

Chapter 1

Introduction:

1.1. Language and people:

Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei are the names of the languages as well as the tribes. But sometimes, some people opine that the names of the languages should be Zelad, Lianglad and Ronglad for Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei respectively. It is generally believed that these three tribes are the descendants of the common ancestor and therefore, they have a common culture, tradition, custom and linguistic affinity as well. Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei are together known as Zeliangrong. The name Zeliangrong was coined to be called as one entity to cover the whole community and resolved to accept as the composite name for ages to come, in Imphal on the 15th February, 1947.

1.2. Origin, migration and settlement of the Zeliangrong:

The Zeliangrong is one of the natives of North East India. Myths, legends and traditions narrate the origin and migration of the Zeliangrong people. However, the actual original homeland and the migration routes of the Naga tribes including the Zeliangrong into the present habitat have not been fully studied. Folklore, mythology and ethnology have been examined to arrive at a tentative conclusion, but an in-depth archaeological study has not been applied to this problem. We agree with the following conclusion of the philologists in connection with the racial and linguistic history of the Zeliangrong. George Abraham Grierson (1903) has established that the Zeliangrong speaks a language related to the Bodo of Assam and it has been grouped under a Sub-family of the Naga-Bodo within the Tibeto-Burman languages. Another well known Indian philologist, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee () has grouped the Zeliangrong into the Indo-Mongoloid, a term coined by him to mean the Tibeto-Burman group of races and languages. Several linguistic and anthropological studies have confirmed the above opinion. Ethnically, the Zeliangrongs belong to Mongoloid, a group of the southern mongoloids who

migrated southwards across the Himalayas in the pre-historic period to Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Most of the Naga traditions point to Makhel in North Manipur as their homeland. Makhel was a point of migration during their migration from South West China to Burma (Myanmar) and southeast Asia, and then North ward movement back to Manipur, then to North Manipur before branching out to their respective tribal habitats.

When the Zeliangrong people came to the present habitat (Manipur), it was not inhabited by any people. The Austric, Negrito and Mon-Khmer people, who might have occupied this land or wandered through, did so, long before they came to this area. There is no vestigial trait of any people or of the Nagas including Zeliangrongs to suggest that there was any encounter of the Nagas with other people. But, it has been suggested by competent archaeologists that Manipur, being located in geographically and cultural corridor between south and south East Asia, holds premises for national and as well as global archaeological interests. The first concrete evidence of Haobinhian culture is found at Tharon cave in Tamenglong District in 1979. The edge ground pebble tools of the cave are similar that is found in Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Philippines. In these countries these tools were used at about 7000-8000 B.C. Before the arrival of the present Tibeto-Burman inhabitants of this area, the Proto-Austroloid must have been in occupation of this cave. The probable date is around 5000-4000 B. C.

The Zeliangrong people most probably entered “the western hills of Manipur in the second half of 13th century A. D. from southern side possibly by a more south-westerly route through which the Cambodian tribes like Mon, Khmer, Funan and Siami arrived on this land by about the 10th or 11th century A. D.” W. I. Singh writes that the Zeliangrongs from their ancestral home, China arrived at some part of northern and eastern Burma in the latter half of 8th century A. D. It is probable that the Zeliangrongs sojourned in eastern Burma before entering to northeast India. There is no historical record on the movement of the Zeliangrongs, but it may be assumed that the Zeliangrongs

moved towards the west to Manipur from their sojourn. They possibly moved under the increasing Tai power in Thailand in the 12th century C. E. The earlier contacts suggest that they may have elements of Tai, and other Cambodian tribes.

The Zeliangrong people believe that their present habitat is their homeland since ancient times and they are the indigenous people of the land. But, their origin is surrounded in mystery and myth. According to legend, the Zeliangrongs originated from a cave called Taobhei. This mythical cave is believed to be located at Ramting Kabin, a place which is about 10 kilometers away from Oklong Liangmai village in Senapati District of Manipur. Their faith in cave origin is also contained in a ritual recitation known as Mhunsoi (a ceremony to ward off the evils) which says, "Once upon a time, human being lived in a cave, the entrance of which was blocked by a huge stone slab. A mithun removed the stone slab with its horns and then, their ancestors came out of the cave." The Zeliangrong tribes, namely Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei have a common belief of cave origin. Every tribes or community living in different countries used to claim at least certain place or cave as the origin of human race to its own belief or legend. According to another legend, men after creation, as desired by Tingwang, the Supreme God were sheltered in a cave. In other words, the supreme God made a safe shelter for human beings and protected them from the wild beasts and other natural forces by keeping them inside the cave. The first man and woman who came out of the said cave were recognized as Pokrei or Dirannang and Dichalu.

The belief in cave origin is testified by a ceremony called Nam-Gutmei, village entry performed by them at the time of founding a new village. According to it, the leader (Nampou) of first settlers would enter into the new village site with a black mithun or bull. This is done with a conviction that the mithun or bull would negotiate with the spirits of the land for settlement as if their ancestors were helped by it while emerging out of the cave.

The concept of cave dwelling should not and cannot be treated literally, because it was usually used in all part of the world as the hiding place and a safe place for mankind before they could master the art of making a house for themselves. The earliest evidence of cave dwelling comes from a cave near Peking, China more than 300,000 year ago. In Europe, it was widely used between 70,000 and 10,000 years ago.

The boy and girl felt no shame with each of their nudity and lived innocently as brother and sister. It is said that one day an idea came to Pokrei (which is believed to be God's creation) that both of them should get married and have children, for which he asked the girl, Dichalu to address him as Apou instead of Achai (brother) as soon as she met him while coming round a raised earthen mound called Pungbut from the opposite direction so that she might become his wife. After going seven times round the Pungbut, Dichalu by the eighth round called him Apou as soon as she met him. From that time, the boy no longer treated her as his sister and presumed the girl belonged to a different clan. Since then, the marriage between boys and girls of same clans are prohibited among the Zeliangrong people. Thus, they were united and became first husband and wife on earth. As time passed, the couple was blessed with four sons, namely Nguiba, Sagee, Aneiu-wa and Chatiu and settled at Makhel, Senapati District. So, Makhel is considered as the original home of the Zeliangrong. The other Naga tribes like Mao, Poumei, Angami, Lotha, Maram, Tangkhul, Sema, Chakeshang etc. refer to Makhel as their original homeland and from this place they dispersed themselves to different directions. They erected megaliths at Makhel in memory of their having dispersed from there to various directions such as to the frontier of western Manipur, Eastern Naga Hills and Barak valley. Even now the erected megaliths remain intact. At the time of dispersal they took oath that they would unite again in future and planted the tree called Chutebu. A genna is observed if a branch of this sacred tree is broken and it is also a taboo to cut the branches of the tree. According to T. C Hodson, "At Makhel is to be seen a stone now erect which marks the

place from which the common ancestors (of the Nagas) emerged from the earth, Makhel is regarded as the centre from where the migration took place.”

From Makhel the ancestors of the Zeliangrongs went westward and took a temporary shelter at Ramting Kabin, old squeezed land. Then, they went south ward and settled in a place called Chawang Phungning or Gwang Phungning, where the concept of Chawang or Gwang meaning king or chief was developed in a rudimentary form. There are many references to the prosperity of Chawang Phungning in many ritual hymns. From this place, some of the migrants took towards the Northeast and arrived at Makuilongdi. Chawang Phungning is identified with the present village of Oklong in North Manipur. The ancestors of Zeliangrong ultimately came to occupy Makuilongdi meaning round big mountain. Nothing is known about Makuilongdi before the Zeliangrong migration. Many Zeliangrong lineages traced their origin from Chawang Phungning which was considered the main village of the cluster of villages, commonly known as Makuilongdi.

As the migrating people came in groups, they must have established separate settlements. Chawang Phungning was the main settlement and the settlers of this village built up Makuilongdi. There was cluster of villages or settlements under the jurisdiction of Makuilongdi that was adjacent to Chawang Phungning. The land, forest and water available at the new site and the rounded great mountain provided enough sustenance to the people. The ancestors of Zeliangrong lived in Makuilongdi for many generations. The village became prosperous with enough land for shifting cultivation, which produced surplus food grains. From a small village it had become a cluster of small hamlets and settlements, which were established for organizing shifting cultivation, as they were quite distant from the original village. In fact, the Zeliangrong people built up a settled life based on shifting cultivation. The territorial extension of Makuilongdi was ubiquitously. At Makuilongdi, a polity was developed under a chief. Religious beliefs and social customs were developed and flourished. Religious ceremonies and festivals were celebrated. Clans and lineages also grew up. It is said that the number of houses in

Makuilongdi reached as many as 7777 and people enjoyed a long peaceful and attained the zenith of their socio-cultural life. Several migration teams were sent out to establish new villages in different directions. Makuilongdi became more or less the Jerusalem of the ancestors of the Zeliangrongs because; it is from there that they began to expose themselves to others.

The theory of migration of the Zeliangrong people is also supported by their mythological and legendary accounts. According to the legend, Nguiba the chief of the village at Makuilongdi had married twice as his wife was thought to be incapable of bearing a son. His second wife gave birth to a male child called Namgang. After a few years, however, the first wife also gave birth to a son named Kading. The second wife gave birth to another son called Rembang. Nguiba had three sons and two wives. When Nguiba became old, he could not decide to whom he had to hand over his Chieftainship. So there was cropped up crisis in the family on the issue of succession. The issue was solved by their youngest uncle, Chatiu who lived somewhere in Northern Koubru range. Their uncle was very clever to deal with the matter and according to his judgment; Kading was given the right to inherit the position of his father. Succession by the youngest son was laid down at Makuilongdi. Thus, the question of succession was solved but this had created disunity among the members of the ruling clan. Being disappointed at the judgment of his uncle and father, Namgang along with his band of followers left Makuilongdi and went to Barak valley and settled at Hereira village, the first village of Zeme. The people who stayed back with Kadi at Makuilongdi came to be known as Liangmai. Rembang and his followers who moved southwards to a barren land were called Rongmei. The ancestors of Rongmei moved to the South and settled at the western hills, present Tamenglong District of Manipur. Moreover, a large section of Rongmei settled in the valley of Manipur. Local legend says, the sudden migration of the people from Makuilongdi occurred after a divine warning for violating the law of nature and regular social life of the village. They devoted to the performance of thirty Tarangki, ceremonial house rituals and celebrations in a single year without any break forgetting their lunar

calendar of the agricultural cycle and indulging in enjoyment and merry making. Suddenly cicada insects flew into the village and in their shrill voice announced to the people that the lunar year had come to an end. The people were shocked and horrified and made quick exodus out of Makuilongdi towards different directions.

There are various factors for the migration of the Zeliangrong people to different places from Makuilongdi. The main causes were over population, economic (non-availability of cultivable lands) and internal differences among the ruling clan. There could not have been a sudden break; but gradual migration of groups from Makuilongdi.

According to the legend, the Zeme were considered to be the descendants of Namgang, the eldest son of Nguiba, the Liangmai the descendants of the second son, Kading and Rongmei, the descendents of Rembang. From Hereira village, Namgang moved to Nroikike and then to Nui or Yangkhulen along with his followers. It is believed that the name Zeme was derived from their settlement at the hill range, which was the frontier of the Zeliangrong habitat, frontier as Ze or Nzie. From this the people were known as Zeme or Nzieme. The Zeme migrated to the Barail range, and did extend their settlement up to the border of Meghalaya and to the West of the Barak and to the hill ranges overlooking the Cachar Valley. By the end of the 13th century, the first wave of migration and the occupation of their habitat were completed.

The Liangmai remained at the original village, Makuilongdi under the leadership of Kading. The population of the village became smaller, and they came to be known as the Liangmai meaning Northerners; (Liang means North and Mai means people). The Liangmai did migrate to the hills overlooking the Manipur Valley to the Northwest. They built villages to the West of the Barak River, the Western most villages being Namtiram to the South, then they came to Kuilong. According to Jamie Saul, the Liangmai further were driven from

their homes in the North East by the Maram and their original home was at a place called Nohemi near the source of the Barak river in the present Mao area.

The Rongmei was the most adventurous and scattered group among the Zeliangrong. Rongmei means the people of the fallow lands and of the southern region. They moved towards the south and settled down for many generations at the village called Kajinglong. According to Gangmumei Kamei, “Kajinglong was well known for the conflict between men and spirits. Many legends grew up among the Rongmei about the contest between men and the spirits who disturbed the men. Men ultimately fought out and confiscated the clothes (Ra-Phei) and flower (Ra-Mun) and subjugated them.” From the Kajinglong village, the Rongmei people moved out to different directions and they founded villages to the South of the Irang River. Thus, villages like Rienglong, Changdai, Kaikao, Nungnang, Ganglon Namthan, Khoupum, Montha etc. were founded and they became quite popular and prosperous. Formerly, the Rongmei people occupied sites to the south of their present homeland, Tamenglong, down as far as the Changphai or Champhai region of present Mizoram where they lived with Lushai as neighbours and where remains of ruined villages known as Mirongmun are still found, Mirong or Milong being the Lushai word for the Rongmei. It is said that the legendry folk hero, Gairemnang travelled as far as Tidim in Myanmar where he founded a village called Duidimlong. Even today some of the Rongmei live in the Mizo capital of Aizwal.

After observing the above facts, it may come to the conclusion that the Zeliangrong people along with other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman family from their original home land South West China or North West China migrated to North East through various routes in batches and at different periods. It is probable that they entered into Manipur through Burma. In Manipur, they first settled at Makhel and then, migrated to different directions. Now, the Zeliangrong people are found settling in three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. The total population of Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei in India was 34,110, 34,232 and 61,197 respectively according to the 2001 Census of India.

Linguistic affiliation:

Marrison in his Classification of the Naga Languages of North-East India (1967), puts Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei (referred to as Nruanghmei) in his Type C-2' group with Rengma, Maram, Khoirao and Puiron. He observes that these languages are characterized by the extensive use of prenasalised consonants. In vocabulary these languages show many affinities with Angami and the other languages of C-1, but cognate words in the two groups are highly contrasted at the phonological level.

Benedict, in his Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus (1972), classified Empeo (Zeme), Kabui (Rongmei) and Kwoireng (Liangmai) under Kuki-Naga within Tibeto-Burman. (see Figure 1).

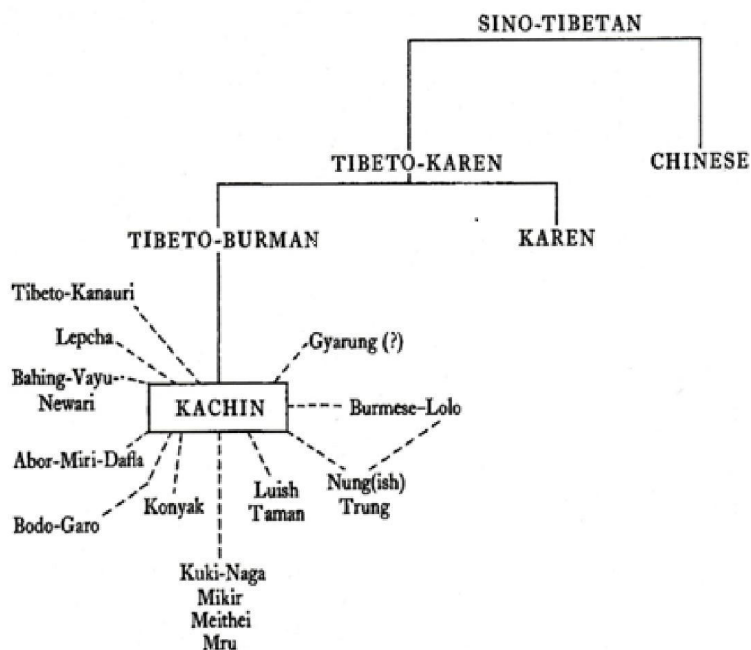


Figure 1: Sino-Tibetan Groups, from Benedict (1972: 6)

Another classification is proposed by Bradley (1997), who group Zeliangrong – consisting of Mzieme, Zeme, Liangmai, Puiron and Nruanghmei with Rengma and Maram, but he places them within the ‘Southern Naga’ subgroup of a larger Kuki-Chin-Naga grouping. (see figure 2)



Figure 2: Genetic Classification of Kuki-Chin-Naga languages according to Bradley (1997)

Finally, Burling (2003), in his classification, places Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei - referred to as (Nruanghmei) in Zeme group, which consists of Puiron, Khoirao and Maram. (see figure 3)

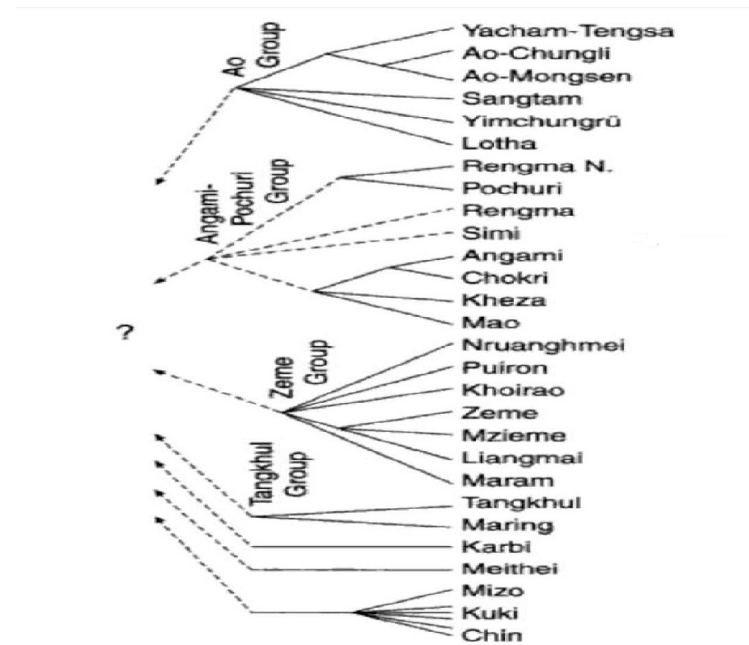


Figure 3: Genetic classification according to Burling (2003)

1.3. Religion:

The Zeliangrong people have a long history, a rich cultural heritage and a well developed religion. Prof. G. Kamei in his *The History of Zeliangrong Nagas* says that the Zeliangrong religion is a historically evolved indigenous religion. The religion has no founder, but through the ages, the law givers, diviners and prophets made revelation of God's wishes and advice to men and society. The prophets like Amang and Tenglaam, aided by others teachers laid the foundation of the Zeliangrong religion. In the twentieth century, religious reformers like Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu started a reformed cult based on the revelations of God. Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak are the names of two Zeliangrong religions. According to Gangmumei Kamei, Zeliangrong religion is

essentially characterized by polytheism with an element of Henotheism and thus “worship of one Supreme God out of many gods” is practiced. The God worshipped by Zeliangrong people, whether Heraka or Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak is called “Ting Kao Ragwang/Tingwang (the Universal God or the King of the gods of the Universe and Heaven)” Three groups of deities were worshipped by Zeliangrong people: the Universal God and the gods of the lower realm, the deities presiding over the villages and the family’s ancestors (Kamei, 2004). They also had belief in the land of the dead where the soul would reach, and therefore elaborate rituals are performed after the death of a person at the funeral service and also during the festival, Gan-Ngai. Observing genna was common among the Zeliangrong people. Genna, according to Assam Census Report, Vol., I by A.W. Davis was described as anything simply forbidden or prohibited. It was “prohibitions, permanent and temporary, periodic and occasional, which form so important a part of the tribal law” (Hodson, 1911, p. 164). Gangmumei Kamei presented a picture of the religious life of the Zeliangrong people. According to him, “Religion became a mere performance of sacrifices and propitiation of spirits and observance of gennas ranging from the birth of a child, a piglet, puppy, or hatching of chicken, a kite and crow sitting over the roof, a dog climbing the low roofs, burning of house, earthquake, a still born child, death of women who died at delivery, death by drowning, hanging etc.” (2004, p. 148).

Using ‘primitive’ in the sense of ‘very old’, Heraka is termed as the ‘primitive Zeliangrong’ religion (Zeliangrong Heraka Association, 2011, p. 1). Apart from Heraka, another group of Zeliangrong people practices different belief system known as Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak or popularly called as TRC. Like Heraka, TRC is also not free from criticisms of the Zeliangrong Christians. Sanctity of religion is sometime challenged. It is claimed by section of Zeliangrong Christians that the Zeliangrong people who are claiming to be worshipping Tingkao Ragwang are confused.

They are worshipping Jesus Christ, they claimed. It is stated that the Zeliangrong people are not willing to use the name Jesus for their God they worship. TRC followers practice community worship on Sundays and sing hymns using hymnal books. These practices have been termed by Zeliangrong Christians as emulation of Christian practices. Some Christians even consider TRC to be a brainchild of Professor Gangmumei Kamei and thus nothing to do with God. The name Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak was coined as a result of Zeliangrong religious conference held on 14th -15th April, 1994 at Imphal in Manipur (Kamei, 2006a). The name was christened after the name of the God they worship - Tingkao Ragwang. The conference also resulted in the formation of Zeliangrong Religious Council as an authority of the Zeliangrong religion. Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak was thus declared the Zeliangrong religion. Apart from casting away “all taboo in the unnatural death. They declared every full moon day and every Sunday as prayer day” (Kamei, 2006a, p. 77). Some followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak do not subscribe to the nomenclature ‘Tingkao Ragwang’ as it means God of Heaven. They question if He is not the God of the world where human beings dwell. According to them, God should not be confined only to kingdom of heaven. His supremacy and existence must go beyond heaven in belief and in words of His worshippers. As Heraka fenced out smaller gods and worship Tingwang, the Supreme God and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak is essentially polytheism and “Pantheism is a feature of Zeliangrong theology” (Kamei, 2006a, p. 66), we may see it as the basic difference between Heraka and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. There is still another group called Champa group within Zeliangrong belief system. Like Heraka, Champa believes in monotheism (Kamei, 2006a). This group is not very popular like the Heraka and TRC. The religious life of the Zeliangrong people is organized under the influence of the village council known as Pai. Pai is represented by elders and priests.

Today it is difficult to provide exact number of Christians amongst the Zeliangrong. However, writing on the Chapter ‘Tribes of Manipur: A Brief History’, K.S. Thokchom claimed that the population of Christians among Zeliangrong is 85% (2011).

1.4. Economy:

The Zeliangrong people are agriculturalists and “shifting cultivators. The staple crops were rice, cotton, ginger, chilly, pumpkins, turmeric etc. They can manufacture cloth, cotton ginning, dying of yarns, spinning and weaving for domestic use. They also produced basketry made of cane and bamboo. They know some black smithy and carpentry for local use, like manufacture of hoe, dao, spear etc. Other means of livelihood were rearing of livestock, pig, cow and mithun mostly for domestic use. Fishing and hunting were an important means of livelihood.

1.6. Script:

Like other tribal languages of North East India, Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei people do not have their own script to write their language. However, they used Roman script for writing their language with some modifications.

1.7. Bilingualism/Multilingualism:

There is widespread bilingualism and multilingualism in most of the Zeliangrong villages. Most of the middle and old age group of people can speak or understand all the three Zeliangrong languages i.e. Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. Manipuri being the lingua franca of Manipur, most of the Zeliangrong speakers in Manipur are bilingual in their native languages (Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei) and Manipuri (Meiteilon). In Nagaland, Zeliangrong speakers are bilingual in their respective languages and Nagamese. Zeme native speakers are bilingual in Zeme and Hindi (a variety of Hindi locally known as Haflong Hindi) at North Cachar Hills of

Assam whereas the Rongmeis of Cachar are bilingual in Rongmei and Bengali. It is to be noted that multilingual speakers are also found among Zeliangrong speakers that is, in addition to their mother tongue, they tend to use Hindi, English and sometimes Manipuri or Bengali according to the situation or the person concerned. However, it is not the case that every native Zeliangrong freely spoke all the languages mentioned above.

1.8. Data and Methodology:

The data for the present study was collected in several visits to the Zeliangrong inhabiting areas of Tamenglong District of Manipur, mainly from Tousem village for Zeme, Namtiram village for Liangmai and Nrianglong village for Rongmei. The data for the present study is based on the primary source. However, secondary materials like books, dictionaries, journals, articles etc. are also used. The primary method of data collection was direct elicitation and group discussion. The speech data were collected and recorded from the native speakers for closer observation.