

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Rethinking *Vang* in the Changing Roles of Women alongside Modernization**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The emphasis of this chapter is to examine how the bride price and dowry have been negotiated and renegotiated by Khumi Chin in Paletwa through family change. In doing so, it is first necessary to understand what the local meanings of bride price are, and what symbols exist in this practice. Family change cannot be simply understood as a universal social process but rather needs to be looked at as a contextualized practice among the Khumi Chin in Paletwa. I will therefore take a critical look at modernization, including access to education, employment and attitudes on reproduction. I will argue that Christianization has worked alongside modernization with similar and historically parallel effects. It is in this context that I will assess how modernization has affected the bride price and dowry, claiming that it has even pushed for a re-conceptualization of the notion of family in the context of Chin. I will do so by forming my own feminist argument, which I will present in critique of traditional Western liberal feminist understandings of women in developing world.

#### **4.2 Discourses, Symbols and Rituals: Rethinking Developing World “victims” and the Narrative of *Vang***

Research carried out on bride price in Uganda by Hague and Thiara (2009) pointed out that the practice of bride price has often had a negative impact on women. In their opinion it symbolizes loss of women’s autonomy, is a source of oppression for women’s personal as well as reproductive life, gives men ownership over women and overall is a form of economic violence towards women and their livelihood. The authors however acknowledge that the practice’s traditional meaning is constructive. Similarly, dowry of India is has also been seen negatively, and Kurian (2000) for example explains that “women are treated as commodities of culture”, although dowries were originally exercised among the upper caste.

In the literature that I have reviewed for the present study, most authors have failed to adequately put the practices into their local context, and consequently not placing enough emphasis of the actors' negotiations over their fluid and ever-changing meanings. To the contrary, it is my contention that authors and researchers have interpreted such practice following (consciously or unconsciously) their pre-existing views and frameworks. This means that their conclusions have largely mirrored their beliefs and interests.

I intend to distance myself from gender essentialism typical of the grand narratives of much Western liberal feminism. I think that integrating cultural diversity into my analysis is necessary to provide a more wholesome understanding of such practices, but at the same time I do not wish to simply claim them as cultural, as this would result in cultural relativism, which is not my aim. I simply want to detach my analysis of bride price from the traditional liberal narratives which do not leave enough space for these complex practices, and are overall dominated by a sense that non-Western women need salvation - in particular brown women needing saving from brown men. Although an in depth discussion of all these arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, a good overview of the debate is given by Kapur (2005)<sup>1</sup>.

The following section will place Khumi bride price and dowry practices into further context by comparison with the Hakha Chin. Firstly, it is necessary to take an in-depth look at the terminology. Bride price in Khumi is called *vang*, and in Hakha is called *man*. In both cases they signify a certain kind of 'value' rather than 'price'. The difference usage of these two terminologies in the context of Chin is that 'value' is mostly used for a certain quality while 'price' accounts mostly for quantity. For instance, using the sense of 'price' for either *vang* or *man* may not make sense in the social-psychological understanding of the Chin, while the buying and the selling of things like mango and chicken for 'price' do. The bride price payment said in Hakha is *man manh* and is thus also relevant in this sense. Therefore, the direct translation of "bride price" is confusing, irrelevant and incomplete for the Chin. By employing terminology that is not adequate, meaning and complexity is lost.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this see Chapter 4, The Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric: Resurrecting the 'Native' Subject in International/Postcolonial Feminist Legal Politics, in Kapur 2005

It is also fundamental to examine the symbols and items put in *vang* and *man* in order to understand the meaning to the Chin. Among the Khumi Chin, before the wedding proposal was made a ritual of *samai pataw* was usually done by a young man to a young woman, by bringing a cigar to her house in the evening. The aim was to listen the women's will and see whether she denied or accepted him as her husband. If she agreed, the groom's party would approach the parents of that woman together with trustworthy people in their community. These trustworthy people are important for not only facilitating the discussion of *vang* and the marriage ceremony among the bridegroom parties but they also act as witnesses for the two families' relation, including surrounding property matters.

In this way, the meaning of *vang* is more similar to a ritual of respect, love, connection, re-connection and *peh tlaih nak* (meaning relatedness in Hakha) at a time of marriage. Once *vang* is paid, the bride's family requires slaughtering of a pig or a cow to have a feast showing their recognition for all the new relations. It is therefore the payment of *vang* that has adverse directions, both receiving-returning and offering-accepting. Most importantly, according to my key interviewees, it's meaning is opposite from the Burman or Rakhine's *ka doh kyae* (a homage fee) which entails only one way in which the groom can pay (usually cash) to the bride's parents. It is not mandatory for the bride's party to return to the groom.

In the content of *vang*, it is important to note that according to etiquette the groom is not allowed to bargain its amount. The bride party has absolute rights to set it but two trustworthy persons can mediate on behalf of the two parties if needed. What is negotiable is that the payment and installment can be made in the future. If the volume of the *vang* (both *mui vang* and *ta moe te*) and the date of marriage ceremony is agreed, *tavi* (a spear) should be offered to the bride, symbolizing a valuable woman is picked up like a flower preventing to drop it down, signify the success of the proposal and preventing outside intervention.



**Figure 4.1** Spears (left) and a gong (right) used for Khumi marriage payment



**Figure 4.2** Different kind of knives used for Khumi marriage payment

Traditionally, the marriage ceremony happens on the day when the groom party arrives at the bride's parents house bringing the agreed number of chickens, *uh'm* (fermented rice wine put in a dried guard), *tavi* (spear) and *charang* (cash or coins) for *ta moe te* and eggs (CKHC 2010: 136). Chicken meat is not meant for consumption by the grooms' party and rather they will eat only what the bride party prepared such as pork and beef. Similarly the bride parties are not encouraged to eat the meats they prepared as marriage etiquette says "one should not eat their own meat curry" as this would be impolite and perceived as a shameful act. For approving the marriage, the bridegroom needs to drink *uh'm*. This symbolically means that this couple will have as

many children as the seeds of the guard. On the same day, the bride was sent to the groom's house a crowd.

Before the missionary introduced it, there was no such thing as a wedding ceremony among the Chin like we “normally” see now. The activities on the day included bridegroom parties enjoying bringing-and-eating-meats and receiving-and-returning-meats, and this was seen as a conjugal act of marriage in the past before the Chin adopt or copy rites of wedding ceremonies from Western missionary or the neighbor Rakhine or Burman. Also, *ka tawi* is presented or transferred to the bride by her natal family which includes three traditional blankets; *dong hoi ka ni* (a blanket brought by a bride when heading to the groom's house for marriage), *beu deu* (to pack rice or curry in replacement of leaves) and *vang khiu* (the most precious one which depends on the amount of *mui vang* and is used for the funeral of the bride). Other items such as women's costumes, jewelries and accessories are normally included, but as this depends on the wealth of bride's parents and this can be expanded as much as they like. For example, in my fieldwork I have observed five blankets being handed to the bride by her family in Paletwa whereas another bride was given one *vang khiu* in Nga Sha village. In contemporary times, the bride's side is responsible for paying for the wedding ceremony. Nowadays, the session of *ka tawi* is normally put after the wedding reception. Nevertheless, the common wedding ceremonies we see among the Chin are mostly new practices introduced by western missionaries or adapted from Rakhine or Burman customs.



**Figure 4.3** *Ka tawi* Items for a Khumi Bride





**Figure 4.4** Components of *ka tawi*: A Cotton Skirt (left) and a Shawl to Cover the Chest (right)



**Figure 4.5** Three Different Blankets Used for *Ka tawi*

As majority of Chin became Christian in Paletwa, the wedding ceremony is almost done in Christian way. That is a couple will be married and say their vows among the audience by the priest or a pastor in the Church. If they elope or have a child already, the wedding will be conducted at outside the Church, meaning, it is ‘unholy matrimony’. Nowadays, many Khumi families especially who have faith in Buddhist hold their wedding ceremony and reception at a public hall or at the monastery or government department hall (if they are close connection to the administrative department officers). Two weddings ceremonies and receptions practice the *vang* and *ka tawi*: I have participated and observed in Paletwa in 2014 will be quoted at length here. Interestingly to note, these two weddings are inter-ethnic marriage and the bride of the first wedding presented is Khumi Christian Chin and the groom is Karen Buddhist. The groom of the second wedding presented is Khumi Buddhist Chin and the bride is Karen Buddhist.

**Wedding 1:** “The wedding ceremony started at 7 in the morning at the Anglican Church. When the Bishop announced to start the wedding, the groom and the bridegroom’s best persons enter into the Church. The bride was accompanied by her father and was left with the groom and the best persons after praying. It is to note that the bridegroom’s best man and woman are the bride’s brothers and cousin. The priest let the couple to take marriage vows and the exchange of golden wedding rings. And he facilitated the bridegroom and their bests to signature on the marriage certificate. This session finished when the bridegroom left the Church. After the bridegroom took pictures with families and relatives and friends, they followed to another building in the Church compound where the reception was held.

The stage is decorated with flowers and balloons for the couple by putting a table and chairs, a sort of poster indicating Mr... and Ms... at the wedding reception and a silver cup is available to put envelopes containing money. The couple received different sizes and packages of wedding presents including cash put in the envelope from the participants. The bridegroom greets participants by shaking hands. Then these participants are assisted by the bride families to join a meal prepared on the table. The meal is rice, pork, beef, chicken, fried vegetables, chili salad and eggs. Instant coffee, candies and cakes was served after the meal. The audience varied - the majority was Khumi, some Rakhine and a few Burmese and two French women from an NGO as colleagues of the bride in Paletwa. This reception session finished around midnight.

The *ka tawi* or traditional session followed at the bride’s house. Wedding presents are put in the middle of the living room by volunteer young boys. The bride’s mother had passed away 5 years ago, and her paternal grandmother was taking part in this session as her mother. The groom was accompanied by his male friend from Yangon. His friend told me that they have been friends since their time at the University of Medicine. He was also interested to observe what was going to happen. All participants were sitting in a circle around the presents. A Bishop who married them at the Church, sat on the right side of the bride’s grandfather, father, aunty, and to the left of the groom, bride and the grandmother. The session started with praying and blessed words from the

Bishop. After that, the bride's grandfather proceeded to giving the groom the head of a spear saying "If you are a member of Khumi, you need to prepare this spear by yourself. Anyway, now I have prepared this spear for you since you may not know of what is to be done". The groom is asked to give this spear to the Bishop and then handed to the bride's father. The groom followed as the grandfather said. The groom was asked for 15000 kyat for '*leing lo*' as a token of Khumi custom. After that, the grandmother of the bride stood up and announced the bride shall be given some presents and added as "I take this task as the bride mother cannot present with us". The items of presents were 3 blankets (1 *dong hoi ka ni*, 1 *beu deu* and 1 *vang khui*) (normally either woven by the mother herself or by relatives or bought - in this case the grandmother bought it), a set of traditional costumes (a pink cloth to put the head, a yard long clothe to cover the chest and a skirt) and accessories such as silver necklace, drum-like earrings, a silver chain like a belt and silver wrist wears. After that instant coffee and cookies were served to all participants by announcing the *ka tawi* session is successfully done. Meanwhile, the grandfather and father announce that the couple shall open the wedding presents and the bridegroom shall only decide on this as they belong. The wedding presents included cash, a thermos, pots and a pan, plates, spoons, knives, food carriers, photo albums and so on." (Field notes in Paletwa, 18 January 2014)



**Figure 4.6** A Christian Wedding Ceremony in the Church (left)  
and its Wedding Reception (right)



**Wedding 2:** “The wedding ceremony was done at a monastery by offering foods and presents to the monks in early in the morning and the reception was held at a government owned town hall as the groom was a staff member at the department of township administration. The Township Administrative Officer and his wife were put as godparents. The groom’s family came from a village to celebrate their son’s wedding. The bride was a Karen residing in Karen state and her family could not be present. She later told me that she got to meet the groom through her friend’s who work in Paletwa. After having a chatting on the phone the groom visited her and finally they decided to marry. The wedding hall was decorated by the groom’s colleagues. The couple and two of their best sat on an elevated stage. Most of the guests were Burmese and Rakhine, from the employment circle and some local Khumi residents in Paletwa. Every time the guests arrived, they all stood up and shook hands, say congratulations, offering and receiving different color wedding packages and taking photographs. After that, the guests joined in having a vermicelli soup, instant coffee, ready-made cake and candies which were served on the table. As the bride was from a different ethnic background, there was no session and discussion about *vang* and *ka tawi*. The wedding reception finished around 12 at noon. But the couple *ka doh* (homage) to both of the bridegroom’s parents with cash and the Township Administrator’s couple with some presents.” (Field notes in Paletwa: 12 January 2014)



**Figure 4.7** A Khumi Buddhist Wedding Reception at a Town Hall in Paletwa

These two cases show the diverse wedding celebrations and different types of marriage payments. Although the weddings were both held in Paletwa, the same month and year, the performance differed based on who the bridegroom parties were related to and the priority beyond the cultural practice. Most importantly, the traditional wedding is no longer practiced among the Chin but they adapted and adopted the old one together with something from outside. For example, *ka tawi* session is combined with the new form of western wedding ceremony in the wedding 1 and *ka doh kyae* is well welcomed by those who associated more the Buddhist institution. It is not so clear, and in fact inappropriate, to say weddings among the Chin are traditional or western or Buddhist as it is fusing and hybridizing together with something else.

That there was no room for *vang* or *ka tawi* in the wedding 2 raises many questions. In a Khumi sense, males are the center of culture and the main responsible agents for carrying out lineage and system on the one hand he is excused by his own culture not to pay *vang* or *ka tawi* when the bride is from the other. Why can Khumi woman not be accepted as active agents and players of culture precisely through their practicing *vang* and *ka tawi*? How do religious and socio-economic backgrounds impact the choice of practicing *vang* or not? How do the personal preference and psychological process of decision making of women impact changes in choices on wedding ceremonies and related payments? What does it mean to claim that a woman is victimized or not by practicing *vang* and *ka tawi*? How is this understanding diversity in different cultures? What different moral frameworks are applied when we see women as victims?

Related to *vang*, *mai rom*, is an important practice to note. It is usually done if the groom passes away and leaves a widow behind. The natal family of the widow is responsible for conducting the *mai rom* ritual, normally her parents or her brothers if the parents dead. As Kressel (1977) explained a widow's or a deceased wife's departure from children is a hardship for children in a patriarchal society while this is not a case in a matriarchal society. Also, the loss of her labor is an important issue for means of production. In the context of the Chin in Paletwa, the volume of *mai rom* depends on the age of widow but her wealth or the number of children she has do not affect it. Currently, the standard range of *mai rom* for a woman over 60 years old is 1 lakh MMK (equivalent to approximately 100 US\$) while 3 lakhs MMK (equivalent to

approximately 300 US\$) for under 60. Regarding this, U Hoih Pa, the main author of History of Khumi Chin Culture, suggested to me that:

“The amount of *mai rom* for over 60 years old woman should be set at as little as possible. For example, if the middle age woman *mai rom* is 1 lakh MMK (equivalent to approximately 100US\$) the old (over 60) women should be 10,000 MMK (equivalent to approximately 10 US\$). We cannot and should not abandon the *mai rom* practice; otherwise there will be no family connection. We need to reconsider this issue and even amending in the customary law”. (Interviewed on 27 January 2014 in Paletwa)

If the bride is not Chin, the bride price can be omitted as it is similar to marrying a Burman soldier by a Chin woman. When asked about bypassing the bride price for inter-ethnic marriage, my key informants were somewhat reluctant to explain further. The common answer ended up as the Chin groom has to follow the rituals of the bride from other cultural background. For the Chin bride marrying Burman soldier the reasoning is that since the bride will be another kin member the bride price needs to be excused. However, this logic, intentionally or unintentionally, accounts the act of assurance of marriage. Looking at the concept of *mai rom*, those Chin women married to Burman groom and Chin men married to brides from different ethnicity do not usually pay the bride price so there is no discussion for *mai rom*.

#### **4.3 Contextualizing Family Change in the Context of Chin in Paletwa**

In the context of Paletwa, the notion of education, employment and the attitude on reproduction are the keys to understanding family change. Thus, the changing roles of Chin women can be largely understood through these three factors. This part will discuss mainly how the changing roles of Chin women are related with education, employment and affected the attitude on reproduction and those relations to the bride price magnitude.

### 4.3.1 Education

In the context of Paletwa, women's education<sup>2</sup> is a major factor for the changing roles of women in the family. While educational status is a direct factor for the attitude of reproduction and changing the role of women in family in OECD countries. The higher the educational status they attained, the more network women could build and thus enhance their economic and employment opportunities.

Education in the Chin context can be categorized as formal and informal. Formal education includes primary school, middle school, high school, diploma or certificate degrees and university level. When asked about their educational achievements the majority of women respondents said they finished their primary education, while a few studied until diploma-level, and only one to university level. The reasons they dropped from school were generally related to their parents' economic condition and prevailing cultural norms. For average parents, sending their children to school is a big investment. Sending children off means losing the human labor in the farm so many parents balance quite a lot. For some families, their farm is 15 miles away from their home and they need to sleep or stay at the farm. Since farming is intensive, the part-time labor or occasional help from children is very important. For this reason, parents let their daughters drop out of school after completion of primary school level.

There are specific reasons why this occurs. First, in primary education level (5- 8 years old), the girl's labor is not very useful for farming, but it becomes useful around middle school age (8- 15 years old). Around high school level (15-19 years old), a girl can lead on farming and taking care of the household as an adult. Since women are not entitled to inherit their parents property and are not responsible for families' issues such as debt, many parents see sending their girls to school is not as useful as teaching them how to take care the household and the farm work. Also, the concept of lineage bars them from getting a higher education status. That is, girls are only temporary members of her natal family as they will become members of her future husband's family. From the parents' point of view thus investing time, finance, and labor to send a girl to school is seen as an investment for others. Parents who send their daughters to extensive

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<sup>2</sup> According to Committee for History of Khumi Culture (CHKC) (2012), total numbers those who got University degree from 1955-2000 (within 45 years) are 119 which numbers of men is 98 and women 21. (p, 176-179)

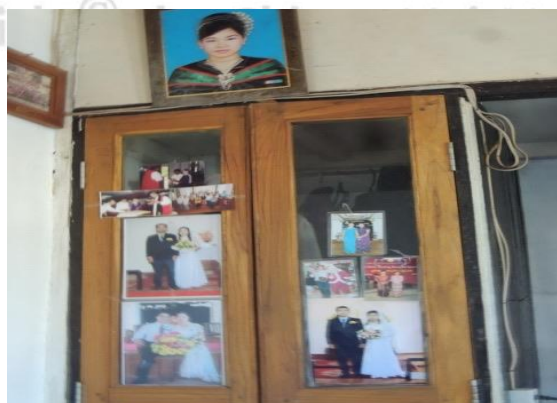


schooling are mostly the economically well-off families, hence education above high school is relatively little.

Informal education is mostly conducted by churches and missionaries, and content is mostly focused on how to take care of the family, how to teach children, how to manage income and expenditure, how to take care of other people and so on. Some women become preachers and earn around 40,000 MMK per month as a salary. What is helpful to women attending this informal education is that network building is very important for their social security. When their families are sick for example they can rely on the church and its members to receive some support such as small amounts of cash, psychological support and helping their recovery or even manage the funeral where there is no functional institutional support from the State.



**Figure 4.8** Children Attending a Kindergarten at Roman Catholic Church in Paletwa



**Figure 4.9** A Living Room Decorated with a Graduation Picture in a Khumi House

### 4.3.2 Employment

In Paletwa, the number of Khumi Chin women employed in the government sector is very low since the majority of them do not pass the matriculation examination and have not obtained a diploma or University degree. However, many of them are employed in a wide variety of other jobs in different sectors such as running a shop/store, trading forest products from Paletwa to lowland areas, weaving and knitting textiles and sweaters, lending cash with interest, working on elephant foot yam and *ga mone* plantations and banana or mango orchards, working at construction, selling wild meats and seasonal crops at local municipal market and assisting church work and so on.

It is interesting to learn that Chin women in Paletwa engage in a wide variety of jobs, especially in business sectors and not only in farm work. As it was mentioned earlier, these women mostly do not have educational qualifications to engage in formal employment. The thing they rely on the most is their religious and extended network. Support from the churches is particularly important to engage in business although its mandate is not of providing financial support.

The example of 50 year old Daw Aung Lone (pseudonym) can be used to illustrate this. She married a Burman soldier in 1991 and now has a 17 years old son. Now she is currently living at her sister's compound in Paletwa but her son is sent to school elsewhere. She opened a small shop at the Municipal market in Paletwa. She buys and sells flowers and honey bees. Occasionally, she also trades fish paste and seasonal forest products from Pyay and Paletwa. Becoming a single mother is due to her choice as her marriage was abusive. She was constantly accused of being with another man having extramarital affairs, so was kept in her in a room with her baby the whole day. This physical and emotional abuse pushed her to become a single mother. This happened, according to her, because he suffered from witchcraft due to her husband's bad manners to others. She explained that the people in the army camp where they lived are uncivilized and had no moral problem in stealing animals and vegetable from a Muslim village at the other side of the river. Also, she explained that her ex-husband returned back with money and jewelry from the war in Eastern part of Myanmar. Although she reported abusive manner of her husband to army officers, no action was taken.

She finally escaped with her son from the camp with the assistance of the Church. The Church sent her to Paletwa in the beginning but she requested to be sent away from Paletwa for fear of being found by her husband. She then worked in a farm owned by the Church as a daily wage gardener. Since she got a place to stay free of charge and clothes from the Church, she even could save some money. However she decided to go back to Paletwa for the future education of her son as well as a closer connection with her natal family. The Church provided her with employment as a cook for boarding students which was helpful for her son's education and they now are both under the protection of the Church. She thinks it is very important to offer the church one tenth of her whole income every month.

Although many Chin women in Paletwa may earn the major income in the family, the power on decision-making management is still challenging. Men and women may work in different sectors mentioned, but even when they both bring money home their husband decides how to use it. In some cases if women obtained formal educational, it is easier for them to negotiate how to manage their income with their husband. A 35 years old midwife explained that:

“I have a larger income than my husband who is a pastor. As you know pastors do not earn much. They sometime cannot support family needs properly with their income. Overall saying for Khumi, most husbands wholly decides everything, especially finance. For my case, I prefer to say we decide together for the whole family issue. But when it comes to his work related issue, he is the main decision maker and so do I when it comes to my work related issue. I do not know so much about his work at the church and he also does not understand how the midwifery work needs to do effectively.” (Personal interview: January 1014)

However, if a woman does not have a certain level of education, it is much more difficult to influence her husband to have an equal footing in decision making. In this case, the traditional custom that ‘men are the head of the family and the household god’ applies. Many women say they do not like this kind of male center system. But some also repeat often that there is no other way since this is culture.

“I only went to school until grade 2 and my parent told me quit because it is not helpful for my future. I was told by my parents that I should learn managing a household work, taking care of my younger siblings and mostly working at the farm when I was at my teenage until I married. Now, in my own family, I am like a servant of all and no one listen my opinion even my children. I work hard like a slave in the house, in the farm, and I made the major income since my educated husband is not working. He is mostly playing cards and drinking alcohol. I even have to ask for petty cash from my husband.” (A note from a tour to *Ou-tae-ma-wa* village in May 1013)

While I was on my field research, I spoke to a Khumi Chin man who works at an INGO in Paletwa. He shared his thoughts and findings of their survey about the roles of Chin women with regards of economics. He said that overall families in the Paletwa area are headed by men and they have an ultimate power to decide everything. Women headed household are rare, apart from when the husband is died. These households however are the most financially well off family in the village because in his opinion the women headed household have a more equal division of labor among members and authority does not laid only on one person. It also seems every one’s opinion is well taken into account for decision. In many families, earning money is not such a major issue, but saving is very important. Since the insecurity on everything in a woman’s headed households are more, they tend to be more careful and prevent future livelihood problems so saving works quite well. Another woman pointed out that many husbands understand less about the home management. If the husbands do not give a chance to women to decide something like buying salt and MSG (monosodium glutamate), it is so difficult since they are not working in the kitchen. For example, the wife understands well the needs of their kitchen since she is cooking every day. But the husband may buy a lot of salt rather than fish paste when he goes to town.





**Figure 4.10** Women at the Municipal Market in Paletwa Town



**Figure 4.11** A Woman Working in Early Morning at Paletwa Jetty



**Figure 4.12** Infants and Khumi Women's Domestic Duties



**Figure 4.13** A Mid-wife Duty at a Sub-center



**Figure 4. 14** An old Aged Man and Woman at home to look after Grandchildren



**Figure 4.15** A Khumi Woman Daily Work at the Farm





**Figure 4.16** A Khumi Mother Washing Dishes at *Kaladan* with Her Children



**Figure 4.17** Men Working at Paletwa Jetty



**Figure 4.18** A Man with an Engine-boat to Paletwa

### 4.3.3 Attitudes on Reproduction

The concept of reproduction is a highly debated subject in Paletwa because most of my respondents could not clearly assess the value of having few or many children regardless of faith, educational status and employment. It is a generally accepted concept that reproduction is out of human control and is only in the hand of a supreme power being, and for a lay Khumi woman being able to reproduce many children is still a matter of pride rather than having none. Some women prefer the status of having many children than being poor and seen as being infertile. An infertile women's status is arguably lower than her counterpart infertile men. As an educated woman who has 8 children (6 sons and 2 daughters) said:

“...I have obtained 7 standard and my elder brother encouraged me to as a school teacher ... I was proposed by a groom parent from *sami*, my first posting village. He passed 10<sup>th</sup> standard and was also a clerk by the time he proposed to me. ... My parent in law asked me having many children as I can because my husband is the only son. They even warned me to have many children I can (laughing) otherwise they would have beaten. They have helped to take care and looked after all my children when young... I am happy that having many sons and daughters which is very important for security especially in my old age”. (Interview with Daw Aung Yat, 26 January 2014)

It is very difficult to support the whole family and their needs on a daily basis. Farm work is not that productive as it was in the past. Many people no longer have the capital necessary to change their traditional farming, hunting and fishing practices and this affects them because different kinds of capital is needed such as cash to invest, network to import and export their raw products within and outside Paletwa area, a skill also required to approach and bond with majority of Rakhine or Burmese police or army in the numerous security check points and so on. In addition, many families struggle with basic food and clothes and basic health care. When an emergency medical issue happens, it is financially threatening condition also because recovery is not guaranteed. Amid in this situation, when I as an outsider suggested to locals that not having many



children might reduce the economic insecurity and making a safer life, a father of 12 children from Tion Ai village had this to say:

“Children are blessed and no one can really control to have and not to have. I know life is so difficult here to support my family. I send some of them to school that gives me a lot of debts. But I do not give up. I am doing different kind of jobs such as planting *ga mone* and elephant foot yam and farming. Rice from my farms is not enough for us for the whole year. When I sell *ga mone* to Rakhine’s traders, they give me very little price than they profit. What can I do, I can do nothing. It is just the way it is. But, I am happy if I could go back home with rice and new clothes for my children. As long as nothing happens to my farm land, I am not afraid to have many children”.  
(Personal interview: May 2013)

In this context, it is inaccurate to agree with reports like OECD (2010) that attitudes on reproduction for new generations is not influenced by women and men’s educational status and employment. Also, religion hardly tells them to have less children, rather welcoming every new generation. In this way, the family size and its structural changes have not been influenced much by Christianization and modernization. However, Christianity rather plays important role in re-conceptualizing the family in the context of Paletwa where there is no family welfare service from the State.

#### **4.4 Christianity and the Re-conceptualization of Family**

Christianity has facilitated the renegotiation and re-conceptualization of family in the context of Paletwa. Its networks extend beyond the institution locally and nationally and have significant impact on old conceptions of the family, facilitating its re-making. As relevant to the present study, it is important to note that Christianity assists the changing roles of women through its networks and resources although its mandate does not explicitly deal with efforts to abolish specific cultural practices.

It is difficult to ignore the presence of churches and missionaries in the context of Paletwa as they play significant roles in assisting family integrity, preventing family decay and fragmentation and rehabilitate those who have experienced violence. I have

spoken to several missionaries funded by churches of different denominations (mainly from the northern part of Chin State as well as from Mizoram in India) and churches from different Diasporas. Few are funded by themselves for the personal mandate to converse the Khumi Chin.

During my first field visit I met a Northern born missionary called Pa Hnin (pseudonym) on the way back to Kyautdaw from Paletwa. We were talking in Hakha dialect and when he asked me where I was staying in Kyautdaw I explained I would stay at the guest house. He invited me to stay at his colleague's house, in Kyautdaw. On the way there he immediately introduced me to two Hakha families. He gave me his mobile phone number and introduced many missionaries to me across Paletwa Township and explained who was working with whom and sponsored by whom, illustrated what the challenges and success were and even provided criticism on missionary work. I greatly benefited from his wide and varied network to contact and learn from other missionaries even in later fieldwork.



**Figure 4.19** Women and Church Activities

On the night I stayed at Pa Hnin's colleague's house in Kyautdaw (they in fact belong to different denominations but work closely through missionary work), the whole evening was spent chatting to a 19 years old man who was on his way to missionize the Khumi in Paletwa and arrives the same day as us. He came together with other two missionary women, sent by the church from Thantlang (a town in northern part of Chin State, 22 miles distance from the capital town Hakha) with a church-owned Jeep car from Thantlang to Kyautdaw passing several towns in several divisions such

as Kankaw, Mandalay, Magwe, Ann and Myruat Oo. This young man declined any kind of financial sponsorship and offers. Every one acknowledged and appraised his enthusiasm and motivation for conversion. He said God sent him to this area to meet with *tha rau tlau* (lost spirits) who were so attached to primitive ways and still living in the dark. Pa Hnin who has 10 years' experience in this area suggested starting the missionary work with education as the beginning strategy as those who directly start with religious topics sometimes will not be allowed to enter or stay in some villages. Some missionaries even approach with basic health care services. Later in my next field work, I saw that this young man is settling at Upper stream of Kaladan River. In the village he stays, he is teaching young children with free of charge. He regularly comes to Paletwa to reply and send personal email to his family in Hakha and in abroad.

Some missionaries' personal stories are interesting and it is possible to make connections with the bride price subject. I was introduced to another missionary woman in Paletwa through the aforementioned network. She shared her story and family life and missionary work at a corner tea shop near the market. She said she did not choose this path but God choose her to work for the people here. Her father is a missionary in Bangladesh and she was born there. Her dream was to become a medical doctor but her life changed at her age 16. She had a crystallized vision that God planned for her to work on the other side of the national boundary but among the same people (the Chin). Then she started a mission and travelled to Kalay town in Sagaing division with three of her colleagues in 1994. They learned the Burmese language and even managed to get *hmat pone tin* (national identity card). Then, they proceeded to Yangon for other intensive training on how to approach missionary work, what to look for, whom to connect with, when to preach, how to maintain members and so on. At first she, was assigned to work at *Bu ti taung* area in Rakhine state in 1995. But she was transferred to the Paletwa area due to frequent attacks between local armed and *tatmadaw* making it unsafe for her. She learned auxiliary midwifery training in Paletwa hospital which is very helpful for her missionary work to gain new members. Her main focus in the missionary work is to address the role of women in the family which is important for the church. She explains by giving her own experience as follows:

“Women here do not know how to take care of the family in an effective and productive way. I talk and also I show them what I practice. As a missionary

family, we do not earn so much money for saving. I earned 4000 Rupee in the beginning. But what can we do is reducing unnecessary our expenses. For example, not to buy clothes frequently and also separate sleeping clothes, school clothes and casual wear. By categorization, the time to destroy and faded clothes longer. Preventing not to buy everything from the market also needed so we are gardening seasonal plants. Also we always raise a piglets and chickens with *rawl le meh hting* (foods and curry to be thrown away to the rubbish). It is also money saving and children familiar with animals. What I always include in my preaching is education is very important for all, not only for men. Favoring a girls' education is what we should do that God put men and women equal... If the bride price makes women inferior or disadvantage, we all should destruct together.” (Interviewed with Tial Ku (pseudonym) in Paletwa on 20 January 2014)



**Figure 4.20** Catholic Churches in Paletwa (left) and in Nga Sha Village (right)



**Figure 4.21** NGO workshop attendants in Nga Sha village (left) and training attendants in Paletwa (right)



The missionaries and churches are cooperating for family problems and mediate between couples for reconciliation. Sometimes they socially rehabilitate people and even provide some resources for the divorced or widows and her children for their new life. Daw Aung Lone (pseudonym) 50 years (case from 4.3.2) and Cecelia (pseudonym) 28 years (case from 4.5) are relevant examples for supporting this narration.

When Daw Aung Lone was “abused physically and emotionally by her husband”, the first institution that she contacted for help was her mother’s church. The church visited the camp she lived in and found a way to bring her back to Paletwa and then to Yangon as this was the safest place where her husband could not follow her anymore. Also, she was employed in a church-owned plantation while the nuns gave her clothes and some basic things for her and her son. The nuns constantly gave psychological support not only to her but also to her natal family in Paletwa. The nuns even played as a personal messenger between Daw Aung Lone and her remaining relatives in Palewa where there were no mobile phones to communicate with at that time.

Similar to Daw Aung Lone’s case, Cecelia’s family would be in more trouble without the intervention and mediation of the Church. In the village, it is customary for neither the local police nor the village head to intervene cases intertwined with cultural practice and ideology. In this case, the Church was not involved directly at the point of *mai rom* of Cecelia’s mother. Its involvement was delicate and not judgmental on any one, but recognizing the victims as agents who can decide what they want to do, where the Church can help and assist privately. With its networks, Cecelia went to Shan State and was introduced to the village in the missionary area. She was happily accepted as their children’s teacher and offered tins of rice as her monthly salary. Yet, it is a different socio-political context from Paletwa as the Shan in the village she worked with also did not speak Burmese and she even learned local Shan dialect. There was, however, more political insecurity due to constant fighting between the Shan armed groups and the Tatmadaw. Finally, she went back to Paletwa, where she found a more suitable job with an NGO thanks to a priest’s network.

In most of the cases although churches, missionaries and locals have a romantic, positive and constructive relationship, their interaction is sometimes unpleasant, exploitative, destructive and negative. The reciprocal relations based on individuals’



goodwill are abused from both sides. For example, I witnessed problems between two different denominations about one local preacher earning a salary from both. The missionaries have a certain amount of salary to pay the locally recruited new ones. Some can pay 20000 MMK per month whereas some can pay around 40000 MMK per month. The case I witnessed involved a newly recruited preacher who took 20,000 MMK and 30000 MMK from two missionary denominations. One missionary said a new preacher was lent money from a personal donation from his friend in United States which he saved to go back to his home with his family. After opening a book which registered converted members, a person's name appeared twice so they discussed how to effectively share names and numbers of the converted on a quarterly basis.

Sometimes, missionaries also exploited local families in different ways. One case was of a 27 years old male evangelist from Hakha who met a teenage girl during his sermons, proposed marriage to her and they eloped. A couple of weeks later, she wrote a letter to her parents saying that she is followed that evangelist to Hakha. He did not pay a bride price or even send a knife to the girl's parent for showing respect. According to Khumi Chin's custom, a man needs to leave a knife at the door of the bride in a case they elope, which symbolize respect to the girl's parents and promises protection to the girl. The knife metaphorically refers to the strong metal which will not destroy easily like such protection bond. 15 years later, a brother of that girl went to Hakha and asked a bride price. The evangelist man's family slaughtered a pig and offered 50,000 MMK to him. He also presented his sister three Khumi women *sa rong*.

In this way, the re-conceptualization family integrity and welfare by Christianity shed the light on aspects of complex interaction between missionaries and churches in Paletwa. It shows that Christianity is an alternative institution that provides family welfare services where the State is completely absent. As this alternative social institution is functioning in less official ways, its unofficial networks and systems of resource provision to the needy are immensely advantageous for those who can access it. The question remains however about how those who are not Christians look to these systems, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. In the process of re-conceptualizing family, it is apparent that new and different exploitative patterns emerge. Christianization in this context has an impact on abolishing the bride price but not encouraging to completely discarding it.

#### 4.5 Reconciling *Vang* with the Changing Roles of Chin Women

All of my women respondents who work in modern industries for example as midwives, school teachers, nurses, small scale traders, vendors, clerks, NGOs workers and preachers have explained to me that in this contemporary time there is no association between the magnitude of bride price and both women's sexual and reproduction capabilities and labor. The roles of women are changing from the past where the majority of them were mostly working only at the farm and in the household. Now, many of them are working different kind of jobs. For instance, they are predominantly mothers, but also housekeepers and occasionally working as daily laborers in construction, commercial plantation like *ga mone* or elephant foot yam or in the orchards.

Generally, it is important to note that the magnitude of the bride price largely depends on the bride's family's financial status rather than any political ideology. In this vein, the groom's family political ideology does not account for any of the magnitude of the bride price as he is ritually supposed not to bargain the amount. I have observed that the more economical power the bride's family has, the more they are able to concentrate on politics by accumulating the bride price. That is, asking a certain bride price means a family will have enough finances to cover the wedding ceremony cost. Usually, many brides' families allocate the bride price for wedding expenses. This are varied and include for example renting a hall or making donations to the church for using its hall; renting utensils for the wedding reception; providing rice and meat and other food items for the wedding reception giving accommodation and food to guests from near and far who are joining the wedding at the bride's house; make-up fees and camera-photographic fees; renting wedding costumes for the bridegroom and the new clothes for the whole family members, and so on. Wedding ceremony costs are mostly the responsibility of the bride's family. An interesting case showing links between the bride price to financial power and political view is detailed in the following passage:

U Thawng Hoih, a retired Bishop of the Anglican Church, is a financially well off person living in Paletwa. He only asked five thousand kyat (equivalent approximately to 5 US\$) *ta moe te* as a token for four of their daughters and exempt the *mui vang*. His wife was a midwife and all of his daughters obtained formal educational status. His concern of asking the customary *vang* for its

cultural value but did not think its amount was important. He did not want to ask too much amount for *vang* as he was aware of its consequences making brides and grooms and their families more financially vulnerable. His view is just to practice the custom in order to show ‘Khuminess’ as they find themselves sandwiched between the Rakhine and Burman cultural entities. At the same time, he condemns the practice of *ka doh kyaе*, which is not ‘theirs’ (the Chin) but an adoption from ‘others’ (Rakhine and Burman).

Most of the cases where the bride’s families ask for a bride price in more than a normal range are mainly social tactics. This fits in with Kressel’s (1977) observation on the “Marriage in Ramla and Lod” in Arab Muslim society where a bride’s father wants to make the groom step back but does not want to directly refuse the groom’s proposal especially if there are already romantic ties. Thus creating financial problems is an effective way to get around this. Also the bride’s family had invested a lot financially to support their daughter’s education and thus seek what can be seen to an extent as a financial reward from their daughter. Since they see women as members of their husband’s family, supporting her natal family is not appropriate in the community. However, the public have judged this kind of phenomenon as an exception. The bride’s father remains in this case a person who is only interested in financial matters. The following case from my fieldwork is of relevance:

A bride’s father called U Aung Pha’s (pseudonym) is a farmer and his daughter who had recently finished a diploma in nursing received a wedding proposal from her boyfriend. His economic status was not as high as U Thawng Hoih, a retired Anglican Bishop, and he was in the normal range. He replied the groom asking to delay the marriage of two years otherwise the bride price would be set at 20 lakhs MMK (approximately equivalent to 2,000 US\$). The groom did not want to delay and thus paid the amount he asked.

Many analysts have failed to pay sufficient attention to the context surrounding bride price, for example ignoring what happened before and after the payment of the bride price in the so called public scenario. This means that many have drawn quick conclusions and often portrayed brides as passive agents more similar to objects and

commodities of culture who have no space for thought or action rather than active decision makers. In the context of the Chin in Paletwa, some brides are the main decision makers and the main practitioners of their bride price. Their personal approaches, decision making strategies and opinions on bride prices are as diverse as their backgrounds. Bride price represents the tip of the ice-berg of a complex web of phenomena, and is affected by a myriad of other structures including emotions such as sadness and anger, forgiveness and competitiveness, aggressiveness and love which are all entwined and interwoven with each other.

Cecelia's (pseudonym) (28), personal story is much relevant for this kind of active decision making on bride price payment entwined with memory, desire and personal emotion. She is a single never married woman who is currently working in an NGO as a field worker. One of her brothers recently married and the younger one still lives in her village with her mother. Her brothers in law only asked for a token as bride price but this in turn caused new problems for her family's existence. This is because her mother's parents had to pay the *mai rom* when her father died in her childhood as her mother did not want to go back to her natal family and wished to remain with her children as a member of her deceased father's lineage. Her mother's choice became a problem for her uncle, her father's brother, as this barred him to get a house they live. As a custom, a deceased man's brothers and uncles are entitled to get property from their deceased brother or nephew if his wife went back to her natal family. Her uncle used different kinds of strategies to persuade her mother to give up and go back her natal family. Until her siblings grew up as teenagers, her life was like a nightmare due to intimidation, offending, embarrassment and even physical assault to her mother and three of her siblings by her uncle. She is now planning to marry her boyfriend next year. She is going to manage 5 lakhs MKK (equivalent to approximately 500 US\$) for her bride price. That is, she is going to give that amount of cash and give to her boyfriend at the time of marriage proposal. She says

“5 lakhs MMK for a bride price is not that a burden as long as I am healthy and working. I do not mean that I am rich. I know my boyfriend is from an economically incapable family and nothing to pay for my bride price. I am grateful for my mother's affection, nurturance, protection and principled me to be an independent person. At the time of my marriage, I want to return something

beautiful and prideful for my widow mother in the community.” (Interviewed on 26 January 2014)

Similar to Cecelia’s case, there are some women who negotiated the bride price amount in both before and after the marriage ceremony. The reason is that building a family with debt is a burden so they try to avoid a hefty bride price. As the bride understands both sides of the families, both her natal family and the groom’s family, she privately talks to her father and mother asking not to demand a large amount of bride price, but to ask as little as possible otherwise her new family will be placed in financial hardship. Sometimes the brides ask her parents to allow payment or installments to be deferred to the future when the other side is economically more comfortable. In some cases when the installment is arranged to be paid in the future, the bride’s father attempts to demand payment as soon as possible to prevent other members’ manipulation and exploitation.

“My father (80 years at that time) asked to pay my bride price to us (she and her husband) since we have not paid it yet. His health is deteriorating at the time he asked us to do. He was afraid that someone (from his male members such as sons, brothers and uncles) would have asked a lot of bride price to us for personal interest and profit after his death. So we have immediately slaughtered a pig for a bride price and we prevented creating a complicated issue.” (Personal Interviewed: 13 January 2014)

It is clear from the above examples that the agency of women in key negotiations around bride price, and the patterns are directly affected by the roles of women. The cases presented above of course only represent individual stories. However this research has revealed common patterns, indicating the presence of connecting social processes. Particularly it acts as an indicator of the Chin collective sense of practicing the bride price, but highlights the different strategies, forms, methods, and tactics used to practice it differently in each case depending on people’s individualities. In several of the cases women clearly appear as the primary players in negotiations over bride price practice, this both in public or private settings or it needs to redefine the public-private discourse from the Khumi women’s point of view.



#### 4.6 Summary

This chapter reinvestigated the meaning of bride price among the Chin and re-narrated its symbolic meaning, ritualistic function and procedures. By contextualizing family change in the context of Chin, I examined the notions of education, employment and attitude on reproduction as measures of modernization, and particularly Christianization in this case. The element of women's education was revealed to be directly affecting the shift in women's roles in the family, as well as through employment and financial status. Employment of women particularly is a means to contest and negotiate her roles in the family. The majority of Chin women in Paletwa are at a disadvantage to attain formal education but acquire informal education through Christianization. However, the element of education does not dictate the attitudes on reproduction for women. This chapter has also shown how the teaching of missionaries or churches on reproduction hardly encourages having less children. Further, it is apparent that traditional concepts importantly make new generations always welcome, and this fact can also be understood in the context of zu pu (a liquor made from a dried guard) whose drinking is a custom practiced for approving the marriage.

Christianization in the context of Paletwa plays a crucial role in the re-conceptualization of the making, re-making, and rehabilitation of family issues. By exploring the experiences of different people, this research has also highlighted the way Christian assistance is political and challenges the weakness of the State to serve its citizen social welfare properly. Although Christianity does not compromise its mandate on abolishing some cultural practice the like bride price, neither it is nor can discard it completely.

Although the roles of Chin women are changing as their occupations and work are shifting into modern types, this research has shown that it does not determine the magnitude of their bride price. On a structural level, most of the respondents collectively practice the bride price but this greatly varies on the individual level. The more financially stable families are better placed to reduce the amount of the bride price. Sometimes this chapter has shown that asking too much can be used as a personal strategy for several reasons, such as disapproving of a union. At times, working class women are the prime decision makers and the facilitators of the decisions around the amount of bride price to be paid, but as this chapter has shown the reasons and practices

behind this are complex and interwoven with personal stories, experiences and emotions.



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