

Polygamy and Christianity: Exploring their impacts on the population growth of Rongmei Tribe in Northeast India

Lunghim Rongmei ^{1,*} and Maheisin Rongmei ²

¹ Department of Geography, Manipur College, Manipur, India.

² Department of Sociology, Manipur University, Manipur, India.

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Abstract

The complicated and frequently contentious subject of polygamy in Christianity has generated a great deal of discussion among academics, theologians, and Christians. Although Christian teachings often support monogamous marriages, it is essential to consider the historical context in which many biblical stories were composed. However, the polygamous culture of Rongmei historically led to strife between traditional and Christian societies after Christianity was introduced to the area in 1914. Currently, 92.32% of the population of Rongmei are Christian, and the religion strictly forbids polygamy. As a result, the practice of polygamy is decreasing significantly, which influences family size and population growth. Therefore, this article aims to examine how Christianity changed the traditional Rongmei community and its impact on population growth. Consequently, the current study adopted an inductive approach and selected 11 conglomerate villages in Khoum Valley, utilizing the snowball sampling technique to obtain the targeted data and conduct comparative analysis to understand how Christianity has impacted the traditional Rongmei community, as well as the impact of population growth resulting from the Christian monogamy system.

Keywords: Polygamy; Snowball; Christianity; Inductive Approach; Rongmei

1. Introduction

Polygyny, the practice of one man being married to multiple wives at the same time (Emily Smith-Greenaway, Jenny Trinitapoli 2014). Historically, polygyny was commonly permitted worldwide; over 80% of the 186 preindustrial societies included in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, a representative database of coded ethnographies spanning all major world regions, permitted polygynous marriage (Murdock and White 1969). Polygamy is officially and broadly practiced in more than eight hundred societies worldwide (Omar M. Khasawneh, Abdul Hakeem Yacin Hijazi, Nassmat Hassan Salman, 2011). One of the forms of marriage that is often talked about in society is the issue of polygamy. The issue of polygamy remains interesting to discuss and will always have pros and cons in it (Novia Helda Rompis, Nur M. Kasim, Dolot Alhasni Bakung, 2020). Christians are in the context of monogamous Jewish culture (including Greek and Roman culture), and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles also lead to monogamy by referring to the creation of Adam and Eve, and marriage is the formation of a fleshly union involving only two parties. Since the arrival of European missionaries in northeast India, there has been a charged debate over people's marriage choices (Douglas J. Falen, 2008). However, Rongmei people regarded polygamy as a blessing and fortune; those who had the highest number of wives gave extreme honour and were considered to be the strongest and mightiest men. So, these are two perspectives which are conflict for centuries in the minds of Rongmei people who reside in northeast India. Over time, after a century of conflict, Christian teaching and ideology have been slowly dominating society in every aspect of life. Before Christianity, more than 50% of married men had more than one wife, and so far, married seven wives is highest number of wives found among the Rongmei Community. But the rate of polygamy has decreased with an increasing in the Christian population and has finally reduced to only 5 % of the polygamous marriages are found. So, for better understanding and

* Corresponding author: Lunghim Rongmei

accurate analysis, seven conglomerate villages of Khoupum valley are chosen for sample villages, adopting the snowball sampling technique, and intensive interviews are conducted to obtain the targeted data, especially from the churches, village courts, aged people, and polygamous families

With a total population of 1,26,500 according to the 2011 census, the Rongmei are an Indigenous Zeliangrong Naga tribe that resides in the states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland in northeastern India. They are referred to as "Kabui" by the Meiteis and other Manipur tribes. Nonetheless, the term "Rongmei" designates the geographic location of the Rongmei people's residence. Rongmei means "people of the south" or "Southerner" since the term "Rong" means "south" and "mei" means "people" (Luthonliu Gangmei and Laimayum Bishwanath Sharma, 2022). The religion, customs, and history of the Rongmei people were passed down orally through folktales, myths, folk songs, legends, and other means. They also possess a vast array of songs and traditions that are associated with marriage and love. However, when Christian missionaries arrived in northeast India in the early part of the 20th century, they brought Christian teachings and philosophy to the Indigenous Community of Rongmei through financial aid and education, particularly for the underprivileged and destitute. In the early days, those who converted to Christianity completely abandoned their traditional way of life, which started a new chapter of losing history, culture, religion, and even love and married life. So far majority of Rongmei people find it hard to differentiate between religion and culture, religious and traditional ways of life, which is the sole result of losing the rich socio-cultural religious life of the Rongmei Community. Hence, this article examines the fundamental aspects of the conceptual split between monogamous Christian marriage and Rongmei polygyny and its impact on population growth.

2. Data and Methods

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of Christianity on the Rongmei polygamy system by examining whether the Christian monogamy system affects the population growth. To obtain the data, the researchers selected a two-time interval: (1) 1971, when Indigenous Religion subjugated the region, and (2) 2021, Christianity dominated the area. Then the target groups are set into four groups by adopting the snowballing sampling technique: (1) village courts, (2) church leaders, (3) Aged people, and (4) polygamy families (both husband and wife) who witnessed the change in society before and after Christianity. After acquiring the necessary data, a comparative analysis was carried out to understand the impact, and an inductive approach was used to generalize the findings to the entire population of Rongmei people in northeast India.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Polygamy from the Perspective of Christianity and Rongmei Tradition

The Rongmei practice several Christian faiths such as Baptist, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Presbyterian. Although there are slight differences in worship and other practices, when it comes to marriage, all of them are highly restricted in polygamy. From a Christian perspective, there are two crucial principles: monogamy and no divorce of the first wife. So, those who violate these two principles, the church will take stern action against them in different ways:

- They will be expelled from the church, subjected to discipline for some time, and classified as second-class members until they divorce or separate from their second or third wife.
- They cannot hold any responsible post in the church
- Even in death, those who violated the above two principles, the church will not perform any forms of religious rites and rituals; they will be buried the same as animals.
- In case of divorce, the first wife's divorce is strictly prohibited, but the second wife's divorce or separation is encouraged by the church.

However, the Rongmei tradition and customs about marriage and divorce are opposed to the Christian monogamous system. The Rongmei community has inherited the polygamous marriage system, which has been practiced since time immemorial. Polygamy is viewed as a blessing and a symbol of power in society. As a result, more than half of the male population in traditional Rongmei society married many wives. In the Rongmei indigenous society, people with many spouses and children are awarded the highest honour.

So, these are two perspectives that are debated between the polygamy and monogamy marriage systems in Rongmei society. Christianity considers polygamy a sin comparable to adultery, and Rongmei tradition regards it as a blessing and might. Each marriage system has advantages and disadvantages; they are appropriate to different types of society. It is not the task of the church to make any absolute judgement between them (David Gitari, 1984).

3.2. Impacts of the Christian monogamy marriage system on population growth

To understand a growth differential, one needs to look at the factors of population dynamics. Three components of population change are fertility, mortality, and migration. Population growth is a simple function of birth, death, and migration rates. In case of population growth in religion, conversion plays a significant role, but once mortality reaches a low level and migration does not occur, fertility becomes the prime factor responsible for differences in population growth (P. M. Kulkarni and Manoj Alagarajan, 2005). Again, Fertility rates are determined by a complex interaction of biological, social, economic, and cultural variables. Age, health, lifestyle choices, educational opportunities, access to healthcare and contraception, and cultural norms on family size and gender roles are all important influences. The fertility and marriage system also need to be considered in studying population growth. Polygamy can have a variety of effects on fertility. Some studies imply that polygamy may cause decreased fertility rates for women owing to variables including rivalry among co-wives or the dispersion of a man's reproductive emphasis across numerous spouses. Other study suggests that polygamy does not always diminish total fertility, and that polygamous men may have more offspring than monogamous husbands. Socioeconomic position, education, and cultural preferences all influence fertility decisions in polygamous settings. According to a National Institutes of Health analysis, the total number of children produced by a polygynous household is much higher than in a monogamous household. In the case of the Rongmei people in northeast India, religious conversion from Indigenous Religion to Christianity completely changes the marriage system (polygamy to monogamy), which has a significant impact on fertility and population growth.

Table 1 Comparison of Polygamy Between Indigenous Religion and Christianity (1971)

Name of the villages	Total population	Indigenous religion population	Christian population	Married male population	Polygamy married male population of the Indigenous Religion	Polygamy married male population of Christianity	Population of the 2 nd and 3 rd wife's sibling
Gaidimjang	410	267	143	57	19	0	77
Satudai	357	357	0	46	23	0	92 26%
Thanagong	316	132	184	39	9	0	37
Khoupum	433	433	0	59	24	0	96 22%
Lubanglong	414	138	276	58	7	2	36
Nungadang/Goitang	331	156	175	42	13	0	52
Satu/Gatao	192	150	42	35	9	0	35
Luwanglong khunou/Namkaolong	452	449	3	64	23	0	92
Taolingpung	178	0	178	26	0	2	7 4%
Nungbai	137	137	0	16	5	0	20
pungshan	90	90	0	14	3	0	11
Total	3310	2309 69.75%	1001 30.24%	456	135 29.6%	4 0.8%	555 16.76%

The frequency of polygamy in 11 Khoupum Valley aggregation villages is displayed in Table 1. According to the 1971 census, 3310 people lived in the study region; 2309, 69.75% of them, practiced Indigenous Religion, while just 1001, 30.24% were Christians. Of the 456 married men in 1971, 135 (29.6%) were polygamous or had more than one wife. Satudai and Khoupum villages were not Christian at the time, but Taolingpung hamlet, which is an outcast of the original village of Luwanglong Khunou, was completely converted to Christianity from the Indigenous Religion. With 50% of the married male population in Satudai village having multiple wives, the village was founded with the highest rate of polygamy, while Taolingpung had the lowest rate, with only two individuals. This situation raises the question of why there is such a stark difference in polygamy between the two religions. The aforementioned table illustrates how Christianity impacted the Rongmei community's marriage system; the village with a larger proportion of Christians had lower rates of polygamy, which had a major effect on population growth.

The effects of religion on population growth are complex and frequently entwined with personal beliefs, societal standards, and economic considerations. Other religions could have more lenient attitudes on family planning, while others might encourage higher fertility rates. However, in many situations, social level, education, and healthcare accessibility have a greater influence on fertility and population increase than religious convictions alone.

But in the case of the Rongmei Community, religion plays a significant role in population growth and witnesses momentous differences in fertility and family size between the Indigenous religion and Christianity, which are mainly exhibited by the marriage system.

The issue of differentials in the growth of populations belonging to the major religions continues to be debated. Two basic questions are raised: first, how large are the differences in growth rates, and second, what are the causes (P. M. Kulkarni and Manoj Alagarajan, 2005). Henceforth, to understand the impact of religion on population growth in the study area, the siblings (sons and daughters) of the 2nd and 3rd wives are counted, and how much they constituted in the village population, and comparing the family size between polygamy and monogamy families. Based on the data collected from different sources, most of the Christian monogamous families are relatively smaller than the indigenous polygamous families. In the study area, the Population of the 2nd and 3rd wives' sibling were found to be 555 people, which accounts for 16.76% of the total population in 1971. But in case of pure indigenous villages of Satudai and Khoupum constituted 26% and 22% respectively, while Christian majority villages were the least among the villages under investigation, as Taolingpung witnessed only 4%, which is the only Christian village in 1971. Hence, from the above discussion, we came to understand that the main causes of disparity in fertility, family size, marriage system, and population growth are mainly determined by the influence of religions.

Table 2 Comparison of Polygamy Between Indigenous Religion and Christianity (2021)

Name of the villages	Total population	Indigenous religion	Christian population	Married male population	Polygamy married male population of the Indigenous Religion)	Polygamy married male population of the Christianity	Population of the 2 nd and 3 rd wife's sibling
Gaidimjang	1677	18	1650	262	1	4	10
Satudai	1519	20	1499	210	2	5	15
Thanagong	729	174	555	139	6	3	23
Khoupum,Taodaijang Namgaijang	884	113	731	136	6	5	34
Lubanglong	1216	16	1200	175	1	8	15
Goitang	890	00	890	187	0	3	7
Gatao	499	79	420	71	1	1	4
Namkaolong	901	26	875	134	1	4	8
taolingpung	520	00	520	81	0	1	2
Longpai	210	00	210	33	0	1	6
Punghan	110	00	110	16	0	1	5
Total	9155	446 4.8%	8600 93.9%	1308	18 1.3%	36 2.7%	129 1.4%

The research region has experienced significant changes in its marriage system, religion, and demographic makeup during the last fifty years. The study area's actual religious conversion rate, or the conversion from the native religion to Christianity, is shown in Table 2. Christianity greatly decreased the rate of polygamy and the number of second and third spouses and siblings in the community. Over the past fifty years, the population has increased threefold, but the indigenous religion occupied 69.75% and has been reduced to only 4.8% in 2021, and Christianity increased to 93.9% of the total population. Because of the domination of the Christian population and teaching, the study area witnessed a tremendous decrease in the rate of polygamy in the society. The rate of polygamy in 2021 is only 4% of the married male population, which is an insignificant amount compared to 1971, which accounted for 29.6% of the married male population. Again, the constituent of the polygamous generation also reduced to only 1.4% in 2021, which is a negligible amount compared to 1971, which was 16.7% of the total population, which means 15.3% expected population has been lost due to Christianity and its monogamous marriage system.

3.3. Behavioural Change in Polygamy Family

There is cultural variation in the categories of men and women found in polygamous marriages. Evidence from numerous studies indicates that polygyny is limited to relatively wealthy men (David W. Lawson Mhairi A. Gibson, 2018). However, the extent of socioeconomic differentiation between polygamous and monogamous men varies significantly, stemming partly from differences in livelihoods, which in turn dictate the nature of wealth inequalities (White 1988). But in the case of the Rongmei community in Khoupum Valley, polygamy is quite contradictory to the other communities. Polygamy is completely not related to the wealth and economic condition of men, and there is no distinctive force that enhanced polygamy in the region. In most cases, polygamy was the individual choice of men and women, which was only encouraged by culture and society. However, we witnessed a lot of behavioural and mental changes in the polygamy pattern and family functioning system. The polygamy families in native religion who married before 1971, most of the 2nd and 3rd wives were younger sisters or cousin sisters of the first wife. As a result, the functioning of families was headed by the first wife, and usually they can live under a single roof without much problems under their elder sister. But after the arrival of Christianity, this pattern of a younger sister or cousin becoming a second or third wife hardly happened in the study area. Out of 38 Christian polygamy families, we found only one family whose younger sister is the second wife of the first wife; 37 of the 2nd wives are not related to the first wife. As a result, they cannot live together peacefully and witness frequent quarrelled between the first and second wife/third wife and among the siblings. By the influence of Christian teaching, only the first wife is considered as a legitimate wife, and second/third wives are not recognised by the church. This right given by the church to the first wife made her a lot of arrogant and completely dominant to the second/third wife and even over her husband, which led to frequent conflict among the family members. Hence, out of 38 sample families, only two families are living together with the first and second wives in single roof, 36 families are living distant from the first wife in a separate house. Interestingly, most of the husbands are living with the second wife.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we came to understand that religion has played a significant role in the marriage system and the population growth in the Rongmei tribe in northeast India. There is a huge conversion of religion that occurred between 1971-2021, which led to momentous changes in the marriage system, family size, socioeconomic conditions, literacy, and ultimately great impact on population growth. Although Christianity has given great blessings in many aspects of the social and economic life of the Rongmei community, it has a bad impact on traditional and cultural aspects. Based on a study of the 11 villages in Khoupum valley revealed that the Christian monogamy system completely discouraged the Rongmei traditional and cultural polygamy marriage system. As a result, there is a significant decline in polygamous marriages and population growth in the valley.

Generalising from the studies of the Khoupum valley to the whole Rongmei tribe in northeast India is a much to understand the situation created by Christianity and its marriage system in population growth. The total population of Rongmei in northeast India in 1961 was only 30,388, and in 1971 it was 51,644 people, with a growth rate of 69.99 %. Whereas in 2001 the population increased to 94,758, and in 2011, which rose to 1,26500, the decadal growth rate decreased to 33.49%. Since there is no census in 2021 the exact population is not certain, but the expected population is projected from the analysis of the past decadal growth, which is expected to be more than 1,68,697. Compared to these two decadal growth rates between 1961-71 and 2001-11, we came to realise that many factors of the population growth remained almost the same in these two decades, but there was quite a difference in social and religious ways of life. Between 1961-71, the region influenced and dominated by indigenous and traditional ways of life, which encouraged polygamy and larger family sizes that exhibited a higher rate of fertility and a high growth rate. However, in between 2001-11, more than 90% of the population were Christian, who are totally against polygamy. As a result, the

growth rate contributed by the siblings of polygamous wives was reduced to only 4%, consequently, the percentage of the population growth rate also reduced drastically.

Now concerning the sample villages of Khoupum valley, especially Satudai, a non-Christian village in 1971, recorded the highest rate of polygamy and which constituted about 26% of polygamous siblings in the population. With reference to the Satudai village, if all the Rongmei tribe in northeast India follow an indigenous religion and they practice and encourage polygamy, the expected population in 2011 is supposed to be 159390, which is 32890 people higher than the actual population. Again in 2021, the expected population is about 1,68,697, which is supposed to be added by another 26% which is rounded to 212558, that is 43861 higher than the projected population. It means that because of the Christian monogamy marriage system, the Rongmei tribe has lost 43861 people in 2021. Although Christian marriage system gives a stable and peaceful family environment but on the other hand, it has retarded population growth.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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