

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of Marriage Payments

The custom of bride price is one type of marriage payment which dates back as far as 3000 BCE and which has been practiced by various ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs and Incas (Anderson 2007:152). This custom has sometimes been practiced together with dowry in some societies. On the other hand, Spiro (1975) has argued that either dowry or bride price has been classified for dower. Historically to date, dower was revealed in the “Ancient Near East (Judea, Sumeria, Babylonia, Arabia and Athens), among the Teutonic peoples in the early Middle Ages (Westermarck 1922: 415-423), in Medieval England, and Colonial America (Queen and Habenstein 1967:228, 285)” (Spiro 1975: 91). The most up to date study done by Anderson (2007) notes that this practice has declined after ancient civilization, modernization and capitalist development, but overall “the decline of bride price is not well understood” (2007: 17).

The basic definition of four types of marriage payments can be observed from Papps (1983) as: bride price or bride wealth (the groom’s family payment to the bride’s family), dowry (payment from the bride’s family to the newly married couple), dower (payment from the groom’s family to the newly married couple) and groom price or groom wealth (the bride’s family payment to the groom’s family). Among these four marriage payments, the greatest attention is paid to bride price and dowry. Particularly, the practice of bride price has been studied by many disciplines including anthropology, economics, feminism and development, analyzing the phenomenon from different angles, and often arriving at different interpretations and conclusions as to its function, role within the family, property relations, or gender relations including economical and status negotiation and its related impact on society.

Papps observes bride price and dowry play as “the more common institutions (among dower and groom price/wealth) and, since they appear to be connected with the giving and receiving of a bride” that have linked with “the popular mind with the

subjection of women". She unveils the relationship of bride price and dowry, conducting cases study in a Palestinian village, which, she asserts, is a lot more complex than that "selling and buying of wives". It is important to note that we might immediately reflect "a positive value" over bride price comparing dowry or the other way round, saying both serves the same kind of payments for marriage. However, she affirms Goody (in Papps 1984: 203) that bride price and dowry "are far from being mirror opposites". She conveys this as

"Goody, along with many other anthropologists, sees dowry as an ante-mortem inheritance – the bride share her own family's assets. This interpretation appears to me to be essentially correct. It is supported by the observation that in almost all cases in which dowry is paid, it is the property of the wife – although it may be used in common in the new household – and when the marriage ends reverts to the original family. Thus on divorce the wife will leave the marital household taking the dowry with her, and if she dies while still married the dowry is inherited by her children or by her own family rather by her husband... By contrast, the bride price is much more likely to remain where it was paid whatever happens to the marriage." (ibid)

Although most anthropologists and economists attempted to demonstrate and give a clear identification of bride price/bride wealth, dowry, dower and groom price/groom wealth, the ethnographic approach of Spiro (1975), from a cross cultural viewpoint, highlights the ambiguity and the vagueness of all these four types of marriage payments in the theoretical discussion. He tells us dower and dowry are viewed as three commonality shared institutions – one; distribution of property at the time of wedding which either parents of the bridegroom present as a kind of property, two; practicing as a pre-mortem inheritance, three; comprising de facto conjugal estate (Rawle 1914 in Spiro). However, he reminds us that none of these attributions can be standardized when cross culturally examined. For instance, he observes traditional English law as the dower was not comprising part of the conjugal estate, "rather, it was set aside for the bride in the event that she became a widow" or in a similar case, the dowry is contributed by the bride but often set aside for the groom or his family. Despite these two marriage payments being brought in principle by either bridegroom

family as a form of property for the newlywed couple as a sort of property, these payments in fact frequently play more as a direct or indirect offer to the family of the lineage of the receiver side. Then, these dower and dowry functions are not so distance from bride price or groom price. However, he reflects considerably on why the bride price is discussed under the dimension of a property institution and the dower is discussed in anthropological discussion as a rare institution.

His ethnographic work in Burma (Myanmar) further refined the terminology for these four types of marriage payments, summarized here under

Dower: is a means for economical and social protection of the bride where there is no gain and loss from the groom. Although hypergamy is a determinant of dowry, hypogamy does not influence dower. Either way, the dower is “de facto part of the conjugal estate, de jure is the property of the wife” (Spiro 1975: 93).

Bride price/ wealth: is commonly practiced in societies where women play important roles in agriculture and children takes important role to perform lineage and ancestral rituals of the groom/husband side. Thus, the bride price payment indicates a compensation for the loss of labor and children bearing capacity of the bride by the groom’s family to the bride’s family. Nevertheless, for example in central Thailand bride price payment is considerably important in the theoretical discussion of bride price. In this case, the giver and receiver are similar, as in all those societies that practice bride price except when the purpose, that is, the objective, is a payment or compensation of the bride’s family for the groom to use his parent in law’s house, agriculture equipment and “his descendants a share in the estate of the bride’s parents since daughters alone inherit” (ibid) so functionally equivalent as Burmese dower. In most cases hypogamy is not a determinant of the bride price. The underlying cause that most Burmese unpracticed bride price customs is that it implies “restoring the prestige loss of the parent’s but as an inducement for them to approve of the marriage” by rather replying on dowry as a mechanism of status-wealth exchange between the bridegroom sides.

Dowry: complex hypergamy is a sufficient determinant of dowry among Burman, especially among urban settlers and elites. Since colonialism was introduced, a class stratum was more fluid among Burman and the marriage itself was not that valuable as before but the class adjustment was. In his ethnographic work in central

Burma/Myanmar, Spiro (1975) analyzes dowry, as wittingly or unwittingly, entailing a means of exchange between the groom's status and the bride's family wealth. The motive of the wealth receivers is not just to restore material loss but to gain social prestige or status. It then leads the wealth givers, the bride family, overwhelmed with debts, especially in India and China¹.

Groom price/wealth: Spiro assumes it is likely to be exercised in "matrilineal and uxori-local societies in which the family and/or lineage of the husband lose, and the family and/or lineage of the wife gain the husband's valuable productive and reproductive powers" (ibid: 114). but there is a lack of evidence to back this up. It is also possible that the payment of dowry could be literally groom price/wealth.

Having noted the clarity observed by Papps (1984) and Spiro (1975), the bride price and dowry denotation as well as interpretation become interesting to explore into the context of the Chin. Reviewing available written literature of the Chin, which is mostly contributed by missionary institutions, the Chin are apparently a bride price practicing society thus Chin women are articulated as victims of a so-called primitive and backward culture. Claims are made that the bride price practice has impacted those women population negatively, leaving them vulnerable, hindering women's liberation, and overall lacking in recognition to their personhood. Further, Chin women are in such perspectives articulated as "slaves" for the society in a sense of "buying and selling" through bride price practice. Thus, abolishing such a "subversive" traditional ritual practice became a priority agenda. As Anderson (2007) and Papps (1983) remind, social characteristics in a certain economic and political context are apparent determinants of bride price practice.

This study attempts to analyze and examine the role of Chin bride price practices and related issues on three levels. Firstly, it will place bride price in the context of constantly changing historical condition. Then it will assess the impact of bride price in the shifting roles of Chin women alongside modernization and Christianization. Finally, it will look at the individual negotiation of bride price both economically and culturally. By employing a feminist perspective of bride price practices, this study is particularly interested in paying attention to the silencing of Chin women's experiences, whose

¹ See Mandelbaum (1970) in Spiro for Indian dowry. Yang (1969) in Spiro indicates the practice of dowry in China is abolished by the communist regime.

voices struggle to be heard in a broadly male-oriented oral culture which struggles to allow space for them. By breaking the silence surrounding Chin women's stories, this study argues that these women are active agents who themselves decide whether to practice the bride price culture and they are those who themselves negotiate and contest their gender power through this practice both economically and culturally.

1.2 Understanding Bride Price Practices in Paletwa

In 2012, amidst the communal violence between the Rohingya and Rakhine, a Chin bride's father in Paletwa, in Myanmar's Southern Chin State asked for 20 lakhs in Myanmar Kyat² (equivalent to approximately 2,000 US\$) to the groom's family as a bride price. This shocked many in a community where the average bride price ranges between 5-6 lakhs in Kyat (approximately equivalent to 500-600US\$). On the other hand, in May 2013 another bride's father in the same community asked for only 5 thousands Kyat (equivalent to approximately 5US\$). These two radically different cases have shocked the Chin of the Paletwa community. Although traditionally it is uncommon for Chin women to compete for their bride price, the interest that these cases have generated points to how the practice of bride price is not only of interest to the couples involved but increasingly has political value. For example, this issue has been taken up with interest by many Chin nationalists who have focused their concern on these circumstances as a matter of ethnic politics in line with the state's hegemonic nation state building outcome. This is because neither the Burman nor the Rakhine pay the bride price nor do they usually practice dowry nowadays. Practicing bride price has therefore become an important cultural marker for the Khumi to differentiate themselves from the Rakhine and Burman people present in the area and to thus maintain a distinct cultural identity in the context of Burmanization. This is particularly important because in Paletwa Christianity alone does not work as an independent political identity marker as it does in other parts of Chin State.

In order to understand these differences, the geopolitics of Paletwa need to be taken into consideration on many levels, not only limited to ethnic politics but also in respect of complex economies that affected many other things, including but not limited

² Myanmar Kyat henceforth referred to as MMK. Please note that Lakh is a common denomination used to indicate a hundred thousand MMK, therefore 1 lakh = 100,000 MMK, 2 lakhs = 200,000 MMK etc.

to bride prices (see also in Kyin Lam Mang 2014; CHKC 2010; Brown 1960). For example, during my research in May-July 2013, some shop owners in the Paletwa municipal market explained how they saw their business severely affected by communal violence in Rakhine state, a major gateway for trading beyond Chin state and Rakhine state. Generally, with regards to ethnic groups, the population component of Paletwa is approximately half Chin and half Rakhine, with the exception of a few Muslim and Burmese. The disadvantages incurred in trading following communal violence can be categorized according to ethnic grouping with Muslims on the top, the Chin in the middle and the Rakhine on the bottom – all crucially depended on each other's ethnic groups' socio-economic network and alliance in Rakhine state. The Chin missionary-cum-nationalists have claimed that Paletwa is in need of “taking care” otherwise their fellows are under the economic “trapping” of the Rakhine business setting.

It should be mentioned in this context that the Rakhine are similarly viewed as Burman³ by the Chin, due to their cultural and religious Buddhist biases. A 38 years old Chin man in Paletwa explained this view to me saying that “both of them (Burman and Rakhine) are brotherly knotting with the sentiment of Buddhism, that is what we the Chin are different from them”. The Chin on the other hand uses Christianity as their religious and ethnic identity for their strategic separation from “others”. In addition, Chin nationalists in Paletwa in particular paid attention to Buddhism as the state's unitary mechanism of nation-state building and view the economic capital influence of the Rakhine as an important generator of the state's hegemonic mechanism so far. In this context, the politics of language and of the practices of bride price setting both provide strong empirical discursive evidence in Paletwa. It is also in this sense interesting to ask what makes the young generation of Chin in Paletwa by far more comfortable speaking in Rakhine than the Khumi Chin dialect.

With regards to the discourse around bride price, a good starting point for the present discussion is to take a critical approach to narratives provided by Chin missionary-cum-nationalists. This should be kept in mind in any objective interpretation of the bride price subject. Many Chin people are not only confidently using the word *a-twin-phoe* from Rakhine and Burman but some also are directly copying the cultural

³ The majority ethnic group in modern Myanmar State is referred as Burman and Burmese is to refer the language.

content Rakhine and Burman's *ka doh kyae* (offering cash as a homage fee to the bride's parent by the groom or the bridegroom together). For instance, they are imitating *ka-doh-kyae* (a homage fee to the bride's family) and offering some amount of cash instead of following the traditional Khumi Chin ritual conduct of *vang*. Ritually, the marriage ceremony is conducted by paying *vang*⁴ by the groom's family to the bride family. The items of *vang* include *tavi* (spears), *charang* (knives), *rkadui* (eggs), and sometime *leinglo* (a sling used to carry the bride when she was infant), representing symbols for social exchange, that is the bride's rite of passage that she is becoming a member of her groom's family and a means for declaring the conjugal marriage. The bride's family in performing their filial piety normally would transfer her *ka tawi* (personal present) such as feminine costumes, accessories and blankets together at the end of wedding ceremony or with holding a feast for paying respect to the groom's family. Unless the groom could afford to, the installment could be followed years later. Among the Chin, fellows who practice *ka doh kyae* rather than *vang* are criticized by missionary-cum-nationalists as "cultural traitors" under double influenced of Rakhine and Burman.

1.3 Understanding the Chin in Context of the Burmanization Process

The formation of the current Chin state in Myanmar occurred after the British separation of Burma/Myanmar as East India in 1947 (Suantak 2007), then splitting the Chin population into three modern states – Mizoram state in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Chin people residing in Chin state in Myanmar only constitute one fifth of the total Chin's population (ZTC 2012:1) with many also scattered in Sagaing division, Magwe division and Rakhine state. They are one of the officially recognized groups known as *htar ne taing yin tar* (Indigenous People)⁵ and one of "national

⁴ *Vang* is Khumi dialectical term and can be preferably translated as the bride price, which include *mui vang* (a major bride price, similar to the Hakha *man pi*) and *ta moe te* (a minor bride price, similar to the Hakha *man te*). If 5 lakh Kyat is asked for *Vang*, 3 lakh Kyat will be entitled as *mui vang* and 2 lakh will be *ta moe te*, for example.

⁵ Indigenous People are defined as "nationalities, keep on dwelling in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar continually after recognizing the country as of their mother land..." see more in The Law safeguarding the rights of Indigenous People published by Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together, 2015, although the content has been controversial.

aces”⁶in Myanmar, and three Ethnic Ministers for the Chin are appointed for outside Chin state, such as in Sagaing division, Magwe division and Rakhine state. It is important to note here that the State controversially put 53 sub groups of Chin in its official “135 national races” (Gravers 2012; Sakhong 2008; Lois Desaine 2011, Federal Journal 2012; Rogers 2012) as different ethnic groups which against the view of Chin themselves. The result of Gender and Development Institution’s ongoing project on census and its public consultation along with Chin political parties’ engagement is to hopefully fill the gap of State’s classification of Chin groups and their self-determination in the future.

Although usually this population is referred to as the “Chin” indicating the whole ethnic group since in British colonial times, they are sometime officially referred to based on each of their geography location such as Matu Chin, Hakha Chin, Asho Chin and so on (Lehman 1970). Nevertheless, it is also common that the Chin refer to themselves as *Khumi* or *Senthang* or *Mara* or *Lautu* or *Vaiphai* and so on. Also, as a matter of internal politics, there is a discourse on whether to call this population either “Chin” or “Zomi”.

The most appraisal given for the Chin groups categorization is in the work of Sakhong which he groups 6 major groups, namely, *Asho*, *Cho (Sho)*, *Khuami (M’ro)*, *Laimi*, *Miso (Lushai)* and *Zomi (Kuki)* (Sakhong 2010: 241). In contemporary social setting in urban areas and or most places where missionary success their movement, clanship, lineage and kinship issues are not paid as much attention as they were in the pre-colonial time. Oral culture is a feature of the elders, who noted that clanship connectedness was important for socio-political alliance so as to find related clan members for marriage. A modern institution result class strata fluid and thus individual interest of alliance building is more happened. For instance, a groom from a wealthy family married to a bride who has a medical degree or the other way round.

⁶ The state officially categorizes these ethnic “national races” as Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan. In Burmese text, *taing yin tar* means Indigenous and *lu myo* for people. It is theoretically and practically confusing by using *taing yin tar lu myo* in Burmese with national races for English text.

Geographically, Chin state is located in the North-Western part of Myanmar, constituting nine townships – *Hakha, Tlantlang, Falam, Tidem, Tonzang, Matupi, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Paletwa*. It is crucial to underline that there are Chin groups who settled outside Chin state such as *Asho, Mro, Sum Tu, Lai tu* and vice versa. Due to distinct dialects, these sub groups of Chin occasionally employ the Burmese language as a means to communicate with each other. Nevertheless, all of them belong to the same ethnic nationality by connecting through their similarities rather than difference. Sakhong (2008) has explained the notion of ethnic nationality using Swedish anthropologist Adam Smith's six main features; a common proper name, a myth of common descent, a link with a homeland, collective historical memories, one or more elements of common culture and a sense of solidarity (see also in Anderson 1991).

In examining the dichotomous relations of state-center versus the Chin-periphery and domination versus resistance, the impact of colonialism and western missionaries are key. Before the invasion of British colonialism, as Chin scholar the like Sakhong argue, the Chin were never part of any neighboring kingdoms and had not been significantly influenced by those major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (Sakhong 2008 & 2010; Rogers 2012; ZTC 2012 & 1999; CHRO 2012). But the Chin according to Sakhong enjoyed their *phung lam* (way of life) until the British invasion. During colonization, significant numbers of Chin were converted to Christianity although the bottom line of conversion was interpreted and therefore argued differently by Chin theologians and secular scholars. The narrative of Christianity has contributed to what for the Chin is a concrete “powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (Scott 2009: 319) against the Burman's introduction of Buddhism as one characteristic of modern-nation state. If Scott is correct in analyzing the “hill” people's adoption of Christianity for their “particular purpose”, Christianity then granted apparently a proxy for Chin-Burman nationalism.

The Chin was one of the four ethnic groups who cooperated with Burman representative General Aung San to achieve Independence from the British. The Chin was convinced by his promise to build a secular modern state, in Sakhong's words with “a clear policy of state-building based on the principles of equality and unity in diversity” (Sakhong 2008 & 2010). After the assassination of General Aung San, his version of the constitution was transformed by U Nu in 1961 and it was declared that

the modern nation State must be built on the basis of Buddhism. In direct response to U Nu's declaration, the majority of Kachin and Chin who self-identified as Christian on the dual basis of religion and ethnic identity, organized armed rebellions against the central government.

In the midst of this political chaos, General Ne Win carried out a coup d'état and introduced the Burmese way of Socialism (Physicians for Human Rights 2011; Karen Human Rights Groups 2010; Rogers 2012; Pau 1988; Sakhong 2008; ZTC 2012; Walton 2012; Ni Kio 2012; Amporn 2008; Sachiko 2008; Pinkaew 2006). The Burmese language "*Myanmar sar*" was officially introduced to the whole nation, and Burman economic practice and culture was extended to social and political domain of non-Burman groups. He tried to make a "homogenous unitary state" by banning all other ethnic languages and stripped ethnic groups of all civil and political rights; pushing through projects of a unitary state onto non-Burman groups who aim to achieve multi-ethnic nationalism, multiculturalism, and religious plurality but to control diversity (Sakhong 2010).

Meanwhile, Burmanization was further facilitated by the state over ethnic groups in the periphery area of modern Myanmar. This was done through prolonged military rule of various degrees, and ending up with extreme violence such as "rape (of non-Burman ethnic women) as weapon of the war (to non-Burman ethnic armed groups)" (Physician of Human Rights 2010; Karen Human Rights Groups 2010; CHRO 2012; The Women League of Chinland 2009; Thanakha team 2010; Walton 2012; Pinkaew 2006; Birmanie-France & Swedish Burma Committee 2012). In this context little is known beyond Chin Human Rights Organization (henceforth referred to as CHRO) documentation⁷ on marriage of ethnic women to Burman soldiers and achieving Burmanization in the marital sphere. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explained marriage as "...the only means of integration in community" (cited in Gamble 2000) which put women under male authority, while Mitchell maintains it as a universal way placing women as an exchange object constituting the basis of patriarchy (cited in Humm 1995).

⁷ This documentation is available upon request.

In this study, I focus on the Khumi Chin at Paletwa in southern part of Chin State in Myanmar. It is my not my intention to neglect the unification of the Chin ethnic nationality but rather to acknowledge its heterogeneity with regards to the internal differences of the Khumi Chin, particularly understood along policies of Burmanization. It is my contention therefore that within this context, the bride price practice is a cultural means of political resistance. It is relevant to mention that other sub-groups of Chin are not extensively performing bride price practices, as often Christianity provides a more immediate and strategically effective tool for resisting State's hegemony. It is important to underline here that in the context of the Khumi Chin in Paletwa, where religious plurality and social web are much intertwined with the Rakhine in day to day basis, Christianity is unlikely to serve as effective institution as in other parts of the Chin community. Nevertheless, I shall refer the Khumi Chin throughout this study as the Chin.

1.4 Problem Identification

Most previous studies on this subject in anthropology, economics, development and feminist studies have approached the bride price practice in various societies from different angles and arriving in each case to unique conclusions and suggesting further studies. Also Chin theologians' interpretation about the role of Chin women in bride price practices is relevant in this study to draw attention in contextualizing the abstract form of bride price understanding into a specific Chin context, or the other way around. There are several classical anthropological studies which attempt to understand the function of bride price and its role in interfamily relationships and the impact on class status and economic stratification (Spiro 1975; Kressel 1977; Eriksen 2010). Although classical anthropological work has contributed some knowledge to the function of bride price until 1980s, this understanding may not fit in our contemporary time and contexts as the interfamily relationship, class status and economic stratification have changed over time.

Whereas anthropologists' approach to bride price studies is often through a structural and functional lens, economists have explored it from wealth exchange/transaction and property rights aspects (Papps 1983; Schlegel and Eloul 1988; Anderson 2007). In Papps's model of bride price and marriage market represented by a

supply and demand curve, a particular social condition such as a “high quality of the bride” is an important determinant in bride price market. Additionally, the personal characteristics of the husband are also counted as one important variation of the supply curve. The application of bride price offers a space for both economic and social negotiation between the two sets of families (Papps 1983). In addition, the economists’ scope directly links to the anthropological aspect that the economics of bride price is always bound with social characteristics.

Development practitioners put forward a more critical analysis of bride price. This angle is quite similar to certain feminist perspectives on practicing bride price customs leading to a loss of autonomy, the loss of agency and a form of man’s property. In this mode of thought, despite the original concept of the bride price being positive, modernization has resulted in the practice being subverted and destroyed and led to the creation of marginalized subjects. This perspective can be found for example in research done in Uganda by Hague and Thiara (2009) and in Anderson’s (2007) economic explanation.

It also is interpreted as a way of purchasing not only women’s sexual and reproductive rights, but also economic capabilities, which affects women’s interfamily relationship and impact society destructively as a matter of unintended consequences. Hence, the practice of bride price is seen as an economic form of gender oppression and sexual abuse, particularly affecting women’s welfare in both domestic and public spheres. This criticism is, in a sense, demonstrating a lack of specific social meaning of bride price practice, standardizing the definition of “public/private” sphere, subjecting women as vulnerable objects and intensifying with discursive development measures.

One feminist anthropologist in particular has paid particular attention to marriage as a political domain where women and men establish relations with other individuals but which also mutes the voices of women over their bride price (Moore 1990: 37; Neuman 2010; Esterberg 2002). According to Moore (1990), a marriage payment or bride price study that reflects the women’s point of view is necessary to provide a better understanding of the issues. It therefore seems inaccurate to say that women who engage in bride price negotiation are objects, and changing the methodology to study this subject is necessary.

The theoretical paradigms mentioned above provide a context in which to study the practice of bride price in Chin, noting the complexities and variations in the Chin cultural practices. Together with my preliminary fieldwork in Paletwa, I also worked with an NGO on a project about awareness rising of “The Rights of Women Participation in Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Project” as civil society response in May-June 2013. I have noted that the response of Khumi members is to appreciate the practice of bride price regardless of gender, age and socio-economic background, although it brings more economic burden and vulnerability as its consequence.

Ideally and practically, neither party of the bridegroom is “profiting” from the bride price payment or dowry. Owing to the norm of rituals on bride price payments, the groom is not expected to bargain the price as the common saying goes that “you can ask anything except the stars and the moon” during bride price discussion. Public shame can result in not following this so the groom needs to pay as asked. So, many grooms are ended up with debt for bride price. The bride’s side normally does not gain anything from the bride price payment. Most of the cash from the groom is spent on the wedding ceremony they are responsible for. Unless rice and curry are offered at the wedding reception, gossip will ensue saying they “look like Rakhine or Burman wedding”. They even need to invest *ka tawi* (*lat saung* in Burmese or personal present in English) for their daughter so there is nothing left of it for both parties to profit from.

To hold a marriage ceremony, both sides of the bridegroom need to prepare financially. Then, borrowing cash with high interest rates often becomes unavoidable. Marrying a Burman soldier or the groom from outside cultural members is much easier to bypass the bride price. This is because among the Khumi there is a common sense that a Khumi woman will follow the groom’s custom. Either way can be said that women are not obligated to carry the duties of maintaining patriarchal system.

Inter-marriage ensures many young men and women more able to avoid such economic burden. Many young men migrate to *Pha-kant* in Kachin state or Malaysia to seek economic opportunities while most of their counterpart women remain in their homeland in Paletwa. Although there are no official statistics showing the precise number of men and women migrating, some believe that 60% of households are led by women in both Rakhine state and Paletwa area, due to men’s migration whilst northern part of Chin state migration is mostly by women. Tentatively, the population of women

is out number in the marriage market in southern axis of Chin but men are out number at the north. Until one is conducting such statistics, we may partially rely on a visual documentation production of recent Thompson and Reuters Foundation⁸ and publicized about young Chin women migration in the north.

Linking this bride price practice with military regime's propaganda, according to unofficial "instruction announcement" documents obtained by CHRO⁹, the level of rewards for soldiers who marry non-Burman bride varies according to the bride's status in the ethnicity. The document details payment as follows: "ordinary women – 500 kyats", "daughter of high social status in village/town – 1000 kyats", "women with university degree – 1500 kyats" and "who is a daughter/niece of an educated man with traditional noble Chin ancestry – 1700 kyats" and reminds Burman soldiers to follow the slogan and instruction of "to assimilate and conquer other peoples through used of people/by using people".

The Chin case is in many ways different, or say moderate, from other ethnic areas, in particular there are differences to areas with active civil war such as on the Eastern boarder of Myanmar and Thailand. In the Chin case, the level of the State's Burmanization and consequent ethnic appropriation works in different and perhaps more complicated ways, entrenching itself slowly within the social fabric and complex political path. In those other areas, as many scholars and NGOs have already pointed out, the way of Burmanization is often more extreme, for example among other things using "rape as weapon of war" (Physician of Human Rights 2010; Karen Human Rights Groups 2010; CHRO 2012; The Women League of Chinland 2009; SHRF and SWAN 2002; Thanakha team 2010; Walton 2012; Pinkaew 2006; Birmanie-France & Swedish Burma Committee 2012; Gravers 2012). For this particular location in Paletwa, inter ethnic marriage payments – Burmese's dower and Chin's bride price – is one dimension to examine the level of Burmanization as referred to CHRO's documentation.

According to Spiro's (2007) exploration in the context of Burma, dower is used as a kind of reservation for women's economic security and preventing their husbands' extramarital affairs. In his over-generalized interpretation Burmese men are described as having a tendency towards philandering, and thus Burmese women are protected from

⁸ See more at <http://news.trust.org/item/20160606090339-izz2r/>

⁹ The documentation is available upon request.

economic and social insecurity by means of dower (Spiro 1975: 96-97). Whilst economic inferiority and poverty are a universal social problem, women are disproportionately affected. The feminization of poverty is less understood in some communities than others. Furthermore, although men had greater opportunity to access modern education in British colonial times, women in the contemporary context also have a similar length of access to education. With better education, women tend to have a space to empower themselves by earning more money and having a certain status.

Finally, although the country's political context has been transforming into a democratic society from military regime ruling starting from 2010, a negative perception of marriage between Chin women and Burman soldiers is deeply rooted in Chin society. Human rights working agencies are urging the Burmese military to stop the unwritten policy of forcing Burman soldier to marry ethnic women and using rape as weapon of political appropriation (see Thanakha team 2010; SHRF and SWAN 2002; Karen Human Rights Group 2010; Rogers 2012; Women League of Chinland 2009; Physicians for Human Rights 2012; CHRO 2012). There is a dearth of academic thought and writing on this issue. In particular, this paper will investigate the conjuncture of Burmanization and Chin marriage arrangement.

1.5 Research Questions

1.5.1 How and due to what historical conditions has the meaning of traditional bride price shifted among the Chin, and how has this become politicized, particularly in the context of Burmanization?

1.5.2 How have modernization and Christianization impacted the roles of women in family, and how have such changes affected the practices of bride price among the Khumi Chin?

1.5.3 How have Chin women of different socio-economic strata tactically negotiated, re-negotiated and contested their bride price both economically and culturally?

1.6 Research Objectives

1.6.1 To understand the changing meaning of bride price practices in historical context

1.6.2 To examine the impact of modernization and Christianization to the bride price practice in the context of Chin

1.6.3 To listen to the voices of Chin women and analyze their active negotiation of the bride price practice

1.7 Research Methodology

1.7.1 Research Sites

This research has been carried out in two different sites. The first is the physical area of Paletwa in southern Chin State, which was my primary field site. The second is a complex cyber space and network as an alternative site to gather and follow up additional information from those who are outside Paletwa, outside Chin State and beyond Myanmar. Paletwa as a primary field site was selected for several reasons. Primarily this was done because the Chin in Paletwa are the most significant Chin sub group who collectively practice bride price, where its geography and social political setting is located to an extent in contestation of the State's occupation of 19 out of total 46 military camps in Chin State (CHRO 2012: 25). Secondly, there are many Chin missionary-cum-nationalists whom both individually and collectively are striving for mass conversions. This is all interestingly intertwined with the social economic activities as well as with the Rakhine ethnic people on a day to day basis.

Geographically, Paletwa is located at the margin of Chin State and Rakhine State and directly borders with Bangladesh and Mizoram state in India. Due to the lack of inland transportation in Chin State, the major route to reaching Paletwa from Hakha, the capital of Chin state, is through Magwe division and Mandalay division. Using public transportation, such as a bus, the journey from Hakha to Paletwa takes one day and one night to Mandalay then changing buses to Kyautdaw in Rakhine state for another one day and one night. After Kyautdaw, a boat needs to be taken which normally takes 6 hours to reach Paletwa. If travelling from within Chin state, it otherwise takes 15-20 days trekking from Hakha to northern part of Paletwa Township.

Chin State is referred to by government staff as the “Siberia of Burma/Myanmar”. Whether for promotion or punishment, a Burman government staff who is transferred to Paletwa is perceived as *tet tar tae* (better than the worse) because Paletwa gives a closer Burmaness atmosphere due to Rakhine residents. Half of Paletwa’s population is made up of members of Rakhine ethnic groups whereas there are a hundred Muslim communities also living together. Owing to the presence of numerous Rakhine households there are a lot more pagodas and monasteries, tea shops, *mont ti* (Rakhine noodle) shops, small vendors’ shops, goldsmiths and small-scale-traders than in other part of Chin State. Most importantly, the majority of government staff are in Rakhine which makes it crucial for the Chin to be able to communicate predominantly in Rakhine rather than only Burmese. During my preliminary field research, a Chin man had explained that:

“Hakha is very far away from us (Khumi in Paletwa). I have learned from school text book that Hakha is our capital city and notes in newspaper and magazine that Chin state is made up with mountains, chilly breeze, rhododendron and cherry blossom in Christmas season December. Here there are not many hilly mountains, mostly with warm air and directly on the bank of Kaladan River and reach the sea in one day to Sittwe (the capital town of Rakhine state), no cherries and Christmas event is not that popular. I wish to go to Hakha to enjoy the capital town. I know it is a costly trip. Mobility to Sittwe (capital town of Rakhine state) is always reasonable and practical option for us. Hakha is only in imagined capital town like an ordinary person like me in Paletwa.” (a 35 years old Khumi man in Paletwa, May 2013)

During colonial times, the British set their outpost in Paletwa (Brown 1960; Vumson 1986). The purpose was to administrator the “Arakhan Hill Tracts” area more effectively although there were not many useful resources in Paletwa. Some Rakhine scholars however seem to have taken British colonial records to mean that Paletwa is part of Rakhine’s territory and the Chin are one of their “hill people”. If one has a chance to talk to lay Rakhine in Kyautdaw, Sittwe or Myae Pone, they frequently describe the Chin as “non-poisonous” people. This is done in comparison to the Muslim in Rakhine, who are perceived and described as more harmful than the Chin. However,

the Burman are generally perceived by the Rakhine as “toxic” people due to their politically dominant role. Nonetheless according to the Chin in Paletwa this region¹⁰ was never part of any Rakhine kingdoms (Federal Journal 2013).

Within Chin ethnicity, some tensions exist between the Khumi Chin and the Mara Chin in part due to issues around territorial boundary demarcations from a few decades ago. Each party has their own map that shows different understandings of villages, population, forest, streams and so on. The Mara group also applied to the Chin state government asking to put two/three villages, which have a majority Khumi population into their “Maraland”, resulting in a boycott from Khumi leaders. Later on, political parties had to solve the problems based on a rumor, as it was claimed that the Mara upstream had dropped “poison” in the river to make the Khumi drink it in the lower stream of the Kaladan River. In this context, the practice of bride price is symbolically effective in both the cultural and political realm to differentiate themselves from the Rakhine and further identify as a unique group separate from the Mara and other groups of Chin.

According to literature of Chin missionaries, the Khumi Chin are the most underdeveloped group among the Chin due to the fact that large-scale mass conversion did not happen there. Since the 1980s, missionary have been intensely involving themselves in the area. By taking the measure of still carrying out “primitive” cultural practices such as bride price, the paradoxical policy of missionary-cum-nationalists recognized the Khumi Chin in need of assistance and rescue from Rakhine domination. As a result, and interesting enough, it is widespread practice to sponsor Khumi young men and women to study theology and provide financial assistance to implant the missionary work to “their” people. One can observe pastors in northern part of Chin state

¹⁰The Khumi Chin’s mythical-story-telling such as “*Pajau Keung*”, “*Anglo Tui hawi*”, “*Anglo Kunjy*”, “*Jeupuchy*” (ACKH 2010) demonstrate their origin, mass migration during natural disaster, resettling in a cave during a flood, losing some of their brothers and sisters on the way back to home, a girl was searching for his mother and the bird told to gave up because she already reached to the bank of the sea in Rakhine and so on.

advocating to their members beyond Chin state to put regularly their cash into a “missionary box” prepared by churches for Paletwa.



Figure 1.1 Map of Myanmar (source: United Nations)

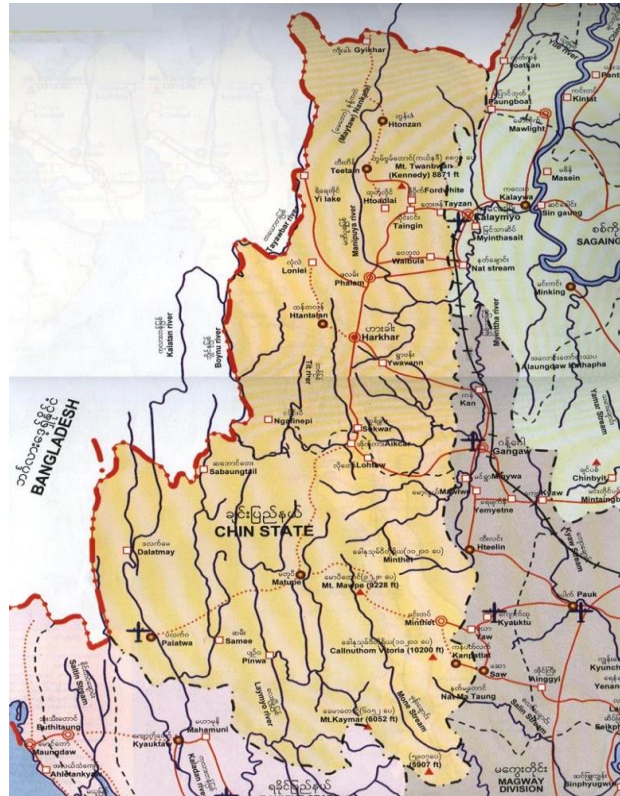


Figure 1.2 Map of current Chin state in Myanmar (source: www.myanmar.net)

1.7.2 Unit and Level of Analysis

This study places particular emphasis on Khumi Chin women who thus constitute its main unit of analysis. Each of them is diverse in respect of age, marital status, family condition, economic power, religious background, cultural awareness and political ideologies. Yet, it is not accurate to generalize all Khumi women's experiences, in that their experience and views about bride prices are not homogenous.

Three levels of analysis are attempted in this study. Firstly, this paper links the changing historical conditions to changing meanings and symbols of the Chin bride price practice. On another level this study examine the impact of modernization and Christianization on bride price practices, and examines the shifting roles of Chin women within the context of family change along modernization. Lastly, this dissertation will attempt to give a voice to individual Chin women's choice and tactics of negotiation, re-negotiation and contestation over their bride price both in economic and cultural terms.

1.7.3 Methods of Data Collection

Field research was the primary data collection method in conducting this study, and documentary research was the secondary method. The two are interdependent as well as at times conflicting with each other. Documentary research was mostly done before entering into the field. Most of this was from archives, web sites, journals and reports from UN and NGOs and exile groups outside Myanmar. Much of the documentary research I have done outside Myanmar comes from a perspective of human rights and popular democracy. Although this provided insightful information, which I could not have otherwise accessed in Myanmar at the time of my research, it limits in understanding of more insightful social meaning.

With regards to my field research, I have employed a variety of methods such as semi-structured interviews/in-depth interviews¹¹, key informant interviews, narratives of storytelling and participant observation. A few things should be said with regards to being a Chin researcher employing ethnography to study members of her own community. According to anthropological definitions, ethnography is “the study of the customary social behaviors of identifiable groups of people” (Esterberg 2002: 59 et al Wolcott 1999; 252-253). I am critical about previous perspectives on the Khumi Chin in Paletwa where their position, in a sense, was seen as considerably inferior, weak and “still primitive” and therefore developing them through Christianity. Although Esterberg maintains that “ethnographic researchers were not encouraged to study themselves or people like themselves”, it is the risk I have taken to get the “first-first experience” information through which to examine the previous knowledge. Thus, by employing this method, I hope to “dispel stereotypes or help increase understandings of the group (I am) studying” with “the explicit aims of giving voice or bearing witness their experience” and choices (Neuman 2006 ; Moore 1973).

In this way, I entered Paletwa for the first time in May 2013, followed in July 2013 as a second time, with willingness to identify my research problem with local people. That was a time to test whether I would be welcomed to study in Paletwa. Particular personal constraints existed for me, as I am the daughter of a Mara father and a Thantlang mother, which could bar me from deeply entering their social web. However, a young Khumi journalist Peter Lweilu assisted me a great deal. Thanks to his

¹¹ Please see “Qualitative Methods in Social Research” by Kristin G. Esterberg 2002.

connections, a young political activist young man Ai Thang assisted me to find a place to stay and organizing participants for a training about: “Awareness rising on the rights of women participation in development process”¹². By allowing me to stay in Ko Aung house, I was able to have a casual and insightful opinion sharing with my host family members and their neighbors. Furthermore, there are other Khumi who encouraged me to study in Paletwa such as Mang Ling, the one who introduced to me to Khumi vertical socio-economic layers; Father Htun Khaing and Sister Aye Hla who exposed me to various villages, transporting me by boat to have face to face interactions with Khumi women group and providing me shelter throughout my stay in Paletwa the second time, and U Hoih Pa, the main author of History of Khumi Culture, who was always open the door for discussions. He and his family even sent me to the hospital when I was suffering from food poisoning. These were remarkable entry points into the Khumi social fabric, which allowed me to confidently pursue this study in Paletwa.

The third field visit happened in January 2014. As this month sees a peak in the amount of marriage ceremonies, it was challenging to follow various rituals occurring in different places at the same time so I missed some I had wanted to attend, but I was often nonetheless able to later discuss with the participants about their experience. Overall I have observed many situations and seen how people managed the ritual and gave it meaning. The social interaction in the wedding and reception served as networking space and provided me chances to follow some people as my respondents. Some even unconditionally invited me for dinner at their houses as their old friend.

After leaving my field site, I contacted some people by phone or through social media to clarify the usage of terminology, the name of social events, the meaning of symbols put in bride price and dowry from Yangon. Steven Nikio gave his time to discuss these issues, the changing meaning and the rituals of marriage payments from Hakha background so that I could compare and check my research with other Chin aspects. Yet, we discussed issues beyond what he mentioned in his book. Additionally, I found mobile phones and social media to be helpful tools to collect additional information from those who belong to Chin but not are not present in Myanmar (many

¹² This project is funded by Chin Human Rights Organization as part of a civil society response to the “Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project” between the Myanmar government and the Indian government.

live in the United States, India, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore) to discuss their view about Chin cultural practice of bride price beyond “good” and “bad”.

I largely used semi-structured interviews (in-depth interviews) “to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg 2006). Each of the respondents’ answers was diverse and through this research method it was very interesting to listen to their opinions and experiences around bride price. This method was useful “because women historically have been silenced, they have not always had the opportunity to tell their own stories. In-depth interviews allow them (Chin women) to do so” (Esterberg 2006; 87). Without hesitating to present my own opinions and beliefs openly, “[I] tend to call those whom [I am] studying my research participants, to emphasize my greater role in shaping the research process” (ibid; 88) by sharing similarity and difference in ethnicity and femininity.

Following Neuman (2006), it is important to underline how key informant interviews enriched the insightful information on what I as a researcher might be less likely to learn from others (Khumi) in regards of a deeper cultural meaning, a specific mentality, the original and the changing meaning of the bride price practice and so on. My key informants reflected their opinion on the conflict and relation of bride price and dowry versus modernization and Christianization by using what I see as “pragmatic common sense” among the Chin. By developing a relationship with several backgrounds of my key informants, I was aware of ‘inconsistent’ and multiple meanings of this bride price subject.

As Gaffin (1992) (cited in Neuman 2006; 474), explains “narrative is both a rhetorical form and a generic, logical form of explanation that merges theorized description of an event with its explanation”. By conducting narratives of respondents’ own storytelling on marriage, which includes how the wedding was done and details of relevant activities my research could “capture people’s ordinary lived experience without disrupting, destroying, or reducing its narrative character”. Also the space allowed within this research method for displaying the researcher’s reflexivity, the communication between researcher and respondents was processed “with a sense of movement and a coherent sequence of events about an engaged social actor in a specific context”. Recounting respondents’ life stories brought an opportunity to learn their life

events within the marital sphere thus individuals are able to relate to their society in the mutually constitutive relations that happen between them, through culture, history, politics, economic, family, and gender.

I used a participant observation approach for two wedding ceremonies in Paletwa. One was the marriage between a Khumi-Karen bride and a Karen groom while another one was a Khumi groom and a Karen bride. This method was useful to research a wedding ceremony where both parties of the bride and the groom exchanged “social information, feelings, and attitudes through non-verbal communication, including gestures, facial expression” (Neuman 2006: 397).

In the usage and quotations of my respondents’ information, it is important to mention that it is my responsibility as a researcher to guarantee their privacy and safety as they have shared some sensitive issues such as for example their difficulties with their in-laws, income status, criticism about family members, rumors, and so on. I used some pseudonyms for some respondents but not for all. It should also be noted here that “reflexivity is unavoidable issue in analysis what and how they (the respondents) told me and what they have not shared with me and why” (Sachiko 2008; 22). This is particularly relevant for this research since I appear in their eyes as a Chin researcher, pregnant woman travelling alone, the northern Chin, openly talking with people of various backgrounds in the churches, tea houses, marriage ceremonies, jetty, household kitchen, farmland, and on the boat.

1.8 Structure of Thesis

This study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter seeks to provide the rationale for this study, explaining who the Chin are, identifying the research problem, questions and objectives. It also attempts to explain the research methodology, by detailing how the research sites have been chosen and why, describing unit and level of analysis, methods of data collection and structure of this thesis.

The second chapter reviews the relevant theories, concepts and related previous studies. The three key conceptual tools used in this study are named as; multiple meanings of bride price in the context of Chin; family change as negotiating the role of women; and bride price as a sphere of gender power relations. I hope the diagram of the conceptual framework provides a visualization of the conceptual framework I use.

In chapter three, I try to depict the shifting meaning and the dynamic trends of the bride price practice over the changing historical conditions in the context of Chin. It is important to reexamine and situate these practices within a specific historical context.

In chapter four, I demonstrate the shifting roles of Chin women in Paletwa and examine the roles of Chin women within bride price practices by contextualizing family change. Modernization and Christianization are key elements that this study pays attention to within the context of family change and they are interchangeably referred for the dimension of bride price.

In chapter five, I try to provide space for the voices of Chin women who calculate, negotiate and contest their bride price both economically and culturally. Since the notion of negotiation and contestation itself cannot be studied without any means, I also look at elements of property relations.

Chapter six constitutes the conclusion of the study and provides the research findings by linking the conceptual framework to my empirical findings. Some discussion is also made in that context with regards to the limitation of the methodological approaches used in this study.