have been found to be one of the reasons for a need for separation. This is despite some Zeliangrong belonging to same religion. Today some Christians from the Zeme, the Liangmai, the Rongmei and the Inpui are burning with the desire to be separated despite all being Christians. They all speak different dialects. Christianity which was one of the factors for unification among the Zeliangrong Christians is no longer instrumental in binding the unity of the Zeliangrong collective identity. It has been proven to be true that “[w]hen two communities speak different languages a common religion is not enough to unite them” (Maalouf, 2012, p. 131). What was earlier a factor for unity and collective identity has evolved into a divisive force.

Identity game of Zeliang and Rongmei in the State of Nagaland

It would be a bitter pill to swallow for many Rongmei to know the fact that the Rongmei who came after 1963 in the State of Nagaland was officially not recognised as scheduled tribe of Nagaland. It was only in August 2012 that only the Rongmei settled in Nagaland before 1963 were officially recognised as Scheduled Tribe. Unlike IP Desai, a member of the Rane Commission, who suggested income and profession as criteria for backwardness (Yagnik 1991, p. 151), the criterion used in determining the Scheduled Tribe status of the Rongmei was the year 1963, or the year Nagaland attained statehood. It is believed that without the year 1963 several other Rongmei from Manipur might migrate to Nagaland for availing reservation benefits and pose a threat to the Zeliang in Nagaland.

According to some non-Zeliangrong people from Nagaland, earlier the Rongmei were unofficially identified as ‘Kacha Naga’. According to Gangmumei Kamei, the term Kacha was first used by the British. It was diluted from an Angami term ‘*Ketsu*’ or ‘*Ketsa*’ meaning deep forests or dwellers of the forest (Kamei, 2004; Kabui, 1982; Pamei, 1996; Sanyu, 1996). Officially, like in Assam and Manipur, there is no ‘Zeliangrong’ in the State of Nagaland, but Zeliang officially refers to the Zeme and the Liangmai (Pamei, 1996). Before Nagaland attained Statehood in 1963, the Rongmei was known as Kabui. Despite Kabui being not recognised in Nagaland, they were “entitled to all facilities of a scheduled tribe under the ethnic category of the Zeliang” (Das, 1994, p. 173). Rongmei was excluded from the Zeliang because Rongmei officers settled in Nagaland refused to accept the ascribed identity Kabui (Kamei, 2004, p. 12). Thus, the Zeliang disrespected the wish of the Rongmei to be known as Rongmei despite “how a group itself wishes to be known...[is]...the only thing that should matter” in identity (Baruah, 2010, p. 241).

It was learned from the Rongmei people in Nagaland that Zeliang people do not wish to include Rongmei as a tribe of Nagaland. However, there are also some Zeme and Liangmai people from Nagaland who desire to be united with their people by recognising the Rongmei who came to Nagaland even after 1963. In fact, some Zeme and Liangmai of Nagaland were responsible for the partial recognition of Rongmei as Scheduled Tribe in Nagaland in 2012.

In Nagaland, Inpui is hardly known as a group of Zeliangrong. N.K. Das (1994), writing about the Kabui of Nagaland, mentioned only the Rongmei. The name Inpui did not appear at all in the writing. A question may be asked whether the so called Zeliangrong or Naga 'integration' means the integration of only the lands inhabited by the Nagas without the Naga people. This further aggravated the fear of some Nagas in Manipur that the ultimate solution of the Naga political problem will be integration of the lands and not the people. The Zeliang in Nagaland did not seem to favour larger collective Zeliangrong identity for fear of losing certain benefits enjoyed under the collective Zeliang identity thus sidelining the interests of the Rongmei despite their shared belief in common origin with the Rongmei (see Samson, 2013).

Writings on some boards in shops in Dimapur are likely to discover another name of a tribe i.e. 'Zeliang Rong'. This new tribe, not officially recognised as Scheduled Tribe yet, seemed like a compound word. 'Zeliang' and 'Rong' were written separately. Such style of writing is also found in the writing of a Senior Research Officer, who is a Naga and do not belong to any of the Zeliangrong groups. While referring to the "Kachcha Naga" of southwest Manipur and the North Cachar Hills, he explained this 'Kachcha Naga' in the footnote that they are "Now known as Zeliang Rong" (Alemchiba, 1970, p. 4). This note is bound to leave confusion as he had mentioned, while writing on a similarity of culture of Angami and Kachcha Naga with the Konyak, the Kachcha Naga was used to mean "Nzemi and Nruongmai" (Alemchiba, 1970, p. 4) without Liangmai. If Kachcha Naga refers to "Nzemi and Nruongmai", where was Liangmai of Zeliang which was already recognised after the State of Nagaland was formed in 1963 while the Rongmei was recognised only in 2012 A.D.?

Complexities of Zeliangrong identity continue

The groups of Zeliangrong are known by different names in different States. This continues despite series of debates. For instance, the Rongmei were not officially identified as Rongmei in the State of Nagaland until August 2012. K.R. Singh (1987) called the Zeme and Liangmai as Kacha Naga in '*The Nagas of Nagaland*'. It was a milestone journey when the Nagaland

Government decided to drop the term *Kutchi Naga* and Zeliang was used (Kamei, 2004). In Assam, Rongmei is recognised and Zeme is recognised as *Jeme*. The divisive force extended when the Zeme and the *Liangmei* were collectively known as Kacha Naga in the State of Manipur. Rongmei and Inpui were collectively called Kabui in Manipur (Kamei, 2004). According to Sipra Sen, the Rongmei are called Kabui in Manipur and Kacha Naga is used to identify the Zeme and Liangmai (1987). Rongmei and Inpui are still called Kabui even after separate recognition granted in January 2012. The Inpui were also called Kabui Anouba or New Kabui. In Manipur, the hill people are collectively and unofficially, but popularly known as *haos* (Yonuo, 1982). Rongmei was referred to as Kabui since the first century in the Manipur Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur (Kamei, 2004), during the reign of King Bhagyachandra and also in the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic of Moirang (AZSU, 2009). Thus, the term Kabui was used much before the arrival of the ethnographers or British colonisers. Now in Manipur, Zeme and Liangmai are also separately recognised while retaining the earlier official collective name Kacha Naga.

Contextual Zeliangrong identity

Zeliangrong identity and the subsidiary identities of the groups are highly contextual. It is found that the collective Zeliangrong identity is subject to the aspirations of the sub-groups. In Manipur and Nagaland, collective identity of Zeliangrong is more assertive in the context of the larger Naga movement. Zeliangrong leaders signed a covenant with their blood pledging to fight for the Nagas in the name of Zeliangrong in the 1950s. Zeliangrong did join the Naga movement before this pledge, but they were not collectively identified as Zeliangrong under the Naga movement before the signing with their blood. Zeliangrong collective identity is still relevant in the Naga movement. Thus, in the Naga movement the four groups were represented under the collective banner of Zeliangrong. In the larger Naga movement, the four groups of the Zeliangrong identify themselves as Zeliangrong despite the separate recognition of the Zeliangrong sub-groups as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India in 2012. Zeliangrong collective identity in the context of the Naga movement has assumed a political dimension with diminishing shared social and cultural significance. S.L. Doshi had differentiated between belongingness of an individual to a tribe and the tribe as an entity (Kumar, 2002, p. 59). Also Jack David Eller, observed that “Taking state names and identities as the names and identities of populations or peoples is a great and often false leap of thought” (1999, p. 2). Despite attempt to project Zeliangrong as a collective nomenclature of Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui, there is a prevailing idea that Zeliangrong cannot

define people, but a political entity or an organisation. Thus, the four Zeliangrong groups experience fading belief in common origin with a simultaneous need for collective Zeliangrong identity within Naga movement. The four groups no longer desire their distinct identities to be subsumed within collective Zeliangrong identity.

Despite the claim of having had same origin and same culture in the past, the collective identity of Zeliangrong is also now seen as a stumbling block in realising their respective cultural freedom and Constitutional benefits. Murkot Ramunny had observed that when different cultures merge with a stronger one, they tend to lose their identity (1989, p. 61). Some individuals from the smaller groups of the Zeliangrong lamented that their cultures were relegated to a position of an offshoot of the larger group. Thus, some Zeme, Rongmei and Inpui are not ready to accept the theory that their cultures and dialects were originally that of the Liangmai.

The collective identity of Zeliangrong is questioned in the context of reservation benefits both in educational institutions and employment opportunities provided by the governments. This may be understood from the fact that, Zeliangrong is not recognised as Scheduled Tribe. It is the sub-groups that were granted Scheduled Tribes status under the Constitution of India. Now there are Scheduled Tribe certificates under the names Kabui, Kacha Naga, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui in Manipur. It is in this context that some people within the smaller groups accuse the larger group of misappropriating the benefits of reservations. Therefore, some people from the smaller groups do not desire to continue subscribing to the collective identity, Zeliangrong. Zeliangrong, as they say, do not give them any betterment in terms of reservation benefits. The tribe name Kabui is viewed as problematic by the Inpui as it also includes the Rongmei. The Inpui alleged that the Rongmei amassed more reservation benefits and do not have due consideration for the Inpui's share. The Inpui people claimed that separate identity will give them higher chance of accessing reservation benefits. However, this speculation for accessing reservation benefits based on separate tribes is baseless as there is no separate reservation policy for different Scheduled Tribes or different districts in Manipur. Nagaland has a policy of reservation within reservation for certain districts considered to be more backward than other districts. However, the Inpui are not recognised as Scheduled Tribe of Nagaland. The Inpui still do not enjoy separate reservation benefits in Manipur.

In Nagaland, with Zeliang already recognised as Scheduled Tribe and more popular among other Naga groups, awareness of the collective identity of Zeliangrong to common people is not widespread. Thus, when Rongmei was recognised in Nagaland in the year 2012, the collective identity of Zeliangrong is further sidelined from the knowledge of the common people as Zeliang and Rongmei are now distinct Scheduled Tribes. However, the collective Zeliangrong identity is still relevant in the Naga movement.

Conclusion

The proposition “Ethnicity unifies and differentiates simultaneously” (Arora, 2013, p. 106) holds true in the case of Zeliangrong. The objective set in 1947 when ‘Zeliangrong’ was coined seemed to have not been achieved. The constituent groups have begun to show tendency for dissociation and find greener pastures in economic, political and cultural realms individually.

The drawback attributed by the absence of empirical evidences in studies of tribes is explicitly manifested in the studies of Zeliangrong people. The change in the pattern of narratives with the changing political scenario and varying geographical locations is also clear. Some of the narratives were influenced by the neighbouring communities. The process of association and dissociation of tribes are also ongoing features within Zeliangrong identity. Various factors were found to influence the course of negotiation for identity formation. With growing scientific bent of mind contributed by a new wave of generation characterised by educated youths who questioned conventional outlook towards life, old narratives of collective identity were begun to be critically analysed. The present generation of Zeliangrong realised the need to build a collective identity based on their needs and it is here the need for rationality became inevitable. They examined the linguistic pattern of the sub-groups and the pattern of representation in the larger collective group. Thus, we found people who claimed that distinct dialects of the four groups should be the bases for separate recognition of the four groups. However, the virtue of respect for elders deterred the educated youths from outright dismissal of the fables and myths of their collective identity. But how long will these fables survive the growing needs for separate recognition and reservations is left to be answered.

Endnotes

1. *Makaam Foundation*. A brief account of the Zeliangrong people. Retrieved from <http://www.zeliangrong.com/zeliangrong/zeliangrong-history>
2. Abuan Kamei from Kohima. He was the Personal Assistant to Rani Gaidinliu for 12 years. He was originally from the birth place of Rani Gaidinliu, Longkao. At the first meeting on 31st May, 2012,
3. Makaam Foundation. Posted on 28 May 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.zeliangrong.com/about-makaam-foundation/makaam-foundation>
4. United Tribe Recognition and Modification Demand Committee, Manipur. 2012. *Tribe Recognition, 2012: the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011 (No.2 of 2012). A brief Report on the process o modification of nomenclatures from Kabui to Inpui, Rongmei; Kacha Naga to Liangmai, Zeme; Koirao to Thangal and tribe recognition of Chongthu, Khoibu and Mate*. Manipur: United Tribe Recognition and Modification Demand Committee, Manipur. See the report for various claims misnomers and some narratives.

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