Chapter-III
Crimes and its Penalties and Social Offences

Crimes can broadly divided into-private crime and public crime. Private crimes are those committed against private or individual person – murder, adultery, theft, pre-marital sex, rape, marriage by force etc. to call somebody devil (Chagaiemi), are also termed as a crime in the Ruangmei society. Crime in as such if they are committed against the customs or to the danger of the whole community such as breaches of the customary marriage laws (incest), boundary disputes in respect of paddy fields, destroying the house of another person or the village properties etc. are taken as public crimes.¹

Crime can be a private or a public affair. So long as the matter is settled within the family or families involved it remains a private affair. Once the matter is reported to the village ‘pei’, it becomes a public affair, crime does not become one in the act itself but in the knowledge or the awareness of it. The village ‘pei’ will now have the full authority to settle the matter and pass judgment. A case is registered in the village council or pei by the victim or his/her family with a jar of wine (zou).

The pei then, tries the case and judgment is given accordingly. The quality is punished according to the gravity of the crime. One does not find capital punishment in a Ruangmei society.

The biggest punishment that is given to a person is banishment from the village followed by excommunication, punishment is the action taken by society against one who has transgressed its laws. The exercise of justice by the village council against an individual who is obnoxious to it or to any of its members is based primarily on the feeling of reforming the guilty and warning the others. Therefore, the criminal must suffer, must expiate his crime, whatever other notions may in time enter into the idea of punishment.\(^2\)

The crimes and penalties under the customary laws of the Ruangmei tribes are discussed as under.

3.1 Meidoumei (Murder)

Murder is considered as the most serious of all the crimes. Murder can be of different types:

(a) Intentional killing

Intentional killing is termed as ‘rih’ i.e., war. So, when murder is committed, the situation is that of war. Taking heads may prevail in such situation when it is inter-village, when it is intra-village, the murderer is driven

\(^2\)Ibid.
out to the village and he is made to pay a fine in cash or in kind. Such persons are not readily accepted by other villages for he may bring conflict between the two villages.³

(b) Killing by mistake or in self-defense

Even when the killing is unintentional or is committed by mistake or due to carelessness, the matter is also taken very seriously. A fine in terms of money or animal will be paid to the victim’s family, when the fine is paid in terms of land, the land is called Theihmeiji i.e., the bed of the dead person.

(c) Murder within the family

Such are settled within the family or the clan itself. Murder is considered as Zeikeimei, i.e., shedding of blood. An animal is killed to compensate it. During the trial of murder case, if the victim’s family raises hands against the killer separate case will be tried. The family has to pay fine (Mhat) again in the form of pig or a cow. The animal so fined will be cut into pieces and distributed to every household of the village to witness the settlement of the matter and to stop any more killing arising out of the matter on which may occur in future.⁴

³ Personal Interview with R.K. Thiugong, Village Chairman, Tamenglong District, Manipur on 04.08.2007.
⁴ Personal Interview with G. Kusanpou, Village Elder, Banhrwang Taudaijang, Village, Tamenglong District, Manipur, on 06.02.2007.
3.2 Nou Soumei (Adultery)

Adultery is a serious crime. It is having sexual relation between a married woman and somebody who is not her husband. This may also include elopement of married women with a person who is not her husband. There are three kinds of adultery (nou soumei) in Ruangmei custom. They are:

(a) Langdai Soumei: This is to have sexual relationship of a married woman with her lover on the bed of the couple in the house of the husband.

(b) Thingrem duijuchang Soumei: This is to have sexual relationship of the wife with other man out side the house of the husband.\(^5\)

(c) Khamthan nousoumei: This is to seduce or to elope or to have sexual relationship with girl who is betrothed to a man.

Among the three types, Langdai soumei is the most grievous though all the three types are treated adultery. In such case, the relatives of the husband can assault the adulterer and can be beaten up. In the first two cases, the following penalties are given:

- The culprit is made to pay double the bride pride as fine
- Fine in the form of pig/cows are made as

(i) Chana munduan – to the husband’s clan
(ii) Matsi changam jaeng- to the husband’s family
(iii) Luang guarek – to the village\(^6\)

3.3 Kaidoumei (Demolition of house)

It is a kind of barbaric revenge resorted by the relatives of the disparate husband against the family of the abductor out of their disappointment and frustration. This uncivilized practices of Kaidoumei was resorted by the primitive people in the ancient society. But this cruel practice becomes absolute in the present society of Ruangmei. The belongings of the offender and his family will be removed from the house and the articles are left to decay.

3.4 Kaihoumei (Theft)

Theft is rare among the Ruangmei people. It is taken as one of the most degrading acts in the society and looked down upon. For such an act, not very heavy punishment is given. The person is asked to refund the item(s) stolen. The plea of the culprit is also considered. But whatever it may be, he has to pay a fine of one pig which will be shared by the whole village.7

3.5 Clan endogamy

The Ruangmei strictly follow clan exogamy. Clan endogamy is not only a crime, but also a sin. The persons so involved have no place in the society. The following penalties will be borne by the couple.

- They will be ostracized by the society

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6 Personal Interview with Ragwangning Gangmei, Ruangmei Literature Society (President), Imphal, Manipur, on 13.08. 2008.
7 Personal Interview with Kariangpou Panmei, Village Peipouc, Raengkhung village part I, II, III, Tamenglong District, Manipur, on 03.02. 2009.
In some cases, they are expelled as outcastes
- They cannot perform any religious rites and rituals
- They can never host the dormitories

They cannot join in any hunting or fishing expedition of the village.
One piece of clothing each of them will be burnt as an act of sanctification.  
- they can never hold any position in the village administration
- Bride price is not given

3.6 Pre-marital sex

The Ruangmei reserves a high place for chastity. In case of pre-marital sex, a pig will be fined as ‘Luang guairek’ for the whole village. If the woman is pregnant, the father will decide for the child. If the child is taken after maturity, the father will pay a fine of one cow as ‘Naguangjaeng’ to the mother and money or whatever the mothers of the child ask for. This is also called ‘Kapuingam’. The woman will be considered married. She will no longer attend ‘Luchu’ (female dormitory of the unmarried women) but will now be a part of ‘Laakpui Kai’ (dormitory of married woman). There are certain villages which consider such women as unmarried. The man will have no difference. The reason for this being that, there are no separate dormitories for married and unmarried men.®

® Personal Interview with Giandai Gangmei, Village elder, Banhrwang Taudaijang village, Tamenglong District, Manipur, on 04.03.2009.
® Ibid.
3.7 Sukasiloumei (Rape)

A man is said to have committed rape if he has had sexual intercourse with a women against her will, the rapists are usually flogged by the male members of the victim’s clan. He is fined with a pig or mithun, punishment was awarded to the traditional custom or customary laws including the decisions or order of peikai.\(^\text{10}\)

3.8 Jai paktatmei (Elopement)

Elopement means running away of a man with a woman or a girl. The elopement usually takes place when the boy and the girl or the man and the woman are in love with each other and when one elopes with another’s wife, one elopes with the husband of another and they are not allowed to become husband and wife by their own parents. The penalties for such elopement were dealt customarily by agreement between the parents of the two parties. However, that kind of marriage was not socially approved. They are looked down upon by the people.

3.9 Tunahpui Noubung Kahimei (Touching the breast of a woman)

It means touching the breasts of a woman without her consent. Touching the breasts of a woman illegally is regarded as a great social offence and crime. Touching the breast means to touch a woman’s breast while she is

\(^{10}\) Personal Interview with Nakulian Kamei, Village Peipouc, Lwangmai village, (Noney), Tamenglong District, Manipur, on 04.02.2009.
lying down or is in such a position that she cannot defend herself or prevent such an act. The act of touching the breasts of a woman of a married woman or girl by a man other than the husband is considered to be a precursor of adultery. The penalty imposed for such an offender varies from one locality to the other.

3.10 Kaikhoup Theisi Theimei (House pollution)

The term ‘Kaikhoup Theisi theimei’ means a house that has been defiled by any kind of crime committed. In other words, it is a violation of the sanctity of the house by some other person. If any person has been killed in a house by hanging, it is known as Karana riangthang luaimei according to Ruangmei people. A house where the incidents have occurred is usually destroyed or burnt down and the people are not allowed to stay in such house.  

3.11 Ram khou theisi Theimei (Land pollution)

A particular place or the plot of land where a person has been killed by a tiger or by any other wild animal. It is also a place where a person has committed suicide by hanging or by stabbing. It is also a place where all villagers have died due to natural calamities. These places are said to have land pollution which can be translated as an accursed land.

\cite{Ibid}
A place where a person has been killed by a tiger or elephant or by any other wild animals is not allowed to be cleared for the purpose of jhum cultivation. The Ruangmei people believe that such a place is no longer fit for cultivation.

A place where a person has committed suicide by hanging or by stabbing is also regarded by Ruangmei as an accursed place and the reason for not allowing it for cultivation is to avoid the recurrence of similar incidents.\(^\text{12}\)

3.12 Latsarammei (Cheating)

This means telling a lie in order to put someone in trouble. The customary laws and practices of Ruangmeis prohibit such things.

The Ruangmeis do not encourage anyone to tell a lie. The transgressions of this law are punished according to the seriousness of the case. The very purpose of making a man swear is to get the truth from the person and to do justice to the parties concerned. Whenever someone causes harms or defames anyone by telling a lie, and if such statements are proved incorrect he shall have to pay a fine or kinds for such act and in addition to the person offender.

In the past, the Ruangmeis never told lies. Every attempt was made to speak the truth, it was generally believed by the Ruangmeis that if any person

\(^{\text{12}}\) Personal Interview with Rugwangpou Gangmei, Khullak, Lwangmai Village, Tamenglong District, Manipur, on 05.02.2009.
spoke falsely about anyone, he would receive the anger of gods and some misfortune might befall him. These days the people who speak the truth are very rare.\textsuperscript{13}

3.13 Mai Kaitoumei (Arson)

This means burning a house belonging to another. In ancient times, burning houses for revenge were not common among the Ruangmei.

W.N. Hunter says that in 1875 a villager of Rakmanpara was insulted or fancied he insulted by a fellow villager. Instead of revenging himself by a direct attack upon his enemy, he adopted an entirely different course. He set fire to the whole village, killed six men and wounded six other women and children seriously.\textsuperscript{14}

These days, customary law imposes different penalties for such acts.

(iv) If one burns the house intentionally, he must pay compensations for all the properties damaged or as decided by the village council.

(v) If a man burns down the house of another without any cause, he may be punished with a heavy fine as fixed by the village council or expulsion from the village.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Personal Interview with G. Gaingam, Former President Zeliangrong Union, Imphal, Manipur, on 06.03.2010.
3.14 Impinmei (Threat)

This means threatening a person for some harm done to another. If a man threatens to kill any person and later the very person whom he threatens has been killed by someone, it is presumed that the other has been killed by the former for while he has to pay full compensation, as demanded by the pei (village council) and the relations of the family.

In case the cause of the death of the person who has been threatened is proved otherwise, the person who uttered the words of threat shall have to pay fine or kinds to the bereaved family and in addition to the village.

The spirit of revenge amongst the Ruangmei is deep rooted. They leave no stone unturned to take revenge on the man who has done them wrong.

In the case of coincidence in death, the person who has threatened him shall have to defend himself. If he can prove himself innocent inspite of his threatening, he is free from the payment of fine and from such other accusations. Once harm has been done to someone, the revenge is bound to come, because the spirit of revenge is deep rooted even at present.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
3.15 Inpinlana theih numei pu titu Lwaimei

(To threaten to kill a person with poison)

A person may threaten the other that he will kill him either by poisoning or by any other means on the following grounds.

i) when quarrels or dissension arise between two persons about land or properties;

ii) to revenge the death of a person who has been killed

iii) Jealousy

iv) Insults or harm done

v) When a person threatens to kill another with medicine but does not do so, but the person whom he has threatened is presumed to have caused him death. The cost of the funeral ceremonies of such persons shall have to be paid by the offender.17

3.16 Duaic (Witchcraft)

Black art is also to some extent practiced in the Ruangmei society. Such black art is called Duaic. One or two persons who know the art are said to live in village. Such art is said to be practiced when there is competition and jealousy among themselves. A person practicing black art is said to use different articles such as needles, dry skin of animals particularly of the cows, hair, or any other items suitable for the purpose are made to enter into the stomach of the person against whom action is wanted to be taken. Besides,

17 Ibid.
black art is also used to create havoc and disunity among the members of the family. This is said to be done through eatable items such as egg, vegetables, betel nut, water, rice beer, wine etc. If the accusation is proved, the accusers are even punished by chasing them out of the village or imposition of heavy fine on them.\(^\text{18}\)

3.17 Zauhzimeita akhangmei (Resisting an enemy)

It is legitimate to defend oneself against attack made by one enemies outside one’s residence.

It is the act of defense, a person killed the aggressors, the customary law allows such killings and no complaint is entertained from the deceased family. The enemy of any one of the tribe is considered as the common enemy of the whole tribe.

If a man, on being chased by someone with an intention of beating or killing him, has taken shelter the house of another for protection, the occupant of the house can defend him against the intruder. The defender is even permitted to injure or kill the intruder.

Customary law allows the killing of an enemy in self-defense. In the past, defending one’s own life depended purely or one’s strength and ability.

\(^{18}\) Tingkao Ragwang Chap-Riak, Pp. 33-34.
At present too, one is allowed to kill a person in self-defense. But the case has to be proved. The case is decided in a village pei.\(^1\)

3.18 Siangloumei (Cursing)

This means to curse a person for the harm done or to curse someone quarreling with him or her. Often, a person curses when he tries to find fault with another, when a person curses someone as he should be killed by a tiger, elephant or by any animal and after sometime if he is actually killed, then this event is considered as a crime.

The act of curse out of anger is common among the tribe. The act of cursing is considered by the Ruangmei as invoking the evil spirits on a man. If it is found that the misfortune has occurred to the person cursed, the man guilty shall have to pay fines to the person offended as the case may be. The nature of the case is decided in a village pei.\(^2\)

3.19 Ramkhat asutna agaymei (Dispute)

The meaning of the word Ramkhat asutna agaymei is a quarrel or dispute. Actually this does not arise without any cause. The customary laws do not prohibit a person from wrangling or engaging in argument. Therefore, there should not arise the case of any injury or damage caused to any person.

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\(^1\) Personal Interview with Gaipuibi Kamei, Village Elder, Zeihkhulwang village, Churachandpur District, Manipur, 10.10.200.

\(^2\) Ibid.
Firstly, if quarrels or disputes go upto the extent of killing a person which is known as murder, then the bereaved family has every right to demand compensation as they deem fit and proper.

Secondly, if a person quarrels and uses abusive and obscene language, the person doing so shall have to pay heavy fines according to the decision of the village court.\textsuperscript{21}

3.20 Ntanvmei (Tease)

The word, ‘Ntanvmei’ means to tease or cut a joke against another. Teasing a man or woman with a view to insult him or her by using ironical words harming his or her reputation, may result in the pay of fines.

Teasing was not taken seriously by the Ruangmeis. But, occasionally, it has caused feuds and quarrels resulting in fights. Today if such things happen, cases are settled mutually, even if the offending person has to pay heavy fine according to the seriousness of the case.\textsuperscript{22}

3.21 Khanhmei (Taunt)

Khanhmei means to taunt or ridicule someone with a view to abuse him. Taunting causes embarrassments to the person ridiculed. And so, customary law prohibits taunting a person without any reason whatsoever. When a person,

\textsuperscript{21} Personal Interview with Tariangkhangpou Kamei, Khullak, Zeikhulwang village, Churachandpur District, Manipur, 10.10, 2010.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
after committing some misdeeds, blames the other and taunts a person in public or in front of some elders, so as to cause him embarrassment, then he or she shall have to pay fines according to the decision made by the village council.\textsuperscript{23}

3.22 Zanv Sw Kasihnimei (Slander or Calumny)

Zanv Sw Kasihnimei means slander or calumny or to malign or speak ill of someone without sufficient reason. The slander or calumny may be on suspicion or impression. And so, customary law prohibits such words as slander or calumny. Heavy fines are imposed on such offenders.\textsuperscript{24}

3.23 Luhmei (Ridicule)

The word Luhmei means to ridicule, rebuke, or backbite someone by means of unkind and deprecatory remarks. Ridicule, backbites or rebukes without any reason whatsoever or if proved with sufficient witnesses, are fined payable to the person offended.

It the person ridicules or backbites against the judgment or decisions of the village council of elders or court with some deprecatory remarks or backbite the whole community. Then he or she shall have to pay a fine to the community.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Personal Interview with Zapanlung Gangmei, Village elder, Zeikhulwang village, Churachandpur District, Manipur, 11.10.2010.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
3.24 Jaikakammei (Kidnapping)

Kidnapping or Jaikakammei is very seldom found in Ruangmei village. If a boy happens to hold the hands of a girl, he is fined heavily. If he kidnaps a girl and hides for some days he is fined very heavily with the biggest pig in the village or Guaichang kachei chou (Mithun whose horn is one cubic) and punished heavily. If the kidnapped girl does not spend a night with the boy, she is regarded as virgin and if she spends a night, she is regarded as married woman. She may be remarried to other boys but the Manlon (bride price) of the girl is low.\textsuperscript{26}

3.25 Ram duijang (Land dispute)

When there is a dispute regarding land between individuals or groups of people a cases is decided in the village council. In the cases of disputes between two villages case is decided in the joint council organised for the purpose. When a particular case cannot be decided both the parties will be asked to swear in the name of God. There are different ways of swearing, oath taking and ordeals. Some of the important methods are immersing in the water, biting tigers tooth, invoking thunderstone, lightning and so on. In this way the guilty is identified through the effect of such method.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ninglu “Customary practices of the Tribals” paper presented in seminar on History and culture of the Tribals of Manipur, on April 27\textsuperscript{th} 2002, organized by Dept. of Culture and EZZC, Kolkata in Manipur.
3.3 Penalty and Punishment

3.3.1 Taan Phikuakmei (Payment of debts)

Taan phikuakmei means repayment of debts by way of manual labour. In case a debtor was not in the position to repay his debts or the debts owned by his parent or forefathers, and in the meantime he had nobody to help him, then the defaulted debtor was liable to serve as labourer to the debtor (creditor) until they were fully recovered under the terms and condition fixed by the peikai.

3.3.2 Kapi guatkuakloumei (Shaving the hairs of the head)

It means shaving the hairs of the head and exposed in naked in public places-road, village road, market in demonstration. It is one of the most severe and humiliated punishment awarded to persons who committed not only sins against God, but also serious crimes like adultery, immoral acts, etc., repeatedly against the society.  

3.3.3 Bang Tibaimei (Enslavement)

In olden days, punishments were so severe that neither the accused nor the accomplice was spared enslavement was awarded in place of being killed. Enslaving the accused man to the aggrieved family for heinous crimes, non-payment of debt, etc. is usually permitted. This severe form of punishment has totally been wiped out from the society.

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28 Personal Interview with Tariang Khanpou Kamei, Khullak, Zeikhulwang village, Churachandpur District, Manipur, 10.10.2010.
3.3.4 Khaapat loumei (Excommunication)

It means expulsion and it was a kind of punishment awarded to the violator of traditional custom or customary laws including the decisions or order of peikai. The expulsion included: Expelling from Khangchu kai (boy’s dormitory), Luchu kai (Girl’s dormitory), and Naam Khaa Loumei (expelled from village society) etc.29

3.3.5 Fines or Mhat

If the accused pleaded guilty of the crime/offence the village authority after evaluating the extent of damage, injuries, value of the loss/damage, etc. used to pass their order for (i) restoring two/three/four folds of the loss/property damaged as a compensation to the petitioner, (ii) fine or Mhat is also imposed on the accused as punishment in the form of wine—jar or bottles or a pig of 5-7 spans or both.30

3.3.6 Social prohibition or Taboo

The term “Genna (Neihmei)” or “Taboo (Nuhmei) means ‘forbidden’ or ‘prohibited’. Many kinds of gennas or taboos were observed by the primitive Ruangmei since time immemorial. These were observed when there were nay unnatural occurrences in the family or village. Colonel M. McCulloch

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
remarked of the Ruangmei that, “A whole village or individual members of it are often ‘Neihmei’ or under prohibition”.31

The following are some important gennas/taboo observed by the family members of Ruangmei society known as ‘Kainumei’. Family prohibitions were observed when a person other than members of the family entered the house of the family during the birth of a new child including pig, puppy, calf, chicken, etc. or illness of a member for whom certain worship or sacrifice had been performed for recovery, and so on, he or she was not allowed to enter the house.

3.4 Village prohibitions

The following village prohibitions were observed with sacrifices offered to a number of evil spirits, whether spirit of trees, rocks, streams, flood, calamities, earthquakes, epidemics, storms, family or ancestors (departed souls) etc. who inflicted innumerable kinds of troubles, sufferings, illness, or woes, to the human beings from time to time.32

1) Genna of rain (Tingnei) was observed on the first raining day of the year
2) Mai nei (genna of fire) was observed when fire broke out or gutted the houses in the village33

31 M. McCulloch, The valley of Manipur. (Delhi, 1980), p. 53.
33 Dichamang Panmei, Liberty to captives, p. 58.
3) Nabung Naashi Nei was observed on the death of pre-mature child delivery

4) Bangla nei (genna of earthquake) was observed when earthquake occurred

5) Dihkap nei- people of the village were prohibited from tilling the earth, cutting trees, etc. on the day of dihkap worship

6) Naphun Kaipui Nei (genna of sowing seeds) was observed on the first day sowing seeds in the field

7) Rapian – Ripian sipui Nei (genna of misfortune) was observed by the priest on the occurrence of epidemics, suicide, burning, etc.

8) Kamang Kaipui Nei was observed when a person was killed by tiger or any ferocious animals

9) Rihdan Nei was observed on the day of victory by killing a person or persons in fighting

10) Meitheipui Nei (genna of death) was observed on the death of a person in the village

11) Racham Dinkasuakpui Nei (genna of predictions) was observed on the prediction of some ominous omens or sign of destruction

12) Laokei Nei was observed on the first day of tilling the ground (Laophunmei) of the year

13) Napthan Nei was observed on the first day of new crops of the year.
There were many taboos in the social, cultural and religious life of the Ruangmei people. It was a taboo for women to touch the drinks, meat meant for menfolk to be used in the festival (Chaga- Ngaih).\textsuperscript{34}

The couple who hosted feast of merit was supposed to abstain from sexual relationship for one month starting on the first day of the feast. It was a taboo to get married from the same clan. It was a taboo to take out fire from the house during festival (Tasuat). It was a taboo for young men to sit on the seat just occupied by his sister. And it was also a taboo to commit a mistake while singing a song called ‘Kuanlu’ sung during the feast of merit.\textsuperscript{35} All these were observed and followed according to different situations and circumstances that occurred in the village.

Crimes, social offences are dealt with according to customary laws, traditions and practices which vary from place to place and from sub-tribes to sub-tribes. All the social offences and crimes committed by person on a woman or on a man by a woman shall have to be reported first to their own respective village court as the case may be. It is the duty of every village court to bring about peace and tranquility in the family and to settle any dispute arising in the family.

\textsuperscript{34} G. Makuga, op.cit, Pp. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{35} Dichamang Pamei, op. cit., p. 59.
From the above discussion, one can grasp a picture of a Ruangmei society. The difference in the penalties of crime given to both the sexes reveals the difference in the status that they occupy. Making to the other side, one finds a Ruangmei society a peace loving one, giving no room for revenge or any bloodshed as punishment (as we have seen that there is no capital punishment). The pei gives a chance to the two parties for compromise after settling of disputes. The rite so performed is called “Chuk-Su-Gah Roumei”. This is not mere social compromise but sanctification as well. The party which fails to abide by it will be dealt severely by the pei. There are cases of judgment bias in accordance to their social and economic status. Instances are there in which the aggression is made only to pay a fine though huge it may be. If the culprit is wealthy, it is easy for him to pay for his crimes. From this, one gets a scent of flexibility in a Ruangmei customary law.

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36 G. Makuga, op.cit, p.203.