

MARRIAGE SYSTEM OF CHIN TRIBE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGES

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Abstract: Every tribe who are living in the world has its tradition and culture. The Chin tribe, one of the Myanmar ethnic groups, also has a unique system in the marriage institution by their traditional and customary laws and practices. The marriage system of the Chin tribal group makes their cultural identities preserve and distinguish their owned traditional tribal culture and custom from the other tribes. Every society needs changes by age from time to time. These changes introduced the modernization and the transition of culture. This present paper attempts to articulate the genesis of the traditional practice of the marriage of the Chin tribe. It also tries to highlight the continuities and changes of their indigenous marriage institution existing in the period of transition.

Keywords: Chin Ethnic, Marriage System, Changes.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are eight major groups in Myanmar: Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Shan, Mon, Bamar and Rakhine. The Chin people occupy the western mountain ranges of Myanmar and the areas of Indo-Myanmar border. They belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Tibeto-Myanmar family. There were various opinions given by some scholars and researchers concerning the origins and the places from where Chins originated. According to the origination myth, the Chin people emerged into this world from the bowels of the earth or a cave or a rock called 'Chinlung'¹ which is spelled slightly differently by different scholars, based on various Chin dialects and local traditions: Chhinlung, Chinlung, Chie'nlung, Chinglung, Ciinlung, Jinlung, Sinlung, Shinlung, Tsinlung and so on. Modern scholars generally agree with the traditional account of the origin of the name 'Chin': the word comes from 'Chinlung'. Hrang Nawl, a prominent scholar and politician among the Chins, confirms that the word Chin, Ciin or Tsin was the original name of the Chin people, and he suggested that it originated in China. His suggestion is based on the fact that there are many places in Chin country, what is now Chin State, which has "Ciin", "Tsin" or "Chin" as names -such as Ciinmuai, Chintlang or Tsinkhua.

Furthermore, he has suggested that "Chin" could have come from Ciinlung, Chhinlung or Tsinlung, the cave or rock from where according to a legend the Chin people emerged into this world as humans.² Chinlung tradition was recognized not only as a myth but also as a historical fact by all scholars and organizations of Chin. According to Lehman, a scholar of Chins, the literal meaning of *Chin-lung* is the cave or the hole of the Chin, the same meaning as the Myanmar word for *Chindwin*, as in 'Chindwin River', that also is the hole of the Chin or the river of the Chin.³ The word *Chin-lung*, however, can also be translated as the cave or the hole where the Chin people originally lived or the place from which the ancestors are originated. Myanmar scholars and researchers assumed that the ancestors from Southeast Asian people were

¹ B.S. Carey & H.N. Tuck, *Chin Hills: A History of the People, British Dealing with them, their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of their Country*, (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1896; reprinted in New Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983), p.142

² Khaivatha, *History of Southern Chin State (1885-1948)*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Mandalay, 2017), pp.2-3

³ F.K. Lehman, *The Structure of the Chin Society*, Champaign, Illinois University Press, 1963, p.20

descendants from Tibeto-Myanmar family and they were Chiang tribes settled in Kansu area in China. Because of Chins belonging to Tibeto-Myanmar family, it was believed that the origin of Chins was Kansu in China where Chiangs lived in. The origin place of the Chiang people was the Chinlung Mountain. Because of the raids from Chinese, the Chins belonged to Tibeto-Myanmar family moved down into present Myanmar through two routes; N'mali Hka-Chindwin route and Mekhong-Salween-N'mai Hka route. They reached Chindwin valley and Ayeyawady valley via N'mali Hka-Chindwin valleys. In Myanmar, some rivers are named in honours of the names of Village and Town; like for example, Hlaing River is named after to the name of Hlaing Town, Yangon River in the name of Yangon etc. Chindwin River, therefore, is also to the name of Chin people due to their settlement along this valley. The Chin tribes belonged to the Mongoloid stock of Tibeto-Myanmar family moved southwards from Kansu area in China because Chinese raided them. They followed the Chindwin River and came down into Chindwin region in Myanmar in A.D 7th century, and they lived there for more than one century. It is believed that the river of Chindwin may not have a name before the Chin people settled down there, but after the Chins occupied the valley, it had the name Chindwin. Therefore, it can be said that the Chindwin region became the homeland of the Chin people. The Shans conquered the Chindwin Valley, which was the homeland of the Chin people and drove them out of Chindwin valley into the western hills regions. It seems that the Chin people moved up to the Chin Hills about the 15th and 16th century because of the oppression from the Shan people. Finally, they reached and settled the western hill regions of Myanmar called Chin state now. Among eight major groups in Myanmar, this paper tries to explain the various aspects of the traditional marital system of the Chin tribal group and to understand its continuity and changes.

2. FINDING A BRIDE

Social customs relating to marriage are different from one place to another or, one tribe to another. Chin's marriage may come out due to falling in love with each other or arranging by their parents or elders. The love between girl and boy in the Chin society begins with courtship. The boy who becomes a young bachelor usually pays a court to whom he is keenly interested in the night times, alone or with his friends. The bachelorhood of the Chin people represented an important role in their traditions and customs. It was because the lives of bachelors and maidens of the Chin people are the most independent and the happiest moment. In paying a court, the girl usually gives a chance of small talk with a bachelor who visits her and provides him with plentiful supplies of nicotine water whether she loves him or not.

Youths propose the maiden with various means of indirect ways, showing by face expression and singing competitively. The maiden studies the youths who have come to pay a court to her for several months.⁴ The elders or the parents of the bride come to see the character of the girl using how much she is skillful in her house-works and fields. The boy can meet and propose girls while girls are fetching water and working hillside cultivation. The reply from the girls also takes times to a certain extent. The youths, therefore, had to pay a court to show their strong feeling and interest every night and for a long time. After observing a considerable period, may be a few years, the girl decides to whom she finally accepts. The young men who used to smoke, come to the girl they interested and ask for her some tobacco pipes when they pay a visit to the house of the girl. At that time, if the girl wants to show her acceptance of any boy, she fills the tobacco pipe with only half of the tobacco as a sign interesting, and he has a chance to visit the girl every night. If someone's pipe is filled, it means her denial. Among the young men, the girl accepts the boy whom she loves most, others retreat. The boy whose proposal accepted by the girl pays a court to the girl's house either single or with a companion at night. As the consequence of visiting the girl's house frequently, the parents come to know the love affairs of the boy and the girl and finally the boy has to go to the house of the girl's parents with a liquor pot to reveal that he is in love with their daughter.

Moreover, from that time onwards, the parents do not permit other youths to court their daughter any more. On the other hand, according to the traditional custom of the Chins, parents are responsible for their children's marriage if they do not have girlfriends. The parents and relatives look for a bride for a boy. In choosing the bride, priority was given to the girl from the clan of the boy's mother. At first, the nieces of the mother are usually considered. The Chins believe that the marriage of the side of the mother's clan brings blessings to family and gain the prestige. It is regarded as distastefulness to marry the girl from the clan of the boy's father. According to the traditional customs, not only the parents want their son to marry the clan of the mother but also the young men have social obligations to marry the daughter of their mother's

⁴ Myanmar Socialist Programme Party, *Tineyintharmyar ei tunyithaw dalehtonesan myar* (Similar Traditions and Customs of National Races), 1st ed., Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1975, p.167

brother and younger brother. When they did not see a girl or bride from the clan of the mother for the boy, then they were allowed to find another girl of a different clan. In choosing a bride, there is no restriction on the inter-marriage between persons of different clans and villages.

3. PRELIMINARY MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

When the boy had a girlfriend, or the parents chose the suitable girl for their son, they sent the representatives who are smart in conversation and possess experiences from the clan of the boy's father to the girl's parents to ask for their daughter. The representatives brought presents for the girl's parents. The presents are articles such as a knife, pot, gong, spear, etc. for the marriage engagement.⁵ The parents of the girl make another appointment to consult for the other day. The period of the appointment relies on the wish of the girl's parents for a week or month or a year. During the time, the parents have to start consulting with their daughter, with all their relatives, and they also discuss their dreams.⁶ If they have great and lucky dreams, they would accept and agree to the proposal of the match without any further questions, and if their dreams are unlucky, they openly reject the marriage engagement. Then the articles brought by the representative of the boy must be returned to the house of the boy's parents. Supposing the proposal from the side of the bridegroom is under consideration and accepted by the parents of the girl, they are looking forward to the day when the representatives of the bridegroom will return to their house. Some of the Chins usually refer to "prediction-by-egg" method before going for engagement to get a complete prediction for the future of the couple, and only when its answer is good, the representatives go to the bride's house for engagement. It is considered as a genius only if the bride is the daughter of the bridegroom's uncle. When the representatives go to a distant village for this, they believe it is unlucky and would go back home if they do not hear the cry of a bird on their way. Other signs of failure are trips something over with their toe or fall on the ground accidentally. If these signs happen during the representatives' trip, they used to decide not to go for the bride's village. The job of representatives is very delicate, and they need to accomplish their mission with traditional manners.

Provided that the parents of the bride accepted and agreed to the proposal, then the parents from both sides of family order something to eat and drink some brewery, rice, curry and chicken etc. However, the bridegroom and bride do not participate in this feast on that day. After that, the representatives of the bridegroom and the parents of the bride negotiate bride price and the wedding day discussed and fixed.⁷ Another one of the curious customs of engagement in Chin society is that both sides of the parents are engaged their children since the early age of 4 or 5. This engagement means that they are engaged their children to express friendship as the father of a boy and the father of girl or the mother of the boy and the mother of girl are very close friends since their childhood. When the children reach the age of puberty, the wedding ceremony is given. If the side of the girl accepts the engagement, then it becomes a commitment. It is an unbreakable promise for the boy's side. Provided that the side of the boy breaks the commitment, he has to give compensation to the amount of the girl's ancestral price.

4. THE MARRIAGE PRICE OR BRIDE PRICE

The bride price among the early Chins plays the most critical role in the traditional custom of the marriage. Without agreement concerning the bride prices, the marriage could not be recognized socially and legally. The practice of the bride price depends on the social status and differed from one clan to another. The wife-giver and the wife-taker usually negotiate the bride's price at night before the day of the marriage is held. The representatives of the bridegroom went to give the marriage price to the girl's parents. If some problem happens in the discussion of the bride price, the marriage proceedings would be carried out till the next wedding day. The marriage proceeding was usually carried out and completed under the supervision of the representatives and the wise men of the village.⁸ In paying the bride price, the bridegroom was collectively helped by his close relatives and clansmen. If the bridegroom was not able to pay the full prices demanded the wife-giver at one time, he was allowed to pay the balance by installment. Some could not pay all the bride's prices during their life time and hand it over to their brothers and sisters to pay it back in full after their death.

⁵ Mylai Hlychho, *Mara History*, Aizawl, Haulhira Offset Press, 1972, p.127

⁶ N.E. Parry, *The Lakhers*, (Calcutta: 1932; reprinted in Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1976), pp.296-297

⁷ Maung Maung Taik, *Tineyinthar yinkyaymu hnit thamaing saing yar kwin sin sartinmyar* (The Culture of the National Races and the Historical Field Trip Papers), 1st ed., Yangon, Do Tar Wun Press, 1985, p.8

⁸ K.Zohra, *The Maras of Mizoram: A Study of their History and Culture*, (Ph.D. thesis, Gauhati University, 1994), p.100

According to the Chin custom, the marriage price consisted of the main price and subsidiary price. The father or brothers of the girl took the main price, and the subsidiary price went to the close relations of the bride's father. The composition of each grade or category of the marriage price was different, depending on the fixed amount of the main price and its subsidiary prices were based on customs and traditions.⁹ In paying the marriage price, the Chins used not only animals such as mithun, cattle, pig but also articles like a gun, gong, pot, earthenware pot, bead and loincloth etc. The position of the clan of the girl is customarily proportionate to the bride's prices. If a boy gets married the daughter of the chief, he has to pay even slaves and many lands to display their greatness. The persons who received the bride prices must kill mithun or cattle or pig and give it to the house of the wife-taker. The side of the bridegroom also slaughtered a pig and gave to the wife-giver.

5. TRADITIONAL WEDDING CEREMONY

On the wedding day, many kinds of animals such as mithun, cow, pig and chicken were used to be slaughtered by both the wife-taker and the wife-giver, and their friends, relatives and all villagers were invited to participate in the wedding ceremony. The marriage ceremony includes a feast which lasts for days and some parts of the meat was slaughtered in that day were shared to their relatives, especially the father's side, by both sides. The young people became involved actively in the feasting, and some of them provided for cooking. In sharing the meat, the hind leg or the head of the pig was given to the representatives and the boy's friend who was a friend of bridegroom while the neck of mythun was given to the wedding ceremony. The oldest man and woman in the village were given the hearts of the mythun and spleen. In the girl's side, the persons who received the bride's prices have to offer mythun, pigs and chicken for the wedding ceremony. According to the traditional custom of the Chin, the wedding party was usually held at the bridegroom's home. On the chosen date of the wedding, the representative of the boy goes to the bride's house to bring her to the house of the bridegroom. If the girl's parents are wealthy or the girl belongs to the chiefly family, they send the bride on the spreading blanket on her way to the groom's house in honour of the bride and her party.¹⁰ The bride specially wore her best dresses, cloths, ornaments and coiffure. While the bride is coming to the groom's house on the spreading blanket escorted by village youths and maids, nobody is allowed to walk through the spreading blanket. After the wedding ceremony, the blankets are distributed among the sisters and young sisters of the groom. Many boys and children have to shout very loudly along the way to the house of the groom, and the verse runs as follow:

"The bride is coming, bless her,
Guardian spirit of the house,
Please welcome her".

Relatives of the groom; parents, brothers and sisters carry rice beer in their hands while they are waiting for them coming at the entrance of the house's compound. When the bride arrives at the entrance of the house, the father-in-law gives a boiled egg and treats a sip of rice beer to daughter-in-law as a sign of recognition her as a member of the family. At the top of the ladder, the bridegroom shakes the bride's hands and kisses on her forehead three times and treats a sip of rice beer. When rice and curry cooked at the house of the groom are prepared in front of the elders of both sides, whereas invocations are made before having meals by any elder, the wedding feast is started by giving the liver curry to the bride, the heart to the groom in return. The marriage procession was led by two or three persons who carried a large pot of rice beer which is carried on their back. The representative of the groom looked after the marriage party and tried to defend the bride and her party against any absurd action or fun from the public. He spoke few words to the bride and the bridegroom, wishing them to have many children, to enjoy a long life and prosperity by giving a cup of rice beer to them.

After then, the bride and the bridegroom spent the whole night with the young people in singing, dancing and drinking.¹¹ The people who accompanied the bride sleep at the house of the groom that night. In the next morning, they all were given something as a present, and then they return to their home. Since then, the girl permanently stayed and lived with

⁹ K.Zohra, A Study of the Mara Customary Law and Justice in the Mara Autonomous District of Mizoram, New Delhi, ICHR Project, 2004, p.212

¹⁰ Myanma Socialist Programme Party, *Chin pyin ne mattan* (The Records of Chin State), 1985, p.341

¹¹ Tekkatho Shinthiri, *Pyihtaungsu thar toe ei yoeyar lathtetpwe dalemnyar* (The Traditional wedding Ceremonies of the National Races of the Union), Yangon, Sabai Oo Press, 1991, p.284

her husband as his wife. As a girl gets married, she then becomes a member of her husband's family, and she has to conserve every lineage of her husband.¹² When the bride gets married a boy from another village, her parents, relatives and friends send her to that village. They used to have a house for lodging booked for the duration of the marriage as they do not have a place to stay in that village. The relatives of the bridegroom and young people welcome the companions of the bride from half way and accompany her on the rest of the way to her new home. The owner of the booked house has to serve and give them food and accommodation free of charge. From that day onwards, the booked house owner is regarded as her relative by the bride who might come to refuge in the time of quarrel with her husband.

6. DIVORCE

As marriage is a life commitment for the Chin people, it is tough to divorce for the couples because they get married to associate for their life time. Another reason is the polygamous system, and at the same time, the bride price is very high. It is found only if they have some certain cases among their families. A woman gets divorced by her husband if he is not satisfied with her work, incompatibility of temper, or if she is, unfortunately, to be barren. He has only to say, "I divorce you", after which she would return to her parents or her brother.¹³ In this case, the marriage prices paid by the groom when they got married would not be returned to the husband.

Provided that the wife goes back her parents' house because it is unbearable to the bully of her husband, the husband has to send the representatives and the village elders to the parents of his wife by killing a pig and tried to call her back. If the wife denies returning to her husband, he has to lose the bride's prices and don not pay compensation to her. If the wife goes back to the house of her parents and divorces her husband without the wish or the agreement of her husband, marriage prices have to be fully refunded to the husband. Divorce by mutual consent usually takes places when they occasionally quarrel and do not get along with each other, and it occurs when they are in that situation of being impossible to live together. The wedding expenses paid by the husband and their current possessions are shared equally between them. The children, however, go to their father and the house has to be owned by the husband. In the custom of the Chin society, a woman has no rights to own her children and the house when she divorces her husband. If the wife is with an infant, she is allowed to stay with the baby until he or she is weaned. When they are grown enough to wean, the father takes the child, but the breastfeeding fee is needed to pay to the mother.¹⁴ Divorce on betraying of one another can take place when the husband or the wife (either one) remarries to a new wife or a new husband without the permission of his wife or her husband, when it comes publicity that the husband or wife is attempting to betray, that one can make a divorce. If the wife commits adultery, she has to leave the husband's house without taking anything. She refunds the bride prices to the first husband. Also, the new husband also has to pay for the compensation to the wife's former husband.

Provided that the husband betrays his wife, he not only loses all of the marriage prices and the wedding expenses but also pay the compensation to her in accordance with the position of the wife's clan. The Chin people consider that the divorce of the commitment of adultery is the most disgraceful among their society. The madness is a form of divorce on account of mental illness. If the wife becomes mentally ill, the husband sends her back the house of her parents.¹⁵ The parents of the wife are entitled to keep the whole of the bride prices.

7. MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHIN SOCIETY

The Chin tribe held the marriage feast based on traditional custom and rituals in the pre-Christian era. In recent years, the marriage of the Chins has been changing because of the forces of the advent of Christianity, modernization and western education like any other society. The arrival of Christianity into the Chinland brought about not only the beginning of modernization but also the introduction of western education. The Christian missionaries were convinced that it would not be easy to convert the Chins to the Christian faith without changing their customs and their old way of thinking. Then

¹² U Min Naing, *Tineyintha sagapon myar* (Fables of National Races), Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Culture, 1968, pp.121-122

¹³ W.R. Head, *Hand book on the Haka Chin Customs*, Burma, Rangoon, Union Government Printing and Stationary, 1955, p.18

¹⁴ Myanma Socialist Programme Party, *Pyihtaungsu Myanmar naing ngan tineyintha yinkyaymu yoeyar dalehtonesanmyar (Chin)* (The Cultural Traditions of the National Races of the Union of Myanmar (Chin)), 1st ed, Yangon, Sarpay Baikman Press, 1968, pp.254-255

¹⁵ Dr. John Hamlet Hlychho, *The Maras Head-Hunters to Soul-Hunters*, Delhi, Cambridge Press, 2009, pp.73-74

they decided to participate well in the welfare of the society in order to obtain the new customs and the modernized thinking. Since then, many changes in the traditional culture and customs can be seen in the Chin society after the arrival of Christianity. The doctrine of Christianity had influenced the customs of the Chins, and they began to create new practices of Christian instead of their old customary ways and practices. With the advent of Christianity into the Chinland, the churches played the most powerful and important role in the Chin society which means that as time passes, the customary practices of the Chins also change and transform in accordance with the situation. On the matter of marriage system in the pre-Christian era, their wedding ceremony has been performed with drinking, dancing, singing and sacrifice offerings to spirits. These traditional customs of marriage are disappearing with the impact of Christianity on their community. They would rather perform the marriage according to the church rules and regulations than their old ways customary practices as it is regarded as the church as the ideal place for marriage. In the contemporary period, the new form of the marriage ceremony is held in the church by the pastor of the church, and it becomes the most significant place for the converted Chin society where the marriages are registered and signed. During ancient times, all of the Chin traditional culture and customs deeply linked with the drinking of rice beer.¹⁶ However, with the emergence of Christianity and the modernized culture, their consequent changes can be seen in the place of drinking rice beer where is substituted by coffee, tea and cakes. The traditional dress of the bride and the bridegroom also changed to be in harmony with the modern culture. The marriage of the Chins now becomes the form of the western tradition, and the church become the foundation of their culture. This results of not only the westernized dress but also a competition regarding the dress worn by the bride and the bridegroom in the holy matrimonial ceremony.¹⁷

In the early years, the Chins considered that traditionally to give the marriage price is a bond to be fastened relationship of love between the two lovers of the bride and bridegroom. In the present day, they introduced church marriage to replace a system of giving higher marriage price instead. The church opposed the traditional payment of the high bride price as it burdened the family of the bridegroom with their difficulties and worries. The present marriage price, therefore, is much less than once the Chins used to practice before. One of the drastic changes that can be seen in the payment of the bride price is the use of currency and cars with the impact of modernization. The drives of the education and urbanization that is nowadays settled in Chin society can also be said as the result of the migration of local people from the rural area to an urban area. This process invites the installation of the culture of different communities in the marriage system among them. The introduction of Christianity and the forces of modernization started to change the Chin society socially and materialistically. The Chins are practicing both church marriage and traditional marriage system of paying marriage price at the same time.

8. CONCLUSION

Culture and tradition, which is known as the life style of people, change based on perception, belief, and modernization. Marriage system is a part of the life style of the people. About the marriage system of the Chin people, it is observed in two marriage systems such as traditional system and western cultural system. The Chin's traditional marriage has the distinctive meaning of how the Chin tribal groups have socio-cultural cohesion, kinship and the socio-cultural relationship between each other. On the other hands, it significantly expresses the socio-cultural identity of the Chin tribal groups. The socio-cultural pattern of the Chin people, particularly roots in their traditional marital system. Nowadays, the Chin marital custom is increasingly changing due to the influence of western cultural system and modernization. The forms of the traditional marriage system such as traditional engagement, bride price, wedding ceremony and wedding dress are being replaced to the new styles which are modernized and westernized system. To preserve the marriage system to upgrade socio-cultural identity, the Chin tribal groups also are facing challenges and difficulties due to globalization and modernization. Dismissing of traditional marriage system will cause disappearing of socio-cultural organization, relationship and kinship, which are brilliantly shaping socio-cultural pattern and identity of the Chin tribes in the future. This paper suggests that the upgrade of the traditional marital system is required to sustain the socio-cultural identity of the Chin people for the next generation.

¹⁶ H.N.C. Stevenson, F.R.A, The Economics of the central Chin Tribes, Bombay, the Times of India Press, 1943, p.114

¹⁷ Elma Lalramthar & M C Arunkumar, "Christianity and Self Image: A Study on Hmar Women of Manipur", IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), Volume 22, Issue 11, Ver.11 (November. 2017) PP 24-30

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