

## **The Bride Price Negotiation Among Chin Women In Myanmar**

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### **Projecting the Bride Price Practice in Paletwa**

In 2012, amidst the communal violence between Roringha and Rakhine, a Chin bride father at Paletwa in southern part of Chin state in Myanmar asked twenty lakhs in kyat (approximately equivalent to 200 US\$) to the groom for the bride price which made the public shocking record that a normal price range around 5-6 lakhs (approximately equivalent to 500-600US\$). On the other hand, the other bride's father asked five thousands kyats for the bride price to the groom in May 2013. These two cases have shocked near and far Chin members in Paletwa. Some Chin young women are even competing for their bride price. Many Chin nationalists have then attained concern for this circumstance as an additional ethnic politics issue from the state's hegemony nation state building process.

Yet, not only the geographical location of Paletwa but its socio economic setting also much interwoven with Rakhine since in the historical time (see also in Kyin Lam Mang 2014; CHKC 2012; Brown 1960). Many shop owners in Paletwa municipal market have informed me in 2013 (May-July) how much they are affected from the communal violence happening in Rakhine where the flow of major basic goods and medicines are imported from Rakhine is limited. In Paletwa, half of the residence belongs to Rakhine ethnic nationalities with a hundred Muslim populations. The trading disadvantage categorized as; the Muslim on the top, the Chin in middle and the Rakhine on the bottom due to their socio-economic networks in Sittwe and Kyautdaw in Rakhine state. That is, for example, a trading associated in Rakhine state have much facilitating for Rakhine in Paletwa while many Muslim and the Chin do not much deserve to have such network. The Chin missionary or nationalists have claims that Paletwa is in need of "taking care" otherwise their fellows are under the economic "trapping" of the Rakhine.

Consequently, the Chin nationalists have criticized the marriage ritual conducted by some of their members, which is, not paying *mui vang* (the bride price). Instead, in their sense, some Chin members have directly copied Rakhine's ritual of *ka doh kyae* (a homage fee). It is in this context being not able to follow the traditional procedure is collectively accepted since the majority of Chin members are in basic livelihood survival. Customarily, it is allowed to make future installment of the bride price. Yet, easily copying Rakhine's way of *ka doh kyae* is commented by some Chin nationalists as the act of cultural "traitor". What is not to forget in this context is that the Rakhine are similarly viewed as Burman by the Chin, reasoning, both of them are knotting with the sentiment of Buddhist culture. Additionally, the state has instrumentally facilitated the success of Buddhism in Paletwa against the Chin's self-designation of Christianity as their political and religious identifications. As a result, at some level, according to a Chin young politician, "many Chin

generation in Paletwa in this time do not aware of they are become Rakhine, for example, perceiving speaking each other in Rakhine is more modernized than in any Chin dialect”.

On the other hand, the Chin women are projected as victims of culture which this bride price makes them vulnerable, trapping and lacking their personhood. In the Chin missionary literature, the Chin women are “slaves” due to the practice of bride price so Christianity is advocated for freedom and against “subversive” traditional “backward” ritual. By employing a feminist critique of bride price, this article focuses on the silence of the Chin women which the male oriented oral culture of the Chin compromise to represent their voices. By breaking the Chin women’s silence, this article argue that the Chin women are the active agencies who decide to practice bride price culture and they are those who negotiated and contested their gender power through this practice economically and culturally.

Yet, the practice of bride price (some time calls bride wealth) has been studied by many disciplines including anthropology, economics, feminism and development, analyzing the phenomenon from different angles, and arriving at different interpretations and conclusions as to its functions and the role in the family, property relations, a means for gender power and its impacts in the society. Historically, the custom of bride price is one type of marriage payments<sup>1</sup> and dates back as far as 3000 BCE (Anderson 2007:152) which has been practiced in various ancient civilizations such as Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs and Incas. This custom has sometime practiced together with dowry in some societies. However, as Anderson (2007) notes, this practice has been declined after the introduction of “ancient civilization”, modernization and capitalization. And he nevertheless maintains as “the aspects of modernization that particularly contribute to the decline of bride price are not well understood” (2007: 17). Beside the decline of bride price practice in many societies, the reemergence of this practice happens in some societies, China as an instance. In following Anderson’s (2007) and Papps’ (1983) analysis of the determinants of bride price, the social characteristics in a certain economic and political context plays a key for demanding this cultural practice.

In examining the roles of the Chin’s bride price practice, this article tries to discuss from three levels; the bride price in the changing historical condition, the impact of bride price in the shifting roles of Chin women in their interfamily relationship and their individual negotiation of bride price economically and culturally. In so doing, I have employed a documentary research for the understanding of Chin’s practice of bride price in historical changing condition. The other two parts have been done by conducting a field work in Paletwa during May-July in 2013 and January 2014. And, overall, it took nearly two months in Paletwa. Moreover, I have constantly followed up some additional information through telecommunication for those who are out from Paletwa in Chin state from Yangon. I mainly focus to Chin women who have a diverse background in respect of age,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Spiro (1975) and Papps (1983), marriage payment types are divided into four: bride price or bride wealth (the groom’s side of the family offer material or money to the bride’s side for the loss of her labor to her father’s family and for her future potential child bearing), dowry (transferring a certain property by a bride’s family to a bride as her inheritance in a time of marriage which is supposedly shared by both the bride and the groom), dower (transferring a property or wealth by the groom’s family to the newly married couple for conjugal estate) and groom price (property offered by the bride family to the groom’s family).

marital status, family structure, economical power, religious background and political ideologies. Having had a counter check, I also interviewed their counterpart men.

In regards of research methodology, I have to justify the ethnographic data used in this project. My intention to utilize ethnography method, for a Chin researcher to a similar people, is to attain as what Esterberg (2002) calls “first-first experience” which my previous knowledge about Khumi Chin was primarily constructed by the Hakha Christian oriented narrative. I find it the primary information I have attained during my childhood postulate the Khumi Chin in inferior sense due to uniqueness from Hakha as well as on the basis of their non-Christianness for Christianization (Tha Sung 1995; Tial Zi 2001; Phe Uk 2007; Aung Hoi 2006; Kyaw Win 2011; ZTC 1999). Yet, Esterberg (2002) warns, “[E]thnographic researchers were not encouraged to study themselves or people like themselves”. My ultimate reason from this risk is the hope to “dispel stereotypes or help increase understanding of the group (I am) studying” with “the explicit aims of giving voice or bearing witness their experience” (Neuman 2006; Moore 1973). I have collected information through in-depth interview, key informant interviews, narrative of storytelling and participant observation. Two third of my field work in this essay were conducted in Burmese and the rest was with native Khumi Chin dialect with interpreters.

### **The Chin and Burmanization**

The formation of the current Chin state in Myanmar was done after the British separation of Burma/Myanmar as East India in 1947 (Suantak 2007) which made the Chin to split into three countries – Mizoram state in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Chin people residing in the Chin state in Myanmar only constitute one fifth of the total Chin’s population (ZTC 2012:1). The Chin are one of officially recognized groups as *taing yin tar lu myo* or one of “national races”<sup>2</sup> in Myanmar. The state, controversially, put 53 sub groups of Chin in Myanmar in its official “135 national races” list (Gravers 2012; Sakhong 2008; Lois Desaine 2011, Federal Journal 2012; Rogers 2012). Since in the British colony time, the Chins are called based on their geography location such as Matu Chin, Hakha Chin and so on (Lehman 1970). Nevertheless, it is significantly common that the Chin refer to themselves as *Khumi* or *Senhang* or *Mara* or *Lautu* or *Vaiphai* and so on.

Geographically, the current Chin state is located in the north-western part of Myanmar. Officially, it has nine townships – Hakha, Tlantlang, Falam, Tidem, Tonzang, Matupi, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Paletwa. Now some townships are comparably mixed with different sub group of Chin due to partly urbanization in towns like Hakha, Paletwa and Matupi. There are various sub groups of Chin who scattered in the low plain area outside current Chin state, known as *myae pyant* (Lowland) Chin. Due to distinct dialects, these sub groups of Chin occasionally employ Burmese language as a mean to commute each other. Nevertheless, all of them belong to the same ethnic nationality. It is much common to connect each other by similarity rather than difference. Sakhong (2008) has argued its notion of ethnic nationality with anthropologist Adam Smith’s six main features; a common proper

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<sup>2</sup> The state officially categorizes these ethnic “national races” with Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan. In Burmese text, *taing yin tar* means Indigenous and *lu myo* for people. It is theoretically and practically confusing by using *taing yin tar lu myo* in Burmese with national races for English text.

name, a myth of common descent, a link with a homeland, collective historical memories, one or more elements of common culture and a sense of solidarity.

Before the invasion of British colony, the Chin was never part of any neighboring kingdoms and not being influenced by those major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (Sakhong 2008 & 2010; Rogers 2012; ZTC 2012 & 1999; CHRO 2012). But the Chin, in Sakhong terms, enjoyed their *phung lam* (way of life) until the British colony invasion. During colonization, significant numbers of the Chin had been converted into Christianity although the bottom line of conversion was seen differently by Chin theologians and secular scholars. The basis of Christianity has contributed the Chin a concrete “powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (Scott 2009: 319) against the Burman’s Buddhism. If Scott is correct in analyzing the hill people’s adoption of Christianity for their “particular purpose”, Christianity then granted a proxy for Chin-Burman nationalism as follow.

The Chin was one of the four ethnic groups who cooperate with Burman representative General Aung San to achieve Independence from the British. The Chin was convinced by his promise to build a secular modern state, as what Sakhong (2008 & 2010) narrates, with “a clear policy of state-building based on the principles of equality and unity in diversity”. After the assassination of General Aung San, his version of constitution was transformed by U Nu in 1961 and declared the modern nation State must be built on the basis of Buddhism. In direct response to U Nu’s declaration, the majority Kachin and Chin who self designed as Christian in a dual basis – “religion and ethnic identity” – organized the armed rebellions against the central government. In the midst of these political chaos, General Ne Win took a coup d’état and introduced Burmese way of Socialism (Physicians for Human Rights 2011, Karen Human Rights Groups 2010; Rogers 2012; Pau 1988; Sakhong 2008; ZTC 2012; Walton 2012; Ni Kio 2012; Amporn 2008; Sachiko 2008; Pinkaew 2006). And by introduction “*Myanmar sar*” (Burmese language) to the whole nation, he expanded Burman’s economic and culture to social and political domain of non-Burman groups. Either way, he tried to make a “homogenous unitary state” by banning all other ethnic languages and stripped ethnic groups from all civil and political rights; justifying as a “unitary state” to solve a desperate non-Burman group who aim to achieve multi-ethnic nationalism, multiculturalism, multi-religious but to control diversity (Sakhong 2010).

Meanwhile, Burmanization was further facilitated by the state, throughout prolonged military rule, into various degrees which also contained extreme violence such as “rape (to non-Burman ethnic women) as weapon of the war (with non-Burman ethnic armed groups)” (Physician of Human Rights 2010; Karen Human Rights Groups 2010; CHRO 2012; The Women League of Chinland 2009; Thanakha team 2010; Walton 2012; Pinkaew 2006; Birmanie-France & Swedish Burma Committee 2012). CHRO documentation<sup>3</sup> of marrying ethnic women, the Chin women for this case, by Burman soldiers is little known. Yet, Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* has concerned “marriage as the only means of integration in community” (Gamble 2000) which women to put under male authority while Mitchell maintains it as a universal used of women as an exchange object constitute a basis of patriarchy (Humm 1995). However, this project basically quest what is the Chin women in Paletwa’s negotiation and contestation of marriage through voluntarily demanding bride price in between

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<sup>3</sup> This documentation is available on request.

male oriented of ethnic politics and their negotiation and contestation in both interfamily relationship and gender power relations.

### **Practicing the Bride Price Culture, Resisting Burmanization**

The Chin's bride price culture has been collectively practiced due to historical conditions and it is not a solely fixed practice. The current practice of the Chin bride price has contained a means of resisting Burmanization. Yet, in the past, it has meant to be differently during colonial time and pre-colonial time. I have examined the changing meaning of bride price in chronological order.

In pre-colonial time, the practice of bride price seemed to be used for social and economic exchange and class upgrading mechanism. It is crucially important to note that Sakhong's (2008) categorization of class system of the Chin due to the concept of bride price seemingly uproot on it. Following him, there were three main class designation, namely, noble, ordinary and slave group. If Sakhong's interpretation about conducting sacrificial ceremonies and festive ceremonies such as *bawi te bawi*, *khuang cuai* and *nau zing dangh*<sup>4</sup> are valid, this class system is not completely fixed. Meaning, marrying a daughter of noble man which needs a high volume of wealth contribution can granted a way to enhance one's class status. And there is a normative value that marrying a high class bride was seen as livelihood integration and political confederation. Once Lehman (1970) has argued that the Chin did not aware of their "cycle in principle" of exchanging wives so did anthropologist like Leach. His analysis of the Chin's preference on cross-asymmetrical marriage was seemingly attractive to wealth lacking members. But, those who prepared for level up status needs to take care of as what Sakhong (2008) notes "[T]he woman that a man married could make him respectable or she could pull him down to a low and degraded position" (Sakhong 2008: 64).

The meaning of bride price has been shifted when the Chin had to engage with colonialism and expose with Western Missionary around 1917-1919 (Sakhong 2008 et al Dawt Sung 1976). Although colonialism and Western Missionary were not intentionally institutionally cooperating, the impact of their work became a conditional power to change the meaning of bride price for the Chin. After some time when the Western missionary came to success its occupation among the Chin, this practice became unattractive due to the notion was linked as an unmodern subject since the world view changed. Sakhong (2008) and Vumson (1986) have given enough concrete cases and phenomenon on changing the world view of Chin. Amongst those examples, it is crucial to note the Chin colonial soldiers who came back from the WWI in Europe have acquired self made middle class status which they did not need to wait capitals and resources from traditional hereditary transaction. With their money resources, they even able to marry whoever they like by paying costly bride price while those who did not join War in Europe still struggled for basic livelihood needs. With the experience they have gained with colony institution and modern subjects, they started to break traditional shifting cultivation and joining modern trading business which then to generate their capitals. Allocating resources to further economic investment rather than paying costly bride price save unnecessary monetary lost to the Chin. Either way, as what Suantak (2007) accords, conversion into Christianity contributed an effective "cost-benefit ratio" calculation to the Chin although

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that there are different calling and conducting these merits of feast in detail among each group of Chin. My intention here is to capture the overall idea of the Chin.

Sakhong's (2008) conclusion for conversion as "collective inner transformation" seemed to be valid for only a psychosocial dimension.

Besides economical and social advantages, a basis of Christianity powerfully assisted the Chin to construct their political identification against the Burman from lowland. Therefore, the Chin were convinced to corporate for independence from British colony by General Aung San for his promise of building a secular state with equal basis. As soon as U Nu break his secular constitution by introducing Buddhism, it was a political condition to negotiate with the state. And this ended up the Chin to arm against the state as mentioned before. The Chin language and culture virtually disappeared from schools and publications became severely restricted when General Ne Win's "Myanmar-sar" has introduced his version of Burmanization.

The project called "to assimilate and conquer other peoples (or non-Burman groups) through use of people/by using people" appeared in the era of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The level of violence is less severe than the internationally paid attention report such as "rape as weapon of the war", but more complicated and fluidized since these activities happen together with romance, family, reproduction and property concerned. From the Chin point of view in Paletwa, marrying a Burman soldier is not only a means to bypass bride price but it is also an excuse from some human rights violence such as "forced labor" for any militia activities. Ritually, the Chin excuses the grooms from outside ethnicity so many of such kind of grooms do not pay the bride price. It is economically valuable calculation and social security by having children with a Burman soldier since there are some basic food items supports, access to medical treatment and financial support for children in school. In the context of Paletwa where every child could not go to school, no adequate medical services and daily food items are limited; all these opportunities came attractive. Also, marrying any uniform person (those who have government jobs) enhance one's social standing. I was informed the peak of marriage between a Burman soldier and a Chin woman was during 1994-5 when military was significantly powerful on the political stage.

The case of Burmanization in Paletwa is something specific that there are three important factors – half of Paletwa population is Rakhine, the state assignment of monks<sup>5</sup> to missionize the Chin and highly militarization – which catalyze the process faster and efficient. By the occupation of half of Rakhine ethic group, in terms of linguistic, all the official communication are done with bilingual – Rakhine and Burmese. Every time, the state projects to construct or renovate monasteries and pagodas, Rakhine's contribution of finance or resources granted to success the state goal. Also, they are the majority who socially support the state's assigned monk in Paletwa. These monks are fully supported by the state by offering monthly salary, granting a card which is valid for three years to get any needed assistance from government departments and promoting after the terms finish in Paletwa. Then, this kind of monasteries becomes an important space for military where they are

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<sup>5</sup> This kind of monk plays virtually important in the State's Boarder Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools ( *Na ta la* in Burmese) under the Education and Training Department within the Ministry for Boarder Affairs and are trained at Hill Regions Buddhist Mission under the Department for Promotion and Propagation of Buddhism under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Please see also in Threats to Our Existence.

hosted for free, having a similar sense of culture. And it becomes, for some cases, a marriage marketing place for Burman soldiers and the Chin women in the village.

It is not to forget the cultural practice difference between the Burman and the Chin in general. That is, as Spiro (1975) have observed, the middle class Burman marriage payments is dower which contain a lot more economic calculation while the Chin bride price is mainly for social exchange purpose. This can be tested by the return activities. Once the Chin's *mui vang* (bride price in Khumi Chin term) is paid by the groom to the bride family, *ka tawi* (dowry items) should be returned by the bride parents that includes 3 traditional blankets; *dong hoi ka ni* (a blanket brought by a bride when marriage heading the groom's house), *beu deu* (a symbol to pack rice or curry in replacement of leaves) and *vang khiu* (the most precious one which depends on the amount of *mui vang* and used for the funeral of the bride).

The Chin's cultural logical behind to practice bride price for against the state ethnic appropriation is preventing members lost and avoiding a social stigmatization to the Chin bride. That is, per ritual, women become the groom's members once the bride price is paid and all the children also become members of the groom. Since the groom is not paid the bride price, the women he married are not ritually accepted as another member and so accepting her children. Although the rate of divorce happened little among the Chin because of the bride price payment, it is relationally increase among Burman-Chin marriage. So, when the women return to her natal family and cultural community, the social stigmatization is comparably low. She can re-enter again as normal.

In this way, the practice of bride price become a cultural tactic to resist the state ethnic appropriation although the original concept of the Chin bride price was a means for social and economic exchange and class upgrading and was unmodern subject during colonization and Western Missionary time.

### **The Relation of Bride Price and the Shifting Role of Chin Women**

It is incomplete to look at the notion of bride price without examining the role of women in family setting. Moreover, it is also needed to examine the relation of the roles of women and their bride price which once anthropologist and economists have pointed out women's reproduction and labor as social characteristics determine this practice (Spiro 1975; Kressel 1977; Papps 1983, Schlegel & Eloul 1988; Anderson 2007). Thus, I seek to understand the relation of the Chin's bride price and the changing role of Chin women under modernization and Christianization.

All of my respondents, regardless of sex, age and occupation, have informed me that there is no association between the magnitude of bride price and either women's sexual and reproduction capabilities or labors. First of all, it is also obvious from the two opposite cases I presented in the beginning. The magnitude of the bride price is much depending on the bride family's social and economic positions as well as the tactics to deal with the groom. That is, Bishop Thawng Hoih cases of five thousand kyats (approximately 5 US\$) is to show his Chinness to both the Chin community members and his non-Chin neighbors. Economic is not solely his concern. But he encourages the Chin members how importance this practice is under the influence of Rakhine and Burman. At the same time, he tends not to give appraisal to *ka doh kya*, claiming it is not Chin's practice but practice of "others". U Aung Pha's (pseudonym) twenty lakhs kyat (approximately 2000 US\$) is on

the other hand a tactic to step the groom back that he does not want her daughter to get marry the time proposed. It seemingly does not mean that he does not like the Chin groom. But he attempts to delay the marriage proposal where his daughter would taking care of all the economic investment he did during her education. In fact, U Aung Pha's case is similar to Kressel's (1977) observation of the "Marriage in Ramla and Lod" in Arab Muslim society.

Moreover, as it happens in "first world countries" (OECD 2011) and the suggestion of feminist scholars such as Thompson and Walker's (1995), the role of women are changing in the context of Paletwa. The division of labor for women is not limited at domestic sphere, but many of them are becoming breadwinners of the family as well as the care taker of the family. Although the tasks of women are competing and contesting, it is nothing to do with the magnitude of their bride price. Papps (1983) has clearly argued that bride price is not "slaves" price on this matter. What is different from Papps analysis based on Arab Muslim and the Chin is that the educational status of women does not play as incentive to increase the bride price. These interpretations can be observed from the personal story narrative of two of my case studies as follows.

**Case 1:** Daw Aung Lone (pseudonym) (50) used to marry a Burman soldier in 1991 and has a 17 years old son now. Now she is living at her sister's compound in Paletwa but her son is sent to school in Pyay (pseudonym). She opens a small vender shop at Municipal market in Paletwa. Additionally, she buys and sells flowers and honey bee. Occasionally, she also trades fish pasted and seasonal forest products from Pyay and Paletwa. Becoming a single mother is due to her choice that marriage was meant to be too abusive for her. She was constantly accused with another man as if she had extramarital affair, so to keep her in a room with her baby the whole day. This physical and emotional abuse pushes her to become a single mother. This happened, in her sense, because he suffered "witchcraft" from his bad manner to others. That is, the people in the army camp they lived are "uncivilized" where there is no moral ground for stealing animals and vegetable from a Muslim village at the other side of the river. She as a normal soldier's wife wished once her ex husband would come back with money and jewelry from the war in Eastern part of Myanmar. Although she reported to army officers, no action was taken.

She finally escaped with her son from the camp with the assistance of the Church. The Church sent her to Paletwa in the beginning but she requested the Church to send them away from Paletwa, for not being able to be followed by her ex husband. She then worked in a farm owned by the Church as a daily wage gardener. Since she got a place to stay as free of charge and gotten clothes from the Church, she even could save some money. But, she decided to go back to Paletwa for the future education of her son as well as a closer connection with her natal family. The Church provided an employment as a cook for boarding students which was helpful for her son's education and they both are in the protection of the Church.

She now realized it was fortunate that her parent excuse of her bride price when her ex husband proposed to marry. That is, she just easily divorced without complication. If it was the case with the Chin groom, it would not be that fast and easy since it needed to discuss the bride price or conduct a feast with her ex-husband party. Then, she would have lost the rights to get her son. Also, there is no social or economic debt remained on both sides. She was exceptional that, her parent asked 15 lakh



(approximately equivalent to 1500US\$) for each of her sisters. Taking her experience, her suggestion over bride price is to keep it more flexible rather than fixing it as a given culture.

**Case 2:** Cecelia (pseudonym) (28) is a single never married woman and is currently living in the Catholic's nunnery. She is working in NGO as a field worker. One of her brother recently married and the younger one still remain in her village. For her, she has two families; a nunnery and her mother house in another village. Although she is not a solely breadwinner of the families, she thinks she associated both families in a great deal. She supports her single-mother and a younger brother financially but contributes petty items and her labor to the nunnery too. She is now getting married to her boyfriend in the near future. Her boyfriend is not from an economical comfortable family. He is on his training in Hakha to become a staff of Myanmar Police Force. So she concerns the bride price matter carefully.

Although she personally does not appreciate *mui vang* (bride price) practice due to what she experienced in her family, she is going to practice it. This practice means a lot more than as a cultural subject. It needs to start from her father dead at her age eleven. Her mother as a deceased wife had two options according to ritual; stay together with her children as her deceased father kin member or going back to her natal parent but leaving her children. Her mother then chose the first option although life would be more complicated and troublesome. As foreseen, she was constantly annoyed by her uncle who was supposed to receive the property from her deceased father if she left her children. He used various methods such as beating them or offending them. The bride price and *mai ron* (if her mother left them her parent needs to conduct a feast to declare the relation was terminated) made her childhood completely dark, intimidating and bitter.

Life was not bad all the time that her friends and the Church warmth to her family a lot. To her, she feels closer to her friends ever than her blood related relatives. Her friends helped her farm work, pounding rice, fetching water and taking care of their animals. Their mutual help and collective work made her feel more comfortable, productive and secure. The Church is also a kind of god-parent by supporting three of her siblings' education in various ways such as staying at the Church freely, borrowing or assisting finance, emotionally encouraging and so on. With the priest's network, she went to Shan state and work in a village school with the voluntary payment. After that she came back Paletwa because the priest informed that there was NGO work opportunity.

For her, nevertheless, *mui vang* is not completely bad as she witness on her mother's case. It has also the other side that it has a flexible and loving sense, looking at the example of her brother's parent in law asked the *mui vang* as a token. She is certain that her future groom is not able to pay the bride price. But she is going to manage around 5 lakh (approximately equivalent to 500US\$) since her mother raised her up in such a physical and emotional difficult situation. In fact, it is nothing comparable with her mother protection, nurturance and heroic sense to rise her up to become a mature, confident and self dependent daughter. She challenges herself as why she cannot contribute something for her mother if others can.

These two cases studies, although it is a very personal story, can also be interpreted as a social process and an indicator of the Chin women collective sense of practicing the bride price, but in different form, method and pattern. The underlying reasons and the representation of bride price

can be vary from persons to persons. It is clear enough that the bride price is not what outsiders understand and frequently interpret as if a solely economic value. Most of my respondents agree to say this practice is a means to connect families to families, declaration of being relatedness and how, a control signal for preventing family decays and fragmentation. Although the original intention is good, it also can happen that members can manipulate for their own profits.

It is crucial to note here that Christianity plays a key to shift the role of Chin women. It is in this context, the Christianization has compromised the traditional practice of bride price, though not encouraging it, did not completely discard it. As I have shown, the concern of the Churches regarding family wellbeing has contributed to the re-conceptualization of bride price as a symbol of ethnic identity and a figure of family integrity.

### **Bride Price Practice as a Sphere of Gender Power**

Anthropologists, feminists and economists have paid attention the connection of property relations and bride price in order to examine the conflict and manipulation over resource, economic form of gender oppression and inequality of gender power. Hague and Thiara (2009: 13) have reported their finding in the case of Uganda as the practice of bride price is “both a symptom of male dominance and power in families and also a cause” because “women have little power in relation to the practice, but, rather, (women) are passed from family to family” and “[N]egotiations usually involve senior men in the two families who decide what the woman will do and how she will behave”. This interpretation only happens to some economically marginalized group of the Chin where parents of this bride have to find a way to solve the financial gap for conducting wedding ceremonies. But the absent of women or not representing herself in the mainstream understanding of “public” does not signify that the Chin women are victims or objects. The Chin women in this project, I argue, are active agencies in the process of bride price negotiation. The practice of bride price then becomes a means of gender power to be negotiated and contested.

I have observed the wedding and the transaction part of *ka tawi* (dowry transaction) in Paletwa in January 2014. *Ka tawi* for the Chin sense is nothing to do with economic value but it is just personal items to keep for a bride. No matter whom she marries and her children become members of her husband, she still can keep her Chinness and beautifies herself with these *ka tawi* items in any Chin related festivals and celebration. This is different from India’s dowry where a bride party offers some monetary items and property to the groom. There is nothing to exchange with this *ka tawi* and any of the groom’s status as the case in India where the bride party can level up their caste standing with the Brahmin’s groom. In this wedding, women members of the bride are in charge of all the preparation for *ka twai* once a marriage ceremony is approved. It is in the case I have observed, the bride mother is dead and her grandmother took responsible for this. Male members of the bride mostly took the responsibilities for giving a welcoming speech to the audience in a marriage ceremony and representing the bride family. Also, male members are offering and receiving items such as spears and knife to the groom as a symbol of succession of marriage. The bride never stands up and represents the whole family to the groom and the audience. What does this tell that she is an object of the bride price and dowry?

I further inquiry what does this mean to the bride, the grandmother and other brides who have the same experience. The answer is they never perceive this passiveness does not make them as objects. The whole process is not solely controlled or dominated by their male counterparts. But the division of labor and the roles in this process are divided and cooperated. In fact, each feminine and masculine responsibilities is vary and but there is no vertical dimension. The aim is to success the marriage ceremony, ka tawi transaction session and bride price agreement. Who proposed how much bride price is mostly unofficially facilitated by the brides or women. It is in this sense; women are in the middle of the groom and her family. They know these two families economic and social standing so they adjust both parties before even the proposal was started. They negotiate both sides either to increase the bride price or to reduce for the purpose of the success of the marriage as well as to avoid any kinds of economic lost from each side.

In terms of property, they accept the ritual except them to access the mainstream understanding of property or resources such as land and housing. For them, these property items are not the only absolute property elements. Education is seen as a modern property. One respondent summaries as "I do not feel bad to my parent for not giving me a house and a land and animals since they send me a school until I complete it and now I am quite supportive to my family". The solid exception is they are facing less priority before their counterpart men. The norm for this is prioritizing women for education is a higher risk for the outcome. Meaning, women will become the other (the groom) members which they will leave their natal kin group. At the same time, women as those who do not access parents' property are not responsible for the parent's debts. Since education needs a lot of investments such as economic support and time and losing the labors of children for farming, many parents view sending their girls to school is not so productive for daily survival.

One male respondent from Nga-sha village express his opinion that many families are suffering problems in family due to this sexist favoritism to send to school. He analyses as "... since most of us prioritize our sons to send to school, many of our daughters become uneducated. What the outcome is we finally suffer, that is, every parent got uneducated daughters in law. She faces many difficulties how to educate and nurture her children. What we should not forget is our time is changing from the past where there is only farming work. We need to engage in a modern world which needs a great deal of understanding how to handle it". Another woman in Oua-tae-ma-wa village comments that "it is quite painful about my situation in my family that my words are not taken account by my children because I am not helpful for their homework and school activities. I would blame that is because of my bride price. My parent told me that I should not go to school because I will be another family member. The only thing I need to learn is household and farming work. And now, my husband who is educated is alcoholic and not able to taking care of the family and children's education".

Yet, it seems the property was reconceptualized and negotiated uniquely by the Chin women who have networks and associated with the Churches. There are some examples in breaking traditional property arrangement scheme. Here is a reflection of Daw Mary (77) who is transferring her self-made properties to her children regardless of sex.

"My late husband was a preacher and I helped his work. We open night study for students and got a mutual help. We help them their home work and they return firewoods 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 husband before I earn... In the meantime, we have to move to Paletwa. I have relatives and friends there. I did several things such as collecting fire woods in the forest and selling it. I lend money with some interest to my friends, relatives and neighbors from what I have saved. Besides taking care of my children, I mostly focus on our family economy. With saving money, I buy a piece of land, house, a room in the municipal market slowly by slowly. I open a pharmacy shop in the market and it is going well. When my husband attempted to ask *mui vang* for my daughters' marriage, I warned him not to because I don't want my daughters to suffer like me and he did not. I divide all properties I have to my children regardless of their sex including of sending all of them to school equally." (Interview with Daw Marry 29 January 2014)

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show the role of the Chin women in the negotiation of their bride price. Firstly, to suggest, the meaning of the Chin's bride price is not completely fixed by looking the changing historical conditions. That is, it changed from social and economic exchange and class upgrading to an unmodern subject when colonialism and Western Missionary was introduced to the Chin. And now, the popular demand of bride price practice in Paletwa signifies a cultural tactics to against the state's ethnic appropriation, Burmanization. Secondly, the changing roles of women do not determinant on the magnitude of the bride price but each actors has excised it different based on their background. Also, modernization and Christianization have shifted the roles of women and facilitating the re-conceptualization of the bride price practice as ethnic identity and family integrity. Lastly, the bride price practice is seen as a sphere of gender power relation among the Chin which various socio-economical background of the Chin women have unique tactics to negotiate their bride price economically and culturally. Throughout this process, the property concept has been shifted as a result of bride price negotiation.

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