

# ANALYTICAL STUDY OF CHIN TRIBES: BEFORE AND AFTER BRITISH ANNEXATION

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**Abstract:** This paper is written to enable the readers to judge the conditions of the Chin tribes before and after the occupation of the British. The Chins had their unique and distinctive cultures and traditions and their religions, customs, culture, traditions have been properly maintained up to the middle of the twentieth century. In the past time, their main religion was animism and the oral tradition passed from generation to generation. That had been also their main source of maintaining their culture in many aspects. After the arrival of British and the Christian missionaries to Chin hill-regions, there becoming changes in the basic culture and the original thinking way of the Chin people. This paper describes the old and new aspects of the culture of Chin people such as religion, naming of a childbirth, fixing the time, education and health.

**Keywords:** Chins, before and after colonization of British, Cultural and religious changes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chin people are living in the western hill region, which serves as the wall between Myanmar and India. Now, the Chin people living within the mountainous region came to be known as Chin state in Myanmar. The early Chin society was a simple tribal society which had been known no contact with her neighboring civilizations until the twentieth century. The Chin hill region was independent of control during the time of Myanmar kings. The chief of the village was the supreme administrative head whose word was law within the limits of his territory. The languages of Chins are belongs to the Tibeto-Assam, branch of Tibeto-Burman family. When Christian missionaries arrive to the Chin hill region, they invented the writing for their language using simple and effective phonetic Hunterian system of Roman script. The British imperialists occupied the lower and upper parts of Myanmar and declared the whole Burma as a part of the British territories on 1 January 1886. In order to extend their authority in the mountainous regions of Myanmar, the British conducted a series of military campaigns and annexed the Chin hill region in 1896. After the occupation of the Chin mountainous region, the British government paved the way for the indigenous cultural changes among the Chin natives. The purpose of this paper is to examine the conditions of the primitive culture of the Chins and the changes of their culture during the colonization of the British.

## 2. RELIGION

Before the Chin people came into the hands of the British imperialists, they believed in Animism. There had never been any religious missionaries such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucius in the Chin-land. The Chins believed in the existence of a Supreme God called *Khazopa* in Chin language, the creator of the universe and life giver of every living being. The Supreme God, therefore, is the creator of the world including spiritual beings and human beings. Chins hold the belief that He also was the controller of everything in the Universe: darkness and light on earth, sunshine and rain on the hill and the river, the eclipse of the sun and the moon, the fate of man and even spirits. The Chins expressed their

knowledge of the Supreme God in myths, stories, prayers, religious ceremonies, songs and proverbs. He was generally believed to live in the place where people live in the world and the abode of the dead. He has neither been born nor died, but knows who has been born and died. They believed the Supreme God possessed all human attributes. Therefore, He knew everything about human beings, even their fate. He could see everything even in the darkness, control day and night, light and darkness. The Chins believed that death, illness, suffering, misery, misfortune, disease, starvation, etc. were all caused by the evil spirits. Therefore, they regularly performed sacrifices and ceremonies in order to please the evil spirits and ward off the anger of the evil spirits. They sacrificed their livestock such as *mithun*<sup>1</sup>, pig, goat, dog, fowl, etc. not to be economically ruined. In Chin society, the ritual rites, sacrifices and ceremonies were the most significant remarkable outward expression of their religious beliefs and practices.<sup>2</sup> The Chins firmly believed when a man passed away, his soul goes to the abode of the death in heaven where he meets with his ancestors and relatives who have gone before and live with the relatives in a community as on the earth. At the funeral ceremony many domestic animals, such as mithun, cow, pig and goat were slaughtered by the remaining family members and the relative as much as they are afford. There was a traditional belief that the souls of the animals killed in the funeral ceremony accompanied their lord, the soul of the death person, to the abode of the death. The soul of the death-person will be popular and proud if he brings much of his companies of the sacrificed animals.<sup>3</sup>

After the British colonial power had annexed the Chin-land, she paved the way for the coming of the western religion, Christianity, to the Chin-land. British colonial officers invited Christian missionaries to propagate the Christianity and western culture in their occupied land. The Christian missionaries viewed this as a golden opportunity and started to establish their missionary station in the Chin-land.<sup>4</sup> First, they understood the development of social welfare work for the Chin people would be the best and most effective instrument and way for persuading them to convert into Christianity. Hence, the schools for the children, and hospitals and dispensaries for all people were established to perceive the new religious view and modernized world. The primary objective of the missionaries' social welfare work was to persuade the native Chin people to accept and become Christians. The Christian missionaries studied the Chin dialects with the help of natives to communicate with them and to preach the gospel of God. The British authorities provided the missionaries spread the western religion among their colonized regions and used them as an agent to prolong their authorities. They taught the children Bible and the doctrine of Christianity at schools and preached the gospel of God with caring the patients at hospital. Because of the endeavor of the Christian missionaries, the Chins gradually came to convert into Christianity from their origin religion, animism and there emerged western cultures. It was one of reasons to abandon their primal religion of the Chins that when the Chin chiefs accepted the Christianity, their subjects also followed to accept Christianity like them because the chiefs influenced their authority upon their subjects. When the Chins were converted into Christianity, the Christian missionaries protested against and abolished the sacrifices to the spirit and traditional festivals due to the opposite to the Christian faith. After having accepted the Christianity, the Chin people invited all the villagers and celebrated the Christmas and Happy New by slaughtering the domestic animals instead of spending a large amount of money on the sacrifice to the spirit. On the other hand, they became to understand that it will be more beneficial to spend the money for the education of their children for the better future. With the British occupation of the Chin-land, the Christian missionaries opened the eyes and minds of the Chin people and changed their way of thinking, way of life and style of living.

### 3. NAMING CEREMONY OF A CHILDBIRTH

In the early time, Chin people had firmly maintained certain taboos, usages, customs and traditions concerning the childbirth. The greatest wish of the parents was to have many children so as to make their family kinship big and extensive, and therefore, the birth of a child was awaited with great expectation. If a woman could not have a child or became barren, she was looked down in the family and society. In the ancient time, the childbirth was customarily looked after only by the experienced women in the village. Chin people believed it was taboo for a man to look after the

<sup>1</sup> A kind of cow can be found only in Chin state where people culture them for meat.

<sup>2</sup> Khaivatha, "History of Southern Chin State (1885-1948)", (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Mandalay, 2017), pp.111-112

<sup>3</sup> Taang Zam Dong, "Socio-Economic History of the Northern Chin Hills (1896-1948)", (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yangon University, 2011), p.98

<sup>4</sup> Rev.R.G Johnson, *History of American Chin Baptist Mission*, Vol. I, (U.S.A, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1988), pp.12-14

childbirth. The Chins encourage the pregnant woman to eat fruit and monkey meat so that the baby will be able to climb high trees when he grown up. They prohibited the husbands of pregnant women from volunteering to dig the grave for burying the dead and carrying the body to the grave. As soon as a child was born, the child's umbilical cord of about two inches from the child's navel was tied with a piece of cotton, and then an experienced woman cut the umbilical cord with a sharpened split bamboo which was considered clean and pure. The other woman took the child and bathed it in cold water to wake it up, after which the mother was bathed in warm water, and she was given food. From the next morning, the child was bathed in warm water. In the early Chin society, the childbirth occupied a very important place in the family and socio-religious life, and therefore, the sacrifices and ceremonies were customarily held for the benefit of the child and its mother.<sup>5</sup> The name giving of a child was slightly different from one village to another in Chin society. A child used to be given the name by one of the grandparents, or relatives or its parents within seven days from its birth. The neighbours, friends and relatives were invited and the parents of a child held the naming ceremony. Mythun or any other domestic animals were slaughtered and entertained the guests with meat, rice and rice beer. There was no rule which guides the naming of a child, and the name was chosen in various purposes of signifying the prestige of past generation, forefather, clan and family. For example, if the father of a child was good in hunting, a child was named 'Ka thai' meaning 'the killer of animals' by honouring the ability of its father among the society.<sup>6</sup> After a name has been given to a child, various ritual ceremonies and sacrifices were performed to ensure the health and favourable growth of the child, and to save the child's soul from the malevolent influence of the evil spirit. After a man and a woman had a child, they were called the father or mother of the biggest child's name instead of their original name: for example, if the name of the biggest child was Bie Bie, they were called father and mother of Bie Bie.

The Christian faith and philosophy have been instilled in the minds of the Chin people indeed, and hope and way of thinking also had been transited to new thought and new idea. The influence of Christianity and impact of the modernization can be seen among the Chins where on giving the name of a child. The Chin people usually used the services of the local midwife at childbirth. Neighbours and the relatives help the parents in their works such as hill-side cultivation, fetching water, collection of the fire wood and washing the clothes. After one month, the pastor blessed and prayed a child with its parents at Sunday worship service at Church, and then he/she has become the full-fledged member of the community of the Church.

Previous system of giving the name of a child concerned with various social circumstances. With the arrival of Christianity, the Chin people named their children based on the kings, prophets and the pioneers on the Bible. A child was named 'Davi' in the Chin dialect in honour of the King of Israel, David, on the Bible who killed the leader of the Israel' enemy with a small stone. The name 'Mari' refers to the name of mother of Jesus, Mary, who born a child who would save the people from the sins. Sometimes, names were given with reference to the circumstances of the Christian community, their faith and the time of the child's birth. For instance, the name 'Byhna', meaning; 'Blessings of God', this name represented the faith, feeling and hope of the child's parents. The name 'Krisma', meaning 'Christmas', showed the bearer of the name was born at the time of the celebration of Merry Christmas Day, the Birthday of Jesus. The name 'Mara Khai' was given to a child, meaning 'the light of Mara people', because a child was born at the first week or month of the arrival of Christianity into the Mara-land. Some people put the name of the father's clan of a child in front of their Children name while others imitated the western system of giving the name of a child and named their children the mixed name of Chin and English. If the name of the clan of a child's father was Bieho, Bh was put in front of a child's name as the abbreviation of father's clan. So, the name 'Bh Ku Ku' was given to a child in order to know its father clan among the society when a child grew up. If the Chin name of a child was Paw Paw, symbols of English name, Victor, John, etc. were added in front of the name and changed to call a child as 'John Paw Paw or Victor Paw Paw' and so on.

#### 4. FIXING THE TIME

The early Chin people could estimate and forecast the time and the weather depending on the phases and movement of the sun, the birds and the cock. The sun showed the time at daytime for the Chins who read and told the time in accordance with position of the sun. The Chin people could know the time by looking at the motion of the sun that it is time to go to the farm and it is time to return home. They looked at the sign of the sun and estimate the daytime as follow;

(1) When the sun rises on the top of mountain, it is time to go to the hill-side cultivation.

<sup>5</sup> K. Zohra, *The Maras Indigenous Tradition and Folkculture*, (Saiha: Mara Research Society, 2013), pp.66-67

<sup>6</sup> A.G.E. Newland, *A Practical Hand Book of the Language of the Lais*, " Rangoon: Government Printing, 1987), p.329

(2) It is time to have lunch when the sun is right over the heads of the people.

(3) When the sun has just set down, it is time to go back home.

In the ancient time, The Chin people listened to the different sounds of the seasonal birds to understand what season they had had, were having and would have in the near future. A cock was the most important and helpful clock for the Chin people for telling the midnight time and early morning time in the early period. The cocks in the village crow three times at midnight; the first time is the best time for the people to sleep between 1 and 2 o'clock. The woman got up to start for cooking after second cocks' crow around 5 o'clock in the morning. The last crowing of the cocks is a sign of dawn is coming. Then all members of family got up and went out to the work of hill-side cultivation after breakfast.

With the British occupation of the Chin-land, the Christian missionaries came to open mission schools in the villages of the Chin region and taught the modernized subjects such mathematics, geography, history and so on. Especially, geography and mathematics helped the Chin people to able to know time such as an hour, a day, week, month and year. The Christian missionaries not only taught the children the doctrine of Christianity with Christian calendar to be interested in the faith of Christian but also gave the children who attended the schools daily books, pencil, photo and calendar as rewards. Moreover, they visited houses to preach the gospel of God by appointing time. The Chin-people, therefore, came to understand that calendar and O'clock are the timekeepers that show time, date and weekday and provides other useful information about time. Calendar and O'clock provide a way to manage systematically their personal time, activities and schedules in time and helps them from not wasting their time.

## 5. EDUCATION

Prior to the arrival of the British, there were no systematic social institutions which represent the training centre of education and indigenous knowledge for the Chin-people. In the past time, they were illiterate, savage, did not have their own script and writing system. Even though there was no art of writing to learn education, the mothers were responsible to teach the children to behave properly in the community and the fathers taught their children how to make farm, build house and hunt animals etc. The most important social institution of the early Chins was bachelor's house or dormitory. Bachelor's house is a culture of young men visit to unmarried girl they admired most and they slept there as group every night until she got married.<sup>7</sup> The owner of that house is belongs to the family of a beautiful daughter. The bachelor's house served as a club of young men where many social recreational activities were performed. The bachelors served many needs of the village community and poor families especially for widows, widowers, orphans, disabled persons, etc. A teenage boy used to stay in a bachelor's house where he started learning social behaviour and moral conduct from his friends. There was a leader of the bachelor's group whom the members obeyed and respected him. The chiefs and elders of the village frequently involved in such groupings to give some suggestions, advice and instruction in social matters in patronage manner. They talked about the village's affairs, social affair, tribal conflicts, village security and the problems of the village etc. They also imparted valuable training, and taught discipline, morality and sense of responsibility to all young men.<sup>8</sup> So, the bachelor's house not only became the only learning centre for the Chin young people but also played a significant role in the development and the unity of the Chin society. Though they never had any schools for learning education, the ancestors were ingenious and they could devise their own ways for solving peculiar problems.<sup>9</sup> They solved the problem of their education by telling their new generation in songs and composed poems which were sung to express their thoughts and ideas. The old ancestors could not leave any form of educations for their children and grandchildren other than heritages which were handing down some words that based on their own experiences to their budding successors through the medium of mouth to mouth relay system.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the Chin people used to study their history depended on only oral massages that were passed down from father to son and from generation to generation.

After the British government had occupied the whole of the Chin hill region and established their administration in the Chin-land, they realized the living standard of the Chin people was very low and the Chin hill region was defined backward area. Hence, for the sake of smooth administration the British officers involved in the matters of civilization

<sup>7</sup> K. Zohra, *The Maras: Their Indigenous Tribal Tradition and Folkculture*, (Saiha: Documentary Film Episode, 2001), p.5

<sup>8</sup> Mylai Hlychho, *Mara History*, (Aizawl: Hauhira Offset Press, 2008), p.124

<sup>9</sup> Burma Socialist Programme Party, *Record of Chin State*, Haka, 1982, p.1000

<sup>10</sup> Chin History Compilation Committee, *A Brief Process History of the Chins, Their Culture and Traditions*, (Yangon; Chotaytanta Literature, 2001), p.7

and invited Christian missionaries to set up schools in this hill region.<sup>11</sup> When the Christian missionaries arrived to the Chin-land along with school teachers from lower Burma who were Kayin<sup>12</sup> Christian converts, they found there did not have any form of writing. The first need to propagate Christianity among the Chin people was first to study Chin dialects and teach them how to read and write. They, therefore, learned the Chin language with the native people and then, they invented writing system of the Chin language which was introduced by using the English alphabets. The Christian missionaries believed opening mission schools was the best and most effective instruments for them to persuade the Chins to accept Christianity and to raise the living standard of the natives. So, they opened mission schools in the villages and gave the resident students with a monthly stipend, books, rice and clothes to attract them. For these advantages, the number of students increased rapidly and the modern education started to spread among the Chin society. These Mission schools also enabled to improve the number of students due to the fact that the Chin people began to embrace Christianity in large numbers. The building sanctioned for the schools became under construction by the help of the native people. In the early colonial period, the education of the Chin hill region was under the control of the Christian missionaries. But later, according to new education policy all Mission schools became the government schools.<sup>13</sup> The Christian missionaries were acknowledged as the eyes openers of pioneers for the development of educational history of the Chin people because the introduction of formal education and the establishment of schools in the Chin hills were launched with the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

## 6. HEALTH

In the ancient time, the Chin people lived on the evil spirit for their health before arriving Christianity into the Chin-land. The early Chins believed that sickness, suffering, death, etc. were caused by the evil spirit which had great power to seize a man's soul. They did not have any medicine nor physician, and did not even know why they felt ill and how to cure their sickness. When a person suffered from some serious illness or suffering, sacrifice was usually held to please the evil spirit to get man's soul back released from the malevolent influence of the spirit.<sup>14</sup> The sick man's family usually consulted a sorcerer who had power of ascertaining what ritual sacrifice was required for the benefit of the sick person. The sorcerer guided the sick person to know what domestic animals they should use to please with evil spirit. If the patient got well while the patient's family was performing sacrifice in accordance with the instruction of the sorcerer, it means the evil spirit was satisfied and had withdrawn the sickness. If the patient did not recover, then the sacrifice was made again with the bigger animals until the patient recovered or the evil spirit was satisfied. When an epidemic disease was raging somewhere, the neighbor villages made sacrifices for their community to prevent an epidemic from entering their village.<sup>15</sup> The Chins believed if they made this ritual sacrifice with animals, an epidemic or disease could not enter their villages and go back to its home or another country.

The British and Christian Missionaries introduced the use of western medicine and western method of medical treatment into the Chin hill region. After the occupation of the Chin-land, the British government built hospitals and travelling dispensaries at the military bases and civil headquarters for soldiers and the rural people. Later, the government was very busy that these hospitals were handed over to the Christian missionaries and they were used as dispensaries, and a part of building was used as a girl-school.<sup>16</sup> The Christian missionaries provided well experienced doctors and nurses in the modern medicine system. They gave medical treatment and preventive medicines against diseases were injected to the rural people as a part of Christian mission services. Educative books and pamphlets on health were translated into Chin dialects and distributed. For instance, the Chin natives were educated to build latrines and farms for fowls and pig separately. Burials of dead near houses were forbidden and so on. The medical conferences were held by the British government and Christian missionaries to spread the modern medical treatment. They gave a short training to issue medical knowledge through headmen and drugs were also distributed in every village. The Christian missionaries produce nurses and midwives within the Chin natives and they render their services in dispensaries and hospitals. The Chin people

<sup>11</sup> Maung Shwe Wa & Sowards, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), p.199

<sup>12</sup> Kayin is the name of the tribal group who lived in the lower part of Myanmar.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. R.G, Johnson, *History of American Baptist Chin Mission*, vol. II, (Pennsylvania: Valley Forge, 1988), p.461

<sup>14</sup> Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and their Culture*, (Manipur: Khampu Hatzaw, 1995), p.159

<sup>15</sup> N.E Parry, *Lushai Custom*, (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1928), p.455

<sup>16</sup> Jordon, Rev. Father, *History of the Southern Chin Mission*, (Kalaymyo: Bishop Centre Publication, 1960), p.4

came to realize that illness could be cured without sacrificial appeasement to the evil spirit.<sup>17</sup> The Christian mission health care was effectively helpful for the Chins and enabled them to appreciate the value of the modernization. The Chin people entered into a new era and began to apply western method treatments which brought a higher degree of development in public health.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Every nation as well as every tribe has their unique characters and manners in their culture and needs changes towards modernization. If a nation loses its culture and custom, she will lose her race too. Culture and custom repeat themselves and indicate the standard of a nation and race in various aspects. After the annexation of the British and arrival of the Christian missionaries, the ideology of the Chin people in social life was different from the old way of thinking. The British and the Christian missionaries introduced the Christianity and western idea to replace the indigenous way of thinking. Some people appreciate the new idea and culture but some feel that they cannot satisfy with the practice of foreign culture. With the development and conversion from animism to Christianity, the Chins gradually abandoned their unworthy culture and customs. On the other hand, many changes and improvements can be found in life of the Chin people after the introduction of Christianity. The conditions of public health, education and religion after the arrival of western culture had been better than the previous situation of the Chins if compared. These improvements of living standard of the Chins not only provided the Chin people with a new world view and value system, which better equipped them to cope with the new challenges but also brought about the changes and disappearance of their old primitive culture and customs. It can be concluded with two ways that every nation and race should preserve their own good culture and customs. Such preservation concretes their socio-cultural identity. But some should be annulled for the exchange of development of their social life in accordance with the modernization.

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