



# Shrinking Communal Living Space: An Ethnographic Study of *Rehangki* of *Zeme* in North-East India

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**Abstract:** The youth dormitory is a community living space for the socialisation of adolescent boys and girls in socio-cultural, religious, political, art and craft aspects in many tribal societies. It is variously known as *Bukumatala* in the Trobriand Islands, *Kwod* among the tribes of Torres Strait Islands, and *Calpule* in Guatemala at the global level. In India, it is known as *Ghotul* among the Gonds, *Dhunkuria* among the Oraons, *Dhangarbasa* among the Bhuyans, *Cavati* among the Muthuvar, *Moshup* among the Adis and *Morung* among the Nagas. With the acculturation process, the advancement of Christianity and intensifying globalisation, this institutional mechanism has become endangered among the majority of the tribal communities. Currently, youth dormitories are maintained symbolically to continue the age-old tradition. Under these circumstances, the present study aims to study the current status of the traditional dormitory system among the *Zeme* of the Senapati district of Manipur state in the northeastern part of India. Auto-ethnography was resorted to collect empirical data, and anthropological methods such as observation, questionnaire, structured interviews and focus group discussion were used. For the present study, descriptive research design is thought of as appropriate to analyse the research findings from an ethnographic point of view. It attempts to uncover the traditional method of arranging youth dormitory, initiation rites, membership, and its role in *Zeme* society. The study concluded that modernity has caused the endangerment of community living space in the present context.

Keywords: *Zeme*, *Rehangki*, Youth Dormitory, Socialisation, Informal Education, Rites and Rituals

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## Introduction

The youth dormitory system has been in existence among the tribes since time immemorial. In anthropological literature, dormitories refer to the communal living space shared by unmarried boys and girls. In some communities, it is combined; in others, it is separate. For example, Muria *Gotul* is shared by both sexes, whereas Konyak Naga boys live in *Morung*, and girls share *Yo* (Majumdar & Madan, 1956: 130-131). Clark while studying the Assamese society used the word *Morung* for identifying youth dormitories. Originally *Morung* means a hollow wooden drum generally played in front of the community house during auspicious occasions. Thus, *Morung* has become a generic term for youth dormitory among Naga tribes. However, every tribe has its distinct vernacular terms for youth dormitories, such as *Arichu* among the Ao Naga, *Champo* among the Lotha, *Longshim* among the Tangkhul, *Som* among the Thadou, *Khruchozü* among the Mao, *Apuki* among the Sumi, *Moshup* among the Adi and *Rehangki/Hangseiki* among the Zeme. Though specific terms exist for youth dormitories, *Morung* has become a generic term for the boys' dormitory in the northeastern states of India.

Some of the earliest accounts of the *Morung* were given by John Butler (1847) in an ethnographic account of Assam (Furer-Haimendorf, 1950:119). Apart from the northeast, the dormitory systems are also found in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Jharkhand, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Roy, 2006: 19-30). They are mainly *Ghotul* among the Gonds, *Dhumkuria* among the Oraons, *Dhangarbasa* among the Bhuyans and *Cavati* among the Muthuvar. While reviewing the different forms of dormitory systems, Verrier Elwin divided them into two types. The first belonged to the military barrack type for the segregation of boys from girls, and the other one allowed both sexes to share the living space and even encouraged them to have a pre-marital relationship (Elwin, 1947: 269). The dormitories are arranged on the basis of lineage, clan, or phratry among some tribes, while others are based on geography. In his study, Bordoloi (1983) stated that the *Morung* among the Zeme of Assam are based on the village as a whole and not based on clans.

Further, a child's membership is claimed by the *Morung* by presenting an egg to the child's parents right after its birth. In his study, Bordoloi also found that pre-marital relations in the Zeme society are neither a crime nor a taboo. Nevertheless, this may not be true in the case of other tribes. Sajit Kumar (2005) pointed out that the role of the dormitory is to acquire social experience for unmarried males in the Muthuvar community who reside in the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary of the Idukki district in Kerala. Das (1989) and

Naskar (1991) argued that youth dormitories are meant to avoid the primal space of parents.

In comparison, Gell (1992) and Nivedita (2002) questioned these results and established that these institutions carry an assortment of functions and spaces to preserve the cultural traditions of ethnic groups. Thus, the dormitory of every tribe has its procedures, rules and regulations about membership, division of labour, and informal learning and training. It varies from place to place and relies on the local geographical and socio-cultural conditions, including time and space. Hence, it is impossible to generalise that all tribal societies perform the sole function of imparting training to their adolescents.

However, these traditional institutions are endangered nowadays as they are under tremendous pressure with the contact of non-tribal communities, modernisation, urbanisation, and westernisation. Zhimo (2011) highlighted that the *Apuki* of the Sumi tribe in Nagaland encountered a drastic change due to the influence of Christianity, modernisation, and globalisation. The youth of Sumi are encountering contradictory values of tradition and market-oriented globalisation. They are trying to catch hold of their roots while availing market opportunities. The cultural institutions continue, though in modified form, despite the changes. Zhimo attributes that Christian missionary schools are responsible for changing the *Apuki* among Sumi. Likewise, studies made by Chongloi (2012) also established that the colonial rule of the British and the introduction of Christianity along with the Western education system are the main factors in bringing change and endangerment in the *Som* community of Thadou. Under these circumstances, *Morung* of *Zeme* in Manipur is also witnessing change and losing its visibility because of modernisation, education, and religious conversions. Hence, the present study attempted to document the existing state of *Morung* among the *Zeme*, known as *Rehaingki* and the changes that are taking place in it with the contact of outsiders. The present study uses a structural functional method to understand how the youth dormitories are integral in maintaining social cohesion and stability. The shared beliefs and practices relating to this social institution reinforce the cooperation in the village.

## Methodology

The present study is about the micro understanding of the institutional framework of *Zeme* in their ancestral village *Ze-Mnui*. The primary data was collected through intensive fieldwork in 2022-23 along with analysis of personnel observations as a member of the society. The study was based on

auto-ethnography wherein subjective experiences of the phenomenon were documented along with participant observation. To accomplish the task of data collection, the researcher immersed in a cultural context and incorporated many personal insights into youth dormitory into a broader cultural and social framework of anthropology. Further, the researcher is critical of certain concepts and processes established by earlier scholars through cross-checking with elderly people and people from other villages. While conducting the field, ethical considerations were adhered to strictly and challenged the misconceptions about youth dormitories. Further traditional anthropological methods like participant observation, key informant interviews, unstructured interviews, and genealogy methods were used. Secondary data were collected from the books and journals to supplement the argument for primary data.

The *Zeme* is a sub-tribe of the Naga who are officially recognised as a separate tribe by the government of India through the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act 2011. The *Zeme* population are scattered in the three northeastern states of India, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. According to the oral history, *Ze-Mnui* is believed to be one of the first and oldest *Zeme* villages established after the mass exodus of the *Zeliangrong*<sup>3</sup> people from a place called *Makuilongdi* (Kamei, 2004). Hence, the *Zeme* of *Ze-Mnui* (also known as *Yangkhullen*) village in the Senapati district of Manipur was selected for the present study. *Ze-Mnui* is located at 25.52N° 93.96E° and an elevation of 1,652 metres/5419.95 feet above the mean sea level. The village is 75 km from the district headquarters and 134.8 km from the state capital, i.e., Imphal. According to the 2011 census, the total population of *Zeme* in *Ze-Mnui* village is 4,166. Of which, 1908 are females, and 2258 are males. *Zeme* is a sub-group of *Zeliangrong* Naga belonging to Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Burman group and linguistically to the Naga-Bodo sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 1909). In the study village, *Ze-Mnui* youth dormitories are established based on clan and lineage, and strict separation is maintained between unmarried boys and girls.

### **Arrangement of Rehangki**

The *Zeme* are an exogamous community evident from establishing a new village where atleast two phratries are required. The *Ze-Mnui* village is formed with *Hauna* and *Hoina* phratries, establishing youth dormitories of respective clans. Every *Zeme* village has two or more *Morungs*, known as *Rehangki*<sup>4</sup>, in local parlance for unmarried boys, which are constructed for the welfare of the village. When a particular phratry or clan can no longer accommodate the

growing population, a new *Rehangki* is branched out for a new clan or sub-clan.

The *Rehangki* is a huge community house where the bachelor boys of the village sleep at night. It stands out from the other *Zeme* personal houses in the village. It has three compartments; the first compartment is the *porch* area. From the open *porch*, two doors lead to the big hall where the boys sleep, along with a big *Mimang* (fireplace) in the middle to keep them warm during the night. In this compartment, they also put up the skulls of the hunted animals as trophies of the clan. The third and last compartment is where the owner or caretaker lives with the family.

The traditional *Rehangki* are built with *Tangai* (thatch grass), *N-gah* (hardwood), *Hebei/Tenpei* (bamboo) and *Herui* (cane). However, today, the *Rehangki* of the study village is built with machine-cut wood, galvanised iron sheets and iron nails replacing thatch grass, cane and bamboo. The *Rehangki Zoi* (Bed), known as *Liangdi*, is made with a single-crafted wooden piece which measures 20 to 30 feet in length and 5 to 6 feet in breadth with a thickness of 3 to 4 inches. *Rehangki* also has another bed called *Liangsing*, shorter than the first one, which measures 7 to 10 feet in length and 5 to 6 feet in breadth and thickness as 3 to 4 inches. It must be noted that after the entrance, the first space in the *Liangdi* is reserved for its clan members, and no outsiders are permitted to sleep in the earmarked place. Another bed type is also found in the *Rehangki*, which *Zeme* calls *Lianghun*. This bed is almost the same size as the *Liangdi*, but the extra feature is that it has wheels. The *Mimang* (fireplace) is surrounded by four long benches for the sitting of the members. A portion of the open space in front of the *Rehangki* is made with a raised stone-henge platform where long wooden benches are placed for the members to sunbathe and hold discussions with the old folks and the members of the *Rehangki*.

The *Zeme* girls' dormitories are called *Releiki*<sup>5</sup>. They are situated in the house of anyone with a larger space to accommodate the girls, preferably in the home of an aged couple who also acts as the caretaker for the girls. However, they are never set up just above the *Rehangki*, as the people believe that it is a disgrace to their male counterparts. They maintain at least one or two houses in between male and female dormitories in case it is located nearby. Another factor affecting the setting of the girls' dormitory is that if any death occurs in the family of the caretaker or the owner, the dormitory would be abandoned by the girls till the completion of *Rekak* (the last funeral rites and the start of a new year). This is so because the deceased's family members go through a mourning stage. During this period, or till the completion of the last rites, the deceased's family members abstain from merry-making, singing and dancing.



Nevertheless, no restrictions were observed on attending to their daily chores. In the meantime, the girls would find another dormitory for themselves. However, they are free to return to the old dormitory if they wish, only after the celebration of the *Zeme* New Year. The girls' dormitories are smaller than the *Rehangki*. Thus, a single girl's dormitory accommodates 5 to 10 girls owing to which the number of girls' dormitories sometimes can be more than that of the boys' *Morung*. The dormitories are often shared with girls of the same age group, but these dormitories are all based on clan. The unique feature of the *Zeme* is that a widow's dormitory also exists in their society.

The boys are free to visit the girls' dormitory and have fun by sharing jokes and exchanging songs of dedication. However, extra or pre-marital affairs are strictly prohibited as it is against the customs of the people. Girls are never allowed to touch the *Rehangki Zoi* (sleeping space) though they are not debarred from entering the *Rehangki*. This prohibition against females touching *Rehangki Zoi* is attributed to the belief that women are prone to pollution during their monthly cycle and contact *Rehangki Zoi* with such pollution. Even the birth of any domesticated animal in the house is avoided by the male members as it is believed to bring bad luck and incompetency to the individual. When *Zeme* go out for any activity such as sports, competitions or war, the married man abstains from cohabiting with their wives and hence sleeps in the *Rehangki*. This belief in pollution is reflected even in the *Rehangki Zoi* and thus protected from the touch of females, as this is where men sleep to keep themselves fit for any job. Though the practice of war and head-hunting is just history to the people at present, *Zeme* continue to keep the *Rehangki zoi* away from girls and observe a cleansing ceremony in case they touch it.

When any female touches the *Rehangki zoi*, the clan undergoes a cleansing ritual known as *Herai-Kielie* by sacrificing a rooster. The price or cost of the cleansing ritual is levied on the individual who committed the mistake. It should be noted here that the rooster selected for the sacrifice should be flawless, i.e., a rooster with no extra growth on the feet, shank and claws, no white spots on its feather or beak, the comb and wattle should be clean with no marks on it. While sacrificing the rooster, *Zeme* observe the omen by detecting the movement of the feet of the rooster. If the rightfoot makes the last move, it is considered a good omen. However, if the left foot makes the last move, it is considered a bad sign. If so, another rooster is then killed to obtain the desired result. Thus, the sacrificed rooster is cooked and shared among all the members of that particular *Rehangki*. The following day, the clan members hunt in front of the village and come back with the hunted game in the evening. In case a

hunt is unavailable in the above-mentioned location, they go hunting from the backside of the village the next day. In the evening, all the clan members feast on the head of the hunted animal. The remaining parts of the game would be shared with the villagers.

### Hierarchical Divisions of *Rehangki*

The *Zeme*, like other Naga tribes, is a patriarchal society and follows a patriarchal type of authority. Their lineage is traced through the male line. Females are allowed to marry the earmarked affinal clans based on the strict rules of exogamy. The phratry consists of at least two consanguine clans, which are divided into several sub-clans or lineages. Though all male members of the family possess inheritance rights, it is the eldest son who takes the lion's share. However, no inheritance rights were given to the female members of the family. As a custom, the elderly member of the clan acts as the caretaker of the *Rehangki*, who in turn also performs the role of the guardian and priest. The diagram shows how phratry, clan and lineage form an organisational hierarchy and the number of *Rehangki* under each clan.

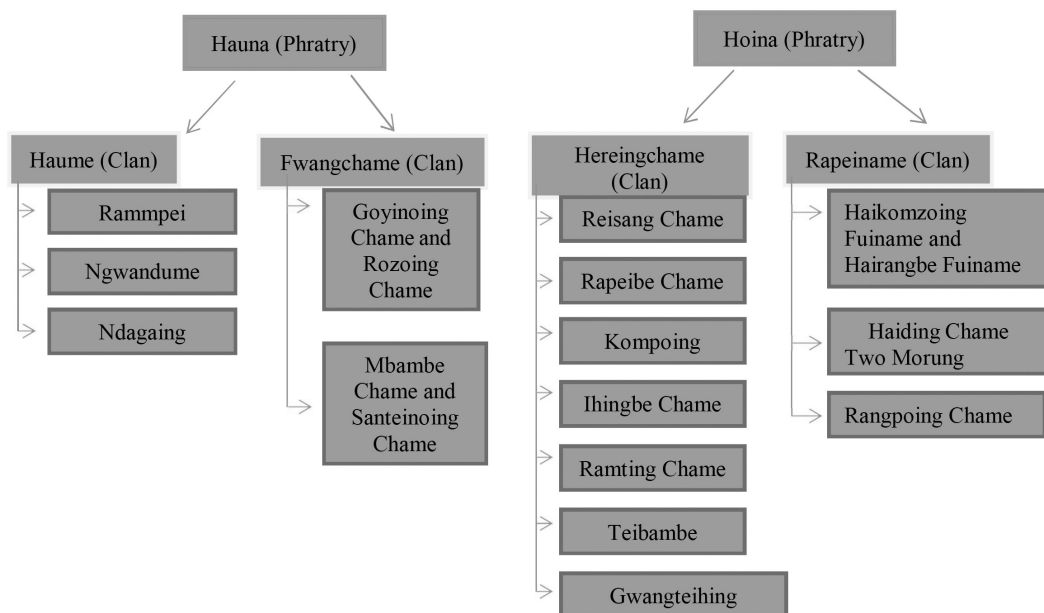


Chart 1: Clan Hierarchy and *Rehangki* in *Ze-Mnuui*.

From the above chart, it is clear that *Hauna* Phratry consists of two clans, namely *Haume* and *Fwangchame*, with separate *Rehangki*. Similarly, *Hoina*

phratry consists of *Hereingchame* and *Rapeiname* clans with separate *Rehangki*. The phratry mentioned in the diagram is a unilineal descent group composed of two supposedly lineally related clans. A man cannot intermarry or take a wife from his consanguine phratry.

Another essential feature of the clan is embedded in the naming of a child. When a child is born, the first preference of the name will be drawn from the ancestor's name of one's clan. A new name is given only when no old name is available at the time of the naming ceremony. Furthermore, no clan takes the name of the other clan. For example, when a woman of the 'X' clan is married to the 'Y' clan, her name after her death will be taken back by the X clan as it belongs to them. Thus, *Zeme* keeps the names of their ancestors alive as a part of the tradition.

### Construction of *Rehangki* and Pacification Ritual

The construction of the *Rehangki* begins with the selection of a tree for the collection of wood which is often done through the observation of dreams by the concerned owner. When a particular tree is selected for construction, the owner spells chants in front of the tree and returns home to see whether the spirits are in favour or not through dreams. If his dream is good and pleasant, it is taken as a virtuous sign. If his dream is unpleasant, it is considered a disagreement between the spirits. Then another tree is selected alternatively. *N-gah* (*Phoebe Hainesiana*) tree is regarded as the most suitable wood for making pillars/posts of *Rehangki*. The day before cutting down the earmarked tree, the owner would abstain from eating and only drink *Zao* (rice beer). The next day, the tree would be cut down and curved into pillars. While carrying the carved posts to the village, the owner walks first with a *Kie* (hatchet) in hand and will not turn back to see those carrying the pillar.

At the outskirts of the village, they would make a stop and consume *Zao* and eat *Kenetam* (sticky rice) along with *Hechu* (mashed perilla seeds) prepared for them by the women folks of the village. Here the sticky rice and *Zao* do not come from the owner's house but it is a contribution from the villagers. Before they consume *Zao*, the owner pours some *Zao* into a *Helui* (cup made of plantain leaves) and then spills some *Zao* on both ends of the pillars to appease the spirits. After this symbolic rite, a feast is arranged for the team entering the forest. Before the erection of the post, the owner puts a small twig of *Tenvui* in each of the dugouts for the pillars. Then the pillar of the house would be erected by filling the earth/putting in mud. The owner observes fasting by avoiding the consumption of solid foods known as *Zao-Nha*. Here the owner of



the house consumes only liquids, i.e., *Zao*, for a minimum period of three days to ten days or even more, adhering to the beliefs that the longer they fast, the more durable the pillars will be.

Once the construction of the *Rehangki* is completed, it is followed by the observance of the pacification ritual. Here the owner of the *Rehangki* carries *Hegwengoi* (shield), *Hengei* (spear), *Kie* (hatchet), and an unblemished rooster in his hand. He is followed by his wife taking the pots and rice needed for the night in her *Kerang* (cane basket). As they enter the house, the owner pronounces the words *Tak Hei*, *Helu Hing*, and *Ringketie Ki* (house of wealth and prosperity) along with a war howling. The owner then sacrifices the rooster and observes the movement of its feet. This observation of the omen is known as *Peda-Pie* in the *Zeme* dialect. In the evening, the owner provides a feast by killing a pig for all the villagers who had helped him in the construction. In this ritual, a dog is sacrificed, and its blood is smeared on the pillars of the newly constructed house. Another rooster known as the *Kilet-Ru* (house inauguration rooster) is also offered to the members as a part of the feast. After dinner, the owner would again pack some sticky rice and the left-out meat in *Tenkwa-Guun* (wild leaf). *Gaipie Kwak* (offering of meat) is a gratitude given to those who have contributed *Tanggai* (thatch grass) for roofing the *Rehangki*.

The next day after the inauguration of the *Rehangki*, the clan will observe a special *Genna*<sup>6</sup> known as *Heroi-Kielie*. On this day, the clan again picks up a flawless rooster and a sacrifice is made by anyone who has a proper wife and at the same time who is supposed to be a *Resei-Reset Kemakme* (person who has not taken the oath of curse in any form of dispute). The movement of the rooster's feet is observed as an omen. A separate hearth is prepared for the male members, and on this day, a new fire is lit through *Milei Toi* (traditional way of making fire), that is, by rubbing cane rope against a piece of one split-end wood along with some shredded wood.

After preparing the rooster, they take up a cleansing rite of the *Zao* called *Zao-Choiket*. Here a young girl who has not attained puberty and is free from pollution takes some rice in her hand, and then she puts some of the rice into the gourd where the *Zao* is stored and the rest into the ground. The idea behind this *Zao* cleansing ritual is that anyone, including those menstruating women, could have prepared the *Zao*. Thus, the young girl is employed to give the final touch to the preparation of the *Zao*. After this rite, they pour the *Zao* into *Helui* and distribute it to the gathering. When everyone has got it, they spill out some *Zao* into the ground twice in unison by saying *Ko* as a form of giving it to the

Gods, and then they will, in the same manner, drink it in unison. This process of pouring out *Zao* into the ground is known as *Zao- Nret*.

After drinking *Zao*, they take out a small amount of rice and meat and place it on *Hegunn* (plantain leaves) that are placed perpendicularly for the Gods. However, it must be noted that not every plantain leaf can be used for this purpose. When we tear a plantain leaf for its utilisation, there is always a left side and a right side. The left side piece of the plantain leaf is used for the Gods and the right side of the leaf for *Zeme*. After the rice and meat are taken out for the Gods, they would also take their share of rice and meat in *Resa* (traditional plate weaved out of bamboo), and no other ordinary leaves are used for the purpose. When everyone has taken their share, they take out a small amount of rice and meat and place it on the ground at once in unison by saying *Ko* (come) as an offering to the Gods by each individual. Once everyone is done with the offerings, they would again say the same word *Ko* as they take the first rice ball and again when they take the first sip of the gravy, after which they are free to eat at their own will. After they all have taken their food, all the able members go out hunting to put up the skull of the animal as a sacrifice for the house known as *Ki-Nro*. It is worth mentioning here that in this ritual, a single rooster is shared by all members of the *Rehangki*. When it becomes difficult for a particular *Rehangki* to share a single rooster among its members, the *Rehangki* is branched out within the clan to a sub-clan.

### **Role of *Rehangki* among *Zeme***

According to the *Zeme*, one of the foremost reasons behind the establishment of *Rehangki* is to safeguard the village from external invasions. During the days of yore, almost every village waged wars against the neighbouring villages, and took pride in head-hunting. Raiding a village, especially during the night, was very common during those days. To protect the village from such raiders, all the abled men slept in the *Rehangki* to fight back in unison if such a raid occurred. In those days, there were two types of *Rehangki*. First, the one where the men slept and simultaneously, enemies' heads were buried, known as *Roiha-Ki*, and the second one, where warheads were not buried, also known as *Rehangki*. The difference between these two can be observed in the architecture of the *Rehangki*, whereby one could see busts placed in the *Roiha-Ki* but not in the ordinary *Rehangki*. However, over time, the head-hunting way of life disappeared with stringent British laws. With this, the usage of the term *Roiha-Ki* seems to have faded. Nevertheless, the tradition of unmarried boys sleeping together in a dormitory was kept alive, and today they are called *Rehangki*.

The members of the *Rehangki* allocate duties, roles and responsibilities based on age- grades. Generally, in *Rehangki*, two age groups are identified wherein the younger ones are trained to take responsibility for cleaning and arranging fire in the evening. They run errands on festivals and help to distribute the hunted meat to the villagers. On the other hand, the elder ones do their work during the day, and at night they would come to the *Rehangki* to sleep. During this time, they teach the younger ones the skills of hunting, folk songs, dance, myths and legends, land boundaries, day-to-day activities, and prohibitions. It makes the younger ones aware of their society's cultural values and systems.

They are also responsible for maintaining the welfare of the *Rehangki* and the village. Every year at the festival of *Milei-Ngyi*, there is a day called *Hengyi-Chingfo* to carry firewood for the *Rehangki* to be used during the year. On this day, every able member contributes their labour in bringing the firewood to the *Rehangki*. In the afternoon, the younger members collect meat and vegetables from the clan members to cook for their lunch.

### **Dialectical Role of *Rehangki*: Competition and Reciprocity**

The *Zeme* are known for their competitive skill and take pride in accomplishing what others find difficult to do. They tend to compete with one another in sports, cultural activities, and community work. During the *Milei Ngyi* (annual festival), the boys compete in *Hezo* (long jump) and *Hefo* (wrestling), and the clan as a whole takes pride in winning their members. The first *Hefo* competition takes place on *Roodi*, i.e., the fourth day of the annual festival known as *Milie Ngyi*. Those who do not win on this day can again make a challenge if they wish to, and the clan members encourage them to take up the challenge on *Bensak*, the seventh day of the festival.

When a new house or *Rehangki* is built, a lot of manual labour is required to bring the raw materials from the forest to the construction site. Thus, to show the clan's unity and strength, they compete in carrying the wooden posts from the forest to the place of work. It is a matter of pride that who initiates the task first. When the house is built for a particular clan in the phratry, the other two clans in the other phratry will compete against each other to make the first move in lifting the pillar from the ground and making their way homeward.

The *Zeme* are dependent on agricultural produce, and since each family holds a large agricultural land, they find it challenging to complete the task on time without community cooperation, especially during the plantation. If the plantation is delayed, there can be a failure of crops. Thus, they engage in extra

labour by calling upon their clan members to maintain this balance. Here the work is exchanged on a mutual basis, not paid in cash. On certain occasions, the girls of a particular dormitory are called upon for paid wages, whereby the funds earned from such works are not utilised for personnel consumption but spent in organising the collective festivals.

Another exciting way of exchanging labour among the *Zeme* is that whenever a new individual house or *Rehangki* is built, it becomes a social obligation for everyone to help by contributing their labour and raw materials needed for the construction. Generally, *Zeme* donate rice, vegetables, and meat for the feast during the construction to feed the cooperating members. Likewise, when there is any new birth in the village or when anyone is seriously ill and cannot work, it becomes a social obligation for the villagers to contribute food to them and help them with their agricultural work without expecting any monetary benefit from them.

Every year during the *Milei Ngyi*, the girls of a particular clan who got married to some other clan within the village or to some other neighbouring village would bring their best-brewed *Zao* as presents for the clan members who are considered as consanguine and in return, their brothers in the *Rehangki* also give out a small portion of meat when members of their clan kill any animal. Another interesting fact is that the exchange of *Zao* in lieu of firewood exists. Here the unmarried girls of a particular clan would present their best-brewed *Zao* to their brothers in the *Rehangki*. The girls are given firewood from the *Rehangki* to return to their respective dormitories. Thus, consanguine bonds are maintained among the brothers and sisters of a clan before and after marriage.

### ***Nngorai*: Initiation of Members into the *Rehangki***

During the annual festival called *Milei Ngyi*, the individuals who are to be admitted into the *Rehangki* go through an initiation ritual known as *Nngorai*. For this ritual, everyone in the family should be clean from all kinds of pollution, and if anyone in the family, i.e., mother or sisters, are in menstruation, the *Nngorai* cannot occur. Thus, it is postponed to the next *Milei Ngyi*.

On the eve of the initiation ritual, fresh *Zao* is prepared. In the morning, a separate hearth would be prepared for the male members of the family who have to undergo the ceremony along with the child to be initiated. They are prohibited from cooking and eating from the same hearth as the female members. The father of the child would light the fire by *Milei Toi* (the traditional way of making fire), and an earmarked flawless *rooster* is sacrificed while at the

same time *Peda Pie* (observing the omen).

Before they consume the ritual meat, the father and son would pour some *Zao* into *Helui* (plantain leaf cups). Having poured the *Zao* into *Helui*, they would take their cups and do the ritual known as *Zao-Nret* by spilling a few drops of *Zao* into the ground. This process is repeated twice as an offering to the Gods and then they consume the *Zao* and the *rooster*.

After their morning meal, male members of the entire village go to the long jump site that had been prepared. On this occasion, the children under the initiation ritual would jump first before anyone else did. If the child is too young to make the jump alone, the father will help him to do it, which would be repeated twice. This indicates his first manly activity, and from that moment onward, the child will be counted as a member of the *Rehangki*. The long jump and wrestling competitions follow among the different clans. On this day, no females are allowed to enter the long jump site and the wrestling area. However, they are allowed to watch the sports from a distance.

Once the child completes his initiation ritual, he becomes an official clan member of *Rehangki* or the sub-clan *Rehangki*. However, the transfer of membership is done with the concern of the elders. Here if a particular clan or sub-clan *Rehangki* has fewer members, then they approach the elders of the sub-clan *Rehangki* with more members to send some of its members to their *Rehangki*. For example, if four to five brothers from the same family are members of a particular *Rehangki*, then the *Rehangki* with fewer members may ask the elders to send some of the brothers to their *Rehangki*. But it must be kept in mind that this membership transfer can only occur within the same clan or sub-clan. It is done only with the consent of the *Rehangki* elders. Thus, an individual cannot join the *Rehangki* according to his will.

### Impact of External Interventions

With the contact of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the acculturation process was intensified among *Zeme*, and consequently, their social institutions underwent a tremendous change, including the *Rehangki*. The traditional way of imparting education in the *Rehangki* is not taking place since adolescent boys and girls are going to schools for formal education. At present, 11.1% of the inmates belong to secondary level of schooling, 6.7% belong to high school, 35.6% are graduates, 42.2% are post-graduates, 2.2% are professionals, and 2.2% are doctorates. It is attributed to the existence of four public schools functioning in the area, i.e., Yangkhullen High School (1960), Mission English School (1985), St. Mary School (1987) and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Awasiya Vidyalaya



(Residential School) (Bendramai, 2012). These schools possess well-equipped playgrounds and encourage the students to participate in games such as football, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, high jump, long jump, wrestling, chess, and carom. Apart from the schools, the people are now given access to government schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), self-help groups, *Anganwadi*, *Pradhan Mantri Kisan Yojana*, Primary Health Centre, and other government-sponsored community houses are also visible in the area.

With the construction of National Highway 129A from Maram to Peren via *Ze-Mnui*, the *Zeme* is exposed to the outer world. They eventually fall prey to modernisation, globalisation, and westernisation. As a result, the traditional way of life of the people has changed to a great extent. The younger generations today are almost unintelligible of their classic art and culture. The advancement of modern technologies such as smartphones, television, and computers has made the youths addicted to vices, and nowadays, they are more divided than in earlier cooperation. The *Rehangki*, which in its golden days was the centre of all youth recreational activities, is today a deserted home to the caretaker and some handful of young children of the village. The decay of its popularity is attributed to religious conversion (68.9%), modern education (15.6%), education and conversion (11.1%), and other factors like spending time on mobile phones, watching films, orientation towards public service, etc.

The first breakthrough of Christian missionaries hit the *Ze-Mnui* village with its first Baptist conversion in 1976 and first Roman Catholic conversion in 1978. As a result, it led to the establishment of the two Churches in the village, *Ze-Baptist Church* and *St. Peter's Church*, and all the believers of each faith regularly visit the Church, including adolescent boys and girls.

At present, 88.9% of the population are converted to Christianity and only 11.1% are practicing *Paupai Renet* (traditional animistic religion) in the study area. The conversion of the people from *Paupai Renet* to Christianity greatly impacted the *Rehangki*. *Rehangki* is the centre for all rites, rituals, ceremonies, and competitions. Still, these rituals are against the religious practice of the Christians, and the Christian converts withdraw from participation in these events. As a result, the attendance of the *Rehangki* has declined. Out of the 16 (sixteen) *Rehangki* that existed, today, the number of *Rehangki* in *Ze-Mnui* has decreased to 8 (eight), out of which only a few are functional. Even the girl dormitory is only symbolically present during festivals and marriage ceremonies, where they assemble at one elderly couple's house to get the bride



ready in the traditional attire and observe customary practices, traditional dance and merry-making. On the other days, the girls' dormitory does not exist.

At present, 29 (64.4%) *Morung* in *Ze-Mnui*; 10 (22.2%) in *Bendramai*, and 5 (11.1%) in *Kenelu*, from *Jalukie* are functional or exist in the study area. Earlier, about 57.8% visited them regularly, 22.2% spent most of their time here, 17.8% visited occasionally whereas only 2.2% rarely visited the youth dormitory. But with the impact of the above-mentioned factors, now 73.3% never visit the *Morung* whereas 8.9% visit occasionally during ceremonial times, and 17.8% visit very rarely. Out of the total visitors to *Morung*, 71.1% belong to the boy's dormitory and 28.9% belong to the girl's dormitory. Though *Morung* is popular for unmarried boys and girls it is observed that only 73.3% of the members are unmarried whereas 26.7% belong to the married category. This data reveals the changing pattern of youth dormitories in tribal areas in the study.

## Conclusion

From the above data, it is evident that the *Rehangki* in a *Zeme* village forms an integral part of the village life by performing a multitude of functions in different aspects of the social, economic, political, and religious life of the people. The *Rehangki*, apart from simply being a dormitory for the village's adolescent boys and girls to sleep in, also serves as an informal school or training centre for them. Right from the moment a child is initiated into the *Rehangki*, they are trained in several ways of life by teaching them how to hunt and defend themselves from their enemy's attack, narration and recitations of folk songs and religious acts and prohibitions, roles and responsibilities. The elderly *Zeme* also narrate their myths, folk legends, folksongs, and awareness of their land boundaries. This learning process at *Rehangki* leads to the enculturation and socialisation of an individual, thereby making them aware of the cultural values, customs, and traditions of their society.

Through the clan, a man gains his inheritance rights, responsibilities, and social obligations and, thereby, his identity. The establishment of *Rehangki* maintains an individual's relationship with other members of society. By encouraging competition among the members, *Zeme* develops a sense of social unity among dormitory members, which stimulates the activities of the village as a whole, thus maintaining its economic solidarity. Thus, historically *Rehangki* played a pivotal role in the people's socio-cultural, economic, and religious realm. It is the centre for clan *Genna* and rituals, and observation of omen forms an integral part of any ritual, ceremonies, pacification, or auspicious event.

Bordoloi's study on *Zeme* stated that the dormitory system facilitated the communion of boys and girls. However, this is not true in the case of *Ze-Mnui*. It is evident from the observance of the cleansing ceremony. The initiation of the child into the *Morung* and maintaining the sanctity of the *Morung* bed from the touch of female members indicates the separation of sexes rather than sexual communion. Contact with Christianity, modernisation, westernisation and the globalisation process have had a significant impact on the youth dormitory system. Due to its significance in moulding the personality of adolescents, the *Zeme* is still carrying the legacy of *Morung* with the commitment of the elderly generations.

An excellent example can be drawn from the construction of a new *Morung* at Makuilongdi, a *Zeme* village in the Senapati district of Manipur. However, elaborate rituals are not performed in this *Morung* as the whole population of the village are Christians. Nevertheless, the existence of *Morung* in a *Zeme* village has its relevance in carrying forward its cultural ethos, which surrounds the ethnic identity of the *Zeme*.

## Notes

1. The ethnonym *Zeliangrong* is derived from the first syllable of the three legendary kindred tribes, where *Ze* denotes *Zeme*, *Liang* denotes *Liangmai*, and *Rong* denotes *Rongmei*.
2. *Rehangki* is a combination of two words *Rehang*, meaning bachelor and *Ki*, meaning house, referring to the *Morung*
3. *Releiki* combines two words *Relei*, meaning girls, and *Ki*, meaning house.
4. *Genna*: There is no suitable English word for the term. It is derived from the Angami word "*Kenna*", signifying "Forbidden", which merely has become regularly used in the Naga Hills for the various incidents of a magico-religious rite (Hutton 1921).

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### ***Key Informant Interviews***

- Mr. Peirieng Heraang (*Ze-Mnui Village Chief*)
- Mr. Peihaunoing Kompoing (*Administrator Mission English School Bendramai*)
- Mr. Lunghienzoing Hau (*Retired Head Master Yangkhullen High School*)
- Mr. Kisulungbe Hau
- Mr. Teikombe Kompoing
- Mr. Elungving Heraang
- Mr. Lungkiezoing
- Mr. Elunghangbe Paul
- Mr. Koulungsibe Teibam
- Prof. Meijinlung Kamson (*Former Union Minister of State for Home Affairs 95-96*)