

BREWING TRADITIONS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE KABUI (RONGMEI) TRIBE IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the indigenous brewing traditions of rice wine and beer among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe in Manipur. Autoethnography method was used in this study to understand the process of brewing and the cultural meanings associated with it from an insider's perspective. Snowball sampling method was used to identify the traditional brewers who were actively engaged in the brewing of rice wine and beer from the valley districts of Manipur. A sample of fifteen brewers were identified for the study who had long years of brewing experiences and methods involved in the production. Semi-structured interview was used for the data collection in Kabui (Rongmei) dialect which was later transcribed into English. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing the transcribed data. The outcome of the study alludes that the preparation, process and methods of brewing rice wine and beer were different. Brewing rice wine involves the complex fermentation and distillation process whereas the production of rice beer primarily involves the fermentation process. The main ingredients in brewing were the rice, yeast and water which could be seen mostly with all the brewing. Use of banana and passion fruit as an alternative ingredient could also be seen with some brewers. Almost all the brewers were women (mostly married) whose income were dependent on brewing the rice wine and beer. Cultural connections with the brewing traditions were reflected in the traditional Kabui (Rongmei) folk songs, dances, festivals and rituals.

Keyword: - Brewing, rice wine, beer, fermentation, distillation, cultural connections

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Brewing of traditional rice wine and beer were known to the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe from time immemorial. In the local Kabui (Rongmei) dialect, brewing of rice wine is commonly known as *jou-songmei* whereas brewing of rice beer is known as *joungao-shoumei* and *joudui-kasemmei*. Rice wine is traditionally known as *jouju* whereas rice beer is known as *joungao* and *joudui* or *timpui*. In Manipuri, rice wine is commonly known as *yu* whereas rice beer is known as *yu-ngou* and *atingba*. Kamei (2015) observed that brewing rice wine and beer is reflective of the emergence of human intellect and wisdom as fermentation and distillation requires special knowledge. The local farmers also invest lot of their time and energy in nurturing and harvesting good quality of rice and pure water as the quality of wine and beer depends on the quality of rice and purity of water used in the brewing process. It was believed that *joungao* (rice beer) was the origin of the all the alcohols known to the Kabui (Rongmei) and it was also considered as the king of all the alcoholic drinks known to the community. In traditional rituals, *joungao* is preferred over all the other wine and beers due to its primacy and its sacredness related to spirituality. The present study focuses on the brewing traditions among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe in the state of Manipur (India). The Kabui tribe is recognized as a tribe under (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 (Part III - Rules and Orders under the Constitution of India). It is also known as the Rongmei tribe which is recognized by the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order

(Amendment) Act, 2011. The Kabui (Rongmei) tribe are mostly inhabited in the three North-Eastern states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES:

Brewing traditions are common among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe but only few scholarly research works are available in the public domain. It is important that such traditions are documented, research and publish so that more dissemination of cultural knowledge could be enriched. The rationale of this study is to explore, understand and reflect the continuing traditions and methods of brewing among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe and the different cultural connections associated with brewing.

The main objectives of the study are highlighted below:

1. To explore the various methods of brewing rice wine (*jouju*) and rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*),
2. To understand the cultural connections associated with the brewing traditions, and
3. To study the role of women and men in brewing.

Based on the objectives, following research questions were formulated:

- a) What are the different brewing methods and techniques used by the brewers?
- b) What are the different cultural and religious connections associated with brewing?
- c) How are women and men engaged in the brewing process?

METHODOLOGY:

Autoethnography method was used in this study to understand the process of brewing and the cultural meanings associated with it from an insider's perspective. Snowball sampling method was used to identify the traditional brewers who are actively engaged in the brewing of rice wine and beer from the valley districts of Manipur. A sample of 15 (fifteen) brewers were identified for the study who had long years of brewing experiences and methods involved in the production. Semi-structured interview was used for the data collection in Kabui (Rongmei) dialect which was later transcribed into English. Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (TA) was used as an analytical tool to identify the codes, subthemes and themes for this study. Since many local words do not have the exact English translations, nearest English meaning/translations were used for the purpose of analysis and interpretations. The paper is written and reflected through an autoethnographic lens where the researcher is also from the same community.

ANALYSIS:

The analysis of the study was based on the participants response which was collected through semi-structured interview and later transcribed into English. A total of 15 (fifteen) interviews were conducted and analysis was done based on Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (TA). Themes, sub-themes and codes were also extracted from the transcribed data.

Coming to the various methods of brewing rice wine (*jouju*) and rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*), a participant responded -

"We have been using the age-old method where three pots of different sizes are assembled vertically over the traditional earthen oven (maimhang) for preparing the rice wine (jouju). The fermented rice is kept at the lowest bottom and it is the biggest among the three pots. The middle pot is hollow and a wine collection outlet is fixed at the middle of the pot. The topmost pot is filled with pure water. Though there are other methods, this method works the best and most brewers prefer to use this method. For the preparation of rice beer (joungao), pounded rice with dried rice sprout are mixed in a large vessel along with hot water. It is constantly steered till the mixture becomes completely cold. It is then closed with a lid and kept fermented for 3-4 days to turn it into rice beer. For the preparation of rice beer (joudui), the fermented rice is soaked in a tight vessel filled with water for about 3-4 days depending upon the season and later bamboo pipe is inserted into the fermented soaked rice to extract the beer".

From the response, it alludes that most brewers use the age-old method of vertical decking and distillation process for extracting rice wine (*jouju*) whereas for the rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*), it is primarily fermentation and soaking which are commonly employed by the brewers. Some brewers could also be seen using powdered or solid

sugar (*gur*) to enhance the fermentation process. Overall, it took about a week from procuring the raw materials to the final extraction of rice wine and beer.

Based on the cultural connections associated with the brewing traditions, a participant reflected -

“Rice wine and beer are sacred to the Kabui (Rongmei) community. Right from the birth to the death, rice wine and beer are used in these rituals. Offering of holy wine to the Almighty and different deities have been practicing from time immemorial by the indigenous followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC). Even in festivals such as Gaan-Ngai, Rih-Ngai, Gudui-Ngai, Pokpha-Ngai etc, we use rice wine and beer for offerings and human consumptions. In many traditional folk songs of Lamlonlu and Majahlu, singers take the name and power of holy wine and beer. For preparing traditional medicines, rice wine (jouju) are the main ingredients. It is also used for treating wounds and cuts. Hence, brewing of rice wine and beer are central to the culture and religion of the Kabui (Rongmei) community. We need to continue the tradition of brewing to preserve our culture, religion and identity”.

The response from the participant alludes that there is a close relationship between the use of rice wine and beer with the culture, religion, rituals and identity of the Kabui (Rongmei) community. The brewing traditions and use of rice wine and beer were also reflected in many festivals, folk songs, dances etc. which binds the cultural fabrics of the community together. Due to such sacred relationships, it reflected that the brewing traditions should continue to preserve and promote the culture, religion and identity of the Kabui (Rongmei).

On the role of women and men in brewing, a woman brewer narrates –

“Women are the ones who are mostly engaged in the traditional brewing of jouju, jounhao and joudui. Though one can't remember how women started brewing, the practice is that women prepare all the necessary ingredients that are required for brewing ... from procuring the raw materials such as rice, yeast, water, brewing pots, vessels, firewood's etc. It is believed that women have the special skills and knowledge particularly for brewing and weaving. Though few men are also involved in the brewing, their role is indirect and they don't directly brew rice wine and beer. Men's role is mostly outside of the breweries such as helping the women to procure the raw materials. So, men's role is limited in brewing as compared to women. Women are fully engaged in the breweries from sunrise to sunset. Sometimes, it is unfortunate to see that many of us are working in smoke filled rooms with the heat of fire and smell of alcohol all days and in all the seasons. We may need to change the working environment for the safety of women as well as family members”.

The response clearly indicates that it was primarily the women who were engaged in the preparation and brewing of traditional rice wine and beer. Based on the brewer's response, women are gifted with special skills and knowledge for the quality brewing. Women were fully engaged from the preparation to the final extraction of rice wine and beer as compared to men whose role is limited and indirect. The response also highlighted the need to improve the working environment of the breweries for the safety of women and their family members.

DISCUSSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

The brewing traditions of rice wine (*jouju*) and beer (*jounhao* and *joudui*) are integral part of the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe. Majority of the brewers were women who are fully engaged in the breweries in all the seasons. The methods and techniques (vertical decking) used in the brewing process were common to most of the brewers which were interviewed in this study. Though some brewers also knew about the other alternative methods of brewing, they still follow the age-old method of vertical decking and fermentation process for most of their brewing processes. Many of the brewers were married though some unmarried women were also involved in the brewing process. Those unmarried women took up brewing due to lack of other formal job opportunities and poor socio-economic conditions of the family. Despite of the challenges faced by them, their determination to preserve the indigenous brewing traditions could be clearly seen among the women brewers.

The reflection of *jouju*, *jounhao* and *joudui* in traditional rituals, festivals, folk songs, dances etc. clearly indicates that brewing is closely related to the culture, religion and identity of the Kabui (Rongmei) community. Though there are many positive aspects of brewing, negative aspects of brewing were also brought up during the study. Negative aspects include the fear among the brewers that their children might be ill-treated by the society as there is also a

taboo associated with brewing. There were also cases where young boys, girls and adults got addicted to alcoholism that has negatively affected the brewers as well as the brewing traditions of the community by outsiders. Concerns were also there regarding the unhealthy working environment where brewers had to engage for long hours in the smoke-filled breweries without any proper ventilation and lighting.

The present study was primarily located only in the valley districts of Manipur where maximum of the Kabui (Rongmei) population are settled. It needs to be expanded to the hill districts as well as in the states of Assam and Nagaland where the Kabui (Rongmei) population are also settled. The sample of participants were only 15 (fifteen) for the study and more samples may be included in future studies.

CONCLUSIONS:

Brewing of traditional rice wine (*jouju*) and rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*) are widely practiced among the Kabui (Rongmei) tribe. Women were primarily engaged in the brewing process though men indirectly help them in procuring the basic raw materials. The method used in the production of rice wine (*jouju*) was the age-old technique of vertical decking system whereas for the rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*), it is primarily fermentation and soaking. Cultural aspects of the brewing and use of traditional rice wine (*jouju*) and rice beer (*joungao* and *joudui*) were reflected in festivals such as *Gaan-Ngai*, *Rih-Ngai*, *Gudui-Ngai*, *Pokpha-Ngai* etc. as well as in traditional rituals such as birth and death rituals. It could also be seen reflected in many traditional folk songs of *Lamlonlu* and *Majahlu*.

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