

CHAPTER 3

Historical Contexts and the Changing Practice of Bride Price in Chin State

3.1 Introduction

This chapter places the changing meaning of Chin bride price and dowry in historical context, and depicts the dynamics surrounding them to show how their meanings and practices have shifted according to historical conditions. Overall, this social and class stratification mechanism seemingly worked well until the introduction of colonialism and Western Christian missionary. Instead of reviewing the overall historical changes in Chin state, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I emphasize the meaning of bride price in traditional Chin society. Secondly, I look at how has this primary meaning shifted when faced with colonialism and Western missionaries. Lastly I will focus on Burmanization, as a means to construct state hegemony, and discuss how this to influenced the meaning of the Chin's bride price.

3.2 Understanding Bride Price's Traditional Meanings

Crossman's (2014) brief overview of 'social exchange theory'¹ is helpful to understand traditional meaning of the bride price. The Chin aimed to gain social prestige and profits by having costly wedding ceremonies (akin to Crossman's notion of the cost of interaction) by marrying a decent bride (reward of interaction). In the Chin sense according to Sakhong (2008) "[T]he woman that a man married could make him respectable or she could pull him down to a low and degraded position" (Sakhong 2008: 64). Therefore marrying the daughter of noble man provides access to wealth and higher class and access political power thus working as a mechanism to move up in social status. For this reason wedding payments were carefully treated since they were a symbolic and ritualistic depiction of one's position in the vertical layer of the social

¹ <http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/social-exchange-theory.htm> (access on 11 January 2015)

web. This is explained using Chin scholar Sakhong's works in *In Search of Chin Identity* and western scholar Parry's monograph together with additional other personal interview in more detail below.

3.2.1 Traditional Weddings and Marriage Payments as Class Order

The notion of bride price should be understood in the context of traditional Chin class order. Instead of reviewing all types of weddings and marriage payments, I will articulate some common themes based on class stratification. It should be mentioned at this point that there is both similarity and difference between each sub group of Chin. General meaning and representation were mostly similar, although specific symbols and items put in weddings and marriage payments varied according to geographical location.

Following Sakhong, the Chin can be divided hierarchically into three main classes²/groups: *Bawi Phun* (noble class), *Michia or Zaran* (ordinary class) and *Sal* (slaves). Wedding ceremony and marriage payments were prescribed according to the class membership of the bridegroom. By following a standard for each class, social order was preserved. For instance, an ordinary groom's family would not slaughter *sia pi* (adult mithun) for the wedding but *sia te* (small mithun) as *sia pi* is meant to be for noble people's wedding. Various levels of social punishments would be bestowed by the public on those violating that ritual practice. If followed, public appreciation would follow. In this way, the formula of 'social exchange theory' asserted by Ashely Crossman seems relevant.

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² A more detail of Sakhong's classification is – 1)Bawi Phun (Noble Class) has three sub categorization as; a) Ram Uk (Chief), b) Tlang Bawi (Priest), c) Phung Sang (Nobility);2) In Michia or Zaran (Ordinary Class); a) Michia Phungthian (ordinary, ritually clean), b) Michia phunthainglo (ordinary class, believed to be possessors of unclean spirits, the evil eye or witchcraft); 3)In Sal (Slaves); a) Inchungkhar Sal (Household Slaves, b) Innlak Sal (Slaves who lived in their own house but worked for their master) (page 35-36)

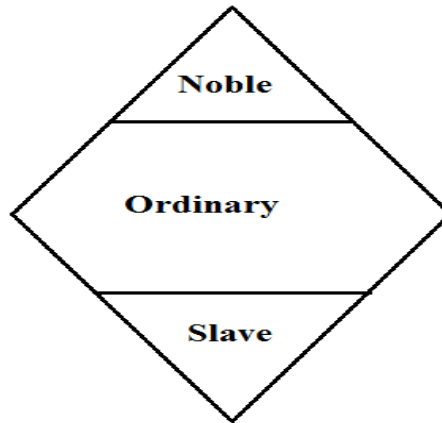


Figure 3.1 A diagram showing class components in traditional Chin society

This class system is based on one's "*phun le hnam*" (genealogy), in following Sakhong (2007) categorization. The nobility of a man is thus due to his lineage and shown by conducting series of feasts and festivals. On the other hand the Sal (slaves) are those who cannot trace their genealogy. This is the most socially marginalized group, stigmatized as *michia phungthianglo* due to their unclean ritual matters which is akin to possessing witchcraft skills.

Nevertheless, this class system is unfixed and adjustable, the most prominent way of doing so being through the ritual of marriage, in particular by conducting wedding ceremonies, and paying a costly bride price and dowry. In order to maintain nobility, it is necessary to marry a bride from the noble class; otherwise the groom is moved down to the level of ordinary class.

Wealth in the Chin sense entails having many cattle, countless copper gongs and jars, blankets, thousands or hundreds tins of rice and cereal stocks such as corn, millets and so on. A case of wealth and class exchange could happen if a wealthy groom of the ordinary class proposed to the daughter of noble men. If there was no objection on the marriage proposal by the bride's family, the marriage payments and other arrangements would be discussed. The interaction might bring about some tensions between the two families if the bride's family asked too much *man* (bride price in Hakha term) unless they belong to a noble class. And if the case is asking too much bride price by ordinary class, public gossip thus will be spreading out. However, even arranging for costly marriage payments was not sufficient to make a wealthy man noble. Two generations

following him have to also marry the daughter of noble men consistently to acquired noble class. This is known in Hakha as Skhong's named '*chan thum hnu bawi*' (noble after three generations).

One particular type of marriage worth mentioning is when a widow is married to her deceased spouse's brother. This is called "re-marriage" and occasionally practiced to maintain lineage. It can provide an alternative way of preventing family decay into a lower class (Parry 1976). In this case, having a feast by slaughtering a pig or a cow indicate the remarriage news to near and far relatives. This does not reduce the bride price because of the woman's sexuality or previous reproduction. After this wedding the widow will not go back to her natal family. In most cases many widows opt for this type of marriage. For the case of the Khumi Chin, the natal family of this woman needs to make a feast, which is called *mai-rom*, mostly slaughtering a pig to record this "re-connection".

Another type is child marriage, and done largely for class concerns. Parry describes this in his ethnographic work among the Mara Chin as "...[T]here are said to be two ideas of Lakher (also known as Mara) parents for their sons to marry into a higher clans, to ensure which is parents reserves a girl of good clan for his son at a tender age; and the second that if a girl is married young she is less likely to be deflowered by some other youth than her husband before she gets married" (Parry 1976: 307). In so doing, a girl is sent to her future husband but on the condition of no sexual relationship while the girl remains under age. Depending on the case she might also continue to live with her parents if verbal agreement was reached or a public engagement ceremony was held. However, both parents have to wait for the final decision of a young girl to see if she wishes to marry the man she became engaged to. If a girl agrees then the parents arrange for her marriage, the costly wedding and a set of marriage payments will follow. In cases when the engagement was agreed but the girl refused the proposal, her parents need to return what had been offered to the groom, and the same applied to the groom. All the above types of marriage and bride price payments have been mostly stopped in among the Chin in northern part of Chin state with the rise of Christianization.

3.2.2 Performing Class Status: A Ritual of Sacrificial Feasts

After marrying the daughter of noble men, there are a series of sacrificial feasts to perform. This also serves as a social parameter to compare levels of nobility among this class. The three most relevant sacrificial feasts are the following: *bawi-te bawi* (nobler than other noble men), *khuang cawi* (honoring a wife or daughter of noble men), and *nau-zing dangh* (a sacrificial ceremony for a newborn baby). All these rites emphasize the shared high class of noble men's family members and displays openly what are the rewards to be reaped from costly marriage payments. They are discussed below in more detail.

The purpose of the *bawi-te bawi* feast is “to show his (a noble man's) ability, power and wealth” to the public and to show off his prestige as shared by his family members as polygamous family members – his major wife and her children, but excludes his maidens and their children. Another level of exclusion occurs where the host family is separated from other nobles, as well as where those not members of the noble class are isolated. Sakhong (2008) provides useful particulars on this practice.

The *bawi-te bawi* feast usually takes around five days, and can extend to seven days depending on the host's wealth. Day one is “purely an observation of thanksgiving to the household's god or the guardian god for all the blessings they enjoyed, and to pray for ongoing protection” (ibid). A black *mithun* is used as sacrificial animal. It is shot with an arrow by a priest in the house compound of the host. Some part of the meat is taken by the host man, his major wife and her children. Although this noble man may have other wives and children according to this ritual's rules they are not allowed to have this sacrificial food. On the second day relatives and clan members celebrate their unification and the power of their lineage. They sing and compose songs remembering their ancestors. The third day another sacrificial animal is slaughtered. The major wife is standing beside her husband holding rice and holy water when the husband shoots. In the end a war dance is performed where the men take part and show their supremacy as protectors of the whole society (ibid). During the fourth day, meats are distributed to every household in the village. It is also a significant day where noble group and ordinary groups are separated by an elevated platform. Noble men who sit on the elevated platform are those who already hosted as Sakhong (2008) narrates “at least one of the feasts, *bawi-te bawi*, *khuang cawi* or *cakei fim* ... they did not go down to the

ordinary feast place and mix with others. They sang songs about their glory and deeds. They did not dance”, while the ordinary groups who are on the floor are “drinking, eating their share and dancing”. Day five is the last day of the event and the day to put “the head of sacrificial animal on the wall of the front porch in rows”. People sit in a circle and sing songs until the evening, when the host and hostess carry out a ceremony known as the day of cleansing – asking the household or guardian god to continue to bless and protect them – by slaughtering another sacrificial pig.

The second feast, *khawng cawi*, can only be hosted by those who have already hosted a *bawi-te bawi* feast. Public curses or embarrassment would occur if not following the procedure. This feast necessitates a great deal of preparation to host hundreds and hundreds of guests, relatives and neighbors. It takes nine “consecutive days” although the procedures and process are mostly the same as *bawi-te bawi* feast. The most crucial activity in *bawi-te bawi* is honoring the wife of a noble man. The hostess is put in a wooden cabin, which is then carried by a group of men and women. Relatives and family members who participate in carrying it signifies they are closely related to that women and it is ritual which displays shared nobility. While she heads for the center of the crowded audience, she throws a live white chicken to the people as well as various other things to them such as coins, combs and mirrors. This event will be narrated generation to generation telling about the hosts’ merit, decency, prestige and honor.

According to Sakhong (2008), the origin of this feast stems from supernatural phenomena. In his investigation, Sakhong explains that Chief Mang Sui of Phaizong in the Senthang area witnessed the cabin was moving up and down like dancing, and so he decided to copy this for his wife and did so to honor and making everyone proud of his major wife. This ritual is a huge honor for the major wife and brings about recognition from the whole of society, and in a polygamist society this ritual can only ever be held for the major wife and on no occasion for any of the other wives. The honor of a wife having had *khawng-cuai* would extend to her children as well as to her parents. For this and other reasons, within a competitive polygamist family structure parents would in most cases try to ensure that their daughter did not accept any marriage proposal as second or third wife or a maiden.



Figure 3.2 A *khawng-cuai* feast celebrated in Hakha (Source: Facebook)

The third ritual relevant to our discussion is “*Nau-zing dangh*”, and is prepared to welcome a newborn baby into society. This is understood both in terms of class but also as psychological preparation for a new generation, leading children to be strong, famous and rich as their forefathers and honorable, beautiful, and decent as her mother/godmother/aunt. This is done by narrating and relating the family’s greatness.

Although this event is not as long and costly as the other two feasts, quoting Sakhong as guests sing “traditional songs and epics, often passed on for generations, which told the story of the family’s fame and honor... family’s achievement: the feasts they held, the wars they won, the animals they killed and so on”. It is not easy for ordinary people to conduct this kind of feast. The slaves of a family are able to participate by listening to stories of the host family’s greatness, and can enjoy the served meal. Most importantly, there is similar to problems without solutions for ordinary people to make this feast for their newborn baby by the assistance of a noble man unless the host is from noble class.

It is only possible for ordinary people to have such a feast for their newborn if the parents have a very good relationship with a noble family. Such a relationship may for example be based on the ordinary people having shared the head of a hunted animal to that noble family, in that way asking them to give a name to the newborn baby. If the child is a girl, the person who named her is supposed to get a bride price at the time of her marriage. In the case of slaves, there is not much research available or evidence about their experiences in these rituals but we know that the strongest and the most reliable male slaves of a bride’s brother or father will get an offer as *salpaman* which is seen as an honor for members of the slave class (Ni Kio 2012).

As this section has detailed, bride price and dowry practices are not only a reflection of class but also of wealth exchange and class mobility. Wealth and class status matters heavily relied on the volume, items and its ritual activities being extended or shorten varied from class to class. A family who is wealthy but lacking in social prestige can seek to adjust their social class by marrying a noble bride and holding a costly wedding ceremony and related marriage payments. After becoming a noble in this way, it is important to maintain such status by holding sacrificial feasts for himself or for his major wife. If future generations failed to marry a noble bride, the family's class would be degraded and thus become ordinary. Nonetheless, this social and class stratification mechanism seemingly worked well until the introduction of colonialism and western Christian missionary.

3.3 The Shifting Meaning of Bride Price along Colonialism and Western Christianization

The start of British colonial occupation, and the arrival of Western missionaries in Chin state, impacted on bride price practices. Diverse missionaries and different kinds and levels of interaction across Chin State meant the impact differed throughout the region. In the Northern part of Chin State for example these practices declined following wide success in conversion rates, while its practice in Southern Chin state did not change much. Weaker colonial control in Southern Chin by the British meant that the bride price was less affected. The Paletwa area was annexed together with the current Rakhine state earlier than its counterpart northern part of Chin state, after the second Anglo-Burma war in 1852 (Sakhong 2008; CCOC 1999; Gravers 2012; CHKC 2010; www.worldatlas.com³).

It is interesting to look at the different mandates of various Christian missionaries' work, seeing how different denominations such as the Anglican, Roman Catholic and American Baptist churches influenced the practice of bride price and

³ The first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826) ended with the Treaty of Yandabo but surrendered current Rakhine state to British India. The second Anglo-Burmese war (1852) annexed lower Burma to British India in the same year. Last and third the Anglo-Burmese war (1885) and captured the whole current Myanmar as a province of British India. Burma was separated from British India as crown colony in 1937.

<http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/burma/mmtimeln.htm> (access on 17 January 2015)

dowry differently. Later Chin missionaries, who can be seen to an extent as a product of the American Baptist missionaries, significantly pushed to abandon the “backward and primitive ancestors’ practice” like bride price (CCOC 1999) as part of their agenda.

After “the last and final resistance” of *Lai Ral* in the Anglo-Chin War in 1917-1919 (Sakhong 2008 et al Dawt Sung 1976), the Chin were engaged with the values and ways of thinking of the Western missionaries and the colonial administrators. That coincided with a time where, largely because of changing socio-political climate due to the post-war condition, famine and disease outbreak, Chin tradition was seemingly in a quest for other ways to conduct sacrificial feasts in ways that required less economic capital.

The *khua hrum* (in Hakha term) *avang kadam*⁴ (in Khumi term) was “a guardian god of the village or the community” who was important for “religious functions, to promote social cohesion,” and to generate class mobility. It can be interpreted as a site where political power is legitimized and where exclusion and inclusion of a social class are practiced and displayed. All villagers needed to participate in the ritual once a year (or once every three years for the Khumi Chin) and on that occasion were required to make offerings and pray to a village guardian god asking them to provide sufficient protection, including a blessing of crops and to protect them from accidents during cultivation such as being eaten by wild animals. This communal activity was no longer practiced when colonialism and Western missionary were introduced.

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⁴ In Khumi Chin terms, a stranger found in the village during this feast was customarily allowed to be captured as a slave of the chief. Signs and symbols were made of bamboo, and placed at the entrance of the village. All the village members needed to cut communication with people from outside the village and were not allowed to eat sweet, sour, a phan, salty, or spicy food, smoking and chewing *kun* (betel). Married men needed to sleep in a specific place around a sacred location. All villagers needed to eat just *yay-lone-pyut* (watery cooked) pork and had to take flesh from the abdomen, liver and heart from the slaughtered pig and offered to a guardian god. The feast finished in three consecutive days. Unless all complied with this feast there was a belief that the entire village populations would suffer from disaster, for example houses, farm, crops will be burnt down. Therefore, a fine existed for one those who disobeyed or interfered with this feast in any way.

After the missionaries and colonials engaged with the Chin's social fabric more deeply, the majority of the Chin found their *khua-hrum* and *Tual*⁵ was not as powerful as before the outsiders had entered their realm where feudal chieftainship had been under the protection of guardian gods. The ordinary groups of the Chin had begun to question how their *khua hrum* protected them no longer as they lost the war, faced disease outbreak and famine, had insufficient foods and cattle and thus psychologically were overwhelmed with frustration. This brought suspicion amongst the ruling and the ruled group of Chin.

As Sakhong rightly puts, the ruling group started accusing the ruled group of not offering enough and thus meaning their guardian gods gave little response. On the other hand the ruled people became suspicious about the power of the guardian gods and the chiefs although more sacrificial feasts were conducted. Weber's contention in rational theory in conversion (in Suantak 2007 et al Hefner 1997) seemingly appropriate here that individual and communities seek and desire to have ability to understand the cause and effect vis-à-vis action and consequences. Western missionaries, especially the American Baptist missionaries in the case of northern part of Chin state filled this gap by providing support with rice to war affected Chin, curing the diseases, introducing personal hygiene, teaching Christian doctrine and so on.

The evidence of a group of chiefs who went to Rangoon (former name of the old capital Yangon) to protest were exposed to the Plague which caused the death of 6 chiefs (Sakhong 2008) is also relevant to support my argument. The rest of that team however were under the impression that this had happened because they were not under the protection and help of their *khua-hrum* (guardian god), as its power only extended in its own region and did not extend to distant places, and could not compare with the power of white-men's god. Moreover, also following the British colonial practice of appointing chiefs to administrate villages without following traditional feudal system, the Chin faced both social and political disorder.

⁵ Sakhong have explained detail about this feast in Hakha terms. Firstly the sacrificial stone would be erected in a favorable place to bless, protect and help the villagers. This was done by a chief who established the village. Planting banyan trees nearby the sacrificial stone followed. Later, the tombstone of a settler or chief of that village was put close to the tree when died. The first offering and praying made by the villagers was called *Tual* and all these elements represented "symbols of community and sacrifice" with collective special protection by never being removed, misbehaving or destroyed even a tiny branch of banyan tree. This was seen as sacred place where various communal sacrificial ceremonies and rites were performed.

Aside from realizing that the Chin's *khua-hrum* had a limit in its sovereignty, the white men's god was more attractive to the Chin for several reasons, as Suantak (2007) has analyzed. For instances, any one from society can directly communicate or relate with god, whilst there was a vertical path to approach in *khua-hrum* and *tual* community practice. In *khua-hrum* and *tual* community practice, there are always mediators such as priests and chief men needed but there is no fixed rules in worshipping the white men's god, that is, the position of individual is situated more equal and less hierarchal. Also, every member could question and dialogue with white men's god on equal grounds and for any problems, both personal and communal. Further, the answers seemed more rational in their cause-and-effect explanations while the traditional belief system was less direct and less explainable. Most importantly, associating with western missionaries provided psychological support to those who were excluded in Chin society, ritually casted out or marginalized, as the notorious case of Thuang Ham⁶ exemplifies.

Another example of how the Chin started to question their position on earth at that time was when soldiers started returning from Europe and had enough money to marry any bride they liked easily being able to easily afford costly marriage payments and wedding ceremonies at a time when the majority of other men who did not join the colonial army were struggling for their basic livelihood. In the meantime, some of the locally recruited Chin soldiers also had had a chance to learn trading, which was still new among Chin (Vumson 1986). These colonial soldiers' experiences were vast. They ranged from observing European war machinery, ships, planes, guns and even the way the sun rose up from the ocean's horizon differently compared to the place they came from, and set between mountains. These new experiences helped bring new ideas to the Chin, which extended to different ways to strategize about their livelihoods. These changes did not happen overnight, and took time to be tested, practiced and evaluated. The presence of Western missionaries in their homeland thus represented a practical testing measure of what these soldiers had experienced in Europe. Gradually therefore

⁶ His case was well narrated in missionary literature that he was in economically depressed. At the same time, his son has got two tooth pierced up of his upper lip which was perceived as ritually unclean in a sense of Chin. The missionary person cum doctor took away with his modern material and technology then looked normal again. His belief certainly thus changed to Christian. Even more, he got enormous crops in cultivation in a sacred place which others did not even dream to do. Then, the Christian God became more attractive to the Chin in some extent.

the Chin's traditional practices were faced with larger global politics through colonialism.

The most important and massively powerful influence to change the Chin ancestral domain of belief into Christianity was through modern education. The British colonial powers tried to introduce modern education by setting up schools and asked local chiefs to send a required number of children. In the beginning, from the Chin's point of view, it was not as attractive as sending their children farming for example, which was more practical and directly beneficial to their everyday lives. Sending the children to missionary or colonial school was in the eyes of many equivalents to wasting time and energy initially. Further, the fact that school children were made to cut their hair, wear trousers and shirts, learn hygienic hand washing and showering was fairly shocking to the community (Sum 2012). Sakhong (2008) and Vumson (1986) have noted that many families from the upper class did not send their children to modern school so the students were mainly from marginalized groups. After the missionary proposed to use the Chin script (itself invented by missionaries) in school, it then became more attractive for others to send their children. As a result, mass conversion occurred in school bringing about new generations of Christian students.

It is precisely these students who later became the teacher-cum-preachers who were important to push for transformation of some traditional practices such as bride price. These teachers-cum-preachers were mostly males. They first acquired and then spread so-called civilized manners. They started dressing up with trousers and coats like *siang-bawi-pa* (the Chin called missionary chiefs *siang bawi pa* and the wife *siang bawi nu*, shortly as *bawi pa* and *bawi nu*, meaning master and mister). They also started teaching in schools and therefore being in the shade instead of under the sun at the farm. They started holding a book and preaching to the public on the pulpit in the church or at one's house.

These teachers-cum-preachers became important people who facilitated the rites of marriage, funerals, festivals, and so on. They started formulating new ideas on bride price and started advocating in public to abolish this practice. However, they had little to say on how dowry practice was unconstructive to the society's welfare. At the same time, they campaigned for marriage to be a more romantic thing rather than a symbolical and ritual bondage between families and collective identity, and advocated

that every person in the society could be free to choose their partners⁷. They explained that bride price should not be a barrier between two people who had fallen in love and wished to marry. They pointed out and stood up for *nu-ngak-tlang-val-cho-va-ruang-co-khoh-lo* (a young man and woman who are in love shall not be away for being not able to pay marriage payments to parents). They also added that classes were man-made matters although everyone is equal before God. They presented churches as an institution that would harmonize class conflict and facilitate social cohesion at its best.

In this way, colonialism and Western missionaries influenced the shifting meaning of bride price and dowry. In this socio-political context therefore, the practice of bride price declined as it started to be seen as an un-modern, old-fashioned practice, which was a burden to social welfare. The trend of dowries however remained the same and remained continuously practiced as it was in the times before the arrival of Western missionaries and colonialism. It still played the role of showing care and love to the bride as well as being a symbol of the rite of marriage for women.

In subsequent post-colonial times the practice of bride price and dowry also shifted for other new post-colonial reasons. These reasons are linked to the hegemonic nation-building which is occurring in modern Myanmar, where ethnic politics play a crucial role in Chin negotiations with Burman state power. In the next section I will demonstrate how the state has attempted to manipulate Chin bride price and dowry practices and use it as a means of domination, and I will then proceed to show how the Chin have attempted to resist this by continuing to practice these rituals.

3.4 Resisting Burmanization through Practicing Bride Price

This section attempts to locate bride price in the context of nation-building which has been ongoing since Myanmar obtained its independence. This is a much more contemporary issue and is ongoing between the State and ethnic Chin. The issue of bride price finds itself in a polarized setting of the state on one side and the Chin on the other.

⁷ Interview with Pu Phun Rung in Paletwa in January 2014. He is a northern born man currently living in Paletwa who was a primary school head-master. He was a pioneer of abolishing the bride price practice in northern part of Chin since 1960s.

Among the Chin, bride price is seen as a cultural symbol useful to resist the hegemonic nation-state building. Bride price has taken up this role rather than other Chin traditional practices because many have been abolished through western missionary succession. This brought about a change in the world-view of many Chin and some practices became unpopular, but Western missionaries were unable to push communities to abandon the bride price. In the post-independence era, it remained as a means to differentiate between Burman and Chin.

As mentioned earlier, according to Spiro (1975), Burman practices either dower or dowry, but not the bride price. Bride price in this way can be seen as essential and effective tool in negotiating the hegemonic state. This cultural practice has therefore increasingly taken up a meaning of political resistance for the Chin, but also a simple way of refusal, wittingly or unwittingly, towards Burmanization. The next section will provide more details and context surrounding Burmanization.

3.4.1 A Glimpse of Burmanization

Burmanization is also known as Myanmarnization in the work of some scholars such as Gravers (2012)⁸ and Walton (2012). The term is used to explain the process of political appropriation over upland, periphery, or non-Burman ethnic groups in Myanmar by the majority Burman⁹ ethnic group. The Burmanization policy became clearer and more apparent after Ne Win's coup d'état. The role of the state or precisely the Tatmadaw is a key in carrying out this policy, and this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.4.2.

I argue that the concept of Burmanization is inextricably linked to traditional Burman political and cultural matters. For example, in the Burman nationalist movement in anti-colonial times there was a motto that aimed to protect and promote “*a myo* (race) *ba thar* (language) *thar-ta-nar* (religion)” against the British. This was necessary in their view to as they saw the threat of the British trying to firstly impose themselves as the master race, then impose the English language as superior, and finally use Christian missionaries to push for a universal better way of life. A British scholar

⁸Cited in Exploring Ethnic Diversity as, “The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), as the ruling military body was named in 1988, gave the ethnicity a new dimension when it defined the ‘135 national races of Myanmar’ as a basis for its nationalism and cultural ‘Myanmarnization’

⁹ The terminology and the usage of Burman and Burmese was already controversial and vague since the British colonial times in Myanmar when Burman was used to refer to persons from the majority and Burmese was for those who from minority. See Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma, 2007.

Taylor (2008) however asserts there was not much ideology to either destroy or support Burman Buddhism.

Traditional Burman political power and nationalism is rooted in the religious sphere – in Buddhism. The institution of Buddhism accounts for a crucial space in the making of and the continuation of being a Burman. Historically monasteries were not only a space for religious preaching but also sites to contend one's Burmanness. For example, young children need to go to monasteries to learn Burmese reading and writing, to learn how to behave towards their elders and towards those younger, as well as how to speak politely to a monk. People who go to monasteries thus do not only share *dhamma* (Buddhist doctrine) but they also serve as a site where to exchange political thoughts and even rumors. Most importantly, Buddhist monasteries are also a site of refuge not only for monks but for all people.

The attitude “*Buddha bar tar Myanmar Lu Myo*” (to be Myanmar (Burman) is to be Buddhist) has been deeply practiced since the first Burman kingdom in 1044 (CHRO 2012; Sakhong 2010). Since Buddhism was established as the State religion, and the King was defender of the faith and of all members, monks and people in Burman society tend to support and promote *a myo-bar tar- tar ta na*. This can also be observed in the current rise of the *Ma Ba Ta*¹⁰ movement.

In the pre-colonial era, the relationship between Burman Kings and monasteries was more or less in mutual support of each other in favor of *tar-ta-nar-pyut* (Buddhist way of civilization). The King needed to defend, protect and promote Buddhism so the monasteries and monks would support him. For example, the monk *A-ra-han* had mutual support with King *A-naw-ya-htar* in the Bagan dynasty during the making of Burman Kingdom. Therefore the space of monasteries has historically been a fundamental space to generate the Burmese way of civilization and its philosophy of being.

Hill dwellers, or up-landers, have very different social structures and organization compared to Burman, as well as different political and livelihoods. Scott (2009) famously referred to these groups as forming “Zomia”. Their faith was mostly animist, they conducted raids and captured slaves from neighboring valleys, slaughtering

¹⁰ Ma Ba Ta is the acronym for the Association to Protect Race and Language and Religion. The monk Ashin Wirathu is the well-known leader of this movement.

animals for sacrificial feasts, practicing slash and burn livelihood as a strategy to escape from taxpaying to any feudal kings. In the eyes of Burman Buddhists such hill dwellers were barbaric or *lu-yaing* (uncivilized) and thus needed to be civilized through Buddhism. According to them, there are two kinds of Chin people – one group which is closer to Burman culture is called *Chin-yin* (civilized Chin), mostly having settled around the Bagan-Popa area, and the others who inhabit the hills and are culturally far more distant are called *Chin-yaing* (uncivilized Chin). Scott (2009) has rightly observed that there is a “cultural elevation” phenomenon between the Burmese center and the so-called periphery ethnic areas which are mostly mountainous by using “*tat*” (climb up) for going down to Mandalay and “*sinn*” (climb down) for going up to hilly area although the geographical usage is the opposite.

The birth of modern *Burmanization* can be traced back to the time U Nu became a prime minister and broke the promise of Aung San to build a secular state following the Panglong agreement. In fact, leaders of some of the periphery ethnic groups – Kachin, Chin and Shan – were convinced to join the Union by Aung San with “a clear policy of state-building based on the principles of equality and unity in diversity” (Sakhong 2010). Aung San himself had not embraced “religiously oriented ethno-nationalism” which he had foreseen would be problematic in the making of the modern Union of Burma. He detailed his political vision in his speech “Problems for Burma’s Freedom” which is worth quoting at length:

“Religion is a matter of individual conscience, while politics is social science. We must see to it that the individual enjoys his rights, including the right to freedom of religious belief and worship. We must draw clear lines between politics and religion because the two are not the same thing. If we mix religion with politics, then we offend the spirit of religion itself”.
(Sakhong 2010 cited in Silverstein 1993)

U Nu redrafted Aung San’s version of the 1947 constitution by making Buddhism the state’s religion and thus enshrining it as a necessity for national integration. His government established the ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs in 1953 and formerly declared that “in the marrow of my bones there is a belief that government

should enter into the sphere of religion”¹¹(CHRO 2012; Sakhong 2010). His political ideology thus contrasted heavily with the thinking of Chinese communism relevant to understand the larger context of regional politics.

Following the imposition of such a policy, mass protests occurred particularly from Chin and Kachin who based their identity politics on being Christian. For the Chin, seeing the Burman state imposing Buddhism by political force was equivalent to being asked to kneel down and give up their self-determination and sovereignty, and challenging their symbolic power in a way that had never occurred not even under the rule of Burman or other neighboring kingdoms. It was not the Chin’s culture or way of life, as Scott also explains about Zomia, to offer surplus production to neither monks nor kings nor others of higher social status. Overall the Chin felt betrayed as the agreement they had signed with Burma Proper had been broken. Therefore, in the 1960s the Chin ethnic armed groups rose up against the state together with other ethnic groups.

U Nu’s version of Burmanization was amended by General Ne Win who took power following a coup d’état in 1962 by introducing “*Myanmar sar*” (Burmese language) to the whole nation, as part of propaganda for the Burmese way of socialism. Ne Win even banned all other ethnic languages and withdrew civil and political rights. The Burmese language became the official code of communication and every school either in the hills or the valleys needed to use *Myanmar sar*. Being able to talk and write in Burmese became a standard requirement for job applications and promotions.

In the arena of ethnic politics, Burmanization – one race, one language, one religion – which General Ne Win justified as a mean for national integration came to clash with ethnic groups’ demands for equal footing in nation state building. Sakhong explains that “ethnic leaders came together at the 1961 Taunggyi Conference, where delegates agreed to seek the amendment of the 1947 Constitution in line with federalism to reflect the principles of equality and self-determination embodied in the Panglong agreement” (CHRO 2012: 8). Federalism, from the view of periphery ethnic groups, is the way to solve the problems inherent in ethnocentric nation state building. Sharing values according to a pluralistic model of society which values multi-ethnic nationalism, multi-culturalism, and different religious contributes to harmony and

¹¹ For More detail, see Threats to Our Existence of Chin Human Rights Organization and Sakhong’s In defense of Identity, 2010

balance in a diverse country like Myanmar. It is commonly accepted and appraised by neither most of Non-Burman groups that diversity should not be neither a policy nor a goal of the state. General Ne Win himself had said that federalism is a threat and risks fragmenting the whole country along ethnic groups risking to ruin the Union of Burma. In this view thus the Tatmadaw is believed to be the only institution which is able to save such a fragmented situation. “This homogenization is generally not welcomed by those among the ethnic minorities who are non-Buddhist”, observes Walton (2012) and thus “religion has become part of their (periphery ethnic groups) political identity, a sign of opposition” and a more or less “passive resistance” (Walton 2012 and Lois Desaine; 2011).

During the Ne Win era, censorship was highly centralized and even printing and circulating Bibles in many different ethnic languages had to go through such bureaucratic procedures. This generalized situation would reach its crisis moment when not only the periphery groups but the Burman also reached their melting point. Foreign missionaries were categorized as an institution, which supported non-Buddhist ethnic groups to disintegrate the state and were thus expelled from the country in 1966. Those who were seen as too close to such foreign missionaries were declared citizens who were disloyal to *Myanmar naing ngan daw* (the Union of Burma).

Throughout these times, and until General Than Shwe became the ruler of Myanmar, the Chin's bride price practice was not overly influenced by Burmanization. As Lois Desaine (2011) puts it, the Tatmadaw had a “centralized authoritarian political system that has a legitimacy that is partly reliant on Buddhism, constantly attempting to homogenize the multifaceted ethnic and cultural mosaic into a national, unified, Bamar (Burman) entity”. Following ancient Burman royal tradition and astrological principles, General Than Shwe was believed to be a charismatic modern king of the fourth dynasty of Burman kingdoms (Rogers 2012; Dulyapak 2009). He gave a speech by standing in front of the gigantic statues of the three great Monarchs in 27 March 2006 in the Armed Forces Day Ceremony as “Our military should be worthy heirs to the traditions of the capable military established by noble kings *Anawratha*, *Bayint Naing* and *Alaung Phaya U Zung Zeya*”, analyzed this by a Thai scholar Dulyapak as “his word shows the historical connotation behind the establishment of Naypyidaw (the current capital of Myanmar) and also reflect the connection between the military's worldview and the

patriotic icons employed for building a Union spirit of Myanmar (Dulyapak 2009: 125). His way of Burmanization was sexiest, ranging from mild to severely inhumane ideology, one attempting to implement a “people to people” mission. In many cases such as for example in the Eastern part of Myanmar the Tatmadaw used “rape as weapon of war” against ethnic groups. As Gravers (2012) asserts this represents “a mutilation of body and identity and generates humiliation, shame, hate and fear”.

Such practices have not been significant in Chin state, however the Burman state is well aware that the private realm of family and marriage is a key place where culture, ethnicity, and membership to a particular social group can be contested and re-negotiated. Thus, the Tatmadaw has employed other techniques to enter and interfere in this heavily charged private realm. In Chin State the Tatmadaw is using *pa-rih-ye* (strategy and tactics) to influence the ethnic Chin in the marital domain by pushing for Burman soldiers to marry ethnic Chin women without paying the bride price. It is my contention in this study that this strategy has had important repercussions on the practice of bride price.

3.4.2 State’s Unwritten Policy on Developing the Chin through a Marital Sphere

Chin state is highly militarized¹² periphery ethnic area by proportioning with the dimension of its geographically remoteness and its civilian population. CHRO has for example documented the high numbers of battalions present in this area compared to other ethnic areas. The fact that there is such a heavy military presence in Chin state is relevant to understand and to re-think Burmanization. It is my contention that the state is institutionally pushing and supporting Burman soldiers to marry ethnic Chin women without paying the bride price¹³. In my research, I have remained aware that personal choice when choosing partners also has a role in the making of family, but I have paid particular attention to the role of the State’s Ministries and Tatmadaw to see if and how

¹² See more detail in www.chro.org for its documentation or one of its publication “Threats to Our Existence”. CHRO reports the “rapid” militarization which happened in Chin state after 1988 and at the time of writing its *Threats to Our Existence*; that there are “14 battalions operational across Chin state, and 54 Burma Army bases. Each battalion has an average 400 soldiers in its ranks, meaning that there are more than 5,000 Burma Army soldiers in Chin state at any given time” (p, 24).

¹³ Numbers of taing-yin-tar (non-Burman) soldiers who serve in tatmadaw are comparably lesser than its Burman that the population itself it lesser. As a social fact, taing-yin-tar tatmadaw tar have obtained lesser chance to get promotion in terms of their ethnic and religious basis. But Burman soldiers who marry Christian ethnic women are also in lower priority to give promotion.

it institutionally facilitates inter-ethnic marriage in Chin State. In so doing, the cooperation of the Tatmadaw, Ministry of Border Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs cannot be put in separate rooms. In my opinion it is apparent that policies and programs of these institutions are unsubstantial, but as it has important impact in practice, its role needs to be more fully studied and its effect properly understood in the context of the Chin.

After the student demonstrations in 1988, the imposition of Burmanization by the military regime – at the time known as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and later incarnated into the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) – was more visible in Chin state and so were the activities of Ministry of Religious Affairs. “[I]n 1990, the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the *Sasana* (*tar-ta-nar*) was established under the Ministry of Religious Affairs by the SLORC regime, and hundreds of Buddhist monks were dispatched to Chin State (and other ethnic minority areas) as part of the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission, using State funds” (CHRO 2012). At the same time, numbers of military camps and outpost were set up together with state funded monasteries nearby every big town in Chin state.

One very well-known local institution is the *taung tan tar ta nar pyut* (Hill Region Buddhist Mission or HRBM), and it is involved in direct contact with the local Chin. Many local Chin view this institution as the apparatus of the state’s intelligence agency that investigates and reports the Chin who are involved in politically issues. Those involved in these missions are mostly monks. Generally, there are two different kinds of monks in Myanmar; the state sponsored and Buddhist fellows’ sponsored monks and the monks in *taung-tan-tar-ta-nar-put* (HRBM) who are financially supported by the state. They are publicly seen in many sermons and contend in their worship that religious space is an important and alternative site for exercising popular democracy. These sermons are regularly translated by local Chin interpreters. Notably, those translators are mostly women who have married Burman soldiers. It is therefore easy to see how from the Chin nationalist-cum-preachers point of view, these women are seen as religious traitors.

Structurally speaking, the HRBM (also known as Missionary Work in Border and Hill Regions) is under the direct administration of the Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (*tar ta na*) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However,

it has an unofficial relationship with the Department of administration. For these monks, according to personal conversations I have with one monk in Paletwa in 2014 “a special card is issued which is valid for two years and is inclusive of a monthly salary from the government”. He confirmed that most monasteries in Chin state are built by the government. By showing their cards, any department’s employee is expected to fulfill the request of these monks. The employees who do not meet the monks’ requests will be reported not directly to his or her mother Ministry, but through the HRBM. On the ground, these monks do not need to deal directly with local departments. Just reporting those to HRBM will process the complaint to the appropriate Ministries and the fine or punishment will proceed from the top.



Figure 3.3 A monastery in Paletwa



Figure 3.4 A young boy playing after quitting his apprenticeship as a novice



Figure 3.5 A Buddhist Monastery in the center of the village

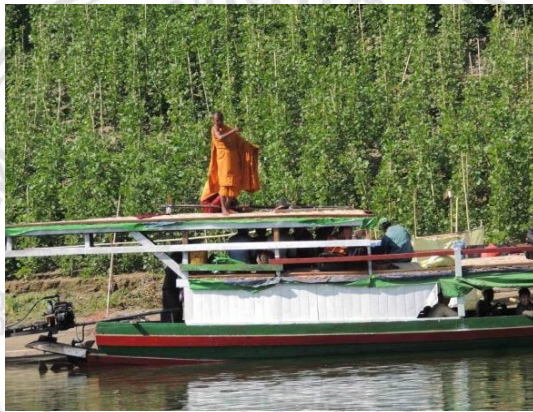


Figure 3.6 A monk travelling with a boat along *Kaladan* River

HRBM also plays a psychologically and sociologically crucial role for those Burman Buddhist soldiers in Chin state reminding them of the different way of life in the lowlands. In fact, that is not only true for Burman soldiers, but it also holds true to most Burman Buddhists in Chin state (mostly government employees). The monasteries in rural areas also host soldiers while they are on a mission. Some monks have been criticized by various Burman writers, such as Myat Su Mon¹⁴ that they are not following Buddhist principles. Nevertheless, these monasteries and monks are very important when interethnic marriage occurs since it has the social power to recognize that marriage. For instance, one *Asho*-Chin woman of Ann town-ship who married a major ranking Burman soldier had her wedding ceremony and reception organized at the monastery without the bride party since the groom did not pay the bride price and also declined to be baptized at the Church according to the Christian ritual.

¹⁴ She wrote an article in *Irrawaddy Weekly Journal*, Vol 39, December 2014.

According to the narratives of the people I have formally and informally interviewed with during my field work, it is commonly answered that a peak in inter-ethnic marriages across Chin state was during 1990s. In particular 1994 was a significant year for the Paletwa area¹⁵ for inter-ethnic marriages. The Chin Human Rights Organization also confirmed that 1994-8 was years where the military was very active in the area and a high number of human rights violations were reported at this time.

As the nationwide political chaos unraveled and government Universities were closed down unconditionally from 1988-1993 this also impacted on the marriage spectrum among young Chin. There, many young men and women, mostly those who had personal or family ties there, fled to Mizoram in India to continue their education, mostly in theology, or seeking refugee status, or simply attempting to secure an alternative livelihood. Most university-students who remained inside Chin state got married. Women of lower socio-economic status women in particular at this time tended to marry Burman soldiers in large numbers.

During informal conversations I had with a woman residing in Thantlang she explained that “eloping was quite popular among us, university-students, that we did not have a promising future, no hope for further education, men and women gather and picnic at the stream so eloping meant to us as a popular way of marriage”¹⁶ while “parcel” marriage occurred after 2000. Parcel marriage is a marriage ceremony or reception during which either the bride or the groom are absent. A film called “*Buantuk*” has tried to capture this kind of marriage. The idea is that when Chin men migrate to other countries for example seeking to resettle in third countries they request their family in Chin state to find a bride on their behalf. In that way, they attempt to carry out traditional practices from a distance, thus maintain membership to their imagined community although physically they are away from their homeland (Anderson 1991; Sachiko 2008; Amporn 2007). Interestingly, most of these men are in the lowest social ranking system in their new host countries and often find it difficult to find a partner.

¹⁵ Interviewees and informal conversation I have during the first field data gathering trip to Paletwa in 2013 May-June. Some of my respondents and person I chatted also have sisters and relatives who married to Burman soldiers.

¹⁶ Personal conversation I had in 5 June 2013 at Hakha.

There are a variety of conditions that encourage Chin women, especially from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with no strong connections with the church. Here are some reasons among others might relevant to my study. Firstly, marrying a Burman soldier enhances their perceived liberation from traditional family structures and powerful patriarchal practices at home. By marrying outside their groups women become freer to make decisions on domestic issues, particularly as they distance themselves from authoritarian mother-in-laws and sister-in-laws. Secondly, it is just personal exploratory. Thirdly, by marrying a soldier who is *lah-khah-ei* (having a government salary) eases every-day life management and reduces the need to borrow money when facing hardships to buy basic goods such as rice, salt, oil, soap and guarantees more livelihood security. Fourth, there is a certain level of support from the *Tatmadaw*, which is mostly unheard of from other sources, for example their children will get *kyaung-hout-pank-kyee* (at least partial support for school fees). They are also be able to go to local markets and exchange for cash the rations of beans, alcohol, gasoline etc. which they receive from the army. They receive free medical treatment in army hospitals when facing critical health issues otherwise indebted from the *pyi tuh se yone* (peoples' hospitals).

It is important to note that there was an “internal announcement” given to mid-level officers in the *Tatmadaw* and in the Department of Religious Affairs in Chin state where it is explicitly stated that influencing the Chin should be done particularly through marrying Chin women. As mentioned in Chapter 1, all Burman soldiers are urged to implement such agenda with the spirit of building the fourth dynasty of Burman kingdom and for the benefit of the unification of the whole Myanmar and its diverse ethnic groups. The instructions explain that this kind of marriage is important “to assimilate and conquer other peoples through use of people/by using people”¹⁷. Inter-marriage between Burman soldier and Chin women in Chin state is reflected by a 34 years old male respondent from Paletwa as

“By sending lots of camps due to National Security reason many of our women married to Burman soldiers including my cousin and aunty. It is quite hard to prevent not to happen as most of our men are not educated,

¹⁷ Further information on the document can be obtained confidentially from the Chin Human Rights Organization.

even educated are mostly drunk and control everything. So children from these family become Burmese as Chin women are not carrying clanship line according to customary law. Many do not know that we are eaten in this way”.

Although this paper places emphasis on structural factors and highlights for example existing incentives and demands of the Tatmadaw, this in no way negates the central role of personal agency in decision-making. No matter what the internal announcements to army personnel say, it is clear that personal choices also remain at the center of any decision to marry someone outside one's ethnic group. What this paper is arguing is that the state and Tatmadaw institutionally facilitates inter-ethnic marriage with an unofficially written policy and this has repercussions to Burmanization on the ground while it became an opportunity for Chin women from economical disadvantage and weak connection with church background to escape from an economical hardship and enjoy domestic freedom.

3.4.3 Another Agents of Burmanization: The Rakhine in Paletwa

A fundamental way in which Burmanization is occurring in Southern Chin State is thus everyday life and contact with ethnic Rakhine, as well as heavy militarization. Among the various Chin groups, it is those in Paletwa who practice bride price the most. The area's complex social fabric and diverse ethnic composition should be taken into account for a wholesome understanding of bride price practices.

The influence of the Rakhine on Chin communities in Paletwa is undeniable. Rakhine language is increasingly used for all communications when greeting others, shopping in the market, travelling by boat, going to government offices, schooling and so on, at the expense of the Khumi language. At the same time, differentiating each other on an ethnic basis is still highly popular and the politics of language are important. Making reference to *tu doh* (they/ness) and *nga doh* (we/ness) is frequent and apparent in various corners.



Figure 3.7 A *Ywar Shin Ma's Nat Sin* (Spirit House) Built by Rakhine Community at a Landmark in Paletwa Town

The two communities are often highly polarized. On the academic level, one highly contentious issue is that Rakhine scholars and historians have not acknowledged and often misspell the term Khumi in Rakhine literature. For example, in the first pages of the book “History of Khumi Culture”, the main author points out the incorrect terms “*Khwai hmoi*” instead of Khumi, but that term actually means dog raiser used by a Rakhine *sayadaw* (scholar monk) in “*da-nya-wa-di a-yay-daw-pone* (Da Nya Wa Di revolution)” as well as Tun Shwe Khaing (Sittwe College), another Rakhine scholar, used “*Kha-mui*” in his book “History of Rakhine’s Kingship and Generations”. Khumi authors often ask why Rakhine authors mostly do not spell and pronounce their name correctly while noting that even the British colonialists managed to use the right terms, for example in the report “Northern Arakan Hill Tract” by G.E.R Grant Brown in 1960. When asked the main author of “History of Khumi Culture” U Hoih Pa in Paletwa he comments –

“I understand that Rakhine and Burmese language are sort of the same. I do not point out lay people who corrupt it unintentionally. Not using and spelling how we determined ourselves is the lack of interest or respect”.

Another aspect of contention is historical relationships between the two groups. According to Khumi oral culture, their ethnic group traditionally exercised their sovereignty by practicing a feudal chieftainship system with distinct social and cultural ways. They were never culturally a part of any Rakhine kingdoms, and politically the traditional chieftainship called “*khu kung*” was administrated independently from

neighboring kingdoms. The Khumi points out that they are a group of Chin who shared common ethnic nationality with other Chin groups.

However, in Rakhine history, the Khumi are portrayed as being part of a group who paid tax to a Rakhine King *Kan-yar-zar-kyi* (BC 1531-150), and who offered food and other needed items to his father and predecessor *Ta-kaung* King *A-bih-yar-zar* during the 24 years when he stayed at Mount Kimo. According to the Rakhine, 3 *ta-pyar* (coins) were collected from “*lin-kyae, Khawi-hmoi*” (referring Khumi in Rakhine’s term) as tax throughout the Third *da-nya-wa-di* kingdom (BC 580-326) from the Khumi. However, the Khumi claim that keeping good relationships with others is an entirely different thing from actually being part of it and thus strongly disagree with Rakhine characterizations¹⁸.

It is somewhat challenging for the Khumi to argue with Rakhine perspectives on this as generally the Rakhine in Paletwa benefit from a stronger social position vis-à-vis the state and government in Paletwa. This is largely due to a stronger economic position thanks to raw material ownership and production and ranking in governmental departments. Such issues are heavily polarizing for the Rakhine and Khumi and compounded by other problems such as the construction of new monasteries and temples in Paletwa townships and placing Buddha statues on top of prominent landmarks, which are financed by Rakhine Buddhists rather than Khumi Buddhist. Up to one third¹⁹ of the local Khumi population is *nat sar* (animist) but significant social difference remains, and often the State apparatus departments refer their religion as Buddhist.

From the Khumi point of view, the Rakhine are seen as key agents of Burmanization because Rakhine and Burman have strong cultural and religious ties through Buddhism and often perceive each other as brothers. These ties are visible and even audible in everyday life. For example in Paletwa, Rakhine music and Buddhist chanting can be heard every evening from the center of town thanks to loudspeakers.

¹⁸ The mythical story telling such as “*Anglo Tui hawi*”, “*Pajua Keung*”, “*Anglo Atlaw atli*”, “*Ryhm kho tapiu*” are good places to find out more about the origin of the Khumi.

¹⁹ Paletwa Township is the second highest number of Buddhist population after Mindat Township which accounts Christian 63%, Buddhist 36.9%, Animist 0.3% while Mindat represent Christian 57.1%, Buddhist 41.3%, Animist 1.6% according to Threats to Our Existence, 2012.

Neither Burman nor Rakhine pay the bride price and they do not usually practice dowry either in nowadays. The language of bride price in Paletwa is spoken in Rakhine and Burmese, and referred to as *a twin phoe* rather than *vang* in Khumi. Also, names of spirits have changed into Rakhine such as *ywar shin ma* (a feminine guardian spirit), but originally most Khumi spirits were not feminine but neutral. Albeit these changes in languages, bride price remains important for the Khumi in Paletwa, and has taken on new significance in terms of identity and its related politics. Practicing bride price is now an important cultural institution for 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. Bishop Thawng Hoih in Paletwa reflects as

“We are definitely neither Burmese nor Rakhine. We are Chin, precisely Khumi Chin. Looking at what works all of us as our identity is practicing bride price. This apparently differentiates us from others”.

On the other hand, practicing the traditional ritual of bride price in contemporary times is economically challenging for the many Khumi due to economic hardship. Therefore, an alternative cultural practice has developed, maintaining much of the cultural symbolic value but allowing for an easier and lighter financial burden. Bride price thus has started to be practiced as “a token”, merely symbolically. Meanwhile, the *ka tawi* also continues to serve for Khumi women as a very personal and political bondage with her natal family and her original ethnic group under a patriarchal system.

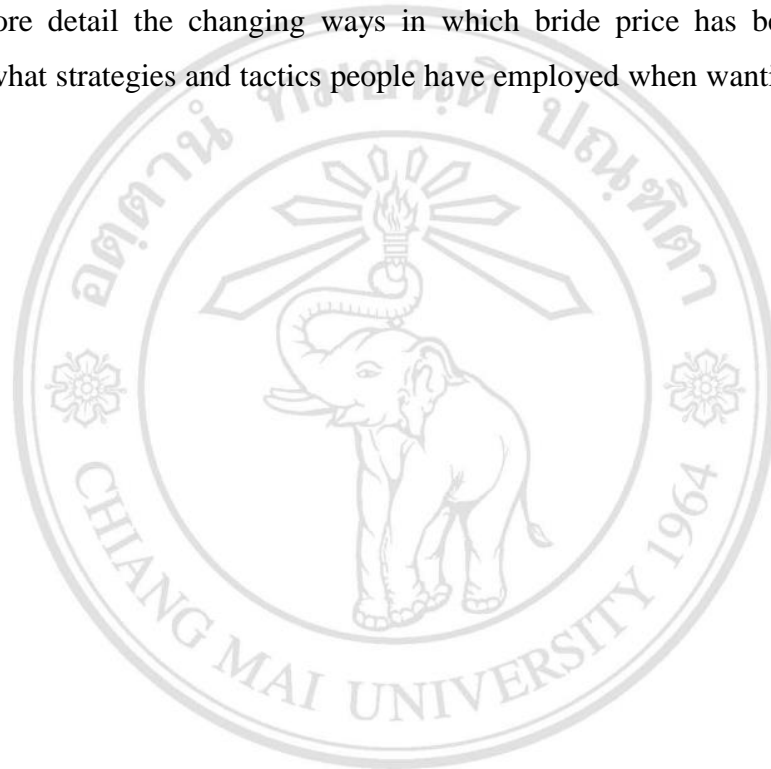
3.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed the changing meaning of bride price and dowry alongside changing historical conditions. Although the bride price was symbolically and ritually practiced for internal bondage, collective identity, and class stratification by the Chin in ancestral time, its meaning has been shifting. Whilst during colonial times the meaning of bride price as a means of social exchange was critiqued by many as un-modern, old-fashioned, unjust, and even a burden of social welfare in colonial times, this understanding has been renegotiated. Trends of bride price practices seemingly declined but the dowry practice did not change much. It has remained a means of

showing personal care and love to the bride as well as a symbol of the rite of marriage for women.

In post-colonial times with the advent of Burmanization, the discourse of bride price became strategic for the state's hegemonic unification efforts vis-à-vis ethnic politics. The Chin on their part have continued to practice the bride price, as it has given them a cultural tool packed with symbolic power useful to resist Burmanization.

The next chapters will put these changes into socio-economic context. I will discuss in more detail the changing ways in which bride price has been practiced, highlighting what strategies and tactics people have employed when wanting to practice bride price.



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