

CHAPTER 5

Vang and Ka tawi: Contestation, Negotiation and Re-negotiation of Gender Power

5.1 Introduction

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the roles of women are changing as they enter modern working industries for employment and increasingly question and contest the existing hierarchal inheritance system and male property system in the context of Chin. This chapter explores the socio-cultural construction of gender by examining property relations in the context of the Chin in Paletwa that impact the bride price. Division of labor, customary law and the practice of *ka tawi* are fundamental subjects to pay attention to for the current struggle of property relations among the Chin.

American anthropologists Schegel and Eloul (1988) have conceptualized bride price as a household mechanism to provide labor needs, circulate property while serving as dowry status adjustment. Using ethnographic and historical data, they suggest that bride price was commonly found in societies where property such as land is limited whereas dowry practice plays as a symbolic dimension of and negotiation of class status in pastoral societies. Following their suggestion, the Chin's bride price and dowry practice can be seen as it is intertwining with the changing property scheme. Either way, the changing property system tells us the functions, adjustment and the negotiation of bride price and dowry among the Chin and is therefore relevant to this study which investigates how Chin women contest, negotiate and renegotiate the changing property schemes with their bride price and dowry.

In this chapter, I will firstly look at traditional conception of gender, and the division of labor among men and women to draw attention to dowry. I will analyze the current modern property system for balancing the bride price and dowry fusion. In the meantime, I will provide a space for the voices and opinions of Chin women in the making of modern property relations. Finally, I will look at women from diverse property backgrounds and analyze their tactics and negotiation of *vang* and *ka tawi* within the discourse of gender.

5.2 Understanding Gender through Property Relations in the Context of Paletwa

In the context of the Chin in Paletwa, the word “gender” never existed and there is no translated or similar word used among the lay population. Gender is commonly used by those locals who are familiar with NGO circles. Whilst gender refers to manhood and womanhood in general, it is more often used when referring to women and women’s rights. This section will address how the Khumi Chin in Paletwa have conceptualized, conceived, distinguished and practiced notions of gender through property relations.

5.2.1 Man and Woman

Property rights of men and women are different in Chin society. To understand this it is necessary to look at the traditional cosmology of the Khumi Chin that makes men and women different. They are seen as living under a blue concave pan called *Mathan*. The sky includes the sun, the stars and the moon and these are attached to the bottom of *Mathan*, which used to nearly reach the earth. However the sky moved up and away from the Universe due to the friction of pounding the rice. Above the sky there is heaven, and there life is a thousand years longer than on earth. The reason why all human beings are different, rich and poor, big and small, strong and weak, wise and mad is because the Creator and its fellows stole a piece of earth from other planets and made the human earth. As the creation of this earth is founded on stealing, the wish for perfection is impossible. All beings in this earth have a dichotomous character, sense, and contents. In this dichotomous nature of human beings, being a man or a woman makes for a different human being.

Becoming a man and woman is not a choice, and is beyond humans understanding. Men and women are distinguished and differentiated through sex and practice further by different rites of passage. Man is believed to have one guardian spirit for life and six guardian spirits for physical well-being, totaling seven spirits. Women are believed to have one guardian spirit guardian for life and five for physical well-being, totaling six spirits. For the purpose of ancestral beliefs, man has to wear seven strings at the wrist and woman wears six strings, representing their different numbers of spirits. When the whole family is worshipping the household guardian called *Kasui Keung*, the man has to blow seven times while the woman has to blow six times on the spirit bottle. In this mode of thought, men are the center for lineage, kinship, religious

activities, property and social political organization. Thus, customary law favors men as they are the center of the system.

When Christian missionaries arrived and Christianity was introduced to the Khumi Chin, they found many things that were in contradiction with Christianity and thus strategized to abolish them. Seeing women as cultural victims due to bride price practice is amongst one example. That is, the lack of having property rights to women is a cross cutting issue of banding bride price practice. There are many ancestral practices that missionaries succeeded to abolish, suspend and eradicate, for example, *Kasui Keung*.

Nevertheless and most importantly, missionaries were never able to bring about the end of bride price completely. As a Western missionary noted in a similar case in Tidim village in northern Chin state, Paletwa *vang* still remains as long term problem. Yet, in the missionary view, *vang* is a practice that suppresses women to lack their property rights by buying and selling daughters and they thus proclaimed that in the name of freedom and women should not be bought and sold anymore as in so-called primitive times.

5.2.2 Division of Labor

Although the missionaries converted large numbers of people in Paletwa, the division of labor among men and women did not change much. Women are supposed to work in the domestic sphere while men are supposed to work in the public sphere. During my fieldwork I stayed with a woman shaman for one day and a night at Lower Nga Sha village at the bank of Upper Kaladan River. And I stayed at two hosts and at a Catholic Church throughout my fieldwork. This experience gave me understandings about the division of labor among men and women in a family unit although I aware of this observation may not enough to understand the full reality. Furthermore, there is not much difference in interactions between men and women in a family setting from the background I come from, in the northern part of Chin.

The first family I stayed with , at least three families lived together in a two storey house. The grandmother was mostly taking care of young children while the grandfather was mostly listening to the radio, talking with guests and hardly entered into the kitchen. The son who has three children was working in a newly formed political party and mostly was not home but outside meeting guests for party and church issues, Khumi

youth affairs and so on. His wife was the main person taking care of guests at house. During my stay, there were four other guests from different villages. The wife was in charge of taking care of all these guests' rooms, cooking food, washing all the household clothes, shopping and ensuring all guests were happy during their stay.

The second family was slightly different from the first in terms of numbers and workload. The wife was a shopkeeper and the husband worked at an NGO. The wife would get up early in the morning around 5am directly going to the kitchen and start cooking. Around 6:30am, the husband and two of their sons as well as her parents who live at the next door would also join for breakfast. One young lady and my hostess would do the cleaning and dish washing while my host and a father of my hostess and I enjoyed a brief chat on different topics. My host had other guests throughout my stay, sometimes one, sometimes three. Their guests came from different villages and were not relatives. The backgrounds of their guests varied as some are typical farmers, some are small-scale traders, some are *ga mone* businessmen and some are preachers. After having their meal, all of my host family would go to the market where they opened the shop. While my hostess took two of her children to a Kindergarten at the Catholic Church, the host looked after the shop. When she got back, he would go to the office. However, since he was mostly travelling, my hostess mostly lives like a single mother. When she comes back to the house around 5pm she starts to cook, wash clothes and count the money she earned and so on. Around 8pm together with their neighbors she would often watch a Burmese movie.

The shaman woman, in her sixties, lives outside of the village. Her hut is built on the bank of Kaladan River, and was built by her husband. Her life changed quite a lot when she was presented with shamanistic skills by five spirits at the age of 51, when she reached menopause. She has been healing for nine years. Before that, her schedule was mostly similar to others but now she is mostly healing and treating patients from near and far. While I stayed at her home, in the evening she would be cooking and preparing our food. She took care of two of her black and white cats, two chickens and a pig.

At 6am, a family from Kyilay village arrived to our hut with their eight year old girl for treatment. They were treated previously by a midwife but remained unwell. The shaman looked at the girl, pointed to the girl's cord with her finger and said something but none understood. She suggests to the parents to offer a young chicken to the farm's

guardian spirit but to also continue with the injections offered by the midwife. The patient offered her 1000 MMK (equivalent approximately 1US\$).

After the patient left, she went back to the kitchen and prepared food, fed the chickens and pigs. Her husband who sleeps in the village arrived just before the patient and sit next to the fire and smoking. He took the money offer from the patient and put it in *noh si bu* (a condensed milk tin). He was chatting with me while the shaman went outside the hut, sweeping the ground, burning some leaves and making a fire outside the hut to make us warmer. Around 8:00am a Rakhine father and his 15 years old son arrived. The shaman asked about how's his family in Rakhine, and then the husband spoke about how the business was doing, which crops were worth how much, who bought the highest rate and so on.



Figure 5.1 A Shaman and Her Hut



Figure 5.2 Men Bringing Fish for the Church

5.2.3 Customary Law

When interviewing my respondents, men and women had the same understanding on customary law. It applied directly to individuals' life and it affects all of them differently. However all of them said that they do not want to abolish the customary law completely, but accepted that it needs to be reviewed, revised, updated and re-applied in accordance to the welfare of every one. The following chart from History of Khumi Culture (CHKC 2010: 155-157) shows details of inheritance law and why women are not allowed to get any inheritance.

Inheritance Law (44) (translated by the author)

- 1) Only the eldest or youngest son will get an inheritance from their parents*
- 2) Although the middle sons is not supposed to inherit, if the eldest and/or youngest son allows them to share, he can get it*
- 3) Although women are not allowed to inherit, they can get it unless no one opposes*
- 4) A middle son can inherit if he takes care of the old parents*
- 5) Adopted sons are not allowed to inherit, but if the relatives of his godparents allow, he can get it*
- 6) If a husband passes away, the wife has no rights to own household property. But if his family members have no objection, she can*
- 7) If a deceased father leaves daughters, they are not allowed to inherit. If he does not have sons, his elder brother or one of the closest people will get it*
- 8) If one inherits property from a deceased man, that person also needs to take care all his children until they come of age and is also responsible for any debt*
- 9) If a widow continues to take care of her children without marrying another man, she can own household property, land and so on. If a widow cannot take that responsibility, she is not allowed to take the property from the deceased husband*

Reasons for not transferring inheritance to daughters (45) (translated by the author)

There are three main reasons not to give inheritance to daughters

- 1) Parents already have or in the future will cover all costs for her marriage*

2) Women become members of another family after they get married. They have to follow their husband's customary practices, and thus not associate and responsible for their natal family's issue

3) Things can get complicated if women inherit from their parents. Those who inherit are not only in charge of taking care of all the family and clans' affairs but are also responsible to pay back the debts of the parents. If women were included in this property regime, it could invite others to engage in one's family affairs which could lead to more complications, exploitation, conflict and tensions among society. Khumi practice patrilineage and patriarchal system.

U Hoih Pa, the main author of this History of Khumi Culture, adds some challenges of this customary law. In his explanation, he points out that polygamy represents a challenge to this inheritance practice. These practices originally intended to be positive, constructive and less exploitative, however in some cases, wives and their daughters can be largely disadvantaged and marginalized from this practice. Also, it raises questions on how to resolve property competition among men from different mothers but the same father.

“Suppose a first wife of X has no sons after some years. Even if she has daughters it is not secure for his inheritance plus genealogical line. Daughters are not supposed to take inheritance from parents. Having no sons also means he is about to end his lineage. He therefore needs to marry another wife (second wife), with the hope to have sons, by carrying out a complete marriage ceremony, including paying all the *vang*. Then suppose the second wife soon has a son. The first wife also has a son after the second wife has a son. Customarily, a son of the first wife is fully legitimized to get inheritance. But for this case, what can we do?” (Interview on 27 January 2014)

5.2.4 Exploring *Ka Tawi* beyond Property Relations

As mentioned earlier, *ka tawi* is conceived as women's property which includes items such as blankets, women's costumes and accessories and sometime includes the groom's costumes although this appears to be in contradiction with Schegel and Eloul (1988) who remind us that bride price and dowries' final destination are quite different. Parents, especially women members in the family, manage and present their daughter,

nieces, sisters at the time of her marriage. Male members are hardly or almost never involved in preparation of these items or discussion as this is seen as a women only subject. *Ka tawi* is also very valuable as it contains key items for most of Khumi women, regardless of their wealth and social status. It is the only thing that the bride brings to the groom's family. The grooms' family members will not access items as it is similar to exploiting one's privacy. All these items are only accessible by the bride, not even her husband. Even if she married to a groom from a different ethnic background, the symbol of this textile and fabric is a personal connection to her natal family. She will even prepare her daughter *ka tawi* no matter whom she marries, how the wedding is celebrated or how much *vang* is paid, if any. However, many are not aware of this tradition of Khumi women which preserves and maintains and continues its ethnic identity, symbols and representation, as it is often seen and narrated only as simple women's property.

Some decades back, it hardly ever happened that someone used some contents of their *ka tawi* for a different purpose than for selling and buying to present a bride. Now, women are also selling some of their *ka tawi* contents for various reasons. It is interesting to listen to how these women manage or plan to re-manage *ka tawi* for their daughters if they sell. A woman who sold blankets or drum like earrings or costumes or other silverware said:

“Surgical intervention was undertaken for my second child. We stayed in the hospital for 10 days. We have spent 12 lakhs MMK (equivalent approximately 1200 US\$). We do not have that amount of money. We had to borrow it with the interest rate *se hna kyat toe* (a Burmese saying means 12 kyat interest for borrowing 100 kyat) in Paletwa. Its already a year and we could not pay back our debt. We borrowed money from other sources to repay the first one, and then took another debt to give back to the second source. I sold my traditional costumes and blankets for that. It was not enough. My husband is sporadically working in construction, at the farm, field and other jobs he can find... We are Khumi no matter how we behave, whatever our faith is, wherever we are and whatever job we do. No one can take away our Khuminess. As long as I am healthy, these blankets and costumes are not difficult to buy. In the market, there are even a modern

styles displaying and it is not that expensive.” (Interviewed with Hla Nu in Me Let Wa, 14 January 2014)

5.3 Stratifying Financial Status, Diversifying *Vang* and *Ka tawi*

Based on various financial backgrounds, the form and magnitude put in *vang* and *ka tawi* are diverse from family to family. I have observed that the difference is mostly based on each family’s financial status and thus how easily they could secure their livelihood. As mentioned in Chapter 4, women’s economical engagement is a key to determine families’ economic status, which then in turn directly influences the bride price exercise. The more women lead family’s economics, the more the bride price is adjusted.

Looking at the two categories where families exercise either the normal range or an extreme amount of *vang*, the economic role of women is central to directly determine the amount and indirectly influenced the two families discussion of *vang* and *ka tawi*. In this sense, the key role of Khumi women is that they have a chance to pursue and lead on family economic activities. Equality on economic activities among Khumi men and women is not a point but the recognition, acceptance and appreciation on the work of women is undermined is key to discuss. Example where women had central roles in adjusting these in different directions can be observed as follows.

The case of 23 years old Aung Ma Phyo (pseudonym) is a good example of an average ‘normal’ case. She dropped out of school at grade four and takes care of her parents farm and household work. She sometime joins trainings or the gospel conducted by the church. One day, a man from a different village proposed to her. Her parents agreed with the groom’s party to a *vang* with 10 lakhs of MMK (equivalent to approximately 1,000US\$). This amount of *vang* is above the normal range as the status of the bride. She did not negotiate the asking price even in private with her parents. A few months later, she frequently came back to her natal parents’ house. Her father investigated what was making her come back frequently. Her father’s brothers told him that the groom had sold their farm to be able to pay the *vang*. Since the groom’s family lost their land, all members had to work in others’ farms as daily laborers. She was thus also working in other farms, meaning that she had to work harder and in more inflexible conditions as well as having to negotiate with the farm owner, which could be stressful.

To escape such kind of atmosphere, she would return to her natal parent's house where she would not need to be so stressed and could simply have a proper meal. In the end her parents finally managed to buy back the land the groom sold and returned it to the groom's family. In many other cases, parents cannot easily fix the situation like Aung Ma Phy's parents so many brides end up in the margins of society.

Cases where women are leading the family's economics have more complex reasons involved in setting and arranging the *vang* and the *ka tawi*. Here we need to remain aware that *ka tawi* is not a direct intervention of the bride but by others - especially her mother, her grandmother or her aunties. Although some brides are economically leading the family, *ka tawi* does not depend much on their economic status but on that of other women.

Ma Sein, 30 years old (pseudonym) finished her nursing diploma and works in an NGO. She is not the only leader of her family's economic management but is a team leader in her NGO work. Her family only asked 15,000 MMK (equivalent to approximately 15US\$) for *leing lo* (a sling carried while the bride has an infant) as the *vang*. This amount is relatively small if based on her education. Needless to say, the education itself is in no way related to economics in this context, but it apparently gives a wide variety of networks for social and economic purposes. It is interesting to note that items and wages (5 blankets and a complete set of women's costume plus some fabric for the groom) included in *ka tawi* is quite comprehensive.

The case of 32 year old Khin Hoih (pseudonym) is different in the sense that she has used her influence to raise the value of her *vang*. She obtained a distance University degree and is employed in one of the departments of the government. Khin Hoih and her colleagues have a side business in which they are shareholders for money lending services with interest. She is supporting her family quite well. When a man she fell in love with proposed to marry her, she agreed with her parents to ask 15 lakhs MMK (equivalent approximately 1,500US\$) as the *vang*. At that time, the groom did not earn enough to cover the *vang* so she borrowed from her friends and gave it to him to cover the price of the *vang*. Also, she asked the groom to borrow some more money with which they could make a decent wedding ceremony. She is now paying back the money the groom borrowed. Although this is very personal story, what it does tell us is that some women are competing to up their level and social status by paying a higher *vang*.

This shows therefore that *vang* proves how capable many women are in financial calculations and how able they are to play with economics and culture in their own interest.

Other women are more interested in *vang* because of personal feelings and interest. The value they see in paying *vang* is interesting in a sense beyond cultural practice as it is mixed with a complex web of emotion, lovingness, carefulness, filial piety, obligations and so on. Two such women's experiences are presented here.

Sein Bee, 40 years old (pseudonym) is the eldest daughter of her parents. Both of her parents are educated - her father was employed as a clerk at Myanmar Economic Bank and her mother was employed as a nurse at Paletwa General Hospital. Her mother died when she was 6. She migrated to Malaysia and there was not much economic opportunity to secure their livelihood. She married a Khumi man in Malaysia and they just skipped the *vang* without totally discarding it, and kept it as a future payment. She also asked her father to himself marry a woman he likes, and is supporting her father's *vang* by sending money. In public it is mostly known how much her father paid for the *vang* for the second wife but no questions are asked about where the money came from. Her father's second wife is now supporting him by working at the farm and at a seasonal crops plantation on the banks of the Kaladan, raising piglets and chicken, cooking and fetching water and sometimes selling her crops to the local market.

The story of 50 year old Koe Win (pseudonym) is also similar. Her son went to Shwe Li, on the Myanmar-China border and came back Paletwa last year in 2013. The remittance her son sends is just enough for their daily needs but is not enough for saving. He earned a much larger amount than in working in Paletwa, but expenses in that place are also higher. Their work as a contracted laborer depends completely on the needs of Chinese businessmen and Myanmar middlemen. Sometimes, he was exploited by both Chinese and Myanmar bosses. The reason he came back is he wants to take a rest after undergoing surgery for appendicitis and his previous job was insecure. He is now randomly working as a boat driver or as a porter. His mother told him to find a woman to marry, but he has been away from Paletwa for nearly a decade so many women see him as a stranger. She wants to see her son's life stable with his own family before she dies. She will borrow 5-6 lakhs MMK (equivalent to approximately 500-600 US\$) for the *vang* he will need to pay to his bride.



Figure 5.3 Interviewed with U Hoih Pa at Paletwa

U Hoih Pa agrees that most of the customary law needs to be revised and amended for the benefit and justice of those who practice it. It does not make sense to follow exactly what has been practiced centuries ago and continue into contemporary time because the Khumi world is not standing alone at the corner of the earth. As the Khumi become more and more interwoven with other cultures, the time has come to gather comments and ideas and to review and amend this law. For this reason a committee has been set up to work towards this and they are in the process of generating new ideas.

5.4 The Creation of Modern Property through the Changing Roles of Women

It is highly debatable about what types of property rights exist in the current context of Paletwa. In the past generally property items were land, houses, a piece of farmland and some domestic animals. In this context, men members were entitled to transfer and receive these things as inheritance, but women were totally excluded from this content. This however was challenged as the roles of women started changing and they accessed new types of properties, meaning the organization of property relations also became more dynamic, fluid and inconsistent.

Nowadays, among the Khumi Chin in Paletwa, families who are following the traditional type of property relations to the letter are mostly economically disadvantageous (see the Customary Law Article 44 and 45 in CKCH 2010). Generally, internal and external factors affect traditional property and transaction schemes. The

majority of people have verbally recognized the traditional inheritance system where men are the only agents who will inherit from parents.

My key informant U Hoih Pa said the “pure” traditional inheritance has not been practical “properly” since decades ago. This exercise has been challenged by outside factors. Access to major items of traditional property items land is more and more limited. For example, the Tatmadaw confiscated local residents’ owned 3000 acres of land nearby Paletwa town in 1990s and used it for militant purposes and commercial plantations for army families. There are many other types of land confiscated by the Tatmadaw in other parts of Paletwa and which have undergone transformation for monastery and pagoda construction, military outpost, police force quarters and so on. The consequence for the local Chin families is that there is no property to leave to their new generations as inheritance. As asking those pieces of land back from the military is against the State’s Law, no family tries to sue the Tatmadaw.

At this point, it is important to note that what makes the Khumi Chin families accept more easily the invasion of their land by a powerful military regime at that time is that they did not solely own the land but they also worked on this land. The concept is “to use the land without having absolute rights to own the land”. Every family plant crops and plants they like in their farm, field and orchards. All of them share the etiquette that “No one should take it and work on it as long as another person occupies on that land”. This means that plants and trees such as banana, mango, rice and tamarind show everyone there is someone still working and occupying on that piece of land so others need to avoid working there. If there is a lot of grass growing and fruits are not picked, it means no one take cares so one can work on it. Recently, some Rakhine businessmen have been introducing some commercial plants. Who will own those lands in the future is still to be seen and remains a contentious topic (see also in Kyin Lam Mang 2014).



Figure 5.4 A Remaining Part of Pagoda Built by Military Officer at *Taung Pyo*



Figure 5.5 A Mount *Kimo*, National Conservation Park



Figure 5.6 A Mono-crop Plantation at confiscated Land by Tatmadaw

It is not only outside factors that are challenging the maintaining of the traditional inheritance system, but the inside factors are also relevant. For example, the changing roles of women are the major push facilitating the breakdown of the traditional inheritance system. As they acquired a higher educational status, women's economic networks and activities expanded and could produce a surplus. Thus they could save more of their production to spend on different kinds of items. Banking and buying

golden jewelries are not that popular and the main target of spending savings was houses. New economic activities played an important role in influencing the concept of property and bring about new practices. A woman who is leading her family economically tells her story by reflecting on her view on property:

“My late husband was a preacher and I helped his work. We opened a night study center for students. We help with their homework and they returned the favor by providing firewood and vegetables and so on. There are many great things we did. But, I did not appreciate the decision making process in the family because my role is to say yes to my husband. He was a supreme decision maker... In the meantime, we have to move to Paletwa. I have relatives and friends there. I did several things such as collecting firewood in the forest and selling it. I lent money with some interest to my friends, relatives and neighbors from what I have saved. Besides taking care of my children, I mostly focused on our family economy. With saving money, I bought pieces of land from here and there, a house, a room in the municipal market slowly by slowly. I opened a pharmacy shop in the market and it is going well...He (her husband) is aware of things we possessed are not owned by him, but mostly by me, so he did not decide everything by his own. I did not go to school, so I really encourage my children to go school. I divide all properties I have to my children regardless of their sex. I think we should not so attach too much on such kind of things. These things can be made, created and also they will be destroy, disappear and be done.” (Interview with Daw Marry 29 January 2014)

In some cases, property is re-conceptualized differently from the above case. Some women even are doubtful on material types of property that are fragile and can be lost. They see these as not being granted forever, being difficult to maintain, more risky to lose and others can take it away. This mostly happens among educated families who do not possess some commodities as property. Most women from these families see property as something that is acquirable, can be created and re-created. Taking care of human capital is necessary as human beings are the place to invest, store and expend and share the new property. A 36 years old woman explained that:

“...my parents do not possess enough material property to transfer. Even if they want to transfer their property, our brother will inherit it. I think my education is a kind of inheritance from my parents. While we were young, my father told us they may or may not be able to afford to give us property like others, and in this way education is a kind of inheritance for me. I am very happy with it. I do not care about material things because while I lived in my parents’ house, I do not need to be jealous at others. I think it’s quite fair that I live peacefully and happily with my parents before I married.” (Interview with Tin Tin (pseudonym) on 15 January 2015)

5.5 Contesting, Negotiating and Re-negotiating Gender Power through *Vang* and *Ka tawi*

Overall, the practice of *vang* is mostly inconsistent, fragile and open to exploitation as well as changing all the time, whereas *ka tawi* is inherently less exploitative, practiced with more stability and consistency and not changing very much over time. One significant difference between these two practices is that *vang* is seen as a communal subject and *ka tawi* is seen as a private subject. Many are focusing on the *vang* but *ka tawi* is less paid attention to. For this point, we may need to consider the patriarchal narration of Khumi culture that ignores women’s symbols, features and characters.

According to patriarchal narratives of *vang*, it is practiced for the stability, harmony and peace among of the family, clan and society. The departure of women, wives or mothers, from the family is a hardship for the whole family. Nowadays, in the context of the Chin in Paletwa, family types are changing into the nuclear type and some families are also changing into the matrilineal type. This structural change affects to the bride price discussion. For example the more women are employed in modern working industries; the less flexible they are to move to the groom’s parents’ house. Due to their work, in some cases, the whole families including the grandparents follow a working woman.

The inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the *vang* and *ka tawi* is also key to understand the gender sphere. As men and women move differently in practices of *vang*, the actors interact in complex ways, sometimes productively, constructively and

positively. Other times, these are negative, destructive and bring about marginalization. How these play out very much depends on the interest of each actor. As mentioned earlier, *ka tawi* provides room for women, a subject to discuss only by women and share to only women. Whilst *Ka tawi* is exclusive in the sense that it totally excludes the male members, it hardly marginalizes subjects in any way. We can also interpret issues we have seen in 5.2.4 to say that some women utilize their *ka tawi*'s items as a socio-economic safety.

As land issues are quite challenging in Paletwa the situation is increasingly insecure due to the advent of the modern nation state and onslaught of capitalist development coming from different directions. Ideally and theoretically, male members are entitled to access and inherit land like property. However, this kind of resource become scarcer bringing about increasing competition over resources as chances to inherit, access and maintain property for future male generations is uncertain so far. On the other hand, the more women are educated, the more opportunities for livelihood options they have got. Thanks to this educational capital, some women extend their socio-economic networks alongside negotiating and re-negotiating their roles in the family. This is in fact why the roles of women are important in the making and recreating of modern property types and schemes. At the same time, it is challenging the collective view of customary law and patriarchal property arrangements. This can even be viewed as bringing about an alternative way of modern property. However, many daughters are still disadvantaged in the lineage system, which means they are not able to and cannot reserve or carry out the lineage. Many daughters are also less favored to go to school than their counterpart boys.

Bypassing the *ka tawi* does not happen often as it is seen akin to ignoring filial piety and the loving kindness of mothers to daughters. But the excuses and systems employed to bypass the *vang* show us that a lot more is involved than as just simple ignorance. Sometime this excuse is cultural, strategic and tactical, especially when it comes to inter-ethnic marriage. Customarily, when a Khumi woman divorces, her natal family needs to return the *vang* they received from the groom. If not returned, the divorce is not legal and unofficial. A woman who divorced a Burman soldier explains in the following passage the re-negotiation of her existence in the family unit as well as in her social web through *vang*:

“I realized that my parents’ excuse of the *vang* is good for me. My parents did not suspend all the *vang* for my sisters, but only for me who married another ethnic group. My parents asked 15 lakhs MMK (equivalent approximately 1500US\$) for my sisters who are nurses. They asked none from my late husband. I realized my divorce would have been very complicated if *vang* was paid as they would have needed to return the amount that my husband gave to my parents. Now, I can just easily come back and interact without any problems. For some women who divorce, coming back to their natal family entails the need to borrow some amount to pay their *vang* back. Now, I can renew my life without debt so in my view is *vang* should be always flexible.” (Interviewed with Aung Lone (66) (pseudonym) on 19 January 2014)

In conclusion, as Schegel and Eloul (1988) put it, the bride price comes from the groom’s family while the dowry from the bride’s family and the final destination is different. For dowry in particular it is still vague in theoretical discussion Spiro (1975) has opened. That is, although dowry is brought by a bride family, the destination differ in cross culturally viewed in this case Indian and Chin. Chin dowry is somewhat need to be investigated since *ka tawi* is given to the bride by her family in principle. And items presented are different from India which is directly going to the marriage.

In the context of the Khumi Chin in Paletwa, land can only be passed down to male generations so a discussion around property itself needs to happen and these relations reconsidered to avoid continued manipulation over bride price. The dynamic and fluctuating amount of bride price is an example. Customarily, in principle, women are not entitled to transact land as property among the families; but nowadays in practice there are families who transact land and houses to their daughters.

5.6 Summary

This chapter presented the Khumi Chin’s patriarchal inheritance system and put forward a critique of the challenged it presents as a property resource becomes limited. It has also explained how the concept of property and its transactions has also shifted into conceptions of private property. In this process, the roles of women are crucial as they are active agents of the recreation of modern property as their economic activities

changed. At the same time, this chapter highlighted a unique negotiation of the *vang* and *ka tawi* based on women's economic status. Finally I analyze the *vang* and *ka tawi* within a discourse of gender power.



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