CHAPTER IV

ZELIANGRONG CULTURE AND RELIGION: AN EXPOSITION
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1. Exposition of Zeliangrong Religion

The concept of Zeliangrong religion is already developed theologically and philosophically. The Zeliangrong people lived very close to the nature and sensed and experienced its mysterious powers. They believe they were at the mercy of the natural forces like the storm, flood, diseases, fire, earthquake, famine etc which were seen as evil forces. Death was also often unmerciful, not sparing even young people. So they felt weak, defenseless, surrounded by evils and unable to cope with life or to achieve happiness. Fears, sorrow and anxieties were part of their lives. In such circumstances, they became aware of an invisible, more than human power surrounding them. Thus they developed their own indigenous religious system to forge links with this power also. The Zeliangrong believe in the existence of one Supreme God—the Creator of all. They also, at the same time, worship different gods for propitiation of their sicknesses. This religion has no founder, but through the ages, the law givers, diviners and prophets made the revelation of God's wishes and advice to men and society. The prophets like Amang (Amangbou, Amangloube) and Tengaam, added by other teachers laid down the religious practices and ceremonies connected with this religion. (In the twentieth century, religious reformers like Haipou Jadonnang and Rani Gaidinliu started a reformed cult based on the claimed revelations of God and removed so many nuhmei or genna and the negative attitude towards abnormal death). But this discussion will emphasize the older original religion of the Zeliangrong.

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CREATION MYTH OF THE ZELIANGRONG TRIBE

Myth is a collective term used for one kind of symbolic communication and specifically indicates one basic form of religious symbolism, as distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (such as temples and icons). Myths in (plural) are specific accounts concerning gods or superhuman beings and extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is altogether different from that of ordinary human experience. As with all religious symbolization, there is no attempt to prove that these unusual, transcendent, or divine events are possible or otherwise to justify them. For this reason, every myth presents itself as authoritative and always as an account of facts, no matter how completely different they may be from ordinary world. Myth occurs in the history of all human traditions and communities and is a basic constituent of human culture. Myths present the model for man's behaviour. The world of myth is a continuous source of the knowledge needed for crucial problems in man's existence: war and peace, life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil. Myth has a special place in Philosophy. Myth reveals the ancient popular belief or idea which is an important source of handing down thoughts, wisdom and belief of old. The power of myth is so strong that it even guides the lives of people showing them the cultural, moral, social and religious way from age old till now with a sense of authority.

Myths are distinguished from folk tales. Folk tales are entertaining with sometimes imparts morals values yet they do not carry authority as does the myth. Folk tales normally opened with: "Once upon a time...." but typical myth begins with: "In the beginning..." 87

Frutiger sees three features of Platonic myth as outstanding: the use of symbols, the freedom exhibited in the handling of the narrative, and what he

pleasantly calls a prudent impression as this throws light on certain characteristics of mythology.\textsuperscript{88}

From the time of Durkheim and Jane Harrison, anthropologists have stressed the function of myths as explanations of rituals which express the social consciousness of a group. In the modern thought from Giambattista Vico to Comte, mythology is taken seriously as a clue to the primitive history of thought and from the 19th century on, there was a variety of systematic attempts at a science of mythology. No doubt, finally, there is the role of myth in modern irrationalism as well in many areas.\textsuperscript{89} From mythology only can we discover the cultural, religious, morals, and social values and life of the early society. Andrew Lang regarded myths as survivals of earlier social norms. Myths are considered by Vico to be the collective mentality of a given age. Oxford dictionary defines myth as ancient popular belief or idea, fictitious or thing, widely held but false idea. But in philosophy, myth is the most important word for studying the origin of human history and belief. Myth is like a centre place for the thinking pattern of a tribe, a race and a nation of the world. Nongsiej wrote, "A tribe that does not have a myth of its own has no original background of belief, no historical fact and no destination at all."\textsuperscript{90}

Myth is a rich secret story of belief of the primitive people telling about the beginning of the human beings including their religion. Max Muller asserted that in order to understand a myth the etymology of the names are to be discovered. Levi-Strauss gave a precise meaning to Vico's contention that the fables of gods are true histories of customs.\textsuperscript{91} But according to Mircea Eliade, the customs of men often turn out to be the expression of their beliefs about the gods. It is the general human religious interest.\textsuperscript{92} According to Mircea Eliade, myth narrates a sacred history, it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings. In other words.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{ibid}
\textsuperscript{90} T Nongsiej, \textit{Khasi Cultural Theology}, Delhi ISPCK, 2002, p 31
\textsuperscript{91} Paul Edwards (Alasdair MacIntyre), \textit{The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy}, New York Macmillan publishing Co., Inc., p 437
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{ibid}
myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it of reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment of reality like an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, and institution. Myth, then, is always an account of creation; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in the myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the beginnings. Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness of their works. According to a German theologian, Rudolf Otto experience of the holy is a unique experience. Scholars like Eliade and Otto believe that myth is to be understood as a religious phenomena and cannot be fully, or cannot at all be, explained in terms of nonreligious categories (e.g., literary psychological and sociological or economic). Etiological tales seem closest to myth.

Goddie too defined 'Myth' as an ancient traditional story about God and heroes. The view of Goddie tally with Coulson when Coulson held 'Myth' as "Fictitious tale involving supernatural persons; embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena: fictitious person, fictitious idea or belief one that has been accepted uncritically. Gaskell explained 'Myth' as the contents of the symbolism of divine emanation of spirit and matter in time and space throughout the cycle of life. It contains the symbolism of origin and growth of the soul, the descent of the spirit into matter. In this we see the origin of dual nature of man made up of matter and spirit which gradually developed into fuller belief in time and space. Buttman explained 'Myth' as generally representing the objectifying talks about God when God is presented in discourse as cosmic power. Therefore 'Myth' is an expression of belief in God, the supernatural powers and his action here on earth. For example, the Hebrew 'Myth' have the written one in

98. T. Nongsie, Khari Cultural theology, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002 p. 31
the book of Genesis which is pictured as 'belief', as 'history' and as scripture with a sense of clear direction. Therefore myths are important with rich meaning.

Noss, one of the religious scholars, perceives the importance of myth in human history as universal among mankind99 and so is important in human history. It is also important for the tribe of the North-East India as is important with each individual tribe. It is also like the two sides of the coin. It tells the historical values and religious belief of the people at the same time. David Brown opined that any religions which have no written scripture have myths instead. Singh quotes; "We cannot fix a point where myths end and religion starts, from the very beginning myth has been a potential religion"100.

Many great religion of the world; both the natural and the revealed religion do not destroy or de-value myths but maintain its valuable fullness. It is important to study myths with an open mind.

Myths explain, justify, validate, describe with authority in the form of narratives about the nature, social, cultural, and biological facts. But that is not to say that myths become identical with aetiology.

Few basic modes of approaches to the study of myth are: rationalistic (like David Hume to fear, psychological function), romantic (Georg Johann Hamann, William Blake, Schelling stressing emotion sometimes bordering on sentimentality), Comparative (Since the Romantic all study of myth has been comparative. Philosophical enquiry aiming at an understanding of the functions of myth assumes possibility of a comparative approach), Folkloristic (collection of data and classification: Wilhelm Mannhardt, James Frazer, and the brothers Grimm (Jacob and Wilhelm), and Stith Thompson), Functionalist (Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist, Bronislaw Malinowski to the necessity of myth to functions it, fulfilled in primitive culture), and Structural approach (like Claude Levi-Strauss observes and looks for resemblance of myth throughout the world).

The word "Cosmology" means reflection on an account of the world or universe as a meaningful whole, as an embodiment or expression of an order of underlying structure that makes sense: cosmology is concerned with the coming into being of the cosmos with the description of its extent. The modern collection of mythologies has strikingly similar themes and stories which recur widely in different places and times like myths of the creation of the world are widespread and myths of the creation of mankind occur everywhere. But even in detail myths resemble one another.\(^1\)

In the Zeliangrong traditional creation myth there are several orders as the creation of Heavens, Earth and Man. According to their myth, they believed that the Supreme Father God (Ragwang-the king of gods) created the heavens including the universe and then man as special creation more so by his divine creative powers and partly by his authorizing heavenly or supernatural agents. The heavenly God willed to create the universe, gods, men and nature. He first created two primeval god and goddess, didimpu and didimpui. They created the sun, the moon, the stars, the water, the wind, fire, earth and seven layers of the earth, the seven layers of water and seven layers of the sky according to the will of God.\(^2\)

**Creation of the Earth:**

Here let me refer more to the second order of creation that is the earth by presenting the creation myth as under:

The Almighty Supreme God who was self-existent from eternity to eternity called his two servants (Newmeiduan and Newlotiap) who were also heavenly beings to come by his side. He commanded them to go to a place called 'earth' (which was quite formless, desolate and the raging ocean was covering almost everything) and make a place suitable for human habitation, all living beings and things needed for its survival. At the supreme command, the two heavenly beings set out by taking the form of crows (as they need

wings) and flew down to the earth. As the earth was covered with raging ocean water, they could not find a resting-place to alight except a small area where a dwarf plant called 'chakhung bünk' was growing. As there was water everywhere, they took the form of two giant frogs trying out ways and means to fulfil the mission. In the vicinity of the plant, a giant earthworm (The earthworm king) was coiling around a clay mound (‘mpung boot). Noticing the giant earthworm the two hungry giant frogs were about to eat it. The earthworm pleaded them not to eat him but to kindly spare his life. He pleaded saying, "I am also living as the king of the earthworm". They agreed to spare him if only he would obey anything they commanded.

Their command was to bring out a vast land suitable for human as well as any living being's habitation. The giant king earthworm dived deep inside the domain of water, consumed tremendously large amount of soil/mud and excreted out several times, giving forms to lots of hills, mountains and valleys (mountains, rocks, valleys were formed every time he released the soil). But he asked the two giant frogs to do the leveling works or other sorts of finishing touch to beautify it according to their wish. He also excreted out so much of soil/mud on the edges that formed the cliffs and rugged, steep mountains for the animals to live.

When the land portion (separated out from the water) had appeared very vast with numerous hills, mountains and valleys, the giant king earthworm also wished to see his work. He started encircling himself around the round ball of the earth and at last noticed his own tail and thought that there was another creature like him. So, he begun to chase after it, spinning round and round ceaselessly.

First, God created the earth with vast domain of water and underneath the water with soil and the rocks. And the remaining task was authorized to the two heavenly beings as 'Newmeiduan and Newlotiap' in accomplishing a suitable place for living beings' habitation; man and animals and all beings.

The giant earthworm too could be a symbol of the cosmic power of supernatural being who could draw out the heaps of dust or soil in an
amazingly vast quantity in which no human being could do it. The supernatural power itself was immanent in the giant creature on the one hand.

In their myth, water becomes the important base or the substratum in the creation process. To them, the concept of 'Duipui' (water-mother/ mother-water) is more appropriate than the word mother earth, which is very common in many other creation myths. The concept of 'Duipui' expresses the vast measureless domain of water and from which the land or earth portion was given birth. After the accomplishment of the task of making suitable place for living beings’ habitation, the mythology when describing the giant earthworm's encircling the round earth enabling him to see its own tail and so started chasing after it ceaselessly expresses the endless circular movement with the round shape of the earth which is even acceptable in this modern scientific age. Could the mythological story of the coiled giant earthworm endlessly chasing after its own tail be a symbol representing the cosmic power of the divine in the area of the rotation of the earth? Nothing can explain why the earth rotates on its own axis but primitive mythological view presents to us the 'Why' of it, if not clearly, in a bleak but reasonable sense of the immanent cosmic power of the supernatural being on the object of his creation.

Creation of Man:

The popular concept of mother earth was far when it comes to the creation myth of the earth but is drawn much closer when the myth of the creation of man comes to the picture.

The Zeliangrong mythological explanation of man tells that God created the heavens and the earth and commanded the two heavenly agents (Dampopui and Dampopu) that human beings be created. In their attempt, they created a fish (khoguak), a frog and a monkey. The Supreme God was
not satisfied with these creations. The fish was set free into the water, the frog into the land and the monkey into the forests.\textsuperscript{103}

The two heavenly deities prayed to the Supreme God for advice so God revealed to them that His image be adopted as a model of man. Male and female were moulded in shape from the dust/clay (clay of an anthill) of the earth. But to their utter dismay they never could breathe nor could they move. So the two heavenly agents complained the Supreme God that the man and woman they made were lifeless. So the Supreme God himself breathed life-soul on them on the head of the bodies that they came to life and live.\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, man is a being made out of both dust and breathe of God that man becomes a unique and special creation. Soul was given by the Supreme God to men. The real philosophy starts to come in here. "What is that breathe of God in man signifies?" Is it the immanence of God in man? Or is it the immortal soul dwelling in the matter- the dust or could it be referring to the unique intellectual and pragmatic aspects of man from that of other being? But here, we can understand up to some extend that man is composed matter and spirit.

According to the Zeliangrong thought or belief, the nucleus of the universe (effect coming into space and time) comes from the external self existent Supreme God, which is the 'Efficient Cause'. The creation initially began with God the creator while the partial task of completion was accomplished by some heavenly beings, here, namely Newmeiduan and Newlotiap (Dampopui and Dampopu).

In this myth, the efficient cause pre-exists before the effect and nothing on this earth is uncaused. God alone is the unlimited external, infinite self existent being and the rests are finite, created and limited beings. The Supreme God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p.7

\textsuperscript{104} Gangmumei Kamei, \textit{A History of the Zeliangrong Nagas} (From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu), Guwahati/Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 2004. p. 25
John Bowker explains myth as something unique in its own way of explaining things when he says;

"Myths are frequently distinguished from legends and folktales by the way in which they offer explanations. But while myths may be both intended and understood as factual, it is clear that more often they are stories which point to a truths of a kind that cannot be told in other ways, and which are not disturbed if apparent 'facts' of the supposed case are shown to be otherwise so that the purported explanation strictly fails: but the value of the story does not fail with it."

It is rare for religions to give a single cosmology or cosmogony purporting to be a description of the origin of the universe, in the way in which a scientific cosmology might aim to give a critically realistic account of the origin and nature of the universe. Religious cosmologies give account of origin and nature, but principally in order to display the cosmos as an arena of opportunity; and for that reason, a religion may offer, or make use of many cosmogonies without making much attempt to reconcile the contradictions between them. It is the aesthetic and spiritual relation, which allows religions to address cosmological issues from the point of view of accountability and responsibility, not as competitors with a scientific account.

Generally, there are several well-known types of cosmogonic myths which are:

(a) creation by a supreme being,
(b) creation through emergence,
(c) creation by world parents
(d) creation from the cosmogonic egg,
(e) creation by earth diverse and the like.

Zeliangrong cosmogonic myth fits in a myth of creation by a Supreme Being as the nucleus of all creation is centred on the Supreme Being’s

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creation though it may lack a philosophical schema yet it is not devoid of philosophical significance. It is still functioning among this people. It gives a sense of direction showing from where the earth or the universe and all living beings originated and where the creations are heading to once they show disrespect to the natural creation or the environment around. The people find it hard to simply reduce it to psychological phenomena of a kind of norms imparted by the grandmothers to the grandchildren which deeply get imprinted in their mind. This provides them the knowledge of God, human being and all beings and also the relation they have with the surrounding or the universe. God is existent from eternity and created the universe and everything in it. He is all wise, self-existent, uncreated but a creative being while humans and other creatures are the created limited beings. The earth is created for man and animals to live. It is with a purpose. The myth also says that the earth was round and the King Earthworm was coiling itself and chasing after its own tail ceaselessly. In modern vocabulary this could mean the cosmic power of the Creator God in the rotation of the earth. The Zeliangrong (formerly called the Hamei, Kapui, Kabui or Zemei during British time or prior to that) people are very religious people. They even believed that the gods lived very close with them and taught them so many things: songs, dance, handicraft, even combination of colours while making clothes, how to prepare foods and drink, make friends with them and taught so many things. It could be possible that God or gods must have taught them few things about the earth and its origin and about mankind. Man is taken to be composed of both matter (clay) and breathe of God (soul/spirit). The Zeliangrong religion believes that when man dies, the clayey body returns to the clay or dust and the soul (bu or bumang) returns to God.

The Zeliangrong creation myth reflects their belief in supernatural being, and his work. The creation is to be revered or venerated as it is God’s creation and not originated from its own like what the agnostic purely mechanistic physical scientist thought of.

Belief in creation myth is not inferior to the belief in the advance science and technology. Besides, the tremendous advance the science has
made, science has hardly begun to unravel the mysteries of life and they still
deal with the things that are given. There are certain things that we can know
never know for ourselves through science alone and there is where myth has
a very important place and we cannot avoid from it. Myth fulfils in primitive
culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief:
it safeguards and enforces morality. Many rites, rituals, ceremonies are
also closely reflected in their mythical beliefs. There is a strong element of
guidance which is functional in one's culture according to one's mythical
belief.

Polytheism:

The Zeliangrong religion can be understood as a kind of polytheism;
worship of many gods and deities of different categories, the Supreme God,
the gods and goddesses of the pantheon, deities presiding over the villages.
The pantheistic features of Zeliangrong religion include the worship of the
spiritual elements present in different forms of nature, and propitiation of
spirits who have a parallel existence with a perpetual malevolent attitude
towards men.

No Animism:

J.H. Hutton, who wrote on the Naga culture in his *The Sema Nagas*
(1921:191), says that Sir James Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* lays down
that when definite deities with specific name and function are recognised, the
so-called animist has become a polytheist and the term 'animist' is not strictly
applicable. As polytheism is an essential nature of the Zeliangrong religion
from the very beginning, the Zeliangrong religion was not an animistic cult.
Even if it was animistic in the prehistoric period, it had ceased to be animistic
in the historical period. Polytheism was followed by monotheism.

The main features of Zeliangrong religion are:

(a) Belief in spiritual world of power or beings superior to man himself,

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106 S.S. Chib, *Castes, Tribes and Culture of India, North-Eastern India*, vol.8 Ess Esss Publication,
New Delhi 1984, pp.102-103
(b) Belief in the concept of a single Supreme God above all powers,
(c) Belief in the existence of numerous spirits/lesser gods around them,
(d) Belief in the immortality of the soul of every human individual,
(e) They depend much on dreams, visions and myths,
(f) They use ritual as a means of communication between the world of spirit and the world of the living or between God, lesser gods and man,
(g) Prayers and offerings are made to the Supreme God and lesser gods or deities featured prominently in the rituals,
(h) Medicine men and priest/priestess played important role in the society,
(i) Offering of sacrifices to the Supreme God and lesser gods were usually in the form of animals' blood even if at times they use vegetables, paddy and drinks (mostly for the forgiveness of sins, animals' blood were shed in times of offerings).

Some spirits were believed to be benevolent and others malevolent. God or spirits known to the Zeliangrong people were:

a. **One Supreme God**: The Zeliangrong people believed in a single Supreme God. They called him as "Ragwang", "Tingwang" or "Rikarua". He was believed to be the creator and sustainer of the universe. He was worshipped affectionately with reverence. The relationship between the Supreme God and man was love and veneration and not fear. Other bad spirits were considered as object of fear. About 17 gods were named by the people but Supreme God is one. The Supreme God was perceived by the people as loving, benevolent, protecting and sustaining being. Special sacrifices were made to the Supreme God out of gratitude. He was also remembered with veneration in every religious festival.

b. **Imbiuh ra/Imbiuh chagaimei (malevolent spirits)**: They harm human beings. It was believed that these spirits brought sicknesses and death. They believed that these spirits live in rocks, thick forests, high mountains, big trees, rivers, lakes and some unused natural features. The malevolent or bad spirits were not worshipped. However, in order to propitiate them lest they do harm, animal's blood and rice beers
were offered. But they spat on the offering to show their contempt to the spirit.

c. **Ra gai (benevolent spirits):** It was believed that those spirits were helpful and worked for the welfare of the villagers. They were worshipped with reverential fear, hope and with certain special observances. Benevolent spirits were believed to shower material prosperity to the people.

d. **Bambu ra (Tutelary spirit):** Every village has guardian spirit which protected and safeguarded the village. Such spirits were known as the *bambu* or tutelary spirits. They believed to have their abode inside the perimeter of the village so that in the village, evil spirits might not get in and harass the villagers. Such spirits were worshipped and offerings were made. Some even claimed to have seen them in the form of human beings.

e. **Asuang ra (stone fetish):** Asuang ra was a fetish erected by a clan or the whole village to be their benevolent spirit. When it was erected it was also worshipped as tutelary spirit for the clan or the village. Asuang is normally located outside the village gate. In the religious festivals, offerings in the form of animals and vegetables were offered. Drinks (rice beer) were also offered to such spirits.

**Divine Teachers:**

A general study of the ritual hymns of various religious sacrifices, the myths and legends regarding the law givers, cultural heroes and the tradition shows that the Zeliangrong religion grew up due to common union between God and men through divine teachers, seers, prophets and personal acquaintances of different individuals. Besides the prominent seers and law givers Amang and Tenglaam, there are divine teachers like Tingpu Rengsonnang the divine patriarch of the dormitory of gods and men who was asked to find out the causes of the miseries of men and to find out remedies and redressals. There is also a reference to one Ragwang Muh Chara Kandi Jungpu the priest advisor to Tingkao Ragwang who continuously gave advice to men how to approach God through sacrifices, worship and offerings.
Zeliangrong Concept of God

One Supreme God:

There is a belief in the existence of one Supreme God who is the creator of this universe, man and living beings. He is the regulator of the universe, giver and source of life, the dispenser of the plenty and justice. He is named as Tingkao Ragwang (Universal God of sky and heaven) or Tingwang (Lord of the heaven). He is considered to be a holy God.\(^{107}\)

Pantheon gods and deities:

The pantheon consists of gods who were entrusted with the affairs of men, animals and things on earth. These gods are below the Supreme God.

Worship of nature:

There is a belief that some elements of nature are endowed with divine status, powers like the water, the fire, the wind and the earth. These elements are worshipped in the form of lords and gods of fire, wind and earth. There is no direct worship of stone, trees, forests or mountain peaks.

Presiding deities of villages:

They worship the deities presiding over the villages. These deities are guardian spirit or protector of the villages known as asuang or bambu.

Ancestor worship:

There is strong belief that the spirit of the dead people live on and they have dealings with those who are still living in this world. To appease the spirits of the dead, memorial stones are erected by the surviving relatives. It is due to their belief that if the dead are not appeased, the spirit of the dead will harass the survivors by bringing sickness or by haunting (kairao simei).

"Ancestor worship is not practised among the Zeliangrong Nagas. However, they believe that their soul did not go too far when they die. It came back and visited the home at least in the first three weeks or more also. So, they offer rice, curry, rice beer etc., to the soul which is known as 'theihkuak kanmei or theih paomei'. These ancestor spirits are known as kairao. Offerings are being given and certain ritual ceremonies are being performed.

Worship and its form of worship:

There are community and individual forms of worship of God and gods. In the traditional system, sacrifices with ritual hymns were the main form of worship of God and deities. Prayer and meditation are gradually practised. The form of worship ranges from a small offering of water and grass to the great sacrifices of Maku-Banru and Taraang. Worship of the Supreme God is through prayer and sacrifices.

Rites and Ceremonies:

Rites and ceremonies are performed to worship the Supreme God, the gods of the lower realm, ancestors and specific deities;

- the great sacrifices are offered to God,
- worship of God by the community and individual,
- Ralen loumei (worship of all the gods of the Zeliangrong religion)
- Sacrifices are also offered to the lower deities.

There are deities representing natural phenomenon:

1. God of wind (mpuan-gwang),
2. God of fire (mai-gwang).

There is also propitiation of spirit near about the villages so as not to disturb men. They are not worshipped but given offerings or

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sacrifices. The appropriate term used is *ra khaangmei* means "propitiation" of spirits or lesser deities.

**Other categories of worship:**

- **Lan kaomei** (invoking or worshiping the God of wealth),
- **Nap kaomei** (invoking or worshiping the God of paddy),
- **Bu kaomei** (calling the soul),
- **Dampa khonmei** (worship of the goddess *dampapui*, the creator of the human child in the womb of the mother),
- **Taroj Jaimei** (propitiation of the god of the land of the dead).

They worship numerous spirits. Their whole life is centred around the feeling of religion. The Kaupuis (or Kabui now called as the Zeliangrong) believed in a Supreme Being who is benevolent. This deity is the creator of the things\(^\text{109}\). They are worshippers of supernatural beings-benevolent and malevolent. Ragwang is the Supreme Being who created the world and rules over it. He also created the firmament and its bodies like the sun, moon and stars. He is invisible, but all pervading, all knowing.\(^\text{110}\) He is a rewarer of every man. He is a good God. They take him to be neutral, and sacrifices are rarely offered in his name because he gives no trouble to man. No doubt, they worship many spirits but not that they are superior gods but because they give disturbances to man therefore they should be pleased by giving sacrifices. The Supreme God is worshipped so that their souls might go the other world and live well.

The spirits are both benevolent and malevolent. They reside in distinct places, and exercise their power within their limitations. They believed that several spirits are residing in rivers, trees, steep rocky places and dense forests and unusual places. It is greatly due to their belief in the presence of the spirits in natural objects that they treat the nature with fear, respect and reverence too. This help in a very sensitive maintenance of the ecological

\(^{109}\) Page 18: 457

balance as it taught about the sacredness of even the forest and everything in it. The people see god and his workings everywhere. The taboos behind handling of natural objects and use are much beyond the idea of preservation and conservation. But is an expression of their beliefs in the presence of God and gods in it and who reward as well as punish the wrong doer.

For the Zeliangrong, God is a spirit, creator, sustainer, all knowing, all powerful, all loving, all just, all rewarding, interested in every individual like the existentialist Kierkegaard's view of individual that God keeps an account of each and every individual and man will face God individually face to face in the end. He is the eternal God. He alone is pure and perfect. God have the authority to forgive sins. To this Feuerbach may say that God is the perfected image of man or the epitome of all human perfections or realities. But to the Zeliangrong, God is an undeniable supernatural self-existent being. There was not a single man in the history of the Zeliangrong who did not believe in the existence of God and lesser gods. Their beliefs in the transcendent God and spirits were not simply because of their inexplicability of the natural forces around but their sources of knowledge were from experiences, testimonies, inferences, prove from the natural things around, personal encounter of religious experience, handing down of religious and cultural values and knowledge from their ancestors, mysteries and so on.

For them the concept of the immortality of the soul is not simply the wish to go on living forever (as held by the philosophical anthropologist, materialist and Psychologists). In their practice, it is said that the soul of the dead person comes back and visits the family in the first week of his/her death (even after the burial of the dead body). So the family and their love ones would prepare a meal along with fruits and drinks and would wait till he/she comes. They scatter pounded rice flour on the floor of an emptied room to notice the foot print of the deceased soul. They claim that they truly come by making foot prints visible on the floor of the room prepared for that purpose and notice the food been touched.
God is addressed as heavenly creator God. They also address God as father. For them, the concept of God is centred around male or Father God (Apu Ragwang). The Supreme God is considered to be a male figure. The concept of mother god (rapui) is also existent but only at times of reference to creation or in songs or in sayings relating to creation and interventions of some of the affairs of man from time to time.

The concept of God or gods for the Zeliangrong is not as far removed from the reach of man as in the Aristotelian or Plato's or Greek philosophers' view of the ancient days nor is it very close as to the Christians' who approach God anytime, anywhere and even with nothing in hand. God is seen as a single judge who always judges things justly or equally. God is also believed to be dwelling in heaven but his presence is believed to be omnipresent too. The Zeliangrong people never ever believed that the sun, the moon and the stars are gods or supernatural powers but were consistently treated as God's creation. At times, the sun and the moon are referred to as the father and the mother respectively expressing the masculinity (Strength) and the femininity (tenderness).

**Priests and Priestess**

There are many kinds of priests and priestess in the Zeliangrong religious society. As for instance:

- *Muhjung* (main Priest) is the main priest chosen by the village to perform the duties of priest in the village.
- *Kagong gamei muh* (priest who cut the throat of fowls and animals for sacrifice). These priests kill sacrificial animals. They are also appointed by the village. They do not perform any other function other than killing the animals to be sacrificed.
- *Daansaanh muh* (Priest who reads and foretells omen, sign etc.) This priest is meant for taking portent or omen. This becomes essential because omen is taken into consideration in every walk of life.
- **Mang muh** (Priest who dreams or interprets dreams): Anyone who has got the power of oneiromancy can become *Mang muh*. Both sexes can become *Mang muh*. There is no restriction of gender to become *Mang muh*.

- **Pu muh** (priest or shaman who treats people with sacrifice or medicine after enquiring from the gods): *Pu muh* is a medicine man. Feeling the pulse of the sick person tells the cause of the disease and the remedy for it. They prescribe herbs for the treatment of the disease.

- **Rakhan muh**: This priest who tells what spirit or god or goddess is behind the sickness and telling what should be done like what animals should be offered and the like to get the healing of the disease is his task.

According to the tradition, only one main priest or priestess can be in the village. If a priest/priestess is coming to the village, the other priest or priestess has to go to other village.

**Rites, Rituals and Sacrifices:**

The rites and rituals of the Zeliangrong primal religion are associated with all walks of life and every festival they celebrate. Sacrifices were made to all the gods starting from the Supreme God in the first place and then to the rest of the smaller ones. As for instance, particularly in Tamenglong village (*Inrianglong*) offerings were made to eighteen gods besides the most important and first one given to the Supreme God. They have many rites. Among the many rituals, the following are important.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the rites /rituals/offerings</th>
<th>For what</th>
<th>To whom</th>
<th>What things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Pum khaangmei</em></td>
<td>Sanctification of Individuals/family</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Rooster/cock without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Pum kanmei</em></td>
<td>To save the soul and body (this is also individual as well as family's sacrifice)</td>
<td>Supreme God <em>(Ragwang)</em></td>
<td>Spotless rooster Cock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Pum thokmei</em></td>
<td>Substitutary offering made for the soul and body of</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>He-goat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Nap kaomei</em></td>
<td>To bless the crops and to give plentiful harvest (mostly performed at a time of sowing and harvesting/when there is unusual or abnormal growth of the</td>
<td>God of paddy</td>
<td>Pig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Racham sumei</em></td>
<td>When an oracle or message is received from</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Boar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Tampi thousumei</em></td>
<td>To invoke the spirits of the dead men of the family to bless them in the form of prolificacy, handsomeness and beauty</td>
<td>Souls of the dead men from the family</td>
<td>Boar, Pork, ginger chutney, rice beer etc is offered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><em>Reih thaakmei</em></td>
<td>When there is epidemic like choler or small pox in the nearby villages to ward off the diseases.</td>
<td>Supreme God</td>
<td>Fowl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Supreme God and lesser gods:

The Supreme God is in control of everything, he is benevolent God, and he is the creator and one who sees everyone and judges or rewards everyone justly. He is existent from eternity. He is the king of the gods (ra means god, gwang means king). He is a moral God. He cares for the poor and the defenceless. As for instance, it is believed that when an unmarried sister or daughter in the family is treated so badly and it comes to a point when she faces so miserable and helpless that she looks up to the heaven and waves her skirt and cries out with tears "my father God" then the family can expect nothing good but God’s wrath upon them and they will never ever prosper in life. So, unmarried daughters in the family were treated with great carefulness so as not to offend them. The Supreme God is worshiped occasionally every year with great offerings of sacrifice and not frequently. When he is worshipped, he is worshipped with great love and reverence.

The lesser gods can be classified into benevolent and malevolent spirits. The Zeliangrong believe in the existence of many spirits. Unlike the Supreme God, the lesser gods have assigned abode limited to them with limited powers say for example the god of the field (lao ra), god of the water (dui ra), spirit of dimei (dimei ra) or specific mountains and forests. Offerings were made for good harvest, to protect them from harms and dangers while working in the field to ward off diseases and sickness to the benevolent gods and so on while on the other hand offerings, sacrifices were also made to the malevolent spirits to appease the demanding spirits like the spirit of numbness. For this kind of torturing or tormenting spirits the offerings were given after it was spat on the offerings to show their contempt for being so demanding and causing harm to people by saying “take this offering and leave him alone, don’t torture anymore”. Offerings like smearing the blood of wild boar or pigs on the lintels or door posts of the houses were made so as to ward off evil spirits causing epidemics or diseases.
Concept of God

At the philosophical level, *Tingkao Ragwang* (Heavenly God) or *Tingwang* is the Supreme God who is the creator and protector of the Universe. He is responsible for the creation of the sun, moon, the earth, heavenly bodies, men and nature. It was through his wish that creation was carried out by the appointed god and goddesses. He was the creator of the gods too. He is eternal and ageless. He is all-knowing, all-powerful and ever present.

Concept of Soul:

When man and woman were created by the heavenly creative agents at the command of the heavenly God, their bodies were lifeless. As they reported the heavenly God about their lifelessness, the heavenly God breathed life-soul unto them and they became human beings. And so, the soul is believed to be immortal since it came into being through the breath of God. The soul is called *bu* or *bumang*. Human life is dependent on the soul.

For the Zeliangrong, presence of the soul or absence of the soul is the indicator of the life or death of a person. Soul emanates from the Heavenly God himself. Though soul resides in the body, it sometimes moves out of the body and meet several experiences. This is called "out of the body experience". The soul which is outside the body can be called back to return to the body which is known as "catching soul" or calling the soul (*bu kaomei*). Since the soul comes from heavenly God, the soul is presumed to be holy. However as the soul resides in the body of man, it is subjected to the good and bad effect of the action, thought and mind of the physical man. The soul enjoys or suffers because of the good or bad action of the man in which he lives. For the Zeliangrong, like for the Greeks, the soul is what gives life to the body. Plato thinks of the soul as a thing separate from the body and Descartes restated Plato's view. A human living on earth consists of two parts, soul and body and the Zeliangrong strongly believe in this. It is also

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said that if the man is living a truthful life, the soul is not afraid of walking in
front of the physical body. Sometimes, he comes home much ahead of the
physical body and people hear exactly as if that person has come and opens
the door but never found for minutes. Later on only he comes exactly like the
way people felt earlier. Those people were considered to be truthful person
that their soul is not afraid to go ahead. But the souls of people who led bad
life never dare to go ahead of the physical body so sometimes walk behind it.

After death, the soul will go to the land of the dead called taruairam
and continues living.

**Beliefs in life after dead and Land of the Dead:**

For the Zeliangrong, there is not much of eschatological problem. They
believe and practice as if next life or life after death as something very real
and is very much a part of the culture as Mircea Eliade’s view about the
primitive religious cultural belief of continuation of life itself seeming to be a
practical reality. Life of man is treated as sacred and even the dead bodies
are treated with great love and respect. After the physical death, the human
soul will go and live in the land of the dead called taruairam. No one knows
exactly where this land is located. But it is believed to be located within the
bowel of the earth or somebody says, the world of the dead land exists along
with the world of the living but the two do not see each other. There is a god
called "taruai gwang" meaning king of the dead (or opposites) who was
entrusted by the supreme God to look after the affairs of taruairam or of the
dead. It is believed that this god will pass judgements on the souls coming
into this land basing on the past actions, commitment of sins, worship of the
Supreme God while living in the human world.\(^\text{112}\) Funeral ceremonies are
extremely important and people from the whole locality or village would
participate in this and even relatives (from same clan) and friends from other
far off villages would come for the funeral rites and rituals. He would be given
a bath and then lots of new clothes will be put in the coffin made of either of

\(^{112}\) Gangmunei kamei, *Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak: The Zeliangrong Primordial Religion*, Imphal,
R.M. offset Printing works, 2005 p.15
wood or the large bark/skin of trees. Many of his /her favourite items or belonging too will be buried along so that he or she could make use of it in the land of the death. The relatives of many people whose dear ones had passed away long back would also even come and send things for their relatives telling them to give them when they meet them in the land and so would bury those items along with the death body. Till the body is buried, hardly anyone will go for private work. It is the duty of the whole community to gather without even sleeping and see to it that the dead body is buried in a proper manner with love and respect. The death ceremonies prepare for the long journey of the soul to the land of the dead. They would bid good-bye and bid the soul or spirit of the deceased to travel well to the world of the dead (taruairam). The condition of life after death will be determined by the kind of life he lived on this earth. If he lives a bad/loose life on this earth, then he will inherit a bad life in taruairam. If he lives a good life then he will go with peace and happiness to taruairam. They did not believe in the physical resurrection of the body but the soul will continue to live in the land of death. As for instance, the concept of heaven and hell as understood in Semitic religions was not very clear to them.

**Concept of Sin:**

Sin is the deviation from or violation of the accepted spiritual, social and moral norms of a society. In Zeliangrong belief, a sin is committed when a man breaks the social and moral conduct. It is called “nuan”. Punishment of the sinners is in different forms; punishment by the taruai gwang (king of the land of the dead). The Zeliangrong religion observes Nuhmei which can be translated as taboo. The nuhmeis are strictly enforced. Such prohibition cannot be violated. The customs relating to birth, marriage, and dead ceremony cannot be violated. Those who violate such nuhmei (prohibition) commit sin (nuan). And the man who violates the nuhmeis will get divine retribution or human punishment.
Concept of Heaven:

The Zeliangrong religion believes in the existence of heaven (Ragwang kandi—kingdom of the Supreme God) where the Supreme God lives. There is a difference between the abode of the Supreme God (heaven) and the land of the dead (taruai ram). There is also a belief in the existence of lower heaven where lower gods dwell and a lower heaven where the dream diviners go in their dreams to negotiate with the gods for the welfare of men.

The Zeliangrong people do not have a clear concept of Heaven where man will go and live. Their religion does not give them future other than the “Land of the Dead” (taruai ram or kathiron or tarui ram or heruime ram). They try to live a clean life in order to have a happy life in this world and to avert bad death (abnormal death) because it is believed that if a man dies a bad death he will live a life of an outcast in the land of the dead. The performance of the great “Feasts of Merit” is to live happily in the taruai ram, not in heaven.

No Concept of hell:

There is no concept of hell in the Zeliangrong belief but it is believed that the king of the land of the dead (taruai gwang) will punish the evil doers. Men’s soul is believed to lead a normal life in the land of the dead under the care of taruai gwang. But there is no perpetual condemnation of the soul to a life of misery in hell.

Code of Social and moral conduct:

The Zeliangrong religion is based on strict social and moral conduct which is reflected in the strict social customs.

Genna or Neihmei: Man’s worship of God, by collective abstention from work when there is unnatural occurrence in the family or in the village is popularly known as neihmei. The Anthropologists describe these neihmeis as gennas from Angami word kenra. It may be observed by the whole village community or by a group of lineage households or individual household. On this particular day, no one is supposed to work or go out of the village gate and no
guests are allowed to enter. It is strictly observed. If anybody breaks this genna, he is liable to be punished for it is believed that the gods will be displeased and may bring punishment to the people. On the other hand if genna is observed properly, the god will be pleased with the people. In the past, there were too many neihmei which were dominated by superstition. Neihmei is also performed as a prayer to God to ward off the bad effects of natural calamities on man like earthquake, fire, death etc. It is also performed to worship God for the welfare of man on the occasion of the first rain or hailstorm, or sprouting flowers during spring etc. Many undesirable elements had crept in and they became the root cause of the orthodoxy and superstition of the Zeliangrong religion. Reformers like Haipou Jadonnang and Rani Gaidinliu abolished many of such unnecessary and harmful customs. Some important gennas are:

- **Mai neih** (genna of fire): This is observed when a fire gutted houses in the village or in the neighbouring village. It is also observed when a wild fowl (arik or agaan) fly across the village. The priest will make a paste of mud and it will be flung at the wall of every house.

- **Jam neih** (genna for injuries): This genna is observed when a man gets injured. However, it is not observed for injury but only when the man who is injured fasts so as to get deliverance from such injuries in future. This genna is also observed when the hoe, or axe or dao is broken while it is being used and only when the owner of it fasts.

- **Chrin neih** (genna of wonder and awe): This is observed when incest, homosexuality or any unnatural incident takes place. This is also observed when triplets or more are born to a mother.

- **Bangla neih** (genna for earthquake): This is observed when earthquake takes place.

- **Goija neih** (genna for killing cattle): When a Cattle is killed for festivals or other ceremonial purposes and the meat of which is distributed to the villagers or to the elders of the village, this genna is observed.

Besides these, there are gennas observed at every festival or as announced by the tingkuh (village senior priest).
Taboo or Nuhmei: Nuhmei means taboo. The customs relating to rites of passage like birth ceremonies, festivals, death ceremonies cannot be violated. This prohibition is called nuhmei. Those who break the nuhmei will be regarded as breakers of social, cultural, religious ritual practices and moral code. There are many taboos considered by the Zeliangrong people:

- It is taboo to go about outside the village on the genna days.
- It is taboo for women to touch the drinks, the meat etc. meant for men folk to be used in the festival of Chaga Ngai.
- It is a taboo to trespass inside the place of sacrifice.
- It is taboo to have sexual relationship during Chaga Ngai (Chaga festival).
- It is taboo to have sexual relationship with the owner of the house of the feasts of merit and his wife from the last day of the feasts of merit for one month.
- To blow horn, beat drum and to use musical instruments etc. are taboo from seed sowing month (Laophunsuan bu) to the month of collection of the harvested crops (Khaam Ngaibu).
- Marriage within the members of the same clan is a taboo.
- It is a taboo to take the fire out from the house in the festival of Tasuat.
- It is taboo for a young man to sit on the seat where his sister (a giri of his clan) has sat just a few minutes back.
- It is a taboo to commit mistake while singing the ‘takon-konlu’, the song sung on the occasion of the feasts of merit. It is even a taboo to take a wrong stepping while dancing in this festival.113
- It is taboo for a warrior to sleep with his wife or even touch her inner clothes before going to war or hunting. It is imperative that all warriors and hunters should sleep in their boy’s (male dormitory) before going out for war or for hunting114. The list goes on.

113 Dichamang Pamei, Dichamang Pamei, Liberty to Captives, Tamenglong: A ZBCC Platinum Jubilee Publication, p.59
114 Lucy Zehol (ed.), Women in Naga Society. (from the section on The Status of Women in Zeliangrong Society by Dr. Hunibou Newmai), Regency Publication, New Delhi, 1998. p.44
The Zeliangrong Naga family believes that violation of this taboo will bring about undesirable consequences to the whole group of which he is a member.

How the God or gods are addressed at Ceremonies:

When worshipping the Supreme God, the prayer starts with "He apou Ragwang" (literal translation is "O my Father God"). When gods like munchaniu (lower but not the lowest) or of equal rank are worshipped, they are addressed starting with "Ou". When addressing the lesser gods, the starting words are "Ho-he".  

Agency of religion:

The religion is organised through the village council consisting of elders who manage the religious affairs of the village and look after the welfare of the people. The village council operates through various social organisations, especially the dormitories.

Priests (Muh):

The village elders take the help of the village priest, tingkupu or tingku for the performance of the religious rites and ceremonies.

Shamanism:

There are priests and priestesses known as a muh and muhpui who act as mediums or brokers between man and God. Some of the spiritual muids are like prophets. God reveals His messages through such prophets. But normally, these priests are usually dream diviners and performer of religious rites. The Shaman priests and priestesses have their friends, guides or protectors or even consorts (spouses), among the spirits with whose help they treat the sick and perform rituals for propitiation. Shamanism is an important aspect of Zeliangrong religious practice.

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Festivals:

The Zeliangrong festivals are performed at the various stages of agricultural operation and seasons according to the lunar calendar. During these festivals the community expresses their thanksgiving to God for his blessing of good harvest and prays for the welfare of the people and for protection against disease and hardship. The Zeliangrong religion is both a cultural and religious phenomenon. The social and cultural values, the aesthetic and creative senses, their love of beauty and colours are expressed in these festivals. Festivals are a vehicle of religion and the Zeliangrong religion is sustained by their colourful festivals, accompanied by religious rites and prayers, dance and music and feasting the year round in different months. The ritual dance and music are a form of worshiping God.

Belief in the coming birth of an Emmanuel

The Zeliangrong strictly adhere to their primitive religion. The relationship they have with the Supreme God is reverence for the Supreme God and caring love for the people by the God. Other lesser gods to whom the people offer sacrifices most of the time are so detestable that they even spit on the sacrifices they offer to the gods showing their contempt for torturing and for being so demanding. But they are compelled to do so for fear of displeasure of the gods which cause famine, sicknesses and barrenness. And because of this they could not even prosper because most of the time they have to keep on offering sacrifices in the form of animals. They were living in fear at the same time. Amidst such situation, the people sang about the coming of the Emmanuel, God's Child. It is also believed that the Emmanuel, God's son would be born. As an example, it is found in the song that people use to sing and dance on the 'Feast of Merit' an important feast that is celebrated by the whole village community. It is not sure of how, when and why was the term Emmanuel being used but this word was being used since time immemorial.

Below is a free translation of a song which illustrates this belief:
"I hope that wonderful birth of love will be there,
I know from my dream that your loving Child will be born,
Who……is that Child?
Who is that Child to be born?
Emmanuel…
There is Love First,
Heaven, oh Heaven,
I long to see You, the best gift……”

Dichamang Pamei has been quoted as saying; “It is strange that Emmanuel is depicted as the love, the loving Child, the best gift and the hope whom they long to see. However, we do not find any other references on Emmanuel in their hymns, teachings, practices or rites and rituals. How and when did they stumble on the ‘Emmanuel Concept’ and how did it fade away from their thoughts are the moot points”\(^\text{116}\)

**Comparison of the concept of God with reference to some major religions of the world:**

The Supreme God is above all and non can transgress, overtake or thwart His power but He doesn’t act very fast. He is the giver of life. Man resembles Him as is found from the creation myth that man heavenly creative agents were ordered to make man in god’s image. He is an all-knowing God. He loves man more than any other creature as is found from many folk tales of God helping or saving mankind from the clutches of the evil one. He is understood in terms of a singular male. The concept of rta as is found in Hindu culture and religion is not found here because in Hindu culture we find that this moral order is above all and even the gods cannot transgress it. It is different from Christian’s concept of the Truine God or of the trinity that is understood in Hindu’s term. The God himself is a moral God.

Problem of Evil:

Is there a problem of evil in the Zeliangrong religion as is found in many monotheistic religions of the world like the Judaeo-Christian tradition when God is seen as all loving and all powerful? Are there sufferings in the world and what are the causes of it? The answer to the untold sufferings and miseries that man faces in this world according to the Zeliangrong religion is because of man's sin (nuan) and also because of the malevolent spirits who are torturing people for no false of theirs. Malevolent spirits simply demand people to give him sacrifices or offerings and it is his work to torture people. That’s the reason that man offers animal’s or fowl’s blood to bring forgiveness of sins and so the animal and birds sacrifices were made through the priest. Sometimes, offerings were made to appease the evil/malevolent spirit for the healing of diseases. So it is not directly by the doings of the Supreme God in many ways that need not negate the existence of all powerful and all loving God. So, the traditional question that lies in the form of dilemma does not necessarily arise and that could perhaps be one of the reasons that Zeliangrong people are hardly atheists.

2. Exposition of Zeliangrong Culture

Social and Cultural life in brief:

The term Zeliangrong is a combined name of cognate tribes, namely, Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei coined in 1947. This is a combination of the prefixes of the three tribes: Ze+Liang+Rong. It was discussed in 1947 and Puimei was also included. Prior to this they were known by other people like the British as the Kabui, Kowpoi, koupuis, Kupooees or kaccha (Kaccha derived from Angami of Khonoma village word Kaccha or kacch meaning forest when trying to explain the British that there were no more people living on the other side except forest but when the British met the Zeliangrong

Gangmumei Kamei, Tamenglong A Brief History, Imphal: Published by Dr. M. Homeswor Singh, 2000 p.36
people deep inside the forest and they called them Kaccha Naga) Naga\textsuperscript{118}. In Nagaland, Zeliang is the official name, in Assam, as Zeme and Rongmei, in Manipur as Kabui and Kacha Nagas. Some like the Mizos would call them as Mirongmi or Mirong. The Zeliangrong people have very rich culture. They lived a life of high moral standard and they were great singers and dancers. They lived a life of self sufficiency in terms of economy. They were hardworking people with a great sense of humour and adventure that the virgin land they occupied is greater than the rests of any other Naga tribes had occupied. The Nagas are not like the wandering race, like the Kachari and the Kuki and rarely, except for some very pressing reason, change the site of village.\textsuperscript{119} They have great attachment to the place they live more so of the importance they attach to the place where their ancestors were buried. Many of these people have bright intelligent faces, and generally they were found by Mr. Soppitt to be simple and honest in character\textsuperscript{120}. Field Marshall William Slim in his book called \textit{Defeat into Victory} spoke highly of the gallant Nagas whose loyalty, even in the most depressing times of the invasion, never faltered.\textsuperscript{121} On the whole the Nagas are hospitable and cheerful in their dealings\textsuperscript{122}. The arts and handicrafts were well developed. Unlike other tribals of the world, they have many colourful dresses for different age group of people in the society. The dress they wear exhibit whether one is a little girl, unmarried adult, newly married or older mother and grandparents. In practice there was neither king nor slave. Almost everyone is equal in the society. They show respect for other individual’s property in the past. It may be mentioned that their granary store houses were just bolted on the outside, for the Kaupuis (Zeliangrong) knew nothing of lock and keys, and indeed, had no

\textsuperscript{118} S.T. Das, \textit{Tribal Life of the North-Eastern India, HABBITATE, ECONOMY, CUSTOMS, TRADITION}, Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1986 P.110


\textsuperscript{120} L.A. Waddell, \textit{The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, A Contribution on their Physical types and Affinities}, New Delhi: Logos Press, p.68

\textsuperscript{121} S.S. Chib, \textit{Castes, Tribes and Culture of India, North-Eastern India}, vol.8 New Delhi: Ess Ess Publication, 1984, pp.201-202

\textsuperscript{122} ibid., p.202
need of either since the habit of stealing or looting from each other is quite unheard of among these simple people. These people were religious by nature. They believe that each and every act of theirs was an act before God who sees everything. These people were hospitable and helpful to one another. However, in this present age, the good old cultural practices had gone down considerably.

The Zeliangrong Naga's social life was deeply rooted in the family, village and the morung. In fact, the value of public social life was stronger than the individuals within the society. The joint family system was practiced widely not because of the scarcity of land but due to their love and respect for their parents and elders. It is a patriarchal society and obedience to the father, the head of the family is expected from each member of the family. The society is interwoven by strong clans system. Marriages taking place within the same clan is strictly prohibited. It is incest and a taboo. If unwanted marriage in the same clan is taken, strict ordeal of customary rituals is to be observed in order to sanctify them, then and then only, they will be accepted in the society again. Still then, people do not appreciate such thing to happen. They have a strict prohibition of marriage within the same clan even if blood relations were not immediately close. They practiced exogamy. On the other hand, marriages between close relatives belonging to different clans were appreciated and encouraged. Much importance was attached to the custom of marriages with first cousin, like the daughter of a mother's brother, which Sir James Frazer had given a remarks saying first cousin marriage has been, as a rule, permitted, and even favoured among all races except the Aryan. As for an instance, marriages between inter clan cousins are permitted or encouraged and considered rightful, mostly between brother's son and sister's daughter and vice versa. Here the blood relations are very much close. The philosophy behind this is that, the mother's family should be given back precious gift (daughter) for what the father's clan has taken (the mother).

124 T.C. Hodson, *The Primitive Culture of India*, (Lectures delivered in 1922 at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London), New Delhi: Ramanand Vidya Bhawan, New Delhi, reprint 1985 p.91
It strengthens the family ties too. The second reason, being that one will not simply throw out one's own close relatives even in the worst of time. So it is also to find secure place for the daughters in good times and in bad times.

Agriculture was their main occupation. Economically, they were self sufficient people and begging was unknown and practically nil\textsuperscript{125}. There is no record of the Kachcha Nagas (Zeliangrong) having raided on surrounding Kachari or Kuki villages, though they fought freely with one another\textsuperscript{126}. Giving to others is an important part of life for the Zeliangrong. In almost all the festivals, we see some kind of rites, rituals, taking omen, prayer and sacrifice, social work, or important task being associated. It is not simply about eating and drinking but doing things together. It is a very social minded community and not individualistic. Though dormitories are there for boys and girls, yet people have high sense of regard for chastity of the individual young people which is not so much the case with other tribes. They are fond of dance, songs, games and sports both indoor and outdoor games. Customs and traditions die hard with the Zeliangrong\textsuperscript{127}.

Clan System:

A clan is a group of people organized into families who are descended from one ancestor. Clan system is the basis of the evolution of the Zeliangrong tribal community. Common kinship is the cornerstone of the tribal identity and organization of the Zeliangrong people. The Zeliangrong society which comprises of four dialectic groups-the Zeme, the Liangmei, the Rongmei and the Puimei is now organized into clans and lineages, and even sub lineages. Historically there were two main clans among the Zeliangrong Society.\textsuperscript{128} The people follow clan exogamy for inter-clan social relationships, most importantly marriage, and a degree of prohibited relations or permitted

\textsuperscript{127} Souvenir, \textit{From the Shadows to Light, North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar}, Imphal: North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar Publication, 1995. P.95
\textsuperscript{128} Ramkhun Pamei, \textit{The Zeliangrong Nagas A Study of Tribal Christianity}, New Delhi: Uppal Publication House, 1986 P.5
relations. There is a strong sense of oneness among the people of the same clan and great respect for the other clan because of this system. If one’s father is from particular clan then the other clan will be his mother’s clan that he needs to respect and love. This system of practice binds the society in a wonderful way in which one will find one’s relatives wherever Zeliangrong people are.

Each clan had a totem which was originally a symbol or emblem of a clan or family, it may be an animal or a bird, a trees or a plant. Eating one’s own totem animal in the wrong time is a taboo. Such are taken only on certain initiation days. Out of a common clan which had a single totem, there emerged several sub-totems due to incidents connected with the origin or evolution of the particular clan or even lineage.

Few of the examples of clans or sub clan along with their totem animals can be organized as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clan</th>
<th>Zeme</th>
<th>Liangmei</th>
<th>Rongmei</th>
<th>Totem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pame</td>
<td>Pamei</td>
<td>Pamei/Mpamei/Kamei</td>
<td>Ahuina (Green Pigeon)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newme (Hnume)</td>
<td>Newmai</td>
<td>Newmei</td>
<td>Ruai-ngao (White bird)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penme</td>
<td>Penmai</td>
<td>Panmei</td>
<td>Ruai-ngao (White bird)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndaime</td>
<td>Daimei</td>
<td>Daimei</td>
<td>Ahuina (Green Pigeon)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riame</td>
<td>Maremmei</td>
<td>Riamei</td>
<td>Frog</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Etc...</td>
<td>Etc...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Besides these there are much more sub lineages but can be placed under the major clans. The Pamei clan is found in all the four cognate groups. For example among the Rongmei, Pamei clan is divided into sub-clans like Kamei, Phaomei, Singongmei, Kamson, Malangmei and Pamei. They have one single totem, the wild green pigeon (Ahuina) which is the tabooed food for all the clans and the sub-clans of the Pamei mostly. However, Malangmei clan has the black monkey (Apang) as their totem animal. Secondly, the Newmei clan is also found among four cognate groups; they are sub-divided into Gonmei, Panmei, Riamei, Daimei, Abonmei, Dangmei, Thaimei, Rongmei, Gonthangmei etc. Clan transcends the villages. Inter clan rivalry was also there at times which was responsible for the slow growth of the tribal community. Clan is still a strong factor and kinship is the basis of the Zeliangrong identity.

Absence of Caste System:

There is absolutely no caste system in the Zeliangrong culture as is existent in many Indian cultures like the varnas or the caste system classifying the people into four castes; the Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. Everyone is equal in the Zeliangrong society. The Zeliangrong great socio-cultural and religious reformer and also a freedom fighter Jadonnang who died in the hands of the British said: “The White man and we are human beings. Why should we be afraid of them? All are equal.” There is neither king nor slave too in the strict sense of the term like any other community of the world. The concept of king is existent only in folk tales and mythology. The society is governed by purely democratic element at the rudimentary level. The head of the village council for certain tenure is elected by the people out of good will and good faith. It is not hereditary. Unlike other Naga strict community like the Ao Naga, who have no place at all in the

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130 Hiabe (ed.), *A Glimpse of the Zeliangrong*, In Commemoration of the 19th General Conference of the Naga Students’ Federation(NSF) at Lodiram, Haflong by All Zeliangrong Students’ Union, 2001 (A section from Jadonnang’s Concept of Naga Raj by Prof. Gangmumei Kamei). Kohima: Kohima Printing Press p.20
society either religious or secular for the children born of incest or illegitimate children, the Zeliangrong after giving due punishment and rituals for sanctification, at least accept the innocent children and they are taken good care of as even their folk tales is full of God himself taking care of the helpless people and making the cruel, rich people ashamed. Even if the child is illegitimate child, the child is not frowned upon but accepted in society, and is generally looked after by the mother or mother's family. Everyone is equal in the society but there is gender distinction in terms of work allotment, inheritance of immovable ancestral property and direct participation in the village administrative council.

There is even indirect sharing of one’s wealth. A wealthy person cannot hoard or keep things for himself. The richest man of the village ought to throw a feast for the entire village and should even welcome the strangers and travelers to feast together or else, it is believed, that they will be cursed by God. As is told, there was one rich man who got a lot of the land’s yield. The harvest was plentiful but he didn’t organize the feast of merit which is deeply engrained in Zeliangrong culture. A song goes about a man who didn’t throw the Feast of Merit (Taraengh kai sumei/Banrudungmei)....

‘...Even in his hens’ nests,
There are lots of hens’ lice.....’(Kakai ruai bou khou si karik nai gei lo.....)
This was expressed as taken to be a curse sent by God for being selfish and so not giving him rest by sending lots of hen’s lice or bugs to the wealth-to-do family.

Pronouncement of Judgment or Conflict Resolution

Quarrels and disputes take place in society sometimes. All disputes

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were solved according to their customary laws. They are by nature imbued with the spirit of forgiveness and strong sense of reconciliation. Revenge among them was not considered as a noble work and not a solution to any dispute. They believe in the peaceful co-existence among themselves and with others. Whenever there is dispute or quarrel among individuals, families or clans, the case were normally taken into the court of justice which is the nammei pei (village council). U.G. Bower also writes, "The council also served as a court of justice. As the area was administered, they were supposed to deal with the minor cases; but in practice they settled everything as they always had". Dispute will be tried to solve as amicable as possible but in case there are extreme disagreement the people even invoked the nature to interfere and bring justice to tell the truth. For example the two parties or even neutral group would agree to come together on one particular appointed day and catch hold of a tiger's teeth or canine and would invoke the nature to be their witness calling the tiger to come and bit the wrong one. People really believe in this and this step is one of the most serious and worst things that anybody could stand for the judgment. Another example would be to select representative and go to a big river or pond and would invoke God and the nature to judge them by saying and agreeing that the erring one will not be able to dive, deep and stay inside the water but the right person will be able to do so. In this way they are judged when humans could not bring satisfaction to both the parties. Another strong example to that kind of dispute settlement is still to be seen as a history in Tamenglong village that in history there were dispute among two clans and there witnesses on each side. Those witnesses agreed to invoke nature and work in the tip of a spear. Seven witnesses each from the witnessing group came to the spot. They agreed to let one witness stand and from far off opposite direction the opponent witnessing man throw the spear at the standing witness and whoever is wrong will fall and die on that day. Turn by turn they all were given chance to throw the spear at one another's group and it so happened that the seven of them from one

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133 Souvenir, From the Shadows to Light, North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar, (p.1 A Note from Convenor) Imphal: North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar publication, 1995.
witnessing group fall to ground while the other witnessing group was not hurt. Some people in memory of those killed ones still desire to call that place seven stones valley.

**Democratic form of Government or polity of the Zeliangrong people**

The Zeliangrong people have no king nor had kings. The kings are existent only in some folk tales. The Zeliangrong style of self governance was purely democratic at the rudimentary level. It is a system of community governance. They have their village state democratic polity and there is a very powerful Village Council "Peikai" composing of all the adult male members of the village of which their Chief or Chairman (present days' term) is the head. But the decision of the chief or chairman is not above the wishes or desires of the village Pei (council). The whole member of any village is governed by the village council. It has been purely democratic while making decisions but respect were also given to the elders at the same time. The representative members of the council are selected from each and every clan of the village known as "meikhin" (meaning representative) as representatives to be presented in the village council or 'Pei'. The highest court of justice of the village council is known as 'Shangbam'. Any notable case or dispute or problem is discussed in the Pei but when there are problems that cannot be solved or decided by the Pei, then, the matter is taken up by the Shangbam for the final decision. Criminal cases were few. They were simply judged in accordance with the tribal law. Expulsion or ex-communication or banishment from the village was the usual sentence for criminal and serious offences.

_Nampou_ or founder of the village has got authority of traditional hereditary rights in the village. But on certain occasion, the council over rule the _Nampou's_ opinion if public opinion was overwhelmingly behind it. _Nampou_ and his clan are not above the customary law.

In certain cases, like boundary disputes, thefts, etc., witnesses will have to be produced. If the decisions of the Pei are not satisfactory to the two parties, they take an oath by ordeal like biting the teeth of tiger, invoking thunderstone to judge or immersion in water takes place.
The highest court of justice. In crucial time only the whole village male would take part otherwise there are male representatives from each clan and they would be the members or representatives in the council. It was a sort of self autonomous village republic.

Women are not the direct members of the village authority council or “Pel”. There is not a single lady who is a representative from any clan up to now even if this tribe is an ancient tribe as well as very much modernised in many aspects and holding many high government official jobs in the Indian Union now.

**Inheritance:**

Zeliangrong Naga society is a patrilineal society. The youngest son has the right to inherit the lion’s share of his father’s properties both movable and immovable. He is also responsible to repay all the debts of his father. All other brothers have a very less share. In some village daughters normally do not have a share in the inheritance even in the absence of male child of the family. In such cases male relative will inherit all properties and will also be responsible to look after the daughters until they all are matured. However, daughters also received lots of gifts and present from their parents and have also rights entitled to various customary gifts from their brothers, family and relatives. Daughters have share of inheritance of whichever belongs to her mother. The sons do not inherit that. In the absence of a daughter the mother’s belongings are normally given to her sisters or nearer female cousins and not given to their sons or daughter-in-law.

Without understanding the legend behind youngest son’s right to inheritance would be incomplete if it is not retold. A man called Aguiiba had no child by his wife for a long time. So he took a second wife who bore him a son. He named him Namgang. After some years the first wife also gave birth to a son and the father named him Kading. When the father grew old the question of inheritance arose and the father out of love could not take a decision. So he sent his two sons to their uncle for his decision.
The uncle, after much consideration, killed a cock, cooked it and made two mid-day meal packets inside one of which was placed the head of the cock. He also brought out a dog and mithun, tied at the courtyard. Then he told them to choose one meal packet each and one animal each and go their father. He told them also that they would reach a river where the animals would drink water. It was there that they also had to take their respective meal. Whoever found the head of the cock in the meal packet was to be the heir of the father’s property. Their uncle also told them that whoever reached the village gate first and made fire there was to be the heir.

Taking the meal packets and leading the animals the two brothers headed for their journey. When they came to a river the animals drank water from it and they also sat down for their meal. When they opened their meal packets; they found the head of the cock inside that of Kading. Again, Kading who led the dog could move faster than Namgang who led the mithun. So Kading reached the gate and made the fire there first and so became the inheritor of the father’s property in spite of the fact that he was younger in age though being the son of the elder wife. This was accepted as divine providence. The system prevails in Zeliangrong society with slight differences from village to village. From the above context it is not clear if the daughters are also entitled to inherit their father’s property in general\textsuperscript{135}. It is different from village to village and also depends much on the will and choice of individuals. There is no restriction as such.

Unmarried daughters or divorced daughters who come back home are also given land to live and to till. The well-to-do family gift even land to their daughters. As far as customary laws are concerned divorced women who came back to her father’s house are also given immovable properties like land and house for their sustenance.

\textsuperscript{135} Reisunriang, (News link)-\textsuperscript{6\textsuperscript{th}} Issue 2003, A section from Women, Divorce and Inheritance and Zeliangrong Custom by Namthiubuiyang Pamei, Naga Women union, Manipur Publication, 2003 p.24
Marriage System:

The boy or man's family will have to initiate in the proposal for marriage by going to the parent of the bride. The groom's family particularly elderly people along with a respectable old man called 'nouthanpou' (who does not belong to the clan of the groom) who will propose the bride and negotiate between the two parties. After the proposal and engagement, no one is supposed to break the engagement. Anyone other man or woman who breaks it will be treated like the adulterer and can be punished accordingly. The Nagas are not permitted to marry until they have attained a certain age, and are able to set up house on their own account.\textsuperscript{136} Child marriage is utterly unknown\textsuperscript{137}. Marriages are strictly based on clan exogamy by the customary laws. For instance, a boy of Pamei clan can marry a girl from Panmei clan only or vice versa but cannot marry from the same clan.\textsuperscript{138}

Polygamy is very rare. The society does not permit polygamy but in some cases, polygamy is practiced and condoned. As for example, if a woman is barren she cannot stop her husband from marrying another woman. Polyandry, is however unknown. A woman marrying more than one man at a time is unheard of in the Zeliangrong society. When her husband happen to die then she can still stay and live with her children or she can go back to her home and remarries as well if she wish to but her children will be separated from her and can no longer claim the children as her own.

There are different types of marriages. There may be slight differences from village to village in the marriage's procedure.

1. \textit{Khamthan} (Holy Marriage):

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 425
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Ibid.}, p.25
The marriage is negotiated between the boy and the girl and their respective parents to have a holy wedding. It is the expectation and wish of all the Zeliangrong parents that their children should go for this holy marriage.\textsuperscript{139}

2. **Noumangmei** (getting bride as wage for one’s service towards the girl’s parents, marriage by servitude at matri-local residence):

The boy lives in the house of the girl’s parents and work for months or years as agreed upon between the two parties. When that period is over, the boy returns to his parents’ house as husband and wife. Example of this kind can be seen in other culture like Jacob working for his father-in-law to get Rachel in the Jewish tradition.

3. **Samtuanmei** (Elopement):

Here the boy and the girl, by their own consent without taking their parents’ consent elope or run away taking shelter in other’s village. Generally, for this type, the parents normally give their consent later whether they like it or not if they had loved each other so much and if the two had united by themselves.

4. **Maduangzaimei** (Marriage by abduction/kidnapping):

This is the most indecent, disgraceful kind of marriage. The boy kidnaps the girl without her consent nor her parents’ consent. Decision whether to give the girl in marriage to that boy or not will be decided after two days of the kidnap. This kind is not socially approved. But when it takes place, the problem is tried to solve by man’s family no matter how much they will have to pay.

5. **Marianmi** (A girl who is slave to a family gets married before her redemption by her parents):

A daughter is sometimes given to others family as a slave due to famine or scarcity of food. But in Zeliangrong society, the treatment given is

\textsuperscript{139} RAISUNGRIANG (News link) 5\textsuperscript{th} Issue (from a section: Marriage in Zeliangrong Society by Rev. M.P. Namthiurei and Ajailiu Newmai), Imphal: Naga women Union, Manipur Publication, 2001. p.26
not like in any other parts of the world. Here, she lives like one of the members of the purchaser's family. Her parents or relatives can redeem her. Before her redemption if she marries, she will not be invited by her parents to the family functions.

6. Kakhaomei:

The younger brother of the deceased man can marry the widow of his older brother if both of them agree so as to bring up the children or to take care of their sister-in-law (but older brother of the deceased cannot marry his younger brother's widow). This culture is similar to that of another Jewish tradition like Boaz marrying Ruth, the widow of Chilion, the son of Elimelech).

7. Nruammei (Marriage between close relatives/same clan considered as incest or taboo):

If marriage takes place within the same clan (considered incest) among the Zeliangrong, the couple is an outlawed in the eyes of the society. The villagers are bound to take the following actions:

(1) Burn all the clothes of the concerned persons at the village gate as sign of purification,
(2) A huge penalty will be charged,
(3) They will not be allowed to live in the same village,
(4) They lose the right to become social leaders any more,
(5) They will be treated unholy in their whole life,
(6) No social status/position will be assigned to them,
(7) Even their entry to somebody else's house and mixing with other people will be treated as unclean.

In such unsanctioned marriage, the two ends of the two clothes of the boy and the girl is tied together and burnt outside the village gate to ward off any bad consequences which may come from committing such taboo. The lovers are excommunicated, ostracized and turned out of the village. The village then observes genna known as "charin nei" (genna of wonder with contempt). After sometime maybe after days, months or years, they can be
received back to the village if they request and if the Village Council (Pei) complies with it.

In order to be received back the couple have to give anything the Village Council ask so as to enable them to perform the sacrifice for purification of the couple. Even if they are received back to the village, they are seldom allowed to take part in the important rituals of the village. When the villagers go for hunting or for war, such persons are sent back from the village gate because it is believed that they will not only get wounded but even their presence itself in such important work is degrading and contemptuous\textsuperscript{140}. Therefore the problem of incest was rare and if it happens by chance also it takes a lot for the couple and the society. So people strictly refrained themselves from such serious activities.

**Adultery (Nou Soumei):**

Adultery is a serious crime in Zeliangrong culture. Punishment to the adulterer is more if that act is committed in the woman's house than somewhere else. When the crime is caught with enough prove then the relatives of the husband can take action and even assault him physically. In some cases even his house can be dismantled. If the offender runs to anybody's house for protection, the host have to protect him whatever may be the case and should take care till the matter is settled.\textsuperscript{141} Such cases are judged in the Village Council (Pei) in the absence of the offender. Whatever fine is imposed upon the offender, he has to pay. He cannot appeal to the court of justice (here Pei). The usual fine are giving away of cultivable land or a water pond (duikhun) etc, to the woman's husband and a big pig (joom pangumei-a type of local measurement standard using tighten fist with the thumb open and straighten and counting to five) to the Village Council. In some cases the offenders are even expelled or banished from the village.

\textsuperscript{140} RAISUNGRIANG (News link) 5\textsuperscript{th} Issue (from a section: Marriage in Zeliangrong Society by Rev. M.P. Namthiurei and Ajailiu Newmai), Imphal: Naga women Union, Manipur, 2001. p.26

If the offender is a wife, she or her parents must give one mithun or at least a pig as fine to the injured party and may end up in divorce. In the above case also, if they desire so they may go for divorce.

Bride Price (Maan):

Payment of the bride price is a basic feature of Zeliangrong marriage. There is no dowry system in the Zeliangrong Naga culture as is found in the West and in many Indian cultures besides the many tribals of India. Many tribals of North-East India do not pay dowry instead bride price are being given by the man's family (bridegroom's family) to the girl's (groom's family) family. That was very important. The Nagas, Mizos or Lushais, the Kuki, the Hmars, the Paites, and many more tribes of North-east India take bride price. Daughters are precious for the Zeliangrong. They are treated with great love and care. They are not unwelcome in the society like many Indians do. According to Col. McCulloch (1859), the reported bride prices for a Kabui/Rongmei (now known as Zeliangrong) bride are: Seven buffaloes, two daos and two spears, two strings of beads made of conch shells, two ear ornaments, two black clothes, two eating vessels, two hoes and so on.

The above mentioned may be bargained according to the economic condition of the bridegroom but it is a pride for the bridegroom's family to pay high price. The parents or relatives of the bride usually fix the bride price. However, there is normal range of bride price ranging from 80 to 200 measures of paddy. Within that range, the bride price is fixed depending upon the status of the bride, that is, whether she is virgin or widow or divorcee. The bride price will be the highest for a virgin. It is neither the looks nor the economic condition of the girl's family but it is the chastity that counts. Chastity is considered a high moral value in the Zeliangrong culture. Even in the girls' dormitory or the morung, no married man is allowed to even enter at night not even the parents in whose house the dormitory is held for

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the night excepting only the village headman may drop in for a fatherly visit\textsuperscript{144}. This culture is slightly different when compared to other tribes like for example, the Zoumi tribe of Manipur, for the bride price will be more for widow or women who has given birth to many children earlier as this is the sure indication of fertility and a good sign showing that she will bless her husband’s family with many children as she is not barren.

Bride price can be paid in installments too if both the parties agree to it. The first installment is paid at the time of engagement and the remaining being paid later. When it is fully paid the bride’s parents would arrange a customary function known as “kapuat suloume?” (packing up things for the bride). In those days, man can even buy a mountain for a hen. So if we calculate the amount in modern days’ value the bride prize is enormous. There is no question of burning the bride because of less dowry and all that. Women secure a safe position in the society. Besides that if the bride is treated badly by the groom’s family, it is a shame for the groom’s family and cannot expect to get a wife from that bride’s clan for their daughter-in-law again in future. But in this modern time, people hardly take bride price anymore in handsome amount. If they do so, they just take a minimal amount only like few hundred rupees so as to let the people remember their culture only.

There is neither force child marriage nor sati practice. Widow can either live in her husband’s family or can go back to her father’s family if death has separated her from her husband. It depends on her choice. Widow can remarry if she wishes so after fulfilling certain formalities like resigning from her husband’s family and after going back to her father’s family.

**Widow’s price (Maiguang maan literal meaning is old person’s price):**

If the husband dies and the husband’s family wants her to live with them, a price known as widow’s price is paid to her parental family. If it is not

\textsuperscript{144} S.T. Das, \textit{Tribal Life of the North-Eastern India, HABBITATE, ECONOMY, CUSTOMS, TRADITION}, Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1986 p.144
settled then the widow can go back to her parent's house if she wishes and her husband's family cannot stop her from doing so.

**Bone price:**

The bone price is paid after the death of the wife by one who inherits the properties of her husband. There is no fix rate. George Watt quoted in ‘The Aboriginal tribes of Manipur’ saying that one of the most extraordinary peculiarities of the Kaupuis (Zeliangrong) is that of taking ‘bone money’ (munda). On the death of a wife her father demands bone price (munda) from her husband, or if he be dead, then from the late husband’s nearest relative. The bone prize normally consists of a buffalo and the one who demands the bone prize have to kill a pig for the family feast\(^{145}\). But in many cases, it depends on the agreement of the settling parties. This is the last payment for the bride.

The bride price is a burden for the poor families. However, this system of paying bride price has some advantages. The woman is made to be faithful to her husband and ultimately the husband is made to love his wife. One who cannot pay bride price is considered as unworthy man. This system spurs men folk strive hard to be successful. The bride price system keeps the marriage bond alive throughout their lifetime and even after their death. The kinship system is strengthened and there is strong cohesion because of this too.\(^{146}\)

**Dormitory System (Morung):**

In olden days in each Zeliangrong village there will always be two dormitories (club-house or morung), some three or four depending on the size of the village population. The boys' or male's dormitory or morung re called “khangchui” or hangseoki and the girls or female called the “kailiu” or “liuchiu” or leoseoki). Dormitory is a place where young people use to have social


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interactions and sleep together. This is an admirable institution, the morung disciplined and educated the young; united the householders and was an instrument in which the elders could control the public body. At once a privileged brotherhood and a public utility, it was the most useful item in the social structure. Here the youth of a society are trained in different fields of life. Ursula Graham Bower gives an appreciation about the morung’s education saying

“\textit{The system teaches early the meaning of cooperation and responsibility. I have known and employed men trained by both methods of the Morung and the home, and if choice existed, I would choose the Morung graduates every time. They are of tougher fibre and rough corners have been rubbed off. They are more self reliant with common sense and better disciplined, and above all their loyalty and sense of service to a corporate body is well developed.}”\textsuperscript{147}

From here, the young girls and boys learn any kind of tribal education and moral discipline including cooking, nursing weaving, knowledge of cultivation, basketries, wood works, household wares, dance and music or songs, moral and social education, or social etiquettes, making or learning of various arts and handicrafts, forefather’s belief and tales, religious values and even the art of warfare and the lists go on. They were also taught the art of fishing, hunting, fighting and any rites, rituals and taboos associated with it too. They were taught how to socialize oneself since their very young age. The most important thing they learn from here is the spirit of co-operation and unity and the realization that one must place the community’s interests above oneself in order to have a good life. Normally, there are three separate dormitories for boys and another three dormitories for girls in a village. These dormitories functioned separately but coordinated among themselves.

The membership of a dormitory is recruited or selected at the time of the birth of the child. When a baby is about to be born in a village, the members of different dormitories will be hiding eavesdropping to find out the gender of the new born child. Soon after anyone hears about the new born

\textsuperscript{147} U.G. Bower, \textit{Naga Path}, London: Readers Union: John Murray, 1952 p.75
baby's gender, any member from any dormitory who raised his voice first
telling ("akailiu khang" or "akhangchiu khang" meaning for he/she will be for
my dormitory) then, that newly arrived baby would be that dormitory's
member when he or she grows up. The baby would be presented an earring
by the dormitory. In that way each and every child is welcome with
importance into the society either one is a male or a female.

There are also both junior dormitories for younger boys and younger
girls separately (7 to 13 years of age and 7 to 12 years of age respectively) in
which they would enter as a beginner and learn several things and after this,
they will have to go to their own respective dormitories as has been recruited
or tagged earlier at the time of their birth.

Every morung has a resident leader or guide who lives in the morung
itself. He or she is chosen by the village elders. Elderly persons with skilful
knowledge in matters common to the villagers and who is expert in bringing
compromise and reconciliation are appointed by the village elders to be the
leader. Such persons should be expert in teaching precepts and also in arts
and handicrafts, music, folk tales, etc. and lastly be very sociable. His tenure
is for indefinite period. There are some ranks in the dormitory according to
their age and marital status; in-gaan-pi (head of men), in-gaan-gong (older
men), khangbuan, haanhza etc. Younger members obey their elders and act
according to the decision and instructions given by the older members.

Lower in rank are other persons selected from the members of the
morung. They are to see the daily needs of the morung like the provision of
firewood and water etc. and also to enforce discipline in the morung life48.

The purpose of having dormitories in village is to impart knowledge to
the members and to defend the village against intruders, wild animals, to help
the widows and widowers of the village, to work as a social guild, and to
perform social work and cultural activities like dancing and music too and so

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48 S.T. Das, Tribal Life of the North-Eastern India, HABBITATE, ECONOMY, CUSTOMS, TRADITION, Delhi:
Dormitory's inmate will clean the village water ponds, make village paths, clean and repair existing path and so on. It is also because they enjoy being in the company others. When social functions are organized, the boy's dormitory and the complimentary girl's dormitory will work together.

Boys or men even after marriage would continue to sleep in the morung if they wish so but girls or women stop going and sleeping after getting married. The real life of the morung starts at night. A central fire is lit in the hall and a pig-fat lamp is lighted. The Zeliangrong do not lack bamboo so they would burn lots of bamboo to give sufficient light to the inmates. After discussing interesting topics or when works were done, they would start singing. When a song is heard from the boys' dormitory, the girls' dormitory inmate too would start singing reciprocating songs from both the sides. All the unmarried young boys and girls are supposed to stay in their morung after their dinner from their respective home. They are not supposed to sleep in their parental house. Courting is also done in the morung. Many youth select their life partners in the morung muses. The elders do not mind the mingling of young people if they do not held from the same clan. Quite often the love affairs among the Naga youth lead to their marriage.

Head hunting:

Head hunting has been a characteristic of not only the Nagas but it had been practised by many tribal communities in different parts of the world like in secluded tracts of Africa, South East Asia and South America. The practise originated from a superstition that the increase in soul matter led to agricultural prosperity and rise in population. Herodotus made a reference in his work about the Asian head hunters. The Ibanan of Borneo, the Was of Burma and the Kogros of Nigeria are still notorious for this game. In Europe also, some of the primitive tribes till recent past practised human sacrifice (which could be a degenerated for of head hunting). The soul matter is

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150 S.S. Chib, Castes, Tribes and Culture of India, North-Eastern India, vol.8, New Delhi: ESS ESS Publication, 1984, p.109
believed to be found in the head. Besides, the belief in collection of the soul matter, head hunting has been practised for displaying prowess and strength on many frivolous grounds among the Nagas. The refusal to pay bride price, giving shelter to a culprit, and insult to a villager are some of the provocations that lead to head hunting. Another reason is like acceptance of a challenge and the exuberant desire of young men to prove their manhood to their wives or beloveds or to prove their masculine superiority. However, the agricultural prosperity and increasing populations of different tribes have been the over-riding considerations.

Like many other tribes, the Zeliangrong Nagas were also head hunters even as recent as a hundred years back. Inter village feuds, tribal warfare and head chopping or hunting became religious functions. This practice continued up to the coming of the British rule in the Naga Hills. The philosophy behind for practicing such peculiar, fearful, gruesome act or cruel act was due to their beliefs. It was believed that the spirit or the energy, or essence of great power of man lies in the head or is located in the head of man that if the head is cut off and brought into the village, the head takers (or the head hunter) is strengthened in power by the addition of the spirit's power of the head that has been chop off. The power of the beheaded man is belief to have transferred to the chopper and accordingly to the village in which the head is been brought. It was also believed that it would increase the fertility of the land and crops' yield. At the same time, it is also to be noted that the people simply do not cut off or chop off the head of anybody they meet on the way but only the head of strong powerful enemy or enemies' group. The unhappy feature of head hunting for many other tribes has been the indiscriminate chopping of heads and women, children, old, weak, and the infirm who have been the unlucky victims who obviously could not resist the ferocious invaders. As a matter of fact, a woman's head was considered a more prized trophy for a variety of reasons and one reason being women were given maximum protection by the village fold, and taking women's head meant
penetrating deep into adversity's rank with all its concomitant risks. Unlike few other tribes who price high on the head of old men, women and children, according to tradition, the Zeliangrong people do not give much honour to people who hunted old men, women and children's head except of the brave enemy warriors.

**FESTIVALS, SONGS AND DANCE:**

The Zeliangrong festivals are connected with their agricultural activities like many other different communities of the Nagas. Like all traditional communities, festivals are also meant for offering prayers to the deities and the Almighty. They largely practiced shifting or slash cultivation. Almost every activity is connected with rites, rituals or taking of omen with their belief in the supernatural beings' guidance and blessing.

**Inchih Dan Sanhmei (taking omen from a soft, light and small kind of bamboo called inchih):**

Actual beginning of the shifting cultivation starts with this practice of taking omen sometime in November of where to select the site for forest clearance for the year's cultivation. The village council will decide about the site basing on the taking of portent of bamboo called inchih dan sanhmei. On a particular day, the owner of each and every dormitory will throw a feast to all the members of the concerned dormitory. After the meal, two priests (portent taker) will fast till this important event is carried out the next day. Two young bachelors who did not indulge in unclean and immoral act are selected by the elders to fetch the bamboo for this purpose. They should not touch any woman till the rite is over. In the early morning they go to the forest without talking to anyone and chose the perfect bamboos at cut each of them with a single stroke with the help of a dao and the cut bamboo should not fall or

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151 S.S. Chib, *Castes, Tribes and Culture of India, North-Eastern India*, vol.8, New Delhi: Ess Ess Publication, 1984, pp.199-200


153 S.S. Chib, *Castes, Tribes and Culture of India, North-Eastern India*, vol.8, New Delhi: Ess Ess Publication, 1984, p.207
touch the ground but both the ends of each were wrapped with leaves and brought home. The priest will invoke the god for correct sign to be shown and splits the bamboo into two halves. The priest then stands on the plantain leaves or banana leaves spread on the ground and catch hold of the split bamboos turning downwards, on both hands at the hips facing each other and shakes them. The reader will see whether halve bamboos curve in and touch each other in the middle or two halves bulge out and turn open. If it is turned upward or open, then the sign is taken as good and so that particular site in which they are looking for sign will be pronounced as the site of the field for that year. If the sign turns out to be bad then they will perform the same thing for another block or site of the forest and in that way, they choose the site for cultivation for each year.

Singhiumei:

After taking the above portent for specific block of site, on one early morning, the owner of this block of forest or land along with young man who have abstained himself from unclean and immoral act will go to the path leading to the chosen jhum site and perform a rite called “singhiumei”. Here the owner of the land/block cuts a small tree at a single stroke and pronounces a prayer to the god then hangs it upside down on the other tree without touching the ground. This rite is performed so as to ward off injury or wound especially while clearing the forest for the annual cultivation. And the village observes genna the whole day. This falls in Matui bu (November). ^154

Some of the important festivals and rites associated with the agricultural cycle are:

1. Katoi Ngai: - This festival is celebrated when sesame (bot. Sesamum indicum) and other winter crops are harvested (sometime in November). Lots of sesame seeds or leaves are put in their food or curry.

^154 Souvenir, From the Shadows to Light, North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar, Imphal; North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar Publication, 1995. p.95-96
household should do this in this festival to ensure good health and as a part of their custom.

2. **Chakaak Ngai** - This festival is observed sometime in the month of December (*Gaanhbu*). This festival has two parts. The first part of this festival is known as Ringh Ngai (celebration of the living). The first two days is celebrated as Ringh Ngai. On the first day, everyone should eat dried met curry on fresh plantain leaves. And on the second day, outdoor games and sports are being played. Following this is ‘*buh jammei*’ which is performed by the head of the family. This is a prayer offered to the gods for protection and safety of the children. A piece of ginger offered to the gods is hung around the neck of the children for the day. ‘*simun tungmei*’ (literal meaning is putting up the head of the dog) is an important feature of this festival. This is performed to ward off evil spirits from the village. A sacrifice is made. Dog is the sacrificial animal for this purpose. The dog is tied and taken around the village and then taken to the place of sacrifice. While taking the around the village, young men and elders following the dog will shout and howl to drive out the evil spirits. There the dog will be beheaded by the priest. The blood is collected and stored in the receptacle made of plantain leaf and placed at the side of the sacrifice. The head of the dog is put up by running a long piece of wood through the mouth and is fixed at the location outside the village gate. After the sacrifice is done, the remaining body of the dog without the head is cooked and eaten by the elders and young men. This is an annual sacrifice.

The second part of the festival is for performance of rites and duties towards the dead. Stones slabs are collected for all the dead by the concerned families. All those stones collected from far off places will be placed in a suitable location near the house in the village. These stones are memorial stones of the dead. This is done with customary rites. There is feasting with libations to appease the departed souls.
3. **Gaanh Ngai**: Chakan Gaanh Ngai (literal meaning is Autumn/Winter light festival) is an important festival of the Zeliangrong. It falls sometime around October. It is a post harvest festival. The Kabuis sacrifice some animals and prepare meat of the flesh of these animals. The meat is used for the common dinner. The Kabuis (now called Zeliangrong) after drinking and eating indulge in night long singing and dancing\(^{155}\). So even when many have become Christians, they keep up with this kind of tradition singing the whole night for other Christians celebration. Blowing of horn is the main part of the festival. Use of musical instruments like drums, flutes, and other stringed instruments, hunting, fishing, and other activities which were put to stop during the working period in the field (since the time of sowing seeds i.e., spring) is opened again. Many musical instruments are being played with great joy with lots of dances and singing of songs marking this grand festival.

Other important ceremonies like piercing of the children’s ear (*nohnu-roumei*) and performing final rites for the dead (*theih kanoimei*) are also carried out in this festival.

- **Ear piercing**: all the children born after the previous Gaanh Ngai and so had not pierced their ear in the last Gaanh Ngai will be pierced this time. Ear piercing is ritually initiated by an old woman with words of blessings for the children while young men will perform the actual piercing on both the ear lobes of the children. If a child dies before the ears are pierced, an old woman will put a black mark on the earlobes of the child so that the child can be allowed to enter the land of the dead.

- **Final rites to the dead (*Theih kanoimei*)**: When someone dies, the family of the deceased has to perform so many rites and rituals. In all the family functions and also in the village or community festivals or functions, there are obligations and duties to be done to the dead till Gaanh Ngai comes. The final rites to the dead are performed in this festival time. It is believed that the dead does not leave one’s earthly home till the final rites are performed.

\(^{155}\) *Ibid.* 102-103
During this festival, songs are sung and dances are performed marking a grand celebration.

4. **Chaga Ngai**: - Some village celebrates this festival in the month of January-February (*Nahnubu*) while some other villages celebrate in August-September. However, the meaning and purpose of the festival is the same. This is known as ‘*Rih Ngai*’ (Festival of war). This is exclusively male festival. *Genna* is declared and no stranger is allowed in the village and no stranger is allowed to enter the village during this festival. Young people collect bamboo from the forest and made bamboo utensils like cups, tubes for storing water, rice beer and all these are used separately by the male members of the family during the festival. Men do not touch women and foods cooked by women are also not taken during this festival. Fire used in the house earlier is not used. Fresh fire is made (*mai alap thanmei mai*) and this is used for cooking. They enjoy eating, drinking, chatting and telling stories.

Another important and interesting feature of this festival is shooting or throwing feathery lance (*raangh keapmei*) to take signs and omens. An effigy of warrior of the size of about 25 feet high is erected at the village gate out of soft wood on the last day of the festival. Spikes of grass stems or feathers are used for shooting the effigy. It is believed that the one who hits the head of the effigy hits the war head and so will be successful in war. One who hits the breast of the same will be successful in hunting. And one who hits the abdomen will be lucky in cultivation and so on.

If any woman who by mistake, eats or drinks the food meant for the male participants of *Chaga Ngai*, she should join the throwing of the spikes to get forgiveness for her misdeed and mistake{superscript}156{superscript}.

This festival lasted for about five days. At the close of the festival all the young men of the village will march to the upper village gate with the bamboo cups that they had used in the festival. The cup will be split into two halves at a single stroke. If the half of the split cup turns open or upward and

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the other half closed or downward simultaneously, then the omen is taken as good.

Rites and sign associated with burning the cleared forest:

After Chaga festival (Chaga Ngai), when the cleared forest for cultivation is dried, a date for setting fire to it will take place by taking sign from an egg. The priest throws an egg and sees whether the furthest broken shell piece turns open or closed. If it turns open upward, it is taken as a good sign and burning takes place or else they have to wait for another suitable day. This falls in the March (Baanrau bu).157

Choksoimei:

A priest along with some young men representing different morung will go to the jhum site and perform a rite by sprinkling the blood of a sacrificial animal which is a dog. The blood is sprinkled in the jhum site or block. This rite is known as 'choksoimei'. This is associated with the belief to ensure well growth of the crops without any disease or damage and for plentiful harvest. On this day, village genna (abstention from work and staying in the village) is observed by the whole villagers.

Laophunsuat:

This festival is observed at the sowing season usually in March or April. After the cleared forest is burnt, and just before the sowing of crops seeds, there is a particular ceremony where the priests invoke the god to grant prosperity to the village and also to dispel the insects, pests, etc. The actual ceremony is known as 'nap-phun pee raanghmei'. The priests along with the elders of the village assisted by a young bachelor, who is a virgin without blemish, make a dummy patch of land with fencing around it. The crops to be sown in their fields are sown as a demonstration. After doing this, they offer sacrifices to the god by killing fowls. This is an annual ceremony

157 Souvenir, From the Shadows to Light, North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar, Imphal: North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar Publication, 1995. p.97
done for the whole village. After this, the villagers can start sowing seeds. In some villages of the Zeliangrongs, it is associated with festivals.

*Baanrau Raohmei:*

The priest cuts a small tree; chop off the twigs and erect it outside the village gate. The priest then pronounces a prayer and cuts the neck of a chick (small hen) and sacrifices it to god. All who will be working in the field especially who will be sowing will touch the blood of the chick with their right hands and dibble or touch the ground with small sticks representing the dibbling sticks or hoes and then hang them on the small erected post (baanrau tiang) in pile. This signifies that all misdeeds or mistakes committed with their hands are forgiven with the touching of the chick’s blood and thereby the seeds of crops sown by their hand would grow successfully. It is also believed that all the unwanted things in the village will be carried away by that ‘baanrau tiang’. Village genna is being observed the whole day. This normally takes place in March (Baanrau bu).

*Banglu Neih:*

This genna is observe by the whole villagers just before the sowing in the month of March. During this genna young members of the male dormitories will go from door to door and distribute crops seed like paddy, cotton, sesame and feathers of fowl. This signifies the declaration of sowing and is a part of the custom.

*Phuton Ngai (hoe festival):*

Two priests, placing bamboo gauzes on their head, throw away the hoe using for sowing on the path leading to the jhum site. They have a have belief that the priests who perform this rite are haunted by god so they use the bamboo gauge so as to disguise themselves so that the god may not recognize them. This rite is followed by genna after which no one is supposed to sow anything again. This genna is followed by festival. This festival falls sometime in April.
6. *Gudui Ngai* (Ginger juice festival):

This festival falls in the ending part of April (*Ginkihbu*) or first part of May (*Maliangbu*), celebrating the completion of seed sowing. In this festival everyone drinks the ginger juice which is a kind of soup made of chicken and ginger or mushroom with ginger. This is done to ensure good health and also to ward off starvation and scarcity. This lasts only for a day or two.

*Apuak mpat Neih (releasing rat genna):*

On one particular day, on the arrival of the weeding season, members of morung go to the granary etc. and catch rats. A priest accompanied by members of morung go beyond the village and after crossing any big river set the rats free with some chanting by the priest. This signifies that all the unwanted elements are carried away by the rats so that no damage will be done to the crops or by other wild animals. Village genna is observed on this day.

*Katiu Neih (genna of 'katiu' is a kind of pest that causes damage to paddy):*

Two young virgin girls without any blemish, led by a priest go out of the village and drop some pests inside the bamboo tubes and crush them with pestle. The people believe that by doing so the pests will not infest the crops and cause damage. This genna is observed in the month of June (*Tung ngaibu*).

7. *Khaam Ngai:*

This festival is celebrated when harvesting of the crop starts sometime in July (*Duiluangbu*). The village paths and paths leading to the paddy fields are all cleared by the young people who are inmates of the dormitories. The village and field paths are divided into a number of portions according to the number of dormitories in the village. A competition is held to see which dormitory does better.
Another important feature of this festival is making of bamboo cups called ‘joubung rienmei’ (making rice beer cups) and presenting to the children born that year. Membership of particular dormitory is awarded formally this time even though the initial recruitment has been done at the time of the birth of the child.

Stringed instruments (inroh) and drums can be used in this festival for two days only.

Besides the above festivals, the dormitory/morung also arranges or can arrange festivals if the dormitory shows the potential strength and have enough funds and if the year’s crop yield is plentiful. Such festivals are Merimei and Matuimei.

In such festivals, young people both boys and girls make a lot of fun like smearing of colour or mud on one another, playing tug of war, singing and dancing, feasting, hills climbing competition and praising each party with their songs between the boys’ and girls’ group. Young people put their best dancing dresses and display their dances to the villagers.

There is also a competition for the young men of catching or capturing mithun or buffalo (guai ajumei) which is to be killed in the festival. The animal is let loose and chased out by the elders. The young men will run after the animal and whoever catches the animal first or ties his kilt on the horn of the animal is the winner.

Merimei festival lasts for three to four days and Matuimei for about a week.

Pukpha Ngai: This is a festival of thanks-giving to the god of grains for the harvest which is celebrated sometime in July. During this festival people kill pigs and mithuns and enjoy a grand feast.

Some sheaves of paddy are brought home from the field and the grains are distributed to each and every household of the village. Important feature of this festival is the performance of a rite known as ‘nap chanmei’ by
an old woman of every family. She holds the grains mixed with pieces of liver of mithun or pig and chants some prayers to god of the grain for prosperity and rich harvest and then places them on the hearth.

**Harvesting:**

Mixed crops are generally sown in the field and particularly when paddy harvest is over, it is the tradition of the Zeliangrong to see who harvested the most by measuring the heaps of paddy and the winner offers a cattle or mithun or buffalo as a prize to the 'Peih' (village Council).

*During the off season, the Zeliangrong organize various festivals occasionally, depending on the year's plentiful harvest. The important festivals of them are Merimei, Matuimei, Malaanmei and Banruhmei.*

**Malaanmei (a time period of eating, resting and health show):**

Another unique and important social institution of the Zeliangrong people is the *malaanmei* meant for the inmates of the *morung* (bachelor's dormitory). This practise is not found in other tribes of the Nagas or any other neighbouring tribes too. This occasion is organized for the boys only when the harvest of the year is plentiful and if circumstances allow them to hold the same. Any bachelor dormitory can arrange 'malaanmei' but the length of it and the willingness to send their son or sons depend on the parents' wishes. Here, the participants are from the same dormitory and there is no cross dormitory competition in this.

The parents of the participants supply good food and drinks to their son or sons in the dormitory or morung and the participants eat, drink, relax and sleep doing nothing. They simply eat, rest and sleep in the morung. The period of *Malaanmei* vary from three days to six months or even more. The *Malaanmei* is of two kinds:

- *Khangchiu laan* (for a shorter period) and

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158 Souvenir, *From the Shadows to Light, North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar*, Imphal; North-East India Zeliangrong Festival-Cum-Seminar Publication, 1995. p.96-100
• *Ra laan* (for a longer period)\(^{159}\)

If the participation is for less than a month, then it is known as *khangchui laan* and if it is extended for a longer period even up to six months or more then it is known as *ra laan*. The parents of the participants would supply good cooked food to the participants in which the participants only eat, drink, relax and sleep to keep the young men healthy and to re-enforce energy to the young men\(^{160}\) after a yearlong tiresome work. *Malaanmei* is not associated with any form of rituals, sacrifice or worship. This has no relation to religion. It *is conducted solely to keep the young men strong and healthy*, to vitalize and nourish them and to re-enforce energy to the young men. It is also a prestige or status show of their economic condition for the parents to send their children. *Malaanmei* is a kind of health competition and this is a typical practice of the Zeliangrong Naga (other Naga tribes do not have this practice)\(^{161}\), showing their strong urge for good health and long life. This practice also pictures a wonderful way of blessing their young ones with good health by the parents and the village community. R.R. Shimray also commented saying: "This is typical of the Rongmei, Liangmei and Zemei Nagas. In these communities, there exists a strong urge for good health and long life which every one of us wishes for but only a few get. Here, at this particular spot of the earth called Tamenglong, West District of Manipur, many people live up to 100 years of age and more. The reason is simple. In addition to the unpolluted air and the freshness of the environment- the mountain vastness, they had a wonderful way of blessing their young ones with good health"\(^{162}\). "This *malaanmei* is the best opportunity and privilege for the young people to undergo such rules so that they relax and rest from all busy schedules of toil and tiredness of life from work in the year. It provides relaxation, enjoyment, peace and serenity in one’s life which help them grow

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\(^{159}\) Ramkhun Pamei, *The Zeliangrong Nagas: A Study of Tribal Christianity*, New Delhi: Uppal Publication House, 1986 p.31


healthy-physically fit and spiritually sound. This kind of relaxation for about 3-6 months in one's life is very essential.\(^{163}\)

On the closing day of this event, the participants are brought out at the village open place or ground to show to the villagers who have put on the weight most (or the fattest one is after whole eating and resting period). The fattest two are selected from among the participants and they are praised and blessed by one of the oldest man of the village representing the village and the morung. The fattest participant is awarded to have won the "luang thuan" i.e., the praise of the village and the second fattest one is awarded "khangchiu thuan" i.e., the praise of the dormitory or morung. The dormitory members will go to the house of the winners with traditional hooing or huaikaomei. The parents or relatives of the winners will give the "thuan" (praise a form of prize) in cash or in kind to the old man who praised and blessed the winners. This is known as "thuan keimei". This is also a typical reverse of the present world's system of rewarding any winner. In this society, the winner receives the name but the actual material prize or feast is given to others by the winner or winner's family.

The last day of this event is marked by a day of merriment, joy, dancing and singing, eating and drinking for the whole village. The fattest pig which has been reared for this purpose of Malaanmei is killed for the happy feast on that day.\(^{164}\)

**MUSIC AND DANCE:**

The art of song and dance is an important aspect of Zeliangrong tradition. While working in the field, cooking, carrying load, the lips of the people can be seen rhythmically vibrating with songs. There is no written literature of music and art of dance. But the songs, which have been composed over a thousand years ago by expert musicians like Guiremang, Kariuki, Asiyang and Hiuwang etc, are still sung being sung. Dance is

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\(^{164}\) Ibid., p.33
always accompanied by song. The songs vary according to festival, work, war, and sacrifice etc. for all the occasions to be sung individually or in groups. Ramkhun Pamei pointed out the inseparability of dance and music with religion and said; "Music and dance are associated with religion according to the cycle of natural agricultural life". The Zeliangrong have very rich folk traditional songs and music, they used wood hollowed drum with animals' skin, horn of the mithun or common bull, cymbal, gong, flute, and stringed instruments. As much as one uses words to speak and communicate, they use songs too which is not less impregnated than words. The unique typical tunes they sang are quite different from any other Indian songs and music. It is quite different from the Western Music as well. The pitch they sing ranges from very low notes to a very high pitch. So when any kind of music is taught to them now, they find no difficulty at all to sing others' song. They sing song for almost every occasion while working; sowing seed, weeding, pounding rice, harvesting, and while celebrating festivals and while worshiping expressing religious ritualistic songs on different religious occasions and ceremonies, dancing, courting expressing romantic songs, expressing poetic communication and so on. They have songs for lullaby too. They even challenge others through songs. They use songs to praise God and man and sometimes to express one's opinion towards others. The Zeliangrong villages are full of the sound of music because almost every one sings wherever they are. Songs are inseparable part of their lives. They have great song composers and at the same time many believed that the people learnt many songs from the gods too who used to teach them.

Acknowledging the richness of tribal traditional songs, M.M. Thomas says, "The rich resources of the Western Church music should not be kept aside from our people, but at the same time, the rich resources of the tribal indigenous music also should not be left behind. The Zeliangrong believed that their ancestors learnt the art of dance and even learnt songs from the gods and all creatures which attended the joulu-me ceremony of Amang (name of a great person or god who invited all the living beings on

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165 Ibid., p. 25
166 M.M. Thomas and R.W. Tayler, Tribal Awakening, Bangalore: 1965 p.184
earth to come and join the feast he threw). Dances were performed and songs were sung on that day under the supervision of the tortoise who was appointed as the song master (lu pou). It is dais that all creatures were gathered on Amang joulumei ceremony. The Zeliangrong claimed that they learnt the art dance mostly from the gods, animals, birds, and insects. There are three important forms of dance:

1. **The ritual dances**: The dances performed in taraangkai, Banruh and Matui are ritual dances. The following is based on the Banru dance forms:
   
   A. **Huai Laam**: Male dance characterise by shouting ho-ho... as invocation to the Supreme God. This dance is an intricate dance performed by both married and unmarried males invoking God by shouting different refrains of ho-hooing... There should be no stoppage of ho-hooing. Huai laam has the following form:
      
      i. Gan laam
      ii. Kaiku laam
      iii. Bang phian laam (sword/dao dance)
      iv. Mpuansa laam (Whirl wind dance)

   Huai is a part of the dance, work and religious worship.

   B. **Joumon kasukmei**: Girls dance carrying wine/rice beer bowls. It is a female dance performed in Banru ritual in which the rice beer will be poured out while dancing rhythmically. It is accompanied by jou lian thanmei laam, a sort of solo dance.

   C. **Group ritual dances**: These dances are accompanied by the ritual dances under the supervision of the song master. The dances are performed throughout the night. Both male and female dancers participate.
      
      - Jeisung laam
      - Kaibon sangmei
      - Kaibon duimei
      - Banjai
D. Guaipi Thenglam: Dance of cutting the mithun head.

Matui Lam

Gaan Lam

2. The festival dances: The dances performed during the Gaan ngai are the festival dances. These are also known as chapa laam. The festival dances cover the dances performed on special occasions, like khangbon kadimei (farewell dance to khangbon), thei kadimei (farewell dance in honour of the dead), tuna kadimei (farewell dance to a bride), tamcham laam, etc. Nanu laam is more of a fertility dance and not a festival dance.

3. Dances imitating nature and wild life: Man learns different forms of movement from the birds, animals and insects. They perform both ritual and festival dances. The following are particular form of dance man imitated from natural animals' movement:
   a. Go laam (Crab dance)
   b. Khoiguna laam (Bee mating dance)
   c. Akit laam (Cricket dance)
   d. Raengdai laam (Dance of the Hornbill)
   e. Guaichei Bang laam (Dance of movement of the horns of bull)
   f. Apang Laam (Huluk/monkey dance of plucking fruits)
   g. Tarieng laam (Spinning dance and others)

Dance Techniques:

i. Makhom laam

ii. Dinglian laam (standing in rows)

iii. Phaicheng laam (from left to right feet)
FEASTS OF MERIT:

Feasts of Merit are performed by individuals. There are two kinds of Feasts of Merit. They are- Banruhmei and Kai sumei. These feasts of merit cannot be carried out if one is not rich enough to feed the whole villagers. If a man could carry out both the Feasts of Merit during his life time, he is supposed to have accomplished his life's task perfectly. It is believed that in the land of the dead (land of the departed souls) he will live happily forever for he has accomplished his life's work perfectly.

**Banruhmei**- When a villager becomes wealthy and knows that he is in a position to carry out these feasts only then he does so. Banruhmei are of two types: Banruhmei and banruh makiumei. Planning and announcement of the plan to carry out the feast are done well in advance. All the villagers will take part in it. Containers of rice beer are brought from the forest. The containers are about twenty feet long and are hollowed out of blocks of wood. The containers are placed in front of the house and are filled with rice beer for the day of the feast. The participants will be served with rice beer. Even to anybody passing by the house will be served with rice beer. This will continue for four days. Singing and dancing will be there. Banruh makiumei is also performed as that of Banruhmei. But there is an additional dance item where the wife of the person who performs this feast will perform the dance of 'Jou puan patmei'. Here in this dance, the host's wife will hold rice beer cistern of gourd with her two hands in front of her waist and dances with the young dancers. While doing so, she pours out the rice beer out of the gourd cistern rhythmically. Out of the two kinds of banruhmei, banruh makiumei is a higher one.

**Kai sumei** (literal meaning is Construction of House) – After carrying out banruhmei, if one can afford, he can carry out this event of construction of a House of Merit. There are many kinds of House of Merit. They are-

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• *Insaangh kai* (kailakjaang kai)
• *Lakpui kai*
• *Apiu kai*
• *Inranghmai kai*
• *Inkhong inriak kai* (Sianluanpui kai)

These are ranked from the lowest to the highest type of House Construction. The lowest one is made of thatch roof and plaited bamboo wall while the highest one is made of wooden roof, wall and floor. The design for all the Houses is the same. Different dormitories will be competing with one another in bringing the materials for the construction of the House. There is also an architecture/designer engineer (*singkhongmei*) who would estimate and instruct how to go about in making the house. Here also, the host wife will perform the 'jou puan patmei' dance in which she dances with the young dancers and pour out the rice beer rhythmically which is considered to be an act before God and man that one cannot commit a mistake in taking the steps while dancing.

The Feast of Merit is celebrated for nine days. Food and drinks like meat and rice beer are supplied by the host to all the guests. On the eighth day of the feast, the boy and girl selected for the purpose by the dormitories will fetch water from the 'water point of men' (*ngon duipang*) The water thus fetched is taken as 'sacred water' (*kalou dui*). The host and his wife will (*tarangpou and tarangpei*) will wash their faces, hands and feet with this water which is poured into the brass plate. This water is also sprinkled on all who are present there at that time. On the evening of the eighth day, the wife of the host will perform the dance of 'jou puan patmei' (literal meaning is bringing out the rice beer. But the host himself is not allowed to witness the dance nor is he allowed to dance. On the last day of the feast, the manager of the feast (*gansinpou*) and his assistants will escort the host and his wife to the village water point. They will beat the drum and play cymbal without singing. When they reach the water point, the basket meant for catching fish, prawn etc will be used by the wife of the host for catching any water animal from the water point. It is believe that the omen is good and the future will be bright if
any water animal is caught. After this, the team will escort back the host and his wife to their room. They will observe abstention (*gan thiangmei*) for two days. From that day onward the host and his wife cannot have sexual relation for one month. When this abstention period is over, they are allowed to have sexual intercourse again but this cannot be at home. They should go out into the forest and the tender plants will be pulled together without cutting or uprooting and there only they can have the first sexual relation again. This is strictly followed lest they believe that bad luck or bad death or other unwanted things will come upon the family.

**Puinung or Buinung dunghmei**- This is a kind of Feast of Merit. In order to perform this, one should have thirty heads of cattle. On the day of feast, all the thirty cattle will be tied in front of the house. The Village Council (*Pei*) will select the best and the biggest animal. The same will be donated to the *Pei* and this animal will be killed and the whole village will enjoy the feast.

**Construction of Individual House (*Kaisu kadaimei*):**

It is customary that a person who builds a new house receives every assistance he needs from his fellow villagers who are never paid for their labour but are entertained with rice beer and sometimes with food. With the assistance of neighbours, friends, and relatives and the availability of materials the house construction does not require more than a day or two. When the work is completed they are invited to a feast thrown by the owner of the house.

**Joint Family (*Inkouh kal*):**

The Zelangrong Nagas social life is grounded in the family, village and morung. In fact the value of the public social life is counted greater than the individual. The Zelangrong society mostly has joint family system. A joint system is practised not because of scarcity of land but out of their love for
their parents. However, it is not compulsory, it is left to the wish of the children too after they are married.

**Position of Women:**

Zeliangrong women enjoy more power and privileges than the women of many other communities yet it is not the same as men's. Though there may slight differences from village to village yet majority of the people do not give immovable ancestral properties as inheritance to woman except for unmarried daughters or one who comes home after her husband's death or divorce. In few cases only daughters are given immovable properties if the parents are generous enough. Woman plays an important role in the family. She is a bread earner and a hard worker. Though the husband is the head of the family, the wife's suggestions and proposal are taken.

In critical situation, the advice of women is sought. In public event also they can take part if they desire so. They can be witnesses in any conflict or dispute. Women can be Priestess as well.

When warriors of the village plan an attack and they start their activities, and if a woman, knowing the situation or by her dream or by premonition or by concrete information, stops the warrior by shaking her skirt *(pheisuai kakhupmei)*, the warrior should stop there.

Woman's marriage is considered serious and taken to be very important. A saying exist in this culture that a good woman who knows how to live a married life properly solves a war between clan and another clan or village and another village but on the contrary, a shrewd, rude irresponsible woman brings war.

No women representatives are there in the Village administrative council *(pei)*. The execution of freedom fighter Jadonnang in 1931 by the

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170 Gangmumei Kamei, *Tamenglong A Brief History*, Imphal: Published by Dr. M. Homeswor Singh, 188
British rule could not suppressed the Zeliangrong revolt. But a time came when woman, as for example, like Rani Gaidinliu (a young girl of 17 years of age only) took the challenge and organized large number of soldiers and fought against the Mighty British Empire which ultimately led her to life imprisonment in 1932 because of her very high potentials of revolt against the British rule in the North-East of India particularly in the Naga Hills of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. This Uprising was one of the only two earliest recorded tribal uprisings against the British rule in India. When women initiate things, men also gave tremendous co-operation. When she started a religious cult called the “Heraka” religion many did joined her and still now many are following that religion in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur.

Costumes dress and ornaments:

The Zeliangrong people used lots of locally herbal dyed colourful dresses with much extra woven design. They do use lots of ornaments too made of metal, beads, sea-shells, germ stones, orchids’ bark, goat’s hair, feathers, bright coloured insects’ wings and even cotton. They have different dresses meant for different age groups or status of the individuals in terms of being a little girl, grown-up unmarried girl, newly married woman, woman who have three or four children already and for older grandmother. The male do have different dresses for different status. It is incorrect to say they were “Naked Nagas” instead there is no other culture as rich as this in terms of unique detail exhibition of status by the dress that one wears. The dresses they wear for dances are extremely colourful and attractive too.

Other Laws

Theft: T.C. Hudson observed that among the kabuis (Zeliangrong) we find in McCulloch a different principle of differentiating between degrees of culpability, which is interesting as testifying to the educative value of matrimony in man’s life. “Theft, if the thief should happen to be a married man, is punished severely, but a young unmarried man might with impunity

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2000, p.26
171 Gangnume Kamei, Tamenglong A Brief History, Imphal: Published by Dr. M. Homeswor Singh, 2000. p.27
steal grain not yet housed, whilst theft from a granary would subject him to the severest punishment". 172

**Murder:** Among the *Kabuis* a heavy fine is levied from the culprit. 173 In the Naga society, when a man kills another for the purpose of robbery, or in any way except in fair fight, may, by the old Naga law be put to death by the relatives of the deceased, but by no other person 174.

**Adultery:** The adulterer, if he does not flee to other village, would be killed; aware of the penalty attached to his offence he dare not stay and is glad to leave his house to be destroyed by the injured husband. The family of the adulteress is obliged to refund the price in the first instance paid to them by her husband, and also her debts. 175

**Practice of black magic/witchcraft:** It is not the practice of the Zeliangrong people but if anybody learnt black magic from other communities and is found to be practicing they are banished or expelled from the village which is the severest of any kind of punishment being levied upon the wrong doer in the traditional society of the Zeliangrong people.

The above mentioned cultural and religious practices need philosophical analysis for proper understanding in the light of philosophical understanding.

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173 Ibid., 1974 P.106