

Economy of Rongmei Naga Tribe Of Manipur

Chamgailiu Gonmei

Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India
Corresponding Author: Chamgailiu Gonmei

ABSTRACT: Economy is one of the major sub-system of any social system. Economy is the organization of production and distribution and consumption of goods and services within a socio cultural system. It refers to the ways people make their livelihood. The ancient economy of this tribal is governed by its geography and its natural resources endowment. They lived a very simple rural life, isolated from the larger world. In the olden times this tribesmen, isolated from modern civilization and advance technology, depended their livelihood directly on their lands. Agriculture is the mainstay of their economy and they largely depend on their forest resources. Their simple life demands not more than their basic necessities and they are able to maintain themselves with whatever is produced from their village. Their entire economic operations are based on the direct production of the land. Over time the interaction which developed between this tribal and the larger world outside their secluded system gradually introduced changes in their economy. Modernisation and cultural contact with the larger society have brought about economic changes in this tribal community. The wave of modernisation is seen to be breaking down the traditional mode of subsistent economy resulting to a new mode of modern commercial agricultural economy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rongmei is one indigenous Naga tribe of Manipur. They are mainly settled in Tamenglong district and also disseminated in the valley of Imphal and Loktak Project Areas as well. They lived in villages and their social and community life is found in villages. There was no tribe organisation during the early days and village was the biggest unit of organization as J.P.Mills writes 'The whole tribe has never been united under one head.. As with all Nagas the real political unit of the tribe is the village'. This tribesman identifies himself with his village rather than the tribe he belong. Every village is the autonomous political, social, economic and cultural unit with a defined territorial boundary. Every Rongmei village is independent of each other. They lived in a natural environment and for which they chose the site of the village wisely taking into certain considerations: fertility of soil for the cultivation, availability of water, suitable landscape for settlement and favourable movement of the wind. Every village have their own territory with boundary demarcation which separates them from one village to another. Mountain ranges, rivers and big rocks were identified to demarcate their village boundaries. This village community have lived for a very long time secluded from the larger mainland. They lived themselves so independent of others and lived a very self sufficient life, making their livelihood through traditional agricultural operations. They grow food crops and the produce is used for domestic consumption and their agricultural output is hardly sufficient to sustain the village household throughout the year. Besides agricultural produces their economy depends greatly on the natural resources of the land mainly from forest recourses. This article deals with the economic pattern of the traditional Rongmei village community and the changes taking place over times. The information is primarily gathered through personal interview with some elders of Rongmei villages as well as referring to some published books.

II. TRADITIONAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Land is the basis of their livelihood and there exists an Integral relationship between the people and their land. It is their foundation of life as it is the basis of their economic and cultural life. Their entire economic operations are based on the direct production of the land. In the olden times this tribesmen, isolated from modern civilization and advance technology, depended their livelihood directly on their lands. Land profoundly became the pivot of this tribal economy. Therefore they make used of their land in a responsible ways and their traditional system of management ensures the wellbeing and productivity of their land. We can see in all the villages that proper land used pattern is strictly organised. Village land therefore is divided into various sections of areas with certain prescribed rules: *Kailuang* (the settlement area); *Rambou* (reserve forest); *Lauram* (cultivation area) and *Ngouh* (unreserved forest). Every family or household settles together in the compact areas of *kailuang*. Every citizen of the village adheres to the norms of the village and their community sense is

very strong among them. A family may choose an area of land to settle within the *kailuang* area of the village where no one had claim ownership over the land and the ownership is claimed only with the permission of the *pei*(village council) which is the authority body of the village. The family may also request the village council to allot the land of their choice. Every family of the village is given a land to settle and they own the plot of land as long as they remain to be the citizen of the village. Thus no family is found without a land. Encircling the *kailuang* or beyond the *kailuangis* the *rambou* which is the protected forest zone of the village. No individuals own this forest land privately but it is the land of the community. Whilst preserving the tress the forest becomes one of the important life supporting base of the village that the villagers depend very much on forest produces for their economic needs. Forest endowed with ranges of natural resources sustained a good deal to the village economy. They collected varieties of fruits, nuts, leaves, roots and tubers, honey, mushrooms etc. which supplements their agricultural crop cultivation to meet their subsistent needs. They also collected dry woods for home fire which is used for cooking. The importance of forest for their economic survival is irrefutable. The villagers depended on the forest produces throughout the year for the forest continuously provides them with different kinds of food items according to seasons. Nature became closest to the tribal world and forest played an important role in the survival of this tribal community. Next to *rambou* is the *lauram*. It is the cultivating areas of the village. The economic activities were mostly organized in a cooperative and communal comportment. Economic activities were carried out collectively as a group. Shifting cultivation is their principle method of cultivation and it is carried out within the *lauram* area of the village. It is a form of agriculture where the field of cultivation continues to change every year. They will abandon the cultivated field for some years allowing it to restore its fertility naturally and they looked for a new field every year. Therefore the villagers continue to move from one plot to another which is locally termed as *baengliang*. This shifting of cultivation is not simply a random process but is carried out with a proper system. The village elders headed by the village priest called *Tingkuh* will decide the area for cultivation. They will see the omen locally called *daansaanhmei* and choose the area of land wherever the omen favours. Therefore the field of cultivation takes turn year by year that rotates within the *lauram* of the village. Every villager will follow according to the supervision of the village elders and cultivate together in the selected portion of land. When the area is chosen they will cut down the trees and keep it dry amonth or two so that they can burn them down and clean the field where the burnt ash will compose the fertility of the soil. This system of cultivation is also known as slash-and-burn agriculture and they grow for their subsistence purpose only. Though shifting cultivation may be considered as one primitive method and slated for its limited production as well as its forest destruction consequences, it has various environmentally sound creditable aspects as it allows the soil renewal through its natural vegetation without using fertilizers. Shifting cultivation maintain the fertility of the soil in its natural process. This tribal group gave great importance to protect and preserve their lands as their livelihood depends on what their land provides. Further away from *lauram* is *ngouh* which is the unreserved forest of the village. This forest stretches till the boundary of the village. The forest is communally owned and every village citizen shared equal rights over the forest and also shared the same responsibility to protect and preserve it. This tribal group have been living in the forest ecology and their entire existence revolves around the forest. Besides crop cultivation they obtained their various requirements from their forest such as fruits, honey, herbs, bamboo shoots, root and tubers and various medicinal leaves etc. They also collected wood for building their houses as well as firewood for cooking. They also obtained cane and bamboo from the forest for crafting various baskets. Their economic life is so woven around their forest and as they depended greatly upon the forest they ensured its protection from degrading by their local ways of conservation. Their system of land use is tied to their economic culture.

Agriculture is the backbone of their economy. Their economic life depends largely on their agricultural produce as well as on their forest resources. Family is the unit of production and they are directly engaged in the economic process of production and consumption. Every family cultivates for their own consumption and no family is found without a land. Understanding their land holding relations will give better insights of their agricultural operational relations. They have three levels of land holdings: *Namvpouc*, *Ramvpouc* and *laupouc*. *Namvpouc* is the nominal owner of the village, who is also the first man to establish the village. *Ramvpouc* is the owner of certain land in the village. When a new village is set up *namvpouc*, the founder of the village, may come along with his friends called *kaduang*, generally from exogamous clan group or he may invite some men to settle together with him in the village. Therefore, the founder did not keep the land for himself but distribute the village lands to his fellowmen and thus give rise to a number of land owners called *dramvpouc* in the village. In a simple word *dramvpouc* means owner of land. *Namvpouc* is also *aramvpouc* as long as he owns land in the village. Then the third level is the *laupouc*, who is the owner of the cultivating field. *Ramvpouc* owned a vast area of land and the village citizens will cultivate on his land. The village citizens become the *laupouc* by clearing some portion of the land of *ramvpouc* making their own cultivating fields. Every family in the village owned land in one way or the other besides the community land such as *kailuang*(settlement area) and *rambou*(reserve forest grove), and each of their land holding system is bounded by the custom and tradition of the village. The mentioned three owners of the village land have their respective

privileges as well as responsibilities towards each other. No party mentioned above has absolute control over their land that they were bounded by the laws of the land.

The relation between *ramvpouc* and *laupouc* is very crucial in their agricultural activities. *Ramvpouc* may own a large area of land, however the law of the land did not allow him to keep the land for himself but he should provide his land for the village citizen to cultivate. Here individual land owners may exist but in the actual tradition there is no absolute private owner of any village land. Any citizen of the village, with the permission of the *ramvpouc*, will clear the forested land making it ready to cultivate and he ultimately becomes the *laupouc* (owner of the field). Therefore in the land of *ramvpouc* there are many cultivating fields owned by several *laupouc*. As the owner of the land *ramvpouc* did not completely control the land but the rights of the field owners was also duly recognised that the *ramvpouc* was not empowered to dispose the several field owners who are within his land. The hard labour of the *laupouc* in preparing the field, which is a sedulous and travail work to cut down big trees from the virgin forest only with their local simple tools of sword and axe, is accredited by recognizing his rights over his field. So long as the *laupouc* live in the village and cultivate the plot, its occupancy or operational right over that plot remains undisturbed. On the other hand, the *laupouc* also acknowledge the ownership of *ramvpouc* by giving *rampuan* in the form of a basket full of paddy when they bring their harvest. While *ramvpouc* holds the ownership right, the individual families who are the *laupouc* enjoys the operational right. Similarly, in all the lands of different *ramvpouc* of the village several families have their cultivating field. Therefore as the cultivation shift from one land to another year by year the *ramvpouc* also continues to change and the cultivating families will give their *rampuan* to the respective *ramvpouc* of the land. A family may not have their cultivating field in every land of different *ramvpouc*. Thus in certain year when the village select the land for cultivation where a family does not have their own cultivating field, they will make settlement with some families who have a big field to share out their field and in return he will have to give *launge* to the *laupouc* (field owner) as well as *rampuan* to the *ramvpouc*. But unlike *rampuan* there is no fix amount for the *launge* but it is decided between the *laupouc* and the share cultivator. This land holding system developed out of their economic culture where agriculture was their main economic activity. Although the village land is not without an individual owner it can also logically be describe as communally own. The owner of the land did not have absolute control over their land but they are bounded by the village laws that every villager makes use of the land for the welfare of the village. Besides cultivation areas those who owned land in the village *ngouh* area became the nominal owner of the land and the villagers were free to collect whatever they need for themselves.

Although agriculture is their main source of livelihood, they are the simple cultivator that in the absence of scientific and technological knowledge of agricultural operation they produce only to fulfil their consumption needs. Their only concern is to produce such things that are necessary for their daily needs. This tribal community is an undifferentiated, homogeneous community of primary producers. Rice is the main staple food for them. They also grow crops like maize, yam, chilli and various other vegetables. Cottons were also essentially cultivated as they produced their own wool and wove for their clothing. They lived a very simple life and it was only the basic necessities of life that they needed. The village lived a self sufficient life that they produced themselves to meet their subsistent needs. They did not have much idea of surplus food produce but were very contented with their limited amount of crops cultivated each year. Almost every family produce for their own consumption and they grow various types of vegetables in their own garden. Their simple life demands not more than their basic necessities and they are able to maintain themselves with whatever is produced from the village. Within this simplest subsistent economy a delightful culture exists that the villagers shared whatever they produced with one another which enabled them to meet their interdependent needs. They hardly carry out any exchange of economic goods outside their groups. Only few items such as salt, iron tools etc. which is not available within the community were depended from outside and it was carried out through barter system. They are the self sustaining community basically unconnected with the larger world. Their elementary life had very little to do with the outside world, all of their essential needs were met in the village. Family as the basic unit of village economy directly engaged all the members of the family together in the agricultural labour. There is relatively no division of labour and specialization. The simple division of labour is seen only in certain works like spinning of wool, weaving and kitchen activities were meant for women whereas basket making, building houses, hunting and fishing were all assigned for men.

The motive of profit making is not present among this people rather they work cooperatively in group and worked hard throughout the seasons just to make enough for their existence. For those families who have harvested plentiful will not keep for themselves but carry out feast and feed their village community. There is a series of feasts, each one costlier than the preceding one: *Maliangmei*, *Banruhdunghmei* and *Taraengkaisumei*. All these feasts are socially significant events that every feast entitles the host to social distinction and increases progressively his prestige in the community. This series of feasts takes years and even a lifetime to complete the series. Many have left without completing the series. The person who hosted these feasts were highly honoured, not only in his lifetime but continues the legacy to his generations. Hosting feast by a wealthy person is also an

act of generosity which provides an opportunity for the village people a time of merry making and a feast with abundant foods. It was also a joyful moment of recreation for the villagers after toiling for days in agricultural works.

Besides crop growing hunting wild animals and fishing were also widely carried out where it was part of their tradition and form one of their vital economic activities. They relied for the most part on wild animals and birds for their meat consumption. However they are not without any regulation for hunting and fishing. They have very much taken responsible to take care of the nature on which their livelihood dependsto a large extent. They have developed their own special way to protect the wild animals from annihilation. They may be illiterate with no formal education but they have wisdom and are more careful and sensible to protect and preserve their ecosystem. Though hunting and fishing are their important economic activity, they did not carry out indiscriminately rather they carry out within some regulations set by the village *pei*, who are also the elders of the village. They put restriction over hunting and fishing during the breeding seasons of the animals and fish as well. They ensured the continual survival of wild populations and balance their ecosystem.

They also domesticate animals like pig, dog, chicken, cow and also mithun for those who can afford. Pig, dog and chicken are the most commonly domesticated animals. They domesticate these animals for their meat consumption as well as for various ceremonial purposes. For this tribal community the wealth of a man is reckoned in term of the amount of crops cultivated and number of animals he owned.

III. CHANGING ECONOMIC PATTERN

Over time the interactions which developed between the tribal and the larger world outside their secluded system gradually introduced changes in their economy. Modernisation and cultural contact with the larger society have brought about various changes in this tribal community. A modern transport and communication provides economic benefits with better accessibility to markets and also facilitates social opportunities by enabling more interaction with the wider society. The introduction of the market system encouraged them the idea of surplus production and profit making. The subsistence economy of this tribesman which was primarily based on their limited agricultural production and forest produces has now developed to producing not only for their consumption but also for the market supply. Carrying of goods to long distance markets becomes easier with the development of road system.

Shifting agriculture continued undisturbed for a very long time and is still continue to persist in many Rongmei villages. However it is now seen to be declining that many villages have begun to adopt the wet cultivation. Besides cultivation for daily consumption, village level small scale farming is now witness to developed in almost every village. Some of the villagers have begun to engage themselves in various farming like orange farm, banana farm, teak farm, pineapple farm etc. Piggery and poultry though in a very small scale are also found commonly carried out among the villagers. All these initiatives taken by the villagers pointed towards their changes in their outlook to surplus production and profit making and their economic development as well. With all these new developments the pattern of land utilization began to change and thus the sense of community land is slowly breaking away and private land ownership overtook the former system. Their subsistence economy is now gradually shifting to a commercialized economy. The undifferentiated, homogeneous aspect of their village living is breaking down. The market economy brought about the differentiated tribal economic structure. However, the cultivation area of the village remained unaffected and the customary pattern of land holding and utilization system continues its operation.

Monetization is one of the major changes taking place. It switched over from traditional barter system of exchange to money based transactions. The introduction of money as a medium of exchange brought about significant transformation among this tribal. The wealth which was measured in terms of their possession of paddy and cattle is now appraised in terms of money. Selling and purchase of goods becomes much more convenient as they exchange their commodities for money which is reduced to a standard value of all goods and commodities. They have now depended much on various factories manufactured goods. Therefore today plantation of cotton for making their clothes is not seen anymore but they prefer to buy readymade clothes from outside. They did not produce their spun wool for weaving anymore rather they are now depending on the threads available in the markets which are produced in the factory.

Education is one very important element in bringing the change in the society. Education is the key to any development and provides the most important channels of transition from traditional to modern sectors. Education opened up many opportunities for this tribal and many members of the tribes have taken up white collar jobs through the advancement of education. Most of their children are no longer seen in the paddy field but they are now sent to various schools for formal education. Many of the villagers have now migrated to towns and cities in pursuance of formal education as well as in search of jobs. Today education has made a great impact among the Rongmei community particularly in their economic development. Education greatly shaped their outlook and brought about great changes in their total ways of life.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Rongmei economy was a very simple economy, essentially an agrarian society with very strong sense of community existing cooperatively among themselves. They are hard working people engaged in various economic activities throughout the seasons of the year and lived a very independent and self sufficient economy. They survived themselves independently in isolation from the outside world, building a strong cooperative community among themselves. Staying unconnected to the modern developed world, nature becomes closest to them and their livelihood linked inextricably with their land resources. The entire life process of this tribesman was centred and built upon their land and forest and they have lived in harmony with nature. But in the wake of modernization this simple tribesmen is no exception from its influences. They are now accommodating modern influences which brought about great change in their economic life. Traditional occupation and their dependence on their earlier source of livelihood like natural forest are found gradually decreasing. Their traditional mode of subsistence economy is now in transition to a new modern mode of commercial economy.

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