

**Decolonizing the Mind: Interrogating Colonial Ideas and Praxis\***  
*The Case of the Luangdimai*

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This is an expanded version of the online presentation at the **Bamduan Reki** held on July 8, 2021, entitled ‘Decolonizing the Mind’. It is an attempt to describe and explain the challenges confronting the Luangdimai (also known as Zeliangrong, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Kabui, Kacha Naga and Zeliang), a fragmented and marginalized community in India’s Northeast. Against these fragmentations and marginality, they responded with divergent identity politics that only furthered their marginality. The challenges Luangdimai people confront is embedded in colonial ideas and praxis into which they have been internalized and institutionalized. The paper has three parts: (i) Introduction to colonial ideas and praxis: How Luangdimai came to be internalized and institutionalized (ii) Engaging the State: How Luangdimai came to embrace the state and, (iii) Negotiating Marginality: How Luangdimai Identity and Interests are shaped. Luangdimai people as a marginalised community are caught in these vicious processes. A possible emancipation lies in their ability to decolonize the mind and interrogate the colonial ideas and praxis.

*Freedom Anomaly*

End of colonialism entails freedom, equality, justice and dignity for most colonized people but for Luangdimai, these benefits of freedom continue to elude them. With an estimated population of about half a million, balkanised by colonial cartography into three states, they are politically underrepresented, socio-economically underdeveloped and vulnerable to alienation of their land and resources. About half of them are represented by five members of legislative assembly (MLA) while the remaining half located outside Peren, Tamenglong and NC Hills are spread out over fifty assembly constituencies as minority voters. Peren, Tamenglong, and NC Hills are known as most backward districts in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

As an underdeveloped region with high rate of unemployed youth, they account for majority of migrants to India’s metro cities, victims of racial violence, and human trafficking. Strategic location of the region, hydro-power potentials, natural resources, and the recent discovery of oil and gas has led to rush for developmental activities. But dubious land acquisition and compensation processes have triggered development-induced social conflict in the region. Mega projects in which the people have little say have also opened the challenges of alienation of land and resources. Exclusive welfare provisions extended to the people under the rubric of *backward tribes* have impinged their sense of solidarity like never before in their history. In short, the people are free but live at the margin of the society with withered experiences of equality, justice and dignity.

How did this marginality happen? Luangdimai as victims of colonial rule have been internalized and institutionalized with colonial ideas and praxis making them agreeable to their marginal situations. Although they began as a state evading community they have come to engage and embrace the state as indispensable and inalienable part of their society. Finding themselves in the margin, they believe they can negotiate their way of these marginal situations by constructing separate identities and interests that are supposed to enhance their welfare.

## *Puzzles*

Why is colonial injustice a recurring problem for the marginalized? Colonial injustice is a recurring problem for the marginalized because colonial legacies are impediments to the marginalized and their quest for justice. These legacies act as structural and ideational impediments against the empowerment they aspire for. India, for instance, has retained colonial cartography and political world views that continue to fragment the marginalized into different political spaces and a policy that patronized them as *tribes*. As a result, Luangdimai who benefits in the continuity of this legacy of fragmented cartographic order becomes part of the system that is averse to reversing the structural and ideational injustices. Notwithstanding the extended affirmative actions and welfare measures, majority of them remain backward and discontented. Marginalized and fragmented people across India exhibit similar traits of backwardness, oppression and discontentment.

Luangdimai see Kabui and *Kacha* Naga as feudal and colonial exonyms loaded with derogatory connotations. But as they have been institutionalized into the system, they do not question the basis of the policy to categorize them as *tribe*, Scheduled Tribe or *jat* that have racist and casteist connotations. As a result, the condescending administrative term of *tribe* which is continued as a social engineering policy is considered a given. It is not to be questioned. Unmindful of the casteist connotations, *jat* is also proudly appropriated as an identity lexicon. *Tribe* is the preferred identity marker while speaking in English, the hegemonic language that institutionalized and legitimized the people as primitive beings. Similarly, *jat* is the preferred identity when people speak in their dialects or other regional hegemonic languages that accepts social hierarchy. Further, people of the Northeast region have come to accept the sexist representation of the region as ‘seven sisters’. Provincial governments in Northeast India desirous of federal government’s developmental assistance imagines itself as ‘sisters’ while the mainland is projected as the brother. This sexist narrative ignores the fact that the Northeast region began as one of the most developed regions in India prior to independence. Violent partition, realignment of international borders, closure of sea ports, roadways, railways, and armed conflicts turned Northeast India it into what it is today.

People with history of marginalization continue to confront the challenges of marginality inflicted by colonialism. People who have been internalized and institutionalized by colonial ideology selectively accepts its ideas and praxis. As a free people they question colonial political legacy and cartography that fragment them as minorities but embrace the ideas and institutions of *tribes* and *jat* although these ideas and praxis dehumanized and placed them at the bottom of the imaginary social hierarchy. In order to appropriate welfare entitlements, the people push the idea of ‘one-tribe one language’ as God-given rights. This essentialist position and practice has been inspired by the linguistic nationalism that wreaked havoc in Europe and across the world with its history traced to German language nationalism. While Europe and the world at large has abandoned linguistic nationalism, minorities in India’s Northeast continue to follow this path.

How did Luangdimai divide themselves? The state recognized them as Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Kabui, Inpui and Zeliang *tribes*. As Scheduled Tribes they imagined separate identities based on their dialectal variations. However, according to their oral narrative they descended from the same patriarch, (Nguiba), they share the same clans and kinship system of Pamai and Niumai, believe in the same cosmic narrative and pantheon of gods and goddesses, recalls the exploits of Asa and

Mensarung with delight, practices similar culture and are proud of their resistance against the British under Jadonang's *Naga Raj* Movement. They performed *Chug* (1934), a reconciliatory peace pact, to bury their headhunting vendetta. The peace and solidarity of this pact continued into the late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the turn of the second millennium, a new identity movement emerged in the society which claimed that they are separate *tribes* or *jat* and have nothing to do with each other. This idea of separate *tribes* or *jat* is proudly asserted although they are disadvantaged vis-à-vis their strategic competitors who are politically advanced in the pecking order. The idea of Luangdimai emerged as a response to reorder this exclusivity, marginality and state-centric identity.

### *Prophets of Revolution*

Prophets and philosophers arise in society affected by injustice to prepare them for impending change. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher suggested breaking away from old traditional Christian moral order to create a new order under an *Übermensch* or a superman. He believed that the existing moral order in Europe was in decadence. Similarly, Haipou Jadonang brought about radical changes in the political aspiration and old socio-religious beliefs of Luangdimai. He began by reordering the hierarchy of the pantheon of gods. In Luangdimai cosmology, the youngest son of Charasinglangpui who cheated in a physical prowess contests between the seven brothers and Didampu, their maternal uncle, won the bout and went on to become the Ragwang. Charasinglangpui, the mother, helped the youngest to cheat and win the contest against his uncle. Bisnu/Munchanu, the eldest brother, who was disappointed by the unfair decision went to live in Pubuan cave. While the uncle went to live inside the earth as Banglagwang, the god of earthquake.

In the reordered religious practices of Jadonang, Bisnu/Munchanu came to be accorded more importance than Ragwang, the younger brother. It is from Pubuan cave that Jadonang received all information about his religious reforms from the construction of temple to the ideas of new religion and the worship of Tingkao Ragwang, the supreme creator. With this act, Jadonang inverted the sense of injustice prevailing in the domain of pantheon of gods. Most importantly, Jadonang raised the slogan of *Makam Gwangtupuni*, a prophesy that the people who ate from the wooden platter would also have their state since the 'Taimei' and 'Tazuangmei' also had their respective states. Injustice of the colonial-feudal order compelled Jadonang to become a reluctant nationalist. A reluctant nationalist with no option but to look to his own people for a new order. *Makam Gwangtupuni* was a response to an unjust sociopolitical system.

If Nietzsche influenced left, right and centrist movements, and thinkers across the world, Jadonang in his limited ways influenced Naga nationalists, and Zeliangrong Movement whose objectives were to reorder the colonial order. That said, history shows that messages of prophets tend to go to unintended recipients. Francis Fukuyama (2018) writes that messages of prophets sometimes get messed up and are delivered to wrong person, thereby, causing problems for the messenger and the intended recipient. He cites the example of how the Shiites believe the message of Allah meant for Ali was delivered to Mohammed, thereby, triggering the Shia-Sunni debate. Similarly, the message of Jadonang which was believed to be intended for the marginalized *Makam* (read as Luangdimai) people was delivered to the post-colonial state. Newly converted Luangdimai

Christian elites rejected Jadonang and his ideas, while the postcolonial state appropriated the prophet and his ideas and projects him as a martyr of the post-colonial state. As the prophet and his ideas are accepted by the state, Luangdimai people are involved in a contested interpretation of the prophet's identity whether or not he is a martyr of the post-colonial state.

### *Internalized and institutionalized*

Luangdimai are enchained to colonial ideas and praxis like the domesticated elephants at the logging site. Although the elephant can easily break the chain and escape to freedom, if it chooses to, but having been domesticated since its childhood it is prevented from experiencing freedom. It has been conditioned to think that the enslaving chain is for its own welfare and not to be broken. For the whole purpose of its existence is to work for the master and make him happy. A Luangdimai is also like a prisoner who has been incarcerated for a long time that he or she is institutionalized or begins to enjoy being in prison. He or she begins to believe that being in prison and acting out the role of a prisoner means experiencing freedom and happiness. Having been institutionalized by the colonial system they cannot think, act, or exist outside of the colonial world order. He or she becomes dependent of its exploitative system and ideas.

How did Luangdimai get internalized and institutionalized into colonial ideas and praxis? Luandimai, like the rest of the marginalized community, simply accepted the ideas that the state imposed upon them as universal truth. Like the institutionalized prisoner, Luangdimai internalized the racialized idea of *tribe*, (including *jat* from the Sanskrit *jāta* or the four-fold caste system) introduced by the colonial-feudal regime as it comes with scheduled entitlements in the postcolonial state. The colonial state introduced the word *tribe* with a condescending intent to justify and legitimize the colonial regime. Use of organized violence, for instance, was justified by the idea of providing the white man's superior governance to the primitive *tribe* even though nobody asked them to do so. Thus began the coercive military expeditions that saw the Luangdimai country balkanized from the 1830s onwards. The expeditions by Jenkins and Pemberton in 1832 and the Gordon-Gambhir Treaty (1833) fragmented them as minorities. This domination process of the colonized were further executed through the processes of census enumeration and surveys. As in Africa and the Americas the word *tribe* was reinvented as a racial term and deliberately deployed against Luangdimai to dehumanize them, thereby, legitimizing the colonial regime as beneficial to the 'primitive' people who needed paternal care of the 'superior' white men.

The enumeration process began with the Census of India from 1865 onwards. Carrying forward this policy of making a headcount of the people to a higher level, the colonial state set up institutions such as Linguistic Survey of India (1894), Ethnographic Survey of India (1901), and Anthropological Survey of India (1945) to deal with the challenges of understanding and controlling the people in the Indian subcontinent. As these institutions and their reports including those of the officials referring to the people as *tribes*, and castes/*jat* associating them with primitivism, savagery, and childlikeness are inherited by the post-colonial state, *tribes* and caste *jat* are considered legitimate terms. These reports are also deemed authoritative sources about the marginalized peoples' history and identity.

So the idea of *tribe* was deployed as an instrument of racism and colonial rule. If the idea of *tribe* succeeded in dehumanizing Luangdimai as primitive, savage, and childlike people, thereby, legitimizing colonial rule, then the voluntary adoption of the term *jat* by Luangdimai as their identity lexicon completed this colonial social engineering project. Although the practice of caste discrimination is prohibited by law, it is ironic that a community that experienced caste discrimination meted out through the notion of purity-pollution has accepted the idea of *jat* as its identity lexicon. They take pride in identifying themselves as Luangdimai *jat* although they do not belong to the caste group. A free people embracing discriminatory ideas in a free country indicates a malady in the system. Either the system is still oppressive in nature or the people are institutionalized to endure injustice. That being said, *tribe* and *jat* are interchangeably used to assert identity based upon linguistic affiliation. For instance, a person speaking Ronglat would proudly claim that he or she belong to Rongmei *jat*. Similarly, when a person speaks in English he or she would state that he or she belongs to Rongmei *tribe*. This is what colonialism did to the colonized. It makes them feel inadequate and inferior as a people in everything that they do. So they borrow others language to make up for the lexicon gap.

#### *Enter the State: Engaging the state*

Historically, Luangdimai lived in the hills as a state-evading community preferring the anarchic highland to the plains which were generally under the control of the state. Scholars of South East Asia observed that the hill people deliberately avoided living under either the Indic or Sinic states. These hill peoples remained largely free and unconquered until the colonial state conquered and annexed their countryside in the 1830s. The military expeditions of Pemberton and Jenkins opened the Luangdimai country to the British for the first time. This was followed by more offensive military expeditions all over Luangdimai countryside in Peren (Berema), NC Hills (Asaloo) and Tamenglong. By 1833, the feudal state of Manipur and the British East India Company signed the Gordon-Gambhir Treaty (1833). Although the treaty bifurcated Luangdimai countryside they were not made party or had any say in the treaty. Captain Gordon and Gambhir of Manipur agreed upon the following terms: (i) the western bank of Jiri was to be the boundary of Assam and the Eastern bank of Jiri River that of Manipur (ii) Gambhir would construct all-weather road from Cachar to Imphal and keep the road safe for British subjects from Naga hostiles (iii) the British East India Company would in return train, supply and equip Gambhir's army with muzzle loading rifles.

Jadonang emerged as a prophet of revolution after the people experienced colonial oppression for about 100 years. With an insight that is close to Nietzsche's ideas of breaking the old order to create a new one, Jadonang initiated socio-religious reforms (Tingkao Ragwang) and the political movement (Makam Gwangtupuni) as discussed above. Jadonang's movement was a carefully crafted symbolic resistance against the colonial state intending to show that his people were as capable as the British. Jadonang initiated three symbolic political resistances against the colonial regime. One, he sent a memorandum to S.J Duncan, the SDO of Tamenglong in 1926 intending to highlight the beginning of the resistance in his own *script* which the British dismissed as gibberish. Two, Jadonang dressed as a European gentleman, personally encountered the SDO on a horseback and refused to dismount and pay obeisance to the British official asserting equality. Three, Jadonang declared the impending end of the British Raj and sent out message to stop paying taxes

to the British. However, as discussed earlier, although Jadonang's movement shook the colonial regime and inspired the marginalized he was betrayed and martyred. With Jadonang's death the movement under Rani Gaidinliu slowly moved towards the post-colonial state's camp. Naga movement seeks political freedom from the Indian state, but the national movement is unable to shake itself out of colonial ideas and praxis. As Ernest Gellner writes sovereign nation ends where the idea of *tribe* begins, the idea of Naga nation is unable to shake off the problems of *tribe*.

### *Nationalism and Tribalism*

Tribalism like nationalism is based on language and has been inspired by European linguistic nationalism. Nationalism emerged in Europe as an inward-looking political ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to mobilize people around the symbol of language while excluding people who did not speak the same language as outsiders. This idea of linguistic nationalism traces its origin to the writings of Jahan Gottlieb Fichte and Immanuel Kant, German philosophers whose pride were affected by the hegemony of the Napoleonic state that overran the German countryside. Finding no other natural barriers to call for the independence of Germany from France, German language was presented as the natural barrier between Germany and France. German nationalism based on German language emerged. This linguistic nationalism travelled around Europe and reached Asia, Africa and the Americas, whereby, it came to be accepted as a universally accepted basis of the state. Nationalism as an ideology that arose to counter imperialism and colonialism is a problem for post-colonial states. With its focus on uniformity of thoughts and actions, it is suspicious of freedom of speech, political dissent, religious diversity as liability and threat to the nation. The far right version becomes intolerant to dissent and diversity.

The idea of *tribe* is similarly premised. Officials of the colonial state who did not understand local people or their languages enumerated and categorized the people as *tribes* on the basis of the languages they spoke. This was done on the basis of the observation made by the orderlies of the colonial officials. As a result, name of tribes, language, village and towns mentioned in the reports, journal and tour diaries of the colonial officials vary from person to person. This was because the colonial officials posted in the Northeast were military people whose primary training and duty were to subdue and govern the 'hostile savages'. Correctness in reporting back to the higher authority in 'civilization' were secondary duties. Political Agents, from Pemberton, Jenkins, Johnstone, McCulloch, Mackenzie, Crawford, Reid, to Higgins, were drawn from the military background. J.C. Hutton who is celebrated as an authority on the anthropology of the Northeast and the Nagas was hired to teach anthropology at Oxford University for his experiences in Northeast India. Today his works are seen as colonial anthropology.

As 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe witnessed competitive linguistic national movements, Northeast India as one of the many anthropological laboratories of the colonial state has also emerged as a hub of identity movements based on the languages spoken there. The separate identity movement within Luangdimai society is one of such movements. It is based on the logic that people who speak different languages are separate entities with separate identities. The essentialist logic of this movement claims that language and identity are God-given attributes. As the Luangdimai linguistic groups seek separate identity they look to language as the symbol of their separate identities while ignoring other common factors. They undertake the project of standardizing these

languages through discourse in religion, art, literature, politics, music and so on. Rongmei Literature Society, Rongmei orthography project, Rongmei Bible translation are examples of this language standardizing project. Translation of the Holy Bible into Ronglat is a process occasionally caught in contests. For instance, controversy over the hermeneutics and methodology of translation have shelved the release of the latest edition of the Ronglat bible.

Linguistic identity is a modernist project. A project that seeks to establish one authority and one standard language in spoken and written format. Any deviation from this established standard is deemed wrong and penalized. Socially, those who do not confirm to this standard are deemed as the ‘other’ an ‘outsider’ or ‘lesser’ people. This is happening in the case of Ronglat and Rongmei identity project. Like they picked up *tribe* and *jat* to compensate for the deficiency in lexicon, they have also picked up many Sanskritic terms as their own lexicons. Many of these borrowed words have made their way even into the Holy Bible and their Christian Hymns. As they seek to set up a standard Ronglat, people who do not accept the Rongmei orthography and the church-based literature are identified as the ‘other’ a ‘people without language’ and so on. Kabui, their own people who has not accepted the Rongmei orthography, the Holy Bible and the study of Rongmei as a Modern Indian Language in the schools comes under this category. Further, this modernist project is caught in a new dilemma about how much to localize and standardized Ronglat. A new school of thought who prefers to revert back to local lexicons by replacing foreign words in the Holy Bible has opened a new political dilemma in the Ronglat and Rongmei identity project. Attempt to replace the cross with *chow* (a tree climbing gear used by Luangdimai that resembles the Christian cross), grapes or *drakha* with *loiringruai* (a grape like creeper plant) among others is one such example.

Language and identity are intertwined edifices that sustain each other. While language as a tool gives voice to identity, a people desirous of certain identity consciously deploys language to assert identity and negotiate the fluidity of identity. Change in a language affects the identity of its users. Owing to these processes, linguists show that rules of grammar and language studies are politically decided before they are studied by linguistics.

#### *Scheduled Tribe and false sense of Security*

As citizens entitled to affirmative actions and welfare entitlements, Luangdimai people imagines that being a member of the Scheduled Tribe is a privilege that would continue in infinity. Taking this logic forward, they came out with the idea of separating themselves as Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Inpui, Kabui, Kacha Naga, (including Zeliang) with the erroneous notion that more *tribes* entail more benefits. This idea originated from their experiences with the Naga non-state actors where every *tribe*, whether big or small, are said to be given equal representation. So the argument was that even as voices of smaller *tribes* are heard in the platform of the Naga nation, the *subtribes* of Zeliangrong or Luangdimai must also get the same share and rejected the idea of unity in Zeliangrong. As the Indian state and the Naga non-state actors follow the ideas of *tribes* and the praxis of fragmenting minority, the people assumed that what is applicable to the Naga non-state actors is applicable to the Indian state and vice-versa. After the government of India accorded ST status to Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, and Inpui in 2011 this recognition and arrangement was also followed by the Naga non-state actor in 2018. Zeliangrong and Luangdimai

civil organizations protested against these moves as ‘inference in their internal affairs’ but they were declared as ‘derecognized’ by the Naga non-state actor.

The idea of accessing greater benefits out of increase in the number of *tribes* is a misinterpretation of the idea of reservation. Irrespective of the number of *tribes* recognized by the state, the benefits of reservation extended to the ST community at the national level in India is fixed at 7.5%. This percentage may vary at the provincial level depending upon their political representation and population. Even there, the ratio of reservation does not increase unless new social entities are designated as ST. In the case of the change from Kabui and Kacha Naga to Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui it was a change of old identities to new identities which did not pose political or economic burden to the state, hence, it was accepted by the parliament. Most importantly, reservation and welfare measures are temporary arrangement. For instance, the political reservation accorded to the Anglo-Indian community under Article 331 to nominate not less than two members in Lok Sabha was recently repealed by the government of India. The rationale provided was that the 2011 Census of India indicated that the community had only 296 members. There was no discussion or debate in the Parliament when this provision was repealed.

The Berbers, a mountain dwelling people in Atlas Mountains adopted the maxim: “divide that ye be not governed”. This was a successful strategy adopted by the people to deter loot, plunder and conquer by the people from the plain. As Berbers dwelled in small numbers and adopted subsistence economy high in the hills, they successfully evaded invasion and subjugation. The cost of invading the Berbers outweighed the benefit. Berber’s mountain dwelling strategy paid off. Luangdimai also followed this strategy as a way of life since antiquity. They preferred to live in the top of the mountains away from the heat and dust of the valley state and its acquisitive politics. This mountain dwelling lifestyle and strategy, however, lost its utility with the coming of the colonial state and increase in competition to their land and resources from the state and their strategic competitors in the neighbourhood. Old Cachar Road that cuts through Tamenglong to connect Cachar and Imphal and the state building project the colonial regime initiated, for instance, cancelled out the benefits of state-evading mountain dwelling strategy. Ironically, Luangdimai continue to believe that to divide and separate themselves into minorities is a gain for them. As minorities they are being pushed out from the mountains and valleys in which their ancestors once lived.

### 3. *Negotiating Marginality: Luangdimai Identity Debate*

Framing Luangdimai identity is a post-structuralist project, informed by the anachronism of nationalism and tribalism and pursued with structuralist intent to secure goals considered as given for its adherents. Unlike colonial space wherein the state exerted monopoly of authority to define a standard meaning of identity, power structure in post-colonial world is diffused and so multiple correlates operate to shape the identity of a people known as *tribe* or *jat*. Given the operation of the post-structural ideas and praxis, although Luangdimai share a history of common ancestry, clan and kinship, language, culture and contiguous land their senses of identity are shaped by post-structural interpretations of linguistic variations, colonial cartographic divide, socio-religious affiliations, among others. Luangdimai identity, therefore, has become contentious and complex to define. Understanding this complexity requires finding an approach that considers the contested



interpretations as one problem to find meaning to this identity imbroglio. It is in this context that the Weberian interpretive method is adopted as an *ideal type* to explain the complexity of Luangdimai identity.

Entrapped in a maze of marginality created by colonial ideas and praxis Luangdimai are caught in an identity crisis. They imagined that embracing separate identities would entail greater welfare benefits and help them come out of derogatory names and images but they are far from reaching these destinations. These dreams are proving to be elusive because being labelled as a *tribe* or *jat* or *Hao* (Manipur) is by itself a disability, that cannot be addressed by change in identity without overcoming their structural marginality. Notwithstanding the identity changes effected by the state they are still negotiating their marginality within the system. They are unable to decide how to address colonial exonyms with post-colonial autonyms. From the colonial exonyms of Kabui and Kacha Naga their identities have moved to the autonyms of Zeliang, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Inpui, including Kabui and Kacha Naga. In between, they endlessly debated whether to choose Hamai or Zeliangrong. The problem with their identity discourse is their inability to close the identity debate as a *fait accompli* with the gazette of the state or the fiat of the civil society organizations. Even if they use the state gazette to declare that they have nothing in common with another and proceeds to go their separate ways, their history, religion, culture, clan and kinship system, and language continues to bind them together.

The table below is an *ideal type* representation of the Luangdimai identity discourse. It reflects their variegated responses to their perceptions of identity and marginality. Each school of thought represents the positions taken by the people with the belief that the stand that they have taken is the best (ideal) way to overcome their marginality and the derogatory connotations in their colonial identities. Luangdimai identity discourse has five schools, equal number or more organizations, divergent identity and interests, and narratives about their preferred identity.

*Negotiating Marginality: Luangdimai Identity Debate*

<b>School of thought</b>	<b>Preferred Identity &amp; template</b>	<b>Basis of identity narrative</b>	<b>Organizations &amp; their status/position</b>	<b>Political aspirations &amp; Outlook</b>
Unionist	(i) Zeliangrong as <i>tribe/jat</i> (ii) Rejects Hamai as derogatory	(i) Makuiluangdi & Pamai-Niumai Clan and Kinship system (ii) <i>Chug</i> (1934) (iii) Common history	AZSU, ZSUM & ZB (i) Dominant players from 1950s-till today as students bodies (ii) United presence in Assam, Manipur & Nagaland	(i) Attempted to re-order colonial order through ZLR movement (ii) Pessimistic about Naga actors (iii) Secular institutions
Ultra-Unionist	(i) Hamai (including Toiti, Thangal, Maram, etc.) as <i>tribe/jat</i>	(i) Makuiluangdi & Pamai-Niumai Clan and Kinship system (ii) <i>Chug</i> (1934) (iii) Common history	ZU (AMN) (i) A dominant player between 1950s-2007/8	(i) Desires reordering of colonial order but unclear about who will do it (ii) Ambivalent about Naga actors

	(ii) Rejects Zeliangrong as name of organization		(ii) Area of operation now confined to Imphal	(iii) Secular institutions
Bandwagonist	(i) Kabui as <i>tribe/jat</i> (ii) Identifies also with Zeliangrong/Hao mei	(i) Makuiluangdi & Pamai-Niumai Clan and Kinship system (ii) <i>Chug</i> (1934)	Kabui Union (i) Minority (ii) Area of operation confined to Imphal	(i) Pessimistic about reorder of colonial order, also given to bandwagon with dominant power (ii) prefers to maintain autonomy (iii) Outlook of indigenous people
Separatist	(i) Zeliang, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Inpui <i>tribe/jat</i> (ii) Rejects Zeliangrong calling it name of ‘organization’; claim that they are separate <i>tribes</i> who have nothing in common between them.	(i) Unclear on origin/identity narrative (ii) Reinterprets <i>Chug</i> (1934) as a measure that enabled them to travel together to pay obey obeisance to the king of Manipur, a recipient of Order of the British Empire. (iii) they argue that <i>Chug</i> did not forbid them from undertaking the path of separate <i>tribes</i> . <i>Chug</i> was only a peace pact.	ZNC, RNC, LNC, INC etc.  (i) Dominant player in the society from 2004-2021 with access to Naga power corridors (ii) Separate presence in Assam, Manipur & Nagaland	(i) Aspires to re-order colonial order through Naga non-state actors (ii) Optimist in Naga non-state actors to address the issue of their marginality (iii) Outlook of Christian right-wing oriented institutions
Reformist	(i) Luangdimai (unsure about <i>tribe/jat</i> as identity template) but is open to inclusive and progressive ideas (i) rejects the extreme posture of Hamai and the exclusivist stand of Zeliangrong for a middle ground to accommodate all including that of the Separatist	(i) Makuiluangdi & Pamai-Niumai Clan and Kinship system (ii) <i>Chug</i> (1934) was a peace pact as well a pact that forbid them from starting violence or misunderstanding against one another that could separate them again. (iii) Common history	LCF (i) Outlier in the society at present (ii) United, inclusive & progressive presence in the society	(i) Desires reordering colonial order but has not indicated how it will do this (ii) Pessimistic about Naga non-state actors to address the issue of their marginality (iii) A secular and progressive movement

Source: Poujenlung Gonmei (2018), *Correlates of Ethnic Identity: Zeliangrong Identity in Post-Conflict Naga Society in Luangdimai: A Forward*, published by LCF, Imphal.

### *Loss of culture/religion is loss of land*

‘Loss of culture is loss of identity’ is a popular maxim of the Tingkao Ragwanh Chapriak (TRC), the religious group that follows the teachings and tenets of the socio-religious movement initiated by Haipou Jadonang. Going a step beyond this popular maxim, I argue that loss of culture or religion cost more than identity. Loss of culture or religion is loss of land. Loss of land in turn

opens existential challenges. In the highland of Luangdiram the uninhabited mountains and valleys were considered the sacred domains of their pantheon of gods. As domains of the gods and goddesses these spaces used to be revered, feared, propitiated and protected. However, when the colonial state brought the Christian missionaries in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century and converted Luangdimai to the new religion these spaces lost their sacred values to the people. They exploited resources in these spaces and even accommodated new comers to settle and cultivate in these spaces. Objection or restriction were rarely raised. With the loss of their culture and religion, Luangdimai alienated themselves from the sacred spaces of Dzuko, Koubru, and Rasuanbut/Laimaton.

Traditionally, culture and religion are collective social practices under an authority. Conformity is rewarded and deviance penalized by the authority to maintain discipline and order in the people including the spaces that are deemed to be the abodes of divine beings. For the authority of the people is derived from the divine beings and the spaces they occupy. However, legitimacy of this authority gets eroded when people embrace new culture and religion and when there is no more control over these traditional spaces, the spaces invariably go to players with greater power and authority. Two types of players are noted in this game of power. One, a player that displaces the old people from their habitat without accepting the old culture and religion. Two, a player who claims the space and the divinity but does not reside in the mountains. Along with the sacred spaces the gods are also appropriated because claim to divinity of gods and goddesses provides legitimacy and authority to the appropriator. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism are organized around this principle. The principle of appropriating local sacred spaces and the divinity associated therein by a conquering patron to gain legitimacy and acceptance of its authority. To explain this idea let us look at the case of Koubru in Luangdimai narrative.

In Luangdimai legend popular around Imphal, the god who resides on mount Koubru is the husband of Dirianglu.\*\* The god is also known as Tingpurengsonang and was a contemporary of Amangh. Dirianglu is said to be a daughter of the Gonmei clan. After her marriage to the god of Koubru, the Gonmei clan was granted the boon of immortality and so they knew no sickness or death. But the Gonmei clan was not happy with this blessing as they could not wine or dine with meat and wine anymore like other clans when their members fell sick and die. One day the Gonmei clan announced that one of their members had died. Their mourning reached the heaven and the attention of Dirianglu. A worried Dirianglu pleaded with her husband to let her go down to earth to be with her folks. Her husband reluctantly agreed and warned her not to partake of human food. A worried Dirianglu came down on an iron ladder with much dignity to her people. To her surprise, none of her clan members was sick or dead. Instead, she found that her clan members were mourning a dead bulbul bird. Dirianglu was angry with her folks and was about to leave but her brothers persuaded her to partake in their traditional feast. Now as a goddess she had been forbidden to partake the food of the mortal so she reluctantly sat down to dine with her folks under the cover of seven sheets of cloths. Her husband saw the whole event from the heaven spat on her food in anger. The spittle dripped through the seven sheets as drops of blood into her cup. The angry god retrieved the iron ladder back into heaven and Dirianglu was left stranded. Similarly, the boon of immortality granted to the clan was also reversed. From that day onwards, the Gonmei

clan is said to have adopted the bulbul bird as its totem. Accordingly, the bird and its natural habitat are regarded as sacred symbols of the clan.

In a slightly different version narrated by one elder from Makhan village, the lady who became the wife of Kouba or Koubru is known as Wiranliu or Wimaranliu from the Abonmai clan. Wiranliu was a beautiful girl, born and brought up in Makhan village.\*\* One day, Wiranliu and her friends went fishing at the floodplains on the eastern side of the village, now known as *Koujengleima pat* around the northern side of present day Sekmai. As evening approached, the girls prepared to head back home but Wiranliu told her friends that she was not coming along with them since she had to meet someone. So the friends left her behind thinking that she would catch up. Wiranliu did not come back home again. Search parties sent out by the distraught family of Wiranliu and the villagers failed to find her. On many occasions, people reported sighting Wiranliu from the hilltop of Makhan but when they came closer she was not to be found. Soon a messenger came to Makhan village with the message that lord Kouba or Koubru had taken Wiranliu as his wife and they would be visiting them soon. Wiranliu's family and the villagers waited eagerly for the bride and the groom but they did not turn up. One night, the bride and groom did come to the village but everybody had gone to sleep. So they left without entering her house. A message was sent again the next morning that the bride and groom had come but as there was nobody to receive them they had left. In the morning villagers saw pugmarks of tigers on the road. From these pugmarks they knew the couple had indeed come and gone disappointed. The messenger also left a divination that Makhan village would be relatively well off and experience no extreme poverty or hunger when other villages face famine and hunger. The messenger also added that the Abonmai clan would know no sickness or untimely death. As Christians Makhan village maintains no connection with the divine couple, Wiranliu or Koubru. In order to fill this void and in remembrance of Wiranliu, Makhan village used to send a *khoulani*, woman's traditional attire every year to the Lai Haraoba of Kouba held at Sekmai.

Oral narratives such as these are slowly fading out from people's memories, replaced by new narrative and beliefs systems that are otherworldly and non-life affirming. As traditional narrative fades away from collective memories, the mountains and valleys which were once protected and preserved as sacred spaces of the abodes of pantheons of gods have become matters of little or no concern to the community. Loss of these narratives, at the end, means loss of the sense of belonging and diminished claim to these spaces or connectivity with the gods who dwell there. However, as humans with a sense of wounded pride they react to assert claims to these spaces when others stake claim to these spaces. But by then the vacated spaces have already been claimed and appropriated. Making matters worse for the community is their identity project that has turned them into fragmented minorities with incoherent voices thereby, making them unable to articulate their claim or sense of belongingness to these spaces. Further, as their land is considered a strategic frontier, these spaces have become highly valued and commodified items, particularly, with the execution of major state-building developmental activities. 'Desecration' and commodification of these spaces in turn has ushered in litigation and violent conflicts over the processes of land acquisition and compensation.

Among others, the narrative of Wiranliu Abonmai or Dirianglu Gonmei connects her people with mount Koubru, the site which has historical significance and proximity with Makuiluangdi. It also connects the two clans as a family and a people, a part of the dyad of the Pamai and Niumai kinship system. Story of the matriarch is popularly narrated across Luangdiram, particularly within the two clans. In the first version of the narrative, the matriarch enjoyed a short-lived divine power and glory which was also passed on to her people as boons of immortality and prosperity but the people squandered this privilege. While the second narrative reflects the pain and agony of humans who are drawn in to the world of the gods. Nonetheless, the personality also manages to extract promises of health and wealth for her people because of her union with the god. Personalities and places of these narrative are the same although variations in narration exist. But with the abandonment of their culture and religion and the onset of the separate identity project, today Dirianglu is imagined as belonging to the separate *tribes* of Rongmei or Kabui, while Wiranliu is imagined as a personality from the Liangmai *tribe*. Owing to this imagination, even those who have heard the story think of Wiranliu Abonmai and Dirianglu Gonmei as separate personalities. Absence of an authority who could maintain the corpus of their thoughts, speeches, actions, including their identity contributed to this confusion.

#### *Issues in the narrative*

As is the case with other narratives concerning gods and humans, patriarchy is the dominant theme in the story of Wiranliu/Dirianglu. It (story of Wiranliu/Dirianglu) is a reflection of the position of women in the society. The woman is relegated into the background as she is seen as an inferior being. She is an object of desire for the gods and the superior beings, man included. She has no voice over the choice of her life partner. She has no right to visit her paternal home. She has no right to her choice of food. She is cut off from her family and people. Her sacrifices go unacknowledged but her innocent mistakes are punishable by banishment. Even in death, with the embrace of new culture and religion, society tries to erase her name from collective memory for she is now seen as an associate of a malignant spirit. Society infatuated by dignity of identity mistakes her for another person and her identity is obscured. Sacrifice is her duty. Her happiness lies in making the ‘superior’ beings happy by fulfilling his needs and desires. Oddly, she wields the power of goddess through her sons who act like the gods to continue this tradition. She is made an associate of patriarchy. Without her the society is an anarchy. How far has the new culture and religion changed patriarchy or the status of women is a subject of interpretation and an ongoing observation. Be that as it may, society will be better off if half of humanity gets the chance to come out of the injustice and sexist understanding of patriarchy.

#### *Conclusion*

In the post-colonial world, marginalized communities are doubly disadvantaged because they continue to be identified with racist (*tribe*/ST), casteist (*jat*) and sexist (7 sisters of Northeast states) condescending terms. This difficulty becomes complex as the condescending narrative of *tribe*, *jat* and femininity are linked with the idea of empowerment, identity, and access to welfare measures of the state. In liberal democracies, marginalized communities do get the right to reverse colonial exonyms which are considered derogatory, such as Kacha Naga and Kabui, with autonyms of their choice. However, as the state and the marginalized communities are entangled in administration

convenient ideas and praxis both of them are unable to look beyond non-racist, non-casteist or non-sexist terms.

As the state has been deterred by political reasons to stick with the idea of *tribe* or ST, a false sense of security provided by the idea of being scheduled deludes the marginalized community to become complacent and divisive. The marginalized imagines that the identity, welfare entitlements and empowerment provided by the state are of greater value than the existential unity of their own beings as people. Owing to this Machiavellian logic, language is projected as the fundamental symbol of their imagined identity that can fetch them expanded welfare entitlements. This focus on linguistic identity bordering on chauvinism, in turn, overrides their culture, history, values and institutions. Due to this paradox, the marginalized may be deemed free but are stranded in the colonial wilderness.

Can people who have been institutionalized as ‘lesser’ beings be emancipated without interrogating the enslaving ideas and praxis? Can they overcome racist, casteist and sexist discriminations without reordering the laws that are embedded in the body politics of the state? Both answers are in the negative. Ironically, Luangdimai politics and identity discourse have been about negotiating marginal situations by embracing marginality. It is fixated on decorous autonyms vis-à-vis derogatory exonyms that the identity discourse around *tribe* and *jat* has lost its meaning and relevance to emancipate them. When emancipation from racist, casteist and sexist ideas require interrogating and rejecting these ideas and institutions they are instead committed to embracing them. Similarly, when interpreting identity and marginality requires understanding the issues, they are engaged in digression and self-contradictions. The marginalized can either live with marginality and the indignity of colonial exonyms and injustices or choose to decolonize the mind by interrogating colonial ideas and praxis for complete freedom and justice.

*\*The title of the paper is inspired by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, an African writer who authored Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986). Ngũgĩ was inspired by a Caribbean writer. Like Ngũgĩ and the Africans, Luangdimai in Asia also grapple with colonial legacies. Ironically, Luangdimai seem to enjoy embracing colonial ideas and praxis rather than seeking to interrogate or reject them.*

*Post-colonial writers who question colonial legacies are broadly divided into two groups. Those who want to do away with thinking and writing in English and those who believe writing in English as more effective in addressing the post-colonial problems. Ngũgĩ belongs to the first category, while most writers in India choose English to interrogate colonial ideas. Salman Rushdie is one of the writers in the second category.*

*\*\*I must acknowledge the people who took the trouble of narrating this story for this paper. Although I have heard about it as a child, the Gonmei version of the story was re-narrated to me by a person who is based in Imphal. The Abonmai version was narrated to me by an elderly person from Makhan village.*

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