



# Exploring The Cultural Significance Of Rice Beer: A Study Of The Rongmei Tribe Of Northeast India

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**Citation:** Dr. T. Deepamanjuri Devi, et.al (2024). Exploring The Cultural Significance Of Rice Beer: A Study Of The Rongmei Tribe Of Northeast India, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 6803-6812

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10033

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The Rongmei tribe of Northeast India, part of the larger Zeliangrong community, has preserved a rich tradition of *Joungao* (rice beer) brewing that transcends mere dietary practice to embody profound sociocultural and spiritual significance. This paper examines *Joungao* as a cultural linchpin, exploring its role in life-cycle rituals (birth, marriage, death), festivals (*Gaan-Ngai*, *Gudui-Ngai*, *Nanu-Ngai*), and daily communal life. Ethnographic insights reveal how *Joungao* serves as: (1) a sacred offering in libation rituals (*Joupan Keimei*) to the Supreme God *Tingkao Ragwang*; (2) a symbol of hospitality and identity; and (3) a gendered economic activity, with women as custodians of brewing tradition.

The study also documents threats to this tradition, including Christian condemnation of ancestral practices, which have accelerated its decline in hill communities. Yet, its resilience in Imphal Valley villages underscores the adaptive capacity of indigenous cultural systems. The role of rice beer in shaping the cultural and social landscape of the Rongmei tribe provides a deeper understanding of the significance of alcohol use beyond its physiological effects, positioning it as a key element in the social and cultural dynamics of an indigenous community in Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Traditional rice beer, Rongmei culture, ritual practices, indigenous beliefs, Northeast India.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Rongmei tribe, often referred to as the *Kabui* is an indigenous tribe of Manipur. They are a part of the broader Zeliangrong community which includes *Zeme*, *Liangmai* and *Inpui* sub-tribes. They are also the subset of the Nagas, largely residing in Manipur, Nagaland and Assam. The *Rongmei* derived their ethnonym from *Rong* meaning South and *Mei* meaning people, signifying "the southern people" or "the people from the south." Racially and linguistically, they fall under the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongolian race.<sup>1</sup>

Homemade alcoholic beverages are a vital part of tribal life worldwide. With profound ritual significance, they have been consumed for generations during cultural, social, and religious events among ethnic tribal communities. The practice of drinking homemade alcoholic beverages is a long-standing socio-cultural tradition, both in India and across the globe.<sup>2</sup> Talking about the tribal groups in the Northeast, crafting rice beer has been a tradition and an intrinsic element of their ethnic lifestyle, associating culturally and religiously.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, rice beer, known as *Joungao*, is highly valued in Rongmei culture, where brewing is a crucial custom that has been fundamental to their everyday lives for centuries. This practice is more than just a dietary habit; it is a vital part of the tribe's sociocultural fabric, playing an important role in religious rituals and ceremonies, social gatherings, household and communal events, such as festivals, births, marriages, deaths, and other significant occasions.

This multidimensional significance makes rice beer an indispensable cultural marker. However, this tradition faces considerable pressures from Christian conversion movements that denounce it as incompatible with the Christian doctrine,<sup>4</sup> and from earlier state prohibition policies in Manipur.<sup>5</sup> Due to such constraint and condemnation, this tradition is gradually disappearing, by and large, among the Rongmei community in Manipur. The present paper examines the sociocultural significance of *Joungao* (rice beer) among the

Rongmei tribe, in Manipur. It also addresses the symbolic meaning and cultural beliefs associated with the use of *Joungao* in rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and other community events. A combination of secondary sources, such as books, dissertations, news articles, and journal articles, with primary data gathered through interviews, is employed to capture the unmediated perspectives pertinent to the study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The brewing and consumption of traditional beer have been entrenched in the religious, social, and cultural aspects of societies throughout the world for centuries. A foundational contribution to this understanding is found in Ian S. Hornsey's 2003 work, "A History of Beer and Brewing", which explores the origins of brewing traditions within ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Asia. His work emphasizes the variety of traditional beers, ranging from Asian rice-based and African sorghum-based beers to American maize-based chicha, and highlights their importance beyond consumption. According to him, rice beer was a social lubricant, playing crucial roles in ritual sacraments and religious rites, shaping communal identities, and even functioning as a means of taxation and a marker of social status.<sup>6</sup>

Expanding on alcohol's symbolic dimensions, Monaco et al., (2020), argue that "Alcohol is an ancestral beverage" that has been both "divinized and demonized". The use of alcohol is ingrained in customs and traditions and is regulated by culture, context, and identity among tribal communities.<sup>7</sup> Across different historical period and cultures, "Alcohol became a symbolic and integrative object."<sup>8</sup> Carneiro (2002) & Paul (2001) describe alcohol, particularly wine, as a historic form of medicine and a cultural artifact used in rituals associated with sociability, healing, celebration, devotion and pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Analogously, Mandelbaum (1965) frames alcohol as the most culturally significant of all traditional substances, historically the most extensively used, the most esteemed in ceremonial and social contexts, and the most deeply embedded within diverse cultural traditions, with its role oscillating between sacred and profane, depending on the cultural contexts and norms of the community.<sup>10</sup>

In the Indian context, particularly among tribal groups in Eastern and Northeastern India, alcohol serves multifaceted cultural and socio-economic functions. Midya (2020) observes that drinking rice beer is a common and uncontrolled behaviour among tribal groups, with no age, gender, educational, or socio-economic restrictions placed upon its use. Rice-beer is intricately associated with significant life rituals such as birth, wedding, death ceremonies, and festivals, and is used to mark social events and connect people. He further asserted that *Handia* or rice beer is used to relieve tensions and anxiety during difficult moments by bringing psychical balance and internal peace, while also encouraging social unity and coherence within the community.<sup>11</sup> Doron (2010) supplements this perspective by describing how the boatmen of Benares use alcohol in ritualistic ways to appease their gods, making seasonal sacrifices of male goats and offering alcohol to *Bhesahsur Baba*, the community's deity for protection. Its sacred utility across life-cycle events is further demonstrated by the ritual consumption of alcohol in various death-related ceremonies.<sup>12</sup>

A study by Rawat et.al (2021) elucidate the socio-economic relevance and the cultural contexts of traditional alcoholic drinks among the indigenous groups in Indian Himalayan Region (IHR). In the IHR ethno-cultures, alcoholic beverages such as *Chhang*, *Judima*, *Apong*, *Madua*, *Opo*, etc. are consumed in various rituals, social activities and forms of worship. Rawat et al.'s research also indicates that rice is the most commonly used grain for brewing alcohol among tribes in the Himalayan region, comprising 46%, followed by millet 17%, barley 12%, wheat 10%, maize 10%, and sorghum at 5%. These results indicate the adaptive use of the available agricultural products within the local areas in the production of traditional alcohol across Northeast India.<sup>13</sup>

Several studies have examined the role and transformation of traditional rice beer among Naga communities, highlighting its cultural, religious, and social significance. Kaisii Athikho (2018) discusses the changing role of rice beer (*ozhe/hayi*) in Naga society. He emphasizes that rice beer was traditionally an integrated part of social, ritual and religious life, as well as everyday food, consumed and shared in ritual and communal contexts, subject to strict cultural rules of moderation and moral self-control. However, since the onset of modernization and the introduction of India-made foreign liquor (IMFL), old ways have been undermined. He further argues that this change has led to greater alcohol abuse, particularly among young people, as alcohol has evolved from a culturally regulated substance to a symbol of contemporary identity, often idealized and abused.<sup>14</sup> Arkotong Longkumer (2016) on the other hand analyzes the influence of Christianity, among the Zeme Naga in Assam, particularly the Baptist, who condemned the native custom involving rice beer as part of a "false religion". This has caused a conflict between Christian and Non-Christian members of the community, where alcohol, particularly rice beer, is highlighted as a marker of cultural boundaries within post-conversion communities.<sup>15</sup>

The paper "Brewing Traditions: An Autoethnographic Study of the Kabui (Rongmei) Tribe in Manipur" by Gangmumei Kamei (2015) offers an ethnographic account of traditional brewing of the Rongmei tribe, describing the cultural centrality of *Joungao* (rice beer) and *Jouju* (rice wine). It demonstrates how these brewing traditions help maintain community identity, uphold ritual customs, and pass down ancestral wisdom, functioning as a form of living cultural heritage that evolves with local environments and traditions.<sup>16</sup>

The academic work “Marginalisation of Women workforce in Indigenous Industry: Evidences of Alcohol Industry in Namthanlong, Manipur,” by Richard Kamei (2015), describes the experiences of Rongmei Naga women, who actively participate in alcohol production and sales. It highlights the intersection of gender, culture, and economy in the production of traditional alcohol. The women of such indigenous communities, such as the Rongmei Naga, assert how they navigate their positions through a complex set of social and legal impediments to maintain cultural practices and sustain livelihoods.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. TYPES OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

In the study of traditional alcohol brewing, the Rongmei tribe uses local vernacular terms such as *Jou* for alcohol, *Joungao* for rice beer, *Jouju* for rice wine, *Joungao-shoumei* or *Joudui-kasemmei* for the process of making rice beer, and *Jou-songmei* for the process of making rice wine.<sup>18</sup> Budha Kamei (2017), in his article, “Traditional foods and beverages of the Zeliangrong of Northeast,” outlines the various types of alcoholic beverages such as *Joungao*, *Timpui*, *Jouju*, *Pheijou*, *Haojou*.<sup>19</sup> Among these, *Joungao* (rice beer) is regarded as the most important traditional beverage of the Rongmei tribe. It is believed to be the genesis of all other alcoholic drinks known to the community.<sup>20</sup> It is consumed and enjoyed by all members of the community regardless of age or gender. Other beverages such as *Timpui*, *Pheijou*, and *Haojou* are typically consumed by adults, while *Jouju*, a rice wine, the strongest drink of the Rongmei tribe, is reserved for the elder members of the community.

### 4. PREPARATION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AT GLANCE

For thousands of years, making alcoholic beverages has been a distinctive element of traditional knowledge among the tribal communities.<sup>21</sup> According to Gangmumei Kamei (2015) the Rongmei tribe has been producing alcoholic beverages for millennia using fermentation and distillation processes.<sup>22</sup> Fermentation is one of the earliest techniques employed by tribal communities in India.<sup>23</sup> In the local Rongmei vernacular, the fermentation process is referred to as *Mbumloumei*. Since fermentation is one of the most cost-effective methods of producing and preserving food,<sup>24</sup> it is widely employed in crafting alcoholic beverages among the Rongmei tribe. Alcoholic beverages such as *Joungao*, *Timpui*, *Haojou*, and *Pheijou* are all produced through fermentation. Distillation, a technique adopted later, is used to create stronger alcoholic drinks, such as *Jouju* (rice wine).<sup>25</sup> The distillation process typically involves an age-old vertical decking system, in which *Jounap*, a fermented rice is cooked at a low temperature to produce a distilled liquid known as *Jouju*.<sup>26</sup>

These homemade beverages, typically prepared at the local or family level, vary from region to region and are made manually by mixing an old starter culture with raw materials.<sup>27</sup> The preparation of alcoholic beverages among the Rongmei tribe involves the use of locally made yeast called *Khai*, primarily made from a mixture of rice powder and a tree bark known as *Khaipuroi* or *Khailoi*.<sup>28</sup> The primary purpose of adding *Khai* (yeast) is not only to initiate and drive the fermentation process but also to induce intoxication.<sup>29</sup> All alcoholic beverages known to the Rongmei, except for *Joungao* are crafted by adding *Khai*.

Focusing on the materials used in alcohol preparation, rice, being the staple food intrinsically becomes the main ingredient in crafting rice beer and other alcoholic beverages among the Rongmei community.<sup>30</sup> Das (1986) further highlighted that, in addition to rice as the primary ingredient, the Rongmei community also used millet as an alternative ingredient in producing alcoholic beverages.<sup>31</sup> Apart from using normal rice, the tribe also known to used glutinous rice, locally called *Napnang*, and banana fruits.<sup>32</sup> *Napnang Joungao*, (a black rice beer) and *Haojou*, (a banana wine made from ripened banana) are particularly known for their sweet, flavourful taste.

### 5. THE CUSTODIAN OF THE BREWING TRADITION

Across the tribal communities in Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), the preparation of traditional alcoholic beverages is predominantly a domestic activity performed by women.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, among the Rongmei tribe, the preparation of alcoholic beverages has been the primary economic activity of womenfolk since time immemorial. Gangmumei Kamei (2015) and Richard Kamei & Majumder (2019) highlighted that women are central to Rongmei brewing traditions, where the practice is not only a key part of domestic responsibilities but also a cultural role passed down through generations. While men may assist in the brewing process, their involvement is minimal - they seldom assist in procuring raw materials but typically do not engage directly in brewing.<sup>34</sup> The entire brewing process, from preparation to production, which involves gathering firewood, cleaning utensils and grains, fermenting with starter cultures, and serving the final product, is comprehensively performed by women.<sup>35</sup> Their deep involvement and generational expertise in brewing not only ensure the survival of this cultural practice but also affirm their role as a custodians of the brewing tradition.

## 6. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RICE BEER

Homemade beverages like rice beer and rice wine play a vital role among the tribal communities, both culturally and religiously. These traditional beverages are integral to various social and cultural events, including weddings, harvest celebrations, rituals honouring gods, religious ceremonies, and commemorations of deceased loved ones. They serve as symbols of unity, joy, sorrow, and togetherness. Additionally, these beverages are deeply connected to the tribe's origins, environment, beliefs, and way of life, and are thus regarded as an essential part of their cultural heritage. Brewing traditional beverages serves not only as a means of livelihood but also an essential part of household and communal life. It is considered to have a food-like value, and its significance is evident in the prominent role it plays in social rituals such as weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies.<sup>36</sup>

In the tribal regions of Odisha, a fermented rice-based drink known as *Handia* is widely consumed during weddings, births, anniversaries, and festivals, particularly in the districts of Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, and others. This drink plays a significant cultural, social, and economic role, especially among the Munda and Santhal tribes. *Handia* (rice beer) is offered to local deities and deceased ancestors during rituals. Apart from its ritualistic application, it also serves other purposes: it is consumed with meals throughout the day and is believed to protect against sunstroke and boost energy during physical labour. Additionally, it acts as a supplementary food, helping to fill nutritional gaps for tribal people who may have limited access to regular meals.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, *Apong*, a rice beer of the Mishing tribe of Assam holds a central role in the community's social, cultural, and religious life, symbolizing more than just a drink. Its usage is prominent in various cultural and religious events, such as *Midang* (Traditional marriage), *Ui* (rituals), *Tani Siko* (death ceremonies or rituals), and other festivals.<sup>38</sup>

*Joungao*, a homemade rice beer of the Rongmei tribe, serves a similar purpose. Much like the *Apong* (rice beer) of the Mishing tribe (Assam) and the *Handia* (rice beer) of the Munda and Santhal tribes (Odisha), *Joungao* (rice beer) plays a pivotal role in the social, cultural, and religious life of the Rongmei tribe. Like *Handia* of Odisha, *Joungao* is considered a vital food item, and its intake is seen throughout the day, from morning to evening. Traditionally, rice beer is brewed and stored in every Rongmei household, where it is consumed by all family members - men, women, and children - and served to guests and visitors.<sup>39</sup> For the Rongmei serving *Joungao* is comparable to serving tea and is widely practiced as a symbol of hospitality.<sup>40</sup> The Mishing tribe of Assam follows a comparable custom, in which the host family offers guests a glass of *Apong* (rice beer) as a symbol of honour.<sup>41</sup>

From a cultural perspective, *Joungao* is believed to have positive effects on both physical health and skin complexion, and it is often compared to drinking milk.<sup>42</sup> As according to the Elders, drinking *Joungao* alone was sufficient to sustain a person for the entire day. In earlier times, *Joungao* was packed into a container made of dried bitter gourd, known as *Jou Mon*, and carried to the paddy fields to be consumed while working in the fields.<sup>43</sup>

### 6.1. RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

The importance of traditional alcoholic beverages is also reflected in various rituals and ceremonies, such as births, marriages, festivals and celebrations, across many tribal communities in Northeast India. For instance, the Ahoms of Assam use *Xaj-Pani*, a traditional rice beer, both in religious rites and rituals and as a refreshing beverage during Bihu festivals.<sup>44</sup> *Sujen*, a rice beer popular among the Deori tribe of Assam, is regarded as pure and is used by Deori priests as sacred water in various festivals and ceremonies.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the significance of *Joungao*, a rice beer of the Rongmei tribe, is manifested in rituals and ceremonies. As stated by Gangmumei Kamei (2015), *Joungao*, because of its spiritual significance and revered status, is favoured above all other alcoholic beverages. Owing to its ritual importance, it plays a key role in various life-cycle rituals such as birth, marriage, and death rituals, symbolizing its deep connection to the community's spiritual values and beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

*Joungao*, revered as the holy wine, plays a central role in the tribe's libation ritual known as *Joupan Keimei*.<sup>47</sup> This offering of holy wine is a cornerstone of the tribe's spiritual practice, performed nearly at every important occasion and major life events - births, weddings, funerals, and festivals, and more. During the birth ceremony called *Najumgaimei*, *Joungao* along with *Sangdai* (a cock), *Sanglou* (a hen) and *Gu* (Ginger), is offered to *Tingkao Ragwang* as a solemn supplication for the newborn's health and prosperity.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in *Nasan Kanmei*, a child purification ritual, the application of holy wine holds symbolic importance. In this ritual, the local priest performs a symbolic act of purification by applying a portion of *Sangdai* (cock) liver, *Sanglou* (hen) liver, a piece of ginger, a lump of rice, and a small amount of holy wine to the child's forehead.<sup>49</sup> This sacred act reflects the community's deep spiritual worldview, with *Joungao* serving as one the material expression of their religious beliefs.

The significance of *Joungao* is also evident in its social role in *Nouthanmei* (a marriage proposal act). Mirroring the alcohol-gifting traditions found in many cultures, the Rongmei uses *Joungao* as a vital medium of social negotiation. In the context of traditional marriage customs, when a girl resides in a different village from her suitor, a jar of wine (typically *Joungao*) and a *Laogai* (a hoe) are presented to the girl's family as a symbolic gesture of goodwill and social bonding.<sup>50</sup> This culturally significant procedure is undertaken by the groom's family to formalize the proposal.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to its role in the proposal, the importance of *Joungao* is further emphasized during the marriage ceremony itself. On the day of the marriage, a traditional ritual known as *Mhairakmei* (an act of marriage) is performed to solemnize the union. As part of this ceremony, a cock, *Laogai* (a hoe, symbolizing sanctity), and *Gu* (ginger) are offered to *Tingkao Ragwang*, the supreme deity of the Rongmei people. These offerings are made, seeking divine blessings for a long, prosperous life and a lasting lineage<sup>52</sup>. Upon the completion of the *Mhairakmei* ritual, a holy wine (typically *Joungao*) is offered to various divine beings - *Tingkao Ragwang*, *Bambu* (village deities), the groom's ancestors, and even malevolent spirits - to ensure the couple's well-being and future prosperity. This ceremony is mandatory; without it, the relationship is deemed invalid. Only upon its completion, the couple is officially recognized as husband and wife.<sup>53</sup> *Joungao* also takes on a meaningful social role during marriage ceremonies. It is traditionally served at Rongmei weddings, where its presence is not just expected but cherished as an essential part of the celebration.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond its ritualistic role in birth and marriage, *Joungao* holds profound spiritual significance in funeral ceremonies as well, where it serves as a medium through which the living connects with the departed. In Rongmei custom, funeral ceremonies are commemorated by offering holy wine (typically *Joungao*) to pay tribute to the deceased. According to their beliefs, when a person dies, their soul, called *Buh*, departs from the body and journeys to the underworld known as *Taroilam*, the realm of the dead. Death is not seen as the end of existence but rather as a transition to a different form of life. Therefore, a libation ritual is carried out, calling upon *Tingkao Ragwang*, the supreme God, to safeguard and guide the deceased on their afterlife journey.<sup>55</sup> Similar to the Rongmei tribe, the Poumai Nagas also perform certain rites, rituals, and offerings for the deceased, rooted in the beliefs in the existence of the soul and the continuation of life after death.<sup>56</sup> This sacred use of *Joungao* reinforces its role as a vessel of cultural expression, spiritual belief, and ancestral reverence in Rongmei tradition.

## 6.2. FESTIVALS, DANCE AND FOLKSONG

Comparable to *Sujen*, the rice beer of the *Deori* tribe of Assam<sup>57</sup>, which plays a prominent role in their cultural festivities, *Joungao*, the rice beer of the Rongmei tribe, also holds great cultural significance in festivals such as *Gaan-Ngai* (post-harvest festival), *Rih-Ngai* (war festival), *Gudui-Ngai* (ginger soup festival), *Pokpha-Ngai* (pre harvest festival) and *Tun Ngai* (Festival of the rains), etc.<sup>58</sup> In all these festivals, *Joungao* is used both for offerings and for communal consumption.<sup>59</sup> During *Nanu-ngai* (ear-piercing festival), a special type of rice beer called *Napnang Joungao* (black rice beer) is served in abundance alongside the regular *Joungao*.<sup>60</sup> Catering *Joungao* is a customary practice at almost every festival, typically served in a buffalo horn, bamboo cup, or banana leaf. The offering of holy wine (*Joungao*) to *Tingkao Ragwang* (the supreme God) is also observed in *Zoumon Kashukmei Laam*, a traditional ritual dance performed exclusively during the sacrificial rituals of *Makru Banru*. This dance is performed exclusively by girls, each holding a decorated dried gourd, known as *Zoumon*, filled with wine. It is often accompanied by a ritual song, along with drums, cymbals, and Gongs.<sup>61</sup>

The importance of *Joungao* is also reflected in some traditional folk songs of the Rongmei tribe. The folk songs of *Lamlonlu* (a romantic song) and *Majahlu* (a harvest song) invoke the name and power of holy wine and beer. These performances are often held at communal gatherings and festivals.<sup>62</sup> A similar emphasis on the cultural significance of rice beer is seen among the Mishing tribe of Assam, where the taste of *Apong* (rice beer) is compared to the act of courting women.<sup>63</sup>

## 7. VALUES AND BELIEFS BEHIND LIBATION RITUAL

In African culture, the libation ritual is conducted to invoke blessings from ancestors and deities, pay tribute to the deceased, and express gratitude for their guidance and protection throughout life's challenges. It involves calling upon, chanting to, and offering reverence, prayers, and petitions to the ancestors and deities of the land, who are believed to relay these to the Almighty. This act serves as a plea to God, the deities, and the ancestors, seeking their intervention of these spiritual beings to shield humans from their enemies.<sup>64</sup>

Similar to African culture, the libation ritual is a key aspect of Rongmei spirituality and religious life, performed at nearly every significant event, including ceremonies, celebrations, festivals, social gatherings, and processions. It permeates all facets of the Rongmei cultural and religious life, from birth to death. For the Rongmei tribe, the libation ritual is an appeal to Gods, Goddesses, deities, or ancestral spirits, seeking blessings and protection, sometimes from unseen evil forces or circumstances, and at other times for guidance and wisdom to assist the living.<sup>65</sup>

The libation ritual constitutes a vital part of every major event in Rongmei culture. It is typically carried out by pouring holy wine, reciting prayer or invocation to gods, goddesses, and deities. The ritual commonly involves the use of *Joungao* (rice beer) and *Gu* (ginger), both of which are considered essential elements in Rongmei customs and are believed to hold deep spiritual significance.<sup>66</sup> However, the items used in the ritual offerings may vary depending on the context and nature of the event. In recent times, rice wine known as *Jouju* is often used as a substitute for *Joungao* due to its greater availability.

It is noted that the execution of such rituals is performed by the local priest, known as *Amuh or Muh*, akin to the *Maibas* and *Maibis* of the Meiteis. In Meitei culture, the *Maibas* and *Maibis* are responsible for conducting complex ceremonies that honour deities and ancestors, facilitating interaction between the divine

and human realms.<sup>67</sup> The *Muhpu* (priest) or *Muhpui* (priestess) of the Rongmei community plays the same role as the *Maiba* or *Maibis* of the Meiteis. However, in most cases, it is the elder members of the *Pei* (village council) who perform ceremonial rituals while the *Amuh* (local priest) engage primarily in more complex ritual.<sup>68</sup>

## 8. SOCIAL CULTURAL IDENTITY

The phrase *Pou-pei riak* is essentially conceived as a cultural designation among the Rongmei. It applies to the "customs" or "lifeways of our ancestors" and encompasses practices, teachings, beliefs, narratives, and social structures that are integrally woven into the ontological and epistemological fabric of the Rongmei lifeworld.<sup>69</sup> The cultural embeddedness of alcohol, particularly *Joungao* within the Rongmei culture has similarly led to the emergence of the vernacular expression *Jou Jang Mei Riak* meaning "the drinking custom." This phrase is a marker employed by Christian converts Rongmei to emphasize the non-Christian members of their community i.e. those who adheres to the Custom of the ancestors, or *Pou Pei Riak*. This connotation, primarily imparted by colonial missionary, framed alcohol-related practices as both sinful and emblematic of so-called pagan traditions has led to the assertion of stigmatized notion towards the ancestral custom.<sup>70</sup> Notably, while *Pu Pou Riak* is a sociocultural identity born out of the customary tradition, the phrase *Jou Jang Mei Riak*, emerged from the puritanical opposition to rice beer consumption and its associated rituals, imbued by the Baptist Christian missionaries who imposed moral judgement upon the Rongmei customary practices.<sup>71</sup>

## 9. CHANGES

The advent of Christianity has significantly affected the Rongmei cultural dynamics, rendering it a disruptive and transformative force on the traditional beliefs and customs. Christian missionaries, particularly Baptist, perceived pre-Christian tradition, such as rice-beer drinking, offerings, and ancestral worship as inimical to the 'authentic' meaning of Christianity based on New Divinity theology which focused on interior spiritual purity over material custom<sup>72</sup>. This viewpoint is further backed by Vibha Joshi (2012), who notes that some new converts adopted a puritanical stance in an attempt to set themselves apart from their "pagan" and "animistic" fellow villagers. This was most prominently displayed by the substitution of black tea for rice beer, a symbolic change that become popular among different Naga communities. Joshi (2012) also observed that baptist missionaries denounced nearly all traditional institutions, including youth dormitories, festivals, rituals, and feasts, branding all ritual act as "pagan" and "heathen" and therefore unacceptable. In addition to bringing a new faith, the Baptist missionaries also brought a whole different way of life, which they actively sought to instill among the new converts.<sup>73</sup> Elias KC (2023) similarly pointed out that Christian theology's repudiation of indigenous lifeworld has resulted in a number of converts discarding their ancestral custom and practices, deemed incompatible with their new faith, including *Gaan-Ngai* festivals.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, Rongmei Christians renounced traditional customs and practices that were perceived to conflict with the principles of Christianity.

Compared to the Rongmei community in the valley, this shift is more noticeable among the Rongmei in the hill regions, where traditional belief systems have significantly weakened. Research findings indicate that Rongmei communities in the Imphal valley, particularly those who practice *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak*, have exhibited more cultural resilience, retaining closer ties to the brewing tradition and related lifestyles. The conversion into Christianity, however, does not entail the complete eradication of alcohol consumption. While they may no longer adhere to the traditional values and beliefs associated with it, alcohol consumption persists among the Christian-converted households.

Apart from the impact of Christianization, the rice beer brewing tradition has also been shaped by the forces of modernization. It is evident that the tribe's traditional production of rice beer and other alcoholic beverages has changed significantly over the past few decades, shifting from subsistence-based brewing to a more commercialized activity. This change towards commercialization is largely driven by socioeconomic pressures, particularly among the Rongmei women, for whom alcohol production and sales has become a major livelihood strategy. As noted by Richard Kamei (2015), the lack of formal employment opportunities and government jobs led many Rongmei women to resort to alcohol production and sales as a reliable source of income to support their families.<sup>75</sup> Given the relative simplicity with the indigenous brewing knowledge, selling alcohol has emerged as a practical and desirable economic alternative.

## 10. CONCLUSION

*Joungao*, the rice beer of the Rongmei tribe embodies far more than a traditional beverage; it is a cornerstone of cultural identity, spiritual practice, and communal cohesion. From birth rituals (*Najum Gaimai*) to harvest festivals (*Gaan-ngai*), and its role in rituals such as *Mhairakmei* and *Joupan Keimei* (wine libation) underscores its deep interconnection with the tribe's worldview.

The influence of Christianity and other societal changes brought about by modernization are gradually eroding traditional practices, particularly among Rongmei community in the hill regions, where such customs are waning. Christian-converted Rongmei often refrain from participating in the traditional religious formalities associated with social and cultural festivals. Nevertheless, they have shown their willingness to participate in secularized version of these traditions. Moreover, student organizations have taken on a growing role in organizing festivals such as *Hega N'gi* and *Gaan Ngai*, which are embraced by Christians communities due to their exclusion of religious rituals.<sup>76</sup> Besides, in areas dominated by *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak* (mostly in Imphal Valley), the tradition of brewing and its associated customs remains vibrant, reflecting the community's ongoing commitment to hold on to their cultural roots. However, to help ensure that the essence of Rongmei cultural tradition thrives in future generations to come, future initiatives must strike a balance between preservation and respectful evolution.

#### END NOTES

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