

**RICE BEER, GENDER,
AND LIVELIHOODS:
NAGA WOMEN OF
MANIPUR WHO BREW**

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Discourses surrounding Northeast India often abound in mentions of violence, terrorism, counter-insurgency, ethnic riots, illegal immigration, and so on, and evoke images of barbarism, savagery, bloodshed, and unabated tensions. However, we Northeast Indians ourselves forget all these major events that inevitably determine and shape people's lives; the locals in such "conflict zones" actually continue to live their lives, chasing their aspirations, earning livelihoods, caring for their kith and kin, and so on.¹ Within such contexts, the lives of women in Northeast India, their work, and their agency in navigating the demands of femininity, motherhood, and their own aspirations are rendered invisible. Though women engage in many unpaid economic activities that are crucial for families and communities, these activities do not fulfil the established criteria of what constitutes work, and thus women's labour is often accorded less value in the surveys and censuses undertaken by the government. Across time and space, the ambit of "work" has undergone numerous transformations. This invisibilisation of women's labour has prompted many feminist economists, sociologists, and policymakers to redefine the concept of work to include the activities that women usually perform.

Even when women leave the household to pursue paid employment, they are not free from the normative expectations of the household and the community, and it is a matter of debate whether paid employment is something they pursue out of necessity or choice. When women work in paid jobs, their work usually involves a huge amount of emotional labour, where the ‘emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself’ (Hochschild 1979, 5). This kind of labour compels individuals, mostly women, to suppress certain “negative” emotions and to learn to express warmth and calm composure in their work. Even when women undertake paid jobs outside the family, they still have to perform their household duties and responsibilities. This is akin to a “double burden”, or as Arlie Hochschild terms it, a “second shift”. This double burden reduces women’s personal and leisure time, both of which are crucial to a fulfilling social and family life. This concerning trend is also becoming increasingly prevalent in Naga society, where due to increasing job opportunities and education, Naga women are spending more hours working. And Naga men do not want to help with household responsibilities like cooking. Though Naga mothers could earlier rely on their daughters for help in the household, they cannot rely on that as much anymore since their daughters attend school. They are also taking up activities earlier characterised as “men’s work”, like repairing and construction, further increasing their work hours (Shimray 2004). Furthermore, there remain huge social, cultural, and economic obstacles to Naga women’s full and unhindered access to paid employment.

In this paper, I primarily focus on Naga women in Manipur who brew rice beer, either as a custom and/or for their livelihood. Even within the Manipur Naga fold, most of my fieldwork and interviews were focused only on Rongmei and Poumai women in Imphal and Senapati, respectively. Through this work, I wanted to investigate the different relationships that Manipur Naga women have with rice beer and alcohol, especially with the arrival of Christianity (which influenced many prohibitionist attitudes and sentiments against

alcohol), women's groups in the state actively organising *nisha bandhs* (bans on intoxicants and drugs), rapid changes in technology and consumer demand, and normative expectations placed on women's choices and behaviour. I would also like to express my regret at the fact that I use the terms "liquor", "rice beer", and "alcohol" interchangeably. The three different brews with intoxicating power made in Manipur are quite distinct, and though I'm unable to pin down their exact scientific classifications, I hope that my primary aim of portraying the lived experiences of these women who brew and sell rice beer is fulfilled.

For this study, I have employed interviews, field observations, and even "unintended" focus group discussions. In my interviews and discussions with these women, I was accompanied either by my aunt or my parents, who helped enrich my qualitative data collection with their unique insights from either having brewed or witnessed close relatives brewing for a long period of time. Furthermore, I conducted these interviews before and during the peak of the Manipur violence, which inevitably shaped the direction and content of my fieldwork. I tried to portray the perspectives of the women vendors in their own words as much as possible, though I am aware that such an exercise is hampered by my own standpoint as well as language. The difference between the languages in which the interviews were conducted (a mix of Manipuri, Rongmei, and Poumai) and the language in which the interviews have been written also means that there could be issues of interpretation, that I could have missed a good chunk of what these women wished to convey. Their names have been deliberately altered out of respect for their privacy. I also visited vendors in Imphal and Senapati to understand every little detail of the indigenous alcohol industry, which is a reliable source of income for many Naga women in Manipur. I wish to narrate one such experience.

Once, I went to have drinks with some Meitei friends at a Rongmei locality near Airport Road. It was January. We sat on low-lying stools and the women workers brought us Sekmai *yu* and a water bottle.

The two were indistinguishable and in my haste to quench my thirst, I gulped down the yu, which tasted so horrible that I threw up some of it on the mud floor, much to everyone's amusement. As we took shots, we punctuated them with spoonfuls of *kelichana* (topped with pork gravy), *singju*, and pork. A delicious combo indeed! As it approached 8 to 9 pm, the women started insisting that we leave as soon as we were done. As it was my first time there, I got anxious and asked my friend if we should leave. Calmly, he replied, 'Bro, do not worry. We'll take our time.' By the time we left, after another 15 minutes, the men of the village came with thick lathi sticks to scare the male customers into leaving. Thankfully we were already on our scooties by then, and I heaved a sigh of relief at leaving unscathed.

RICE BEER, GENDER, AND LIVELIHOODS: NAGA WOMEN OF MANIPUR WHO BREW

INTRODUCTION

It was the 15th of July, 2023. My cousin sister and I went down to Imphal for her SSC exams. Imphal was back to “normal”. A little too normal, and we felt uneasy. It was as if the orgies of violence and bloodshed had not taken place two months back. Her exam finished around 5:30 pm. As we were making our way back to our hometown in Senapati, it got darker and I contemplated what we would do if violence broke out at the Meitei-Kuki border areas. That day, there were rumours that a Naga woman had been killed by a vigilante mob, rumours that were not “confirmed news” yet because of the internet ban. Later, we found out that a Maring Naga woman, Lucy Marem, had been murdered by the Arambai Tenggol with the alleged involvement of Meira Paibi organisations. We were understandably tense, and munched on a lot of junk food and fried chicken as a result.

The distance between Senapati and Imphal is merely 63 km, which can be covered in less than 2 hours. However, this stretch of road is a

treacherous one as it passes through Meitei, Kuki, and Naga territories and villages. During this civil war, the most dangerous areas were the ones where Meitei and Kuki villages share borders. Meitei villages such as Sekmai and Kanglatongbi lie adjacent to Motbung and Charhajare, two Kuki villages. Frisking and identity checks by volunteers are frequent. On the Meitei side, the Meira Paibi women's groups checked Aadhaar cards and vehicle registration certificates while on the Kuki side, some village volunteers and gun-wielding militants stood as defence, also checking IDs.

As we rode up to Sekmai, our Nepali driver, in his thickly accented Manipuri, asked us if he could stop in Sekmai to buy some rice wine (locally known as *yu asaba*). I could barely understand him at first, and my cousin sister burst into laughter and explained what he was trying to say. Apparently, he was also asking me if I wanted to buy some wine for myself, which I didn't comprehend. It became obvious that the driver was planning to make some profit out of selling the Sekmai *yu* for a higher price in Senapati. Perhaps there was a shortage of the distilled alcohol in Senapati due to the civil war. The initial apprehension we felt was tempered by the relative triviality of this man's profit-seeking ventures even during wartime.

Passing through Sekmai had never been like this. In my childhood, whenever we travelled to Senapati, it would always be during our summer and winter breaks. We would always stop at Sekmai and buy some *kabok*, chips, and juice while the men of the family would discreetly go buy *yu*, much to the chagrin of the silently disapproving women. Sekmai *yu* is transparent and has a strong bitter taste. It has been brewed by the womenfolk of Sekmai for centuries. This special alcohol is made using a distillation process, which requires lots of resources like firewood and water. The taste bears a strong resemblance to Japanese *sake* and Korean *soju*. The drink is in high demand, and is consumed in large quantities by countless men.

In T.C. Hodson's *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, there are several references to the 'raw spirit manufactured at Sengmai'² which was in high demand 'by Nagas, especially those of the Mao'³ and Maram

villages, who visit the valley for trade' (Hodson 1911, 7-8). It seems that the Nagas had to acquire permission from the local British Political Agent to 'prevent any excessive consumption of the ardent spirit distilled at Sengmai' (Hodson 1911, 61). Rice beer occupies a unique and prime position in the life-worlds of the Nagas of Manipur. It was an important aspect of many rituals and traditions related to marriages, feasts, festivals associated with the agricultural cycle, and so on.

Such is its popularity that it has made its entry into the cultural discourse surrounding alcohol in Manipur. The popular song, '*Sekmai gi yu na 1st class ni*', sung by the Manipuri singer Sorri Senjam, has the iconic lines:

Sekmai gi yu na 1st class ni
Yu thongbi bu prize piba yai
Phayeng gi yu su amaha ni
Yu thongbi ine da mana piba yai
Kakhulong gi jou su amaha ni
Yu sungbi iche da prize piba yai

The verse roughly translates as:

Sekmai alcohol is of top-notch quality
The women brewers deserve a prize
Phayeng alcohol is also no less
The aunt who brews this deserves a prize
Kakhulong alcohol is also no less
The sister who brews rice beer deserves a prize

Similar Manipuri songs like '*Yu nang keidou leirammi*' echo the exhilarating thrill of being intoxicated and the importance of alcohol in enabling bonding among the youths of Manipur, while also pointing out the potential harms of alcohol. The people of Sekmai are classified as Scheduled Castes (SC) by the Government of India. They identify as Lois while other SC communities in Imphal like Andro, Leimaram, and Phayeng call themselves Chakpa. It is said that when the Meitei

Maharaja converted to Hinduism and ordered his subjects to do the same, they resisted and were exiled to the peripheries of the valley, near the foothills, where they still reside. Several restrictions were imposed on the Lois and Chakpas regarding inter-marriage and inter-dining with mainstream Meitei society (Ningthoujam 2016).

In the Thadou Kuki community as well, several popular songs like ‘*Ju na don a*’ and ‘*Hepa Ju don tahih in*’⁴ have captured the sentiments and attitudes of the larger public towards excessive drinking. There are many such popular songs in the different dialects/languages spoken in Manipur. In the former, the iconic lines compare the singer’s drunk lover to Johnny Lever⁵ and portray her disappointment at what he turned out to be.

Na melhoi chu nakham tengle nakilom ji poi
Kavet vet le Johnny Lever toh nahung bang ji e
Kamutil la kaginchat toh tun nabang poi
Kakisih tai nang tabang lungset kana chan

Which roughly translates as

Your handsome face doesn’t suit you when you are drunk
When I look at you when you are drunk you remind me of Johnny Lever
You are not what I expected you to be
I regret that I was fated to meet a love like you

Such songs capture the dislike of alcohol that women in Manipur have. Many women’s and civil society organisations like the localised Meira Paibis and the Coalition Against Drugs and Alcohol (CADA) have united in their agitations against and opposition to the sale and consumption of liquor and any attempts by the government to legalise it. In the hills, the All Tribal Women’s Union (based in Churachandpur/Lamka), the Senapati District Students’ Association, and the Senapati District Women’s Association have all vehemently expressed their stance against alcohol and the “immoral” activities associated with it. The ban goes back to the Nisha Bandi movement

in the 1970s and 80s, when unfettered access to narcotics, drugs, and alcohol brought ruin to many youths and families through crime and violence against women. Any man caught drunk would face some of the harshest humiliation by women. It was a period that saw a string of energising local mobilisations among many women in the valley, who took up the admirable task of standing up against liquor lobbies, bootleggers, and the state government to protect their families from further ruin.

Finally, in 1991, *The Manipur Liquor Prohibition Act* was passed under the leadership of the then Chief Minister R.K. Ranbir Singh. The act made selling and drinking alcohol completely illegal, with exceptions made for the Scheduled Castes (like the Lois and Chakpas) and the Scheduled Tribes of Manipur. A blanket ban would have been impossible, given that rice beer is considered cultural heritage by many communities in Manipur and holds ritual and social importance. In the aforementioned song ‘*Sekmai gi yu na 1st class ni*’, the places named—like Sekmai and Phayeng—are SC-dominated villages, and Kakhulong is a Rongmei Naga village in Imphal. However, despite the ban, the alcohol-drinking culture has not budged but has rather flourished due to the entry of private players seeking rich profits.

It is important to note that before the official ban in 1991, the militant outfit People’s Liberation Army had already declared in 1990 that there would be an alcohol ban in the state starting from the 1st of January, 1991. Militant outfits supported the ban ardently demanded by women’s civil society organisations because they believed that the state was using these intoxicants to lure youths away from taking up arms against the state. The act has undergone many amendments through the decades. Among all the amendments made, some of the most recent amendments are worthy of discussion. In September 2022, the Manipur State Government announced a partial lift of the ban on liquor. This would allow the sale and consumption of liquor in all district HQs, armed bases, hotels with no less than 20 rooms, tourist areas, and the state capital. In October of the same year, a short draft of the Manipur Liquor Regulation Policy was released to clarify

the details of what would be permissible and what would be “illegal”. It stated the following—local brews that did not adhere to or meet FSSAI standards were outlawed, alcohol sales would be regulated, state revenues would be raised, and the policy also emphasised the health hazards⁶ resulting from a lack of regulation of the alcohol industry and over-consumption, among other things.

Recently, amidst the civil war and ethnic conflict raging in Manipur since May 2023, the state government decided to remove the act prohibiting liquor and, in its place, set the stage for imposing regulations on it. Some saw the move as politically insensitive given that many Kuki-Zo and Meitei families were grieving for their loved ones, lost homes, and future. Others were quick to point out that the Manipur government’s revenue-increasing motive was not plausible. Organisations like the Nupi Samaj (women’s collective) and CADA continue to maintain their prohibitionist stance on alcohol. Some also emphasised the rising cases of tobacco and alcohol usage among women from Manipur as a cause for concern. However, the Meira Paibis have also been criticised for their moral policing activities, as exemplified in the assaults and abuses of young party-goers, mostly from the urban elite, in the 22 March incident in Bishnupur district’s Utlou. The local women’s organisations alleged that such “immoral” activities and alcohol consumption needed to be stopped at the earliest. Viral WhatsApp videos showed young women being physically assaulted and almost stripped, with verbal abuse directed against them by the Meira Paibis for their “skimpy clothes”. This incident triggered a strong wave of debates, especially among the youth of Manipur, about the excesses committed by the Meira Paibis on the mere excuse of protecting the moral fabric of society. The hashtag #endmobviolence trended on Instagram for some time. Unfortunately for the women who were left humiliated and traumatised, the long arms of the law proved to be not so long.

In the next sections, I will lay out the entire process of making the three different types of indigenous liquor and the local yeast in Manipur. During my fieldwork, all the women I talked to had described

with great detail and patience the different processes of liquor production. However, the interview with Seinai helped me visualise and understand each and every step involved in producing rice beer, as she was willing to demonstrate it in front of us. Unfortunately, demonstrations with the other women were not possible due to a paucity of time and other work priorities.

YU ASABA

Yu asaba is called *tsu/chu zou* in Poumai and *Jou-ju* in Rongmei. ‘The process of making *yu asaba* is very similar to *yu atingba*,’ said Seinai. This variety is quite strong and transparent like water. She said that the distillation process involved in making this is quite arduous. ‘It requires quite a lot of firewood and effort, which is why I prefer to make the other two brews,’ Seinai explained as she animatedly described with



*The elaborate apparatus involved in distilling liquor, Imphal East district, Manipur.
Photo: Kaguilinlu Gangmei, 2023.*



*Seinai preparing to mix the yeast with the rice, Senapati district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*

her hands how two pots are stacked on top of each other with a pipe connecting them to a third pot, where the intoxicating liquor is finally collected.⁷ I had seen the elaborate set-up in my previous interviews, as well as via YouTube videos and pictures sent to me by helpful friends and family who took an interest in my research.

In Manipur, in addition to the distilled *yu asaba*, there are two types of rice beer called *yu atingba* and *yu ngou*. Making rice beer is less time-consuming than distilled alcohol and requires no firewood. Different communities in Manipur make rice beer in the same manner, albeit with slight variations in the usage of raw materials, the type of local rice, pots, and other things.

YU ATINGBA

Yu atingba is called *jou-dui* in Rongmei and *rohi* or *tou mata* in Poumai (Poula). The process of making *yu atingba* starts with cooking large quantities of rice (5-10 kilos), after which it is poured on top of a plastic cover or flat bamboo basket (called *morou* in Pou-la) to cool

down properly. Seinai explained, ‘Nowadays, some brewers keep the cooked rice under the fan to cool it down faster.’

‘Usually, we use any available variety of rice, but for better flavour, we add some amount of sticky rice,’ Seinai said as she showed us the fermenting rice. After it’s cooled, the local yeast (called *hamei*) is crushed into a fine powder and then mixed with the rice. As she pounded the yeast into a fine powder, she explained that there are two types of yeast, one sweet and the other bitter, which are mixed together.

During summers, the amount of *hamei* can be reduced. Moreover, if the brewer wishes to make the rice beer stronger, she would mix more *hamei* with the rice. Then, the mixture would be poured into a bucket



*Yu atingba in the making, Senapati district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*

or clay pot, and covered with a piece of clean cloth. At present, they have started using plastic covers to wrap the fermenting rice. During winters, they would wrap the mixture in locally available big leaves called *Khongurui*⁸ in Rongmei (Rong-lad) to aid in fermentation. It would be left to ferment for around five days during summer and seven to ten days during winter. Some decades back, clay pots were used more frequently. 'However, due to [the] easier availability of buckets at affordable prices, we have started using buckets more to store the rice beer,' Seinai said as she detailed the multiple changes in the brewing.

After the fermentation, water is poured into the fermented rice and left for around two to three hours to mix well. 'When the rice starts floating towards the top, it means that it's ready to drink,' said Seinai with a half-smile, as she looked at the fermenting rice beer intently. The liquid would then be separated from the fermented rice, after which it is fit for consumption. Otherwise, the alcohol is not up to the mark and tastes merely like water. Veine, a Poumai brewer from Senapati, said that some people pour water into the fermented rice in the morning and drink it in the afternoon after lunch or during their *dai* ('afternoon meal' in Poula).

YU NGOU

Yu Ngou is called *Zou che/tsei* in Poula, *Zhuchu* in Mao (Emela), and *Jangao* in Rongmei (Ronglad). For this kind of rice beer, glutinous sticky rice is used, although other rice varieties can be used too. 'After we separate the husks from the grains, we soak the uncooked sticky rice for at least five to six hours, though some women brewers I know personally also prefer to keep it soaked overnight,' said Seinai, continuing on to explain how glutinous sticky rice is crucial for the rich flavour of this special rice beer. Then, the rice is pounded into a fine powder with the help of heavy wooden rods. Boiling water is poured in

to form a paste and it will continuously be stirred with a wooden spoon to ensure no lumps form. ‘The next day, when the mixture cools down, a different kind of yeast in the form of germinated paddy is pounded into powder, which we then add to the mixture,’ said Seinai, teaching us about the heritage of rice beer making in rich detail. ‘We then wait for days and weeks, depending on the season and weather, for the fermentation to take its course.’

HAMEI

The types of yeast used for *yu atingba* and *yu ngou* are different.

For *yu atingba*, the starter cakes⁹ made by womenfolk from Sekmai, Andro and Phayeng—called *hamei* in Manipuri—are the most common. After raw rice is soaked in water, it is crushed into a fine powder. Then, it’s mixed with crushed pieces of the bark of *Albizia myriophylla*, locally known in Manipuri as *Yangli*. There are two types of *Yangli*, sweet and bitter, and the former is used in preparing *yu atingba*. The plant has been consumed and used by different communities in South Asia and Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and others) for its medicinal properties. Its leaves, when applied topically, can control bleeding and are also used to treat coughs. The pounded bark is mixed with the powdered rice and starter cakes from previous years, and kneaded like a dough. The dough is allowed to rest for around 30 to 40 minutes and is then separated into round flat cakes, which are kept on top of rice husks. These are covered with a thick jute bag (*bora* in Manipuri), a thick piece of cloth, or banana leaves. After around three days, the cake is tinged with a yellowish hue and tastes like alcohol. It is up to each brewer’s discretion whether to dry them in the sun or not. These cakes have a long shelf-life of at least a year. As per Subramanian (2021), *Vangueria spinosa* and cup and saucer vine can also be mixed with pineapple and passion fruit, and then used to make *hamei*. The preparation of starter cakes varies from village to village.

To make *yu ngou*, a different kind of yeast like germinated paddy is used as a “starter” with which to ferment rice. The yeast used to make rice beer is also called *khekhrii* in Mao, *threi/khei* in Poumai, and *khai* in Rongmei. The paddy is soaked in water for two to three days in a tiny pot. ‘Only when it starts emitting a strong, bad odour [do] we drain the water, [and] keep the paddy outside on a clean surface like bamboo mat to dry,’ said Seinai after she had shown us her tiny traditional basket containing the germinated paddy that was ready to use as starter. When it has dried and becomes warm, it is put in a basket and wrapped in cloth, where it will germinate or sprout.

After germination, the paddy is dried again in the sun until it has a slightly crunchy texture. The germination process can differ based on prevailing climate conditions. In hot climates, germination occurs



Germinated paddy to be used as a starter in the preparation of rice beer, Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

faster, whereas in cold climates, the germination process can be too long and cumbersome. The whole process can take seven days in summer. ‘We have to ensure that it germinates properly or else there is no desired effect on the rice, which means no rice beer for me,’¹⁰ Seinai explained, after which she closed the lid of the basket and started discussing family and village matters with my parents.

In his landmark study on rice beer in Mao Naga villages, Ashiho A. Mao documented the intensive process that women brewers from Mao villages followed. Firstly, the water used to soak the paddy is brought in a dried gourd shell. They hold the belief that if water is brought in any other container, the paddy will not germinate. Secondly, two fresh twigs of *Elscholtzia blanda* and charcoal, which help maintain the quality of the rice, are soaked together with the paddy in the pot/jar. Thirdly, *Justicia adhatoda* leaves are used to seal the mouth of the jar to give the beer a better taste (Mao 1998).

POUMAI AND RICE BEER

The Poumai tribe largely inhabits the northeastern and eastern parts of Senapati district, plus a few villages in Razieba sub-division, Phek district, Nagaland. The Poumai people trace their origin to Makhel (Mathrapfii/Khyapfii) and Saranamai (Siimai), which is the dispersal site from where all Poumai villages branched out. The former is also considered to be the origin of several tribes like Mao, Maram, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Tangkhul, and Thangal, too.

In the olden days, Poumai village folks would show their hospitality to guests by giving them rice beer. It was a social obligation. People drank a lot, and therefore, every household emphasised keeping a good amount of alcohol/rice beer. During Poumai festivals like *Louni*, *Thouni*, and the *Joh shudi*¹¹ ceremony, they would make a huge amount of rice beer in wooden drums for everyone to engage in merrymaking. Rice beer has been replaced by tea, ever since rice

beer became associated with “satanism” and “paganism”. The first Christian converts in Phaibung Khullen are said to have prepared rice beer without adding the *threi* (yeast) to consume it like ‘*nini-cha*’, which means sweet tea. However, at present, even the women brewers are unable to feed their children rice beer, which has become a means of income, as one woman brewer/vendor observed.

The Feast of Merit is called *Zosoyi*, *Zhosoyu*, or *Zousomozii*,¹² depending on the inter-village dialectal variation used. It is an integral part of the Poumai culture. At present, the Feast of Merit can also be organised during Christmas.¹³ In this feast, the feast-giver gives the entire village huge portions of rice beer and meat (like pork and buffalo) for merry-making. After the feast-giver and his family announce their decision to give a feast for their fellow villagers, the preparations for providing enough rice beer begin. He would invite 30 to 50 women to help make the rice beer, for which two to three rice granaries (called *thoubao*) would be used. The women would pound the rice grains into a fine powder while boiling water to pour into the powder. Since this amount might not be enough, they would even dig into the earth and use bamboo mats to line the hole, where they would ferment more rice beer. Our pre-Christian Poumai ancestors held the belief that if the *genna* and rituals of the Feast of Merit were not observed properly, the household deity got angry and spoiled the rice beer.

If they put the rice to ferment in huge hollow wooden drums, they used to hear bursting sounds (*bum bum bang bang*) from the ongoing fermentation process inside the drum. If there was a violent explosion on one end, then the rice beer would splash violently against the other end. Spillage was quite common. To prevent this, they would add a small piece of local ginger called *ravou* (meaning God’s ginger) to the fermenting mixture to stop the spillages and bursting sounds.

When mothers died during or after childbirth, the orphaned babies were fed the water naturally released from the fermented rice, since there was no lactose powder or Amul then. Cow’s milk was also hard to get. Relatives would take the orphaned infants to other lactating

mothers with babies of their own and request them to feed them milk. However, other mothers were quite reluctant to share their milk with orphans and often refused by lying that the babies seemed full. The infants' relatives would walk away dejected.

The process of brewing rice beer has largely remained the same. However, the raw materials and items used in brewing have changed. In the olden days, they used to leave the rice to ferment in earthen pots brought from the Poumai village of Oinam (*Onaeme*). This special Poumai pottery (called *Pouli*, meaning Pou's pots) had a lot of cultural and ritualistic importance in the lives of our Poumai forefathers. According to popular folklore, it is said that the villagers of *Onaeme* deliberately made their language unintelligible to other Poumai villages in order to protect their pottery secrets, which helped them establish a monopoly over pottery in the region. People from neighbouring villages would buy new *Pouli* whenever the women gave birth or when young boys reached adolescence, and would cook delicious food in these pots. The fact that people bought new pots despite the hefty prices gives us an idea about their importance in the Poumai people's lifeworlds. In Mao villages bordering Nagaland's Kohima district, earthen pots from the Angami villages of Khuzama and Viswema¹⁴ were used in the brewing process and for various other purposes. However, in recent years, brewers have started using buckets or transparent plastic covers to wrap the fermenting rice in.

At present, whether it be in Senapati town or the village, most brewers are not necessarily vendors. Vendors can outsource a significant chunk of their rice beer brewing operations to women brewers. But in most cases, vendors also brew and the brewers also vend. The vendors allow their customers to drink in their kitchens or somewhere near their kitchens, where a low-lying table is kept with low stools or *mora*. This kind of arrangement inside the house is prominent among the Rongmei brewers and vendors in Imphal too.

Men typically drink in groups, and while women sometimes drink with men, women drinking openly in groups is totally unheard of. In the olden days, there were not many restrictions against women

drinking rice beer. The vendors in Senapati would give their customers dry-fried *hrathou* (Naga dal) and king chilli chutney to eat with the beer. The men can either drink in the vendor's house or get take-aways depending on their preference.

If the women brewers think that the rice beer will get over soon (and soon usually means in around three days), they will start making a new batch some days prior. This is to ensure that they do not run out of rice beer and that their business operates smoothly. Sometimes, if the fermenting process is slow and they run out of rice beer supply, they ask fellow vendors and brewers to loan them some, which they would repay after some days when they restock.

RONGMEI, RICE BEER, RELIGION, AND CULTURE

The Rongmeis are a Naga tribe that mainly inhabit Tamenglong, Churachandpur, and other valley districts in Manipur (Imphal East, Imphal West, Bishnupur, and Thoubal). The Rongmeis have a small and sizable presence in Nagaland and Assam as well. The settlement of Rongmeis from the hills to Imphal Valley is a recent one. A distinction is often maintained between 'Hill Rongmeis' and 'Valley Rongmeis'.¹⁵

Samson Kamei (2022) writes of the forced labour enforced upon Rongmei and Inpui captives by the Meitei Kings for which they were brought from the hills to the valley. Kamei also writes of how different Rongmei villages were formed in the valley. For instance, the first settlers of Namthanlong are said to have been the cobblers of the British officials. He also writes that Ragailong, my chosen site for research, was also occupied by Rongmei Nagas who worked in the adjacent army camp as sweepers, among other things.

In Ragailong, there are two main religions: Christianity and Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), a formalised religion based on the Rongmei forefathers' 'ancient' beliefs. Even within Christianity, there is a further division between Baptists and Catholics.¹⁶ The Rongmei

Christians call themselves *Ra-ningmei*, meaning “those who worship God”, while they refer to TRC adherents with a derogatory term, *Joujangmei*, meaning “those who drink rice beer/wine”. (The terms used by the Poumai and Rongmei Christians to refer to these groups, and their meanings are similar, as are the attitudes of the groups.) This can be largely attributed to the Baptist aversion to rice beer. All the women brewers and vendors in Ragailong are members of the TRC. Any Baptist doing so runs the risk of incurring strict disapproval from church members and sometimes even suspension or expulsion from the church. This division is also seen in the celebration of the traditional festival of *Gaan-ngai*, which the Christians largely abstain from celebrating. Even if Rongmei Christians celebrate the traditional festival, they would not perform the elaborate rituals associated with it. Among the followers of Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak, there remains a strong anxiety about the loss of their culture as they consider themselves to be the inheritors of their ancestral religion and heritage, which they have to protect from the “wrath” of “foreign” religions like Christianity. A common refrain seen often in posters in Ragailong and Namdunlong in the months of December and January (around the time of *Gaan-Ngai* celebrations) is,

*Loss of religion is loss of culture,
Loss of culture is loss of identity.*

Kamei (2022, 76) writes of the importance of rice beer and wine in the lifeworlds of the Rongmei Nagas and how the utility of alcohol shifted with migration, and therefore with changing local contexts and livelihoods,

Wine was produced primarily for religious purposes and for basic consumption. It is used in various rites of passage of the Zeliangrong people. With growing needs and aspirations infused by their ways of valley life and with no effective alternative sources of livelihood and no political representative from among them to address their valley-tribal specific

grievances, producing wine on a commercial scale became gradually phenomenal in valley Kabui villages.

Due to the lack of large swathes of land (unlike in the hills), valley Rongmeis were compelled to adopt other livelihoods to make a living. Brewing and selling alcohol became a family enterprise that every family member contributed to in their own way. Women also adopted handloom weaving as another source of income. Rongmei women still remain marginalised within the larger Rongmei society, and are restricted from holding posts in village administration. This is often justified with references to women's menstrual cycles, as can be seen in the statement, '*Ntumei thu zamv phunghmei de* (a woman is somebody with a wound)' (Panmei 2018, 2). Rongmei women are still discouraged from actively participating in politics and contesting elections. Inspirational exceptions have emerged in certain cases, like that of Dithuanliu Kamei from Machiang in Tamenglong district, who acquired the post of village chairman amidst a bitter feud between villagers for scarce resources. She has contributed immensely to her village's well-being by bringing about electrification, building a water reservoir, implementing forest conservation, and even putting several women on the village development committees. Often, the increasing double workload of looking after the households and being caregivers in addition to the tediousness of being in politics acts as a strong deterrent to women's meaningful participation. This is especially true if women have careers outside their homes, thus incurring the 'double burden' of managing their households as well as their careers. Like most tribal women, Rongmei women are not allowed to get a share of their parents' ancestral land since they are considered to have no clan, meaning their clan identity changes when they get married (Panmei 2018).

In their study 'Brewing Alcohol and Emotions: Narratives from Namthanlong, Manipur', Richard Kamei and Mrinmoy Mazumdar (2019) highlighted various issues that women brewers in the indigenous alcohol industry face. The literacy rate for these women in Namthanlong is low and lags behind that of men. Women's education

is not encouraged as their labour is considered more important/valuable, contributing as it does to the family income from an early age. The women workers employed by vendors earned a measly 70 to 80 rupees per day, which was not proportionate to their labour contribution. The study was done in 2019, and these rates may have increased. There are women's groups for them to express their grievances to the village authorities and MLA, and to help make safer working environments. Kamei and Mazumdar also talked about the emotional labour these women do to hide their real emotions for the sake of appealing to customers' needs.

When I asked my aunt about the educational levels of these women brewers, she replied, 'In Ragailong, there used to be older sisters who gave up education and marriage to provide for their younger siblings. This usually happens when there are no parents to look after them. They sold rice beer, wove clothing items, and even did other odd jobs to survive and provide.'

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS NAGA WOMEN OF MANIPUR WHO BREW AND SELL ALCOHOL

SEINAI

‘My son wants to interview you about rice beer.’

‘Ah sure, he can visit my place and ask all the questions he wants. I’ll tell him all that I know. I can even show him the process of making rice beer.’

‘That would be great. We’ll come around 11, after lunch. *Tralode* [thank you].’

That was a small excerpt from a phone call between my dad and Seinai, a distant relative. Her name had come up when my parents were helping me find leads for interviews with women brewers and vendors.

Seinai is a 60-year-old Poumai Naga woman from Phaibung Khullen (*Zhifiimai*). She is a divorcee who lives by herself. Her house is located right on the riverbank, nestled among green rice fields.

There are no motorable roads to her place. Right near the NH-2, you have to walk down a hill on a narrow muddy path and cross a rickety wooden bridge that can be slippery and hence dangerous to walk on during the monsoon. (I almost slipped!) It's a short distance, but definitely requires caution.



*The wooden bridge that leads to Seinai's house, Senapati district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*

She has been brewing rice beer ever since she was 10 years old. During those days, when young girls reached the age of 10, they were expected to start helping with household chores like cleaning, cooking, and also rice beer preparation. Whenever their parents went to cultivate in the fields, her mother would ask her to take care of all the household work, which she would do obediently. She had gotten her first taste of rice beer around this time. She remembers how children also used to drink rice beer, either the liquid or solid fermented rice. Children preferred the sweeter rice beer while the elders liked the mature and older one, perhaps because of its greater potency.

She recalls how tough life was in winter, when they had to go fetch water barefoot. In those days, there used to be a lot of ice in the morning. The ice covered a huge area, ‘almost as big as the roof of a big house.’

Her parents were “non-Christians” or *Zousoumai* (literally meaning “those who drink rice beer”). When she was around 12 years old, she became a Catholic. Only the Baptists call themselves *Roshimai*, or those who worship God. I remember an instance when I asked my paternal grandmother’s younger brother whether he still had “non-Christian” friends. He replied affirmatively, and started listing their names. My father burst out laughing and told us that they were Catholic Christians. In Poumai villages, Catholics do not face the same restrictions as the Baptists in terms of brewing, selling, and drinking rice beer. Since they openly brew and drink, they are often clubbed together with the few remaining practitioners of our forefathers’ way of life as *Zousoumai*. Therefore, even after her conversion, Seinai did not stop practising the art of brewing.

Zhifiimai has around 200 to 250 Catholic households. Within the village, the women in Catholic households brew rice beer and sell other liquors like *Sekmai yu*, Kingfisher beer, and rum within their houses, while Baptist men come and drink it. ‘Despite Baptist people chastising us for our connections with alcohol, ironically, it is the Baptist men who come and beg us to give them rice beer. Snatching is not uncommon,’ Seinai observed. While women do drink, it is

considered immoral for a woman to do so openly, unlike their male counterparts, whose drunken behaviour is tolerated more.

The womenfolk of her village don't make distilled liquor (*tsu zou*) much—perhaps a couple of families do. In the neighbouring village of Laii (*Vafiimai*), they make distilled liquor a lot, and theirs is said to have a better flavour.¹⁷ Within the Mohmai clan, Seinai noted that there are approximately 10 households that brew and sell rice beer. However, in terms of full-time vendors whose sole income is from rice beer, there are only around four or five households. 'Every Catholic knows how to brew rice beer since we have not forsaken our age-old customs, but only a few sell it,' said Seinai. In *Zhifiimai*, there are no collectives for women brewers.

Seinai worked as the head of the Catholic women's committee of Phaibung Khullen residents in Senapati town. She noted that she has not seen any Catholic people from her village sell rice beer and other liquors for income in the town. Her village is approximately 67 km away from Senapati town, and the journey to and fro can take anywhere between two to five hours depending on the route, season, and condition of the roads.

In Senapati town, Seinai has stayed in different localities, each with different attitudes towards alcohol and prohibition. In the locality where a kind acquaintance offered to let her stay for free in a mud house, brewing and selling are prohibited by the village authority. That's why she has foregone her home brew business. She prepares rice beer only for her own consumption or when she gets orders from people. However, when she stayed in a neighbouring locality called Tasari, she constantly brewed and sold rice beer without any backlash from her neighbours. She was the only one from *Zhifiimai* to brew and sell alcohol in Tasari. Most brewers and vendors were from other villages and tribes.

Most women brewers get help from their husbands in this household business. While Seinai makes the two rice beers (*rohi* and *zou tsei*) herself, she buys Sekmai *yu* and sells it for a slightly higher price in Senapati. When asked about sales volumes during festivals,

she replied, ‘I get much higher profits during festivals like Christmas and *Thouni*, [but for] a relatively short span [of time]. Once, I went and sold *Sekmai yu* in my own village and the business was good.’ *Zou tsei* is the most popular because it is made with rich and high-quality sticky rice (called *churu* in Poula), and is thus more expensive. A mug of *rohi* would cost 20 rupees whereas a mug and jug of *zou tsei* would be 30 and 60 rupees respectively.

Seinai used to earn around 1,000 rupees per day, with a profit margin of approximately 50%. As people drink a lot more on Sundays, Sunday was never a holiday for her. She used to supplement her income by weaving shawls common to the Poumai, Mao, and Chakhesang tribes. ‘I would weave before the customers came to drink, but because of my deteriorating eyesight, I have stopped weaving,’ Seinai lamented. She also looks after pigs to eat at Christmas. She feeds the pigs leftover fermented rice, because of which the pigs get drunk sometimes and sleep a lot.



Seinai's pigs meant for Christmas, Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

However, at the time of the interview, since she did not sell alcohol on a large-scale anymore, she earned a livelihood by toiling in the fields and taking small orders for rice beer. When she used to operate her rice beer business, a few customers also requested foreign liquor like rum, whiskey, or beer. However, she chose not to sell them because they are quite expensive. Even in her ancestral village, vendors sell a can of beer for around 300 rupees. ‘I do not think that foreign liquor will affect local women brewers’ business. After all, many customers love our rice beer and the demand has not dipped,’ Seinai remarked confidently when we asked whether she thought the small-scale business of brewers/vendors would be wiped out by foreign liquor.

Whenever Seinai got sick or started showing symptoms of illness, the rice beer would taste sour and unpleasant and would also be slippery to the touch. She was not sure why this happened. To improve the taste, they would mash special tree leaves called *khatsii* with herbal leaves called *chivu*. The bark of the former is used in catching fish. The log drum or pot used to store fermenting rice beer would be emptied and then its inner walls would be washed and rubbed with the *khatsii* and *chivu*. This would be followed by adding the fermenting mixture back into the log drum and the *khatsii* leaves would be allowed to float in the rice beer. ‘My mother and father showed me how to refine and correct the rice beer when such unavoidable incidents happened,’ said Seinai.

When we asked her whether she would want her children to also brew and sell rice beer, she replied, ‘I do not know whether I want them to do so. I have seen the daughter of a brewer also become a brewer herself. I guess I’m indifferent.’

VEINE

Seinai introduced us to Veine, who is also a woman brewer from the same Poumai tribe. She took us to Veine’s house in Bridge Colony,

where she lives with her husband. To reach her place, one has to enter a small *gali*, where we saw the unnerving sight of what was probably a customer's vomit. It is hard to find the place as there are many similar vendors, abuzz with customers. The place is congested, in stark contrast to Seinai's. The kitchen of her house serves as both a brewing area and a drinking place for her loyal customers. As we sat in the kitchen, she served us three cups of rice beer—one each for me, my mom and dad—alongside some dried meat (*souchi/souki*), which we consumed heartily. Seinai had already got a cup for herself before us, and had started drinking it.

'Our locality is full of vendors who brew and also sell rice beer and alcohol to customers. There are probably around 50 vendors in Bridge Colony alone who sell openly,' Veine said as she began explaining the business of women brewers like herself. She said that there were also a few brewers and vendors in River Colony and the Senapati bazaar area, also called Makhrelui.



The drinking place at Veine's, Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

Veine is a Poumai woman from Purul (*Hiimai*), which is only 44 km away from the town. She joined the Catholic faith when she was only seven or eight years old, and her parents were *Zousoumai*. She started learning the art of brewing from her mother when she was around 10 years old, alongside household chores. She has been drinking rice beer ever since. 'My elders, especially my mother, used to tell me that drinking rice beer in the fields gives them energy to do hard labour,' said Veine as she mapped out her relationship with rice beer.

She started brewing rice beer as a full-time source of income only 10 years ago. She explained her journey. 'Though my husband is in service [meaning he has a government job as a policeman], I wanted to do something to contribute to the household income.' Her husband does not help her with the brewing process, except when he has time off or no personal commitments. She does it all by herself.



On the left is a container where rice is being fermented, and on the right is meat in the process of being dried. This dried meat is sold to customers at 20 rupees per piece.

Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

In her ancestral village, the brewing and selling of rice beers like *rohi* and *zou tsei* is allowed, but foreign liquor and *Sekmai yu asaba* are not. She wondered whether she was the only one from her village in Senapati doing this business. As if trying to answer her own question, she continued, 'Perhaps it is because many of my village men are employed in government service. I know more vendors from the Mao and Maram tribes.'



Rohi in the making, Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.



Veine checking her rice beer, Senapati district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

In earlier times, *zou tsei* was the most popular and common kind of rice beer. Even the yeast used to make *rohi* was tough to procure then. Though making rice beer still follows the same process, Veine noted several changes similar to Seinai's observations. 'Nowadays we use clean and big plastic covers to wrap the fermenting rice in, but in those days, we used pots from *Onaeme*. The rice beer tasted better with the pots,' Veine said as she traced various social and material changes. 'I remember using our local sticky rice and other rice varieties when I was a young woman, but at present, I use superfine rice to make the *rohi*.'

Though she used to brew *tsu zou* (or *yu asaba*), now she buys it regularly from Sekmai for her customers. It was just more convenient that way. She also keeps a stock of rum and whiskey since the young male customers ask for it often. Though fellow women brewers tried to form a society and everyone contributed 10 rupees as a 'membership



*Onaeme pottery (one pot can hold three cups of rice beer), Senapati district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*

fee', it failed to materialise. She suspects that it might have been because none of them took on a leadership role.

That young men get violent and unruly when they get drunk is acknowledged by all. 'After gulping down rice beer, there are two types of men—the first picks the silliest reason to get into a fight while the second one leaves after having a good time with friends,' Veine explained. 'If we keep giving to these people, thinking about profits, then I would have faced problems. However, I have avoided that

because if a customer gets a bad reputation for causing a ruckus, we blacklist them and stop providing them with rice beer. We only give to mature and understanding men.’ She also emphasised that she refuses to sell to underage school-going teenagers.

Veine highlighted the harassment she has faced from civil society organisations and some neighbours and acquaintances in the locality who think alcohol is “evil”. They refuse to understand that this work gives their family income. At this, Veine expressed her anger. ‘Sometimes I feel like our union leaders scrutinise our indigenous rice-brewing business more than they do drug peddlers, drug abusers, and prostitutes, as if it is more sinful. I just do not understand our people sometimes.’ She noted that there is more surveillance of her business during elections. ‘We are not spoiling our customers’ lives. The problem is with the alcoholics who have no self-control and cause destruction wherever they go.’ Seinai also echoed the same sentiment. ‘It is not right for us to get the blame for this.’

Oversight is not very strict outside the election period, though they do have to adhere to the rule of closing their doors by 6 pm. Veine usually opens her doors according to office timings—when office ends, office-goers flock to her place from 3 pm to 6 pm. However, there are a few exceptional men who start drinking in the morning. After 6 pm, new customers will not be entertained anymore as the vendors might be fined by either volunteers of civil society organisations, police officers, or even the underground (militant outfits) at times.

Veine earns a profit of around 2,000 to 3,000 rupees a day, and this can occasionally reach as high as 20,000 to 30,000 rupees per day. They sell huge quantities of rice beer during Christmas, traditional festivals like *Thounii* and *Lounii*, and sometimes even at weddings. During a festival organised by a students’ organisation, Poumai Naga Tsiidoumai Me, at Purul, a group of five women brewers, including Veine shared a profit of four lakh rupees among them, which meant that each woman earned a jaw-droppingly high amount of 80,000 rupees in merely 15 days.

When Veine is not engaged in her brewing business, she likes to work in her kitchen garden and in the fields. From this, she gets fresh vegetables and herbs to feed her family. With the combined income of both her and her husband, she has been able to look after the needs of her six children. Two of them are in Delhi, three are in Imphal, and the last one is in Maram. One of them is set to finish their MBBS degree from JNIMS, a premier medical institute in Imphal and Northeast India, in December 2023. 'When they return home during their holidays, they help lighten the workload of my business,' she said, giving away her sheer love and appreciation for her children.

She believes that her work as a brewer/vendor will not go obsolete any time soon, even with the arrival of other liquors. She gives a fresh perspective. 'Rather, customers request the Sekmai alcohol and other bottled liquors because they do not get the local rice brews.' We asked her for her thoughts on whether she wants her children to also brew for a living. Softly, she replied, 'I do not want them to do small-scale brewing. Rather, I want them to work in large-scale brewing establishments like professional breweries and factories.'

My mother asked her whether she thinks her struggles are similar to those of other Naga women brewers of Manipur. After a pause, Veine replied, 'Sometimes, I think about the Rongmei brewers in Imphal. They are just like me, earning money to feed their families.'

CHUN, THON, AND KADI

'We have been brewing and selling rice beer in Ragailong ever since the 1990s,' said Chun as she gave us a short history of brewing in her family and community. Her sister, Thon, joined in. 'Our mothers and grandmothers taught us how to make rice beer.'

It was a hot day in Ragailong, a small Rongmei locality in Imphal East. Accompanied by Kadi, my aunt and I set out for Chun's house holding floral, bright-coloured umbrellas to shield ourselves from

the sun. Kadi's a close relative of Chun and Thon, and had also been brewing sporadically at different points in her life. Chun is 50 years old and belongs to the Rongmei community in Imphal. Kadi and my aunt are close friends, and upon my aunt's request she agreed to come along with us. When we reached our destination at around 2 pm in the afternoon, the strong acidic smell of fermented rice hit my nose. I was shocked to see that there were already some men drinking and devouring food items, much to my aunt's dismay, who discreetly commented to me in Tangkhul-tui, 'Disgusting men.' My aunt is a Tangkhul woman who married a Rongmei man.

Though I had initially thought we were conducting an "interview" only with Chun, it became apparent that it was going to be an impromptu focus group discussion. We went into their common room with comfortable sofas, *mora*, and even a refrigerator in the corner. As we sat down, I began asking questions, mainly directed at Chun as she was the head of the brewing and vending operations in the house. She gets help from her sisters, in-laws, as well as other part-time labourers she hires. However, responses came from all four of the women in the room—my aunt, Chun, Thon, and Kadi, all of whom had experience in this art at least at one point in their lives for a significant period of time. To almost every query, every woman would give a response, no matter how short, which would elicit another response and so on, thereby enriching the discussion.

'At least according to our customs, both men and women can brew if they wish to—there are no strict taboos against men brewing. But based on my observations, only women prepare the rice beer,' said Chun. Kadi put forward a similar, yet slightly different opinion. 'Men are often caught [up] in other activities, so we don't disturb them.' Then my aunt added to Kadi's point by saying, 'When our family used to brew, the men used to go to the pond to fetch water used for brewing.' In those days, people did not buy water, but rather sourced it from the pond, located at the other end of the locality. The pond water has become too polluted for domestic use in recent years. After the distillation of *yu asaba* was completed or the *yu atingba* was extracted

from the fermented rice, the leftover fermented rice was fed to the pigs, which is said to make the pigs fatter and tastier.

As they began explaining the process of making rice beer to me, all of them took turns explaining the little details. While the process of preparing rice beers like *yu atingba* and *yu ngou* was easy to understand, I was not able to visualise the distillation process of *yu asaba*. Chun and my aunt took me to the fireplace, where there were two pots, one stacked on top of the other. The pot on the lower end was connected to a third pot, a slight distance away, via a wooden pipe (which I described earlier, in the section on *yu asaba*). The pipe was used to transport the condensed alcoholic liquid to the third pot, covered with a damp cloth. Beside the fireplace is the drinking place, with mud floors and low tables and *mora* lying around.



*Distillation process of yu asaba and the equipments used, Imphal East district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*



*Chun's vendor shop in Ragailong, Imphal East district, Manipur.
Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.*

People who do not belong to Ragailong are not allowed to be alcohol vendors. While Chun is a vendor, there are women brewers in her locality who only prepare rice beer and sell it off at wholesale rates to the vendors. 'Perhaps having customers over at one's house can be troublesome. One can easily get flustered over whether to focus on household duties or the business,' was my aunt's reply when I asked her why some women choose to only brew—this was when we were back at home, enthusiastically going over the interview.

In the olden days, the equivalent of *cha* (tea) was rice beer, which was offered to guests and visitors. At present, this age-old custom has transformed into a lucrative source of income for many women brewers in Ragailong and other Rongmei localities in Imphal. There have been some tensions and locality feuds when Meitei women tried to stop the sale of alcohol in Rongmei localities. Kamei (2022) argues that since rice beer was an indispensable aspect of traditional Rongmei religious and cultural rituals and rites—those surrounding births, deaths, marriages, and festivals—it provided Rongmei women with useful rhetoric to argue against a complete ban of alcohol in the state, a long-standing demand by the Meira Paibis. When I asked them about their thoughts on Meira Paibi movements demanding prohibition of alcohol in Manipur, Thon took the lead and replied, ‘Rice beer is our custom and integral to our cultural heritage and identity. Even if some Meira Paibis wanted to stop us from continuing to sell, they have no power over us in our own locality.’ The three other women nodded in agreement.

The women brewers have to pay approximately 1,000 rupees as tax every month to the excise department. Chun remembers how a few decades back, when she was still a young woman, her parents used to get anxious whenever there were raids at the end of the financial year and during elections. If they were caught selling alcohol, they had to pay fines, and thus they took a lot of precautions to avoid arrest. There were also numerous cases of Rongmei women brewers being taken to police stations. Apparently, the women would volunteer to go, since if the men went, there was a greater chance of it becoming a huge issue. Currently, harassment by the police and government is less common.

The men also like to eat delicacies like pork, beef, chicken, *singju*, and *kelichana* while drinking. ‘We cook whatever meat is available at the parking [referring to the meat bazaar near Namdunlong and Nagaram],’ Chun said when asked if she cooks all kinds of meat every day. In the meantime, Thon was busy attending to some household chores and collecting the amount due from the customers at one table.



Refrigerated yu atingba (or Jou-dui) sold in plastic bags. This drink is said to be refreshing during peak summer, Imphal East district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

Unlike before, customers' preferences have expanded to other liquors like beer, rum, and whiskey, which she keeps a stockpile of.

The women brewers also face problems in their interactions with unruly customers. When any fights erupt between customers, they do not send the men in the house to mitigate the conflict because there is a higher chance of the small fight escalating into a big one. The women would simply scold the men to go fight outside the locality so that the neighbours would not be disturbed. Otherwise, the neighbours would complain and talk in their social circles. Cars and two-wheelers are usually lined up in the compounds of the vendors.

There have been cases of some men puking in inappropriate areas, like the drinking places or near the verandahs. Chun replied bluntly, 'When that happens, we just get them to sober up and tell them to clean the mess. If we do it for them, they might start taking us for granted.' Some of their male customers also treat them poorly, and with their entitled attitudes attempt to order them around. '*Aphao saba khoi bu di* [to those who are arrogant], we directly reprimand them and tell them we are allowing them to drink in our house, our locality. They usually become more polite after this,' Chun explained when talking about the hardships of serving men. Kadi also narrated a similar incident she had faced.

Whenever there are ethnic tensions or political instability in the city, the village authority (*peikai*) sets some timings for the sale of alcohol and rice beer, a deadline beyond which customers are to be denied more servings and chased out. However, when there is a semblance of peace in Manipur, there are no timings enforced by the village and it is up to each vendor's discretion how long they want to stay open.

The volumes of sales and profits vary from day to day and reach their peak during festivals like *Cheiraoba* and *Yaoshang*. These festivals are celebrated with great merry-making by the Meitei people, the dominant community in the valley. On these days, Meitei men clad in white dhotis come to drink in Rongmei localities. 'We make a special type of rice beer during *Gaan-ngai*,' said Chun as she expounded on how rice beer was an important part of their festivals.

'I feel that our profits depend on luck, because sometimes we can amass even 10,000 rupees in just a day,' Chun explained. 'Since it's a business, the money is always rolling between different investments. The money I get from sales today will be reinvested into buying rice, *hamei*, and meat tomorrow. It stays in our hands for only a short time.' The money also goes into paying their children's tuition fees and other household expenses.

When we were almost done with the interview, Chun asked her workers to bring us some spicy mixture.¹⁸ Kadi and I devoured the

mixture, and second and third servings were brought, much to my aunt's embarrassment.

Moreover, we found that the fridge contained chilled *yu atingba*, packed in transparent plastic covers and sold as a take-away option to customers. Since I was still a novice at that point in time, they showed me two samples of *yu asaba* and *yu atingba* to help me know the difference. The former was transparent and was tough to distinguish from water, while the latter was murky and had a slightly thicker consistency.

'My children do not want to continue this business anymore. They probably will not as they want to go for more lucrative and modern professions as they are more educated. I am fine with that,' Chun replied as she gave us a brief glimpse into her children's opinions of



On the left, yu asaba (distilled spirit), and on the right, jou-dui or yu atingba, Imphal East district, Manipur.

Photo: Schulu Duo, 2023.

her indigenous brewing business. Many Rongmei brewers express their desire for their children to have easier lives, since they say that this kind of work is physically and sometimes mentally exhausting too. The number of households that sell rice beer has reduced, with the grandmother of one of my sister's friends from Kakhulong remarking that there are only around 10 such households in their locality at present. Contrast that with the condition a few decades back, where every household, regardless of their economic condition, used to brew and sell rice beer and alcohol as an expression of their culture and as a means of livelihood.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this piece, I have tried to map as faithfully as I can the lived experiences of Naga women brewers in Manipur. Readers must have noticed that I paid scarce attention to the charges of alcohol consumption leading to domestic violence against women and its emotional and financial burden on families. While I do believe that there is a strong correlation between alcohol and various social evils, and that the plights of people, especially women, whose lives have been ruptured and brutalised by alcohol should be recognised and talked about, I deliberately decided to throw light on the perspectives of the women who make a living out of selling alcohol and thereby provide for their children and dependents. That crucial human aspect was missing in the entire discourse and debates surrounding alcohol, and I felt the urgent necessity of highlighting their joys, struggles, and aspirations. I also tried to locate their experiences within the larger web of eventful social, political, historical, and technological happenings in Manipur—the arrival of Christianity, the loss of culture and the anxieties surrounding this, prohibitionist movements, the easy availability of foreign imported liquor, and so on. What I observed

during and after my fieldwork was that for these women, their brewing business was also a valuable part of their cultural heritage, and also a means of income that could help their children climb the social ladder and access the avenues of social mobility. Basically, what was inherited heritage became a useful weapon in navigating their ways through the demands and aspirations brought forth by postcolonial modernity in Manipur. We cannot foretell what the future will bring for the tradition of brewing rice beer, and for the women who brew and their children. The situation is bound to undergo a multitude of changes and we can only pray that, no matter what forms this tradition takes, it can survive and flourish.

NOTES

1. The waves of economic migration seen in Northeast Indian youth travelling to metropolitan cities in the mainland like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore can also be attributed to the lack of economic opportunities in their respective states.
2. In many monographs, Sekmai is written as 'Sengmai'.
3. Poumai was once considered a subtribe of Mao. The Poumai community got recognised as a separate tribe in 2002.
4. This song is sung from the perspective of a son lamenting his father's drinking and begging him to stop doing so because it hurts his mother. The lines '*hepa ju hin don tahih o, kanu ka o kangai ngam poi*' (which translate to 'father, please don't drink anymore, I can't hear my mom cry no more') allude to one's love for one's parents and the potential harms drinking causes the family, especially women.
5. Johnny Lever is a well-known Indian actor and comedian.
6. In 2017, five people died in an unfortunate case after drinking alcohol in Manipur, which fuelled intense public debates and discussions. The alcohol was found to have been contaminated with methanol.
7. The Angamis from Khonoma are said to have acquired the knowledge of making distilled liquor, known as *zuharo* in Tenyidie, from Manipur (Hutton 1921, 97).

8. The use of locally available herbs and plants in the brewing process is well-known and well-documented. Hodson noted the usage of ‘jungle herbs for flavouring’ in Longoi, a Tangkhul village, and datura leaves by the Kukis (Hudson 1911, 61).
9. Some Angamis might have acquired the yeast starter cakes from Manipur, though they also knew how to make them from some jungle herbs. Hutton writes, ‘The yeast used for making rice beer is sometimes bought in cakes from Manipur’ (Hutton 1921, 97).
10. Earlier, the paddy would be wrapped in *reibeihou*, which have a large surface area and resemble banana leaves, to germinate.
11. In Joh shudi, through the act of the bride offering rice beer made with rice sourced from her parents’ fields to her husband’s kith and kin, she becomes accepted into his family and clan. It is a performance of reciprocity (see Punii and Meyieho 2020).
12. A good source on the importance of the Feasts of Merit and rice beer among the Poumai Nagas is a documentary called *Rone* made by Sophy Lasuh from the YouTube channel MondaytoSaturday.
13. See ‘Couple hosts ‘Feast of Merit’ after more than decade in Zhavame’ (Krocha 2021).
14. Refer to The British Museum and Himalaya Cambridge. Also, refer to Hazarika (2013): *Cord-impressed Pottery in Neolithic-Chalcolithic Context of Eastern India*.
15. While the latter are called Kabui (and are fine with being called this), the Rongmeis from the hills do not identify with that term. A hill Rongmei friend of mine narrated an incident where he threatened to beat up someone because he was called “Kabui” multiple times despite repeated polite requests to refer to him as “Rongmei”.
16. The former has a much larger community while the latter is a small minority.
17. A Chakhesang man from Chizami (Nagaland) who I met at Tezpur for work in 2023 told me that he and his friends used to visit the neighbouring village of Laii (Manipur) to procure distilled liquor. Chizami and Laii are bordering villages.
18. This is made with badam, chopped green chillies, onions and chives, *mangan*, and seasoned with mustard oil, salt, and lemon juice squeezed on top.

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