

# SOCIAL CHANGE AND CONTEMPORARY MIZO MARRIAGE RITUAL: AN EXPLANATORY CASE STUDY

**Ringngheti Khenglawt**

Department of Sociology and Social Work, Christ (Deemed to be University).  
Email: [ringngheti.khenglawt@res.christuniversity.in](mailto:ringngheti.khenglawt@res.christuniversity.in)

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.12770853](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12770853)

## Abstract

Marriage is a social institution which shapes social norms and community behaviours. This paper looks at contemporary marriage rituals of the Mizo community, tracing the evolution of these practices from pre-Christianity to the present day and examining the implications of these changes within the broader context of cultural and social transformation. It explains Christianity and westernization as the driving forces behind the changes. By using explanatory case study, the article takes both primary data like in depth interview, participant observation and secondary data like Mizo Customary Law (2005) and existing literature to trace these changes in Mizo marriage ritual.

**Keywords:** Mizo Marriage Ritual, Christianity, Westernization, Case Study, Observation, Social Change.

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an important social institution that is regarded as universal across all cultures. It has often been studied simultaneously with the institution of family since they complement each other in many ways. Because of its fundamental role in the development of human capital resources and its inherent ability to shape the behavior of individuals, households, and communities, marriage is considered the fundamental and significant unit of society (Sriram, 1993). In addition, it serves as a vital conduit for socialization, emotional attachment, and continuity in the face of change (Desai, 1995). Nag (1993) even states that Mizo family is constituted through marriage (p.8).

However, the purpose of this paper is to explore the contemporary Mizo marriage ceremony by looking at how it has changed throughout the years and what these changes imply at the larger framework of culture and social change. By employing in depth case study as a method, the researcher interviewed 30 participants- 15 male and 15 female and observed three marriage ceremonies. The paper explores the concept of Mizo marriage ceremony through primary sources including in depth interviews and participant observation along with secondary sources like Mizo Customary Law (2005) and available literature.

### **Mizo marriage ceremony before Christianity- A brief introduction**

Mizo customs and traditions including marriage ceremonies have evolved throughout the years because of different socio-cultural influences and proselytisation to Christianity (Lalthanliana, 2010). Nunthara (1996) explains the institution of Mizo marriage as a social contract involving two groups- the wife giver and wife receiver (p.91).

In the book '*Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*' (1992), James Dokhuma mentions that in Mizo marriage, two important players are the boy and girl where institutionalized courtship called '*nula rim*' becomes significant. These two had to 'fancy each other' first for the marriage ritual to commence. Even though this is so, there may be few instances where they jump right into marriage before courtship called '*tawn sa bawpa innei*'.

*Palai* or representative to ask the girl's hand in marriage is one of the important factors in marriage ritual. According to Dokhuma (1992, p.146 & 147) their roles were as follows-

1. They must go to the girl's home either just after dinner or before breakfast when there are not much visitors
2. When reaching the homes, they should have small talks first (not for long) and go to the topic of discussion, i.e. the proposal
3. They should take heed of their words and speak politely so as not to offend the girl and her family.
4. They should return after a few days to confirm whether the girl and her family consent to the proposal

According to Shakespere (1912), marriage was primarily a civil contract among the mizos before Christianity. A distinctive feature of Mizo marriage is the requirement of *man* (bride price), which is an indispensable component of the marriage process. There are two components- *Manpui* (principal bride price) and *Mantang* (subsidiary bride price), given to the bride's family. *Manpui* is given to the bride's father or brother and traditionally consists of *sial* (mithun).

After '*man leh mual inhlan*' or the ceremony of bride price gets over, the bride goes to the husband's home, a ceremony called '*lawi*', and is escorted by *lawichal* with families from both the man and women's side. If she even slips on the way (which the *lawichal* is supposed to prevent), she will return to her maternal home and even the marriage gets annulled. Sacrificial offerings also played an important role in Mizo marriage rituals. To appease the spirits and secure their blessings for the newlyweds, chickens were commonly sacrificed by the *sadawt* (priest). It is called '*rem ar*'. After the bride *lawi*, *sadawt* sacrifice *rem ar* and they are officially considered husband and wife, even if the marriage is not consummated. It was customary for both the bridegroom's and the bride's families to prepare *Zu* (rice beer) for the marriage feast, an essential element of the celebration. Vanlalchhuanawma (2006) argues that this went beyond the communal aspect but it was also a ritualistic act that symbolizes a new social bond.

### **Contemporary Mizo marriage ceremony**

In Mizo society, marriage constitutes an important institution since this meant the continuity of the tribe, cultural practice and tradition. The nature of society being patriarchal, the marriage system is also patrilocal. This means that after marriage, the wife resides with the husband's family. Monogamy is usually practiced while there were instances of a few chiefs practicing polygamy in the history of mizo society.

Like mentioned earlier, the process of marriage commences with the institutionalized courtship called '*nula rim*'. Traditionally, during *nula rim*, the bachelor visits the lady's house usually at night after dinner where they sit and talk about different things. This practice has continued till today. In contemporary times, the courtship may last several months or years. If the boy wanted to marry the girl or if they liked each other, the boy informed his parents and the family sat together. The parents would then take initiative by sending two or more *Palai* or representatives from their family to ask the girl's hand in marriage to her parents. One of the most important elements is the consent of the boy and the girl. Further, the girl's family also has complete authority on whether they would accept the proposal. Usually, the *palai* would go twice. On the first occasion,

they would ask the daughter's hand in marriage as representatives. The girl's family would tell them that they would consult each other. The palai would return after a few days to hear the decision of the family. In case the family rejects the proposal, they would politely tell the *palai* that the girl was still immature to get married. In the contemporary time, families are usually informed beforehand regarding when the boy's family would send palai. Hence '*Palai tirh*' can be considered the first step in Mizo marriage ritual.

When negotiations have been completed, the date of the wedding is fixed. The second step of Mizo marriage ritual is the '*Man Hlan*' or the ceremony of bride price. Traditionally, the bride price had been paid in the form of a kind, i.e. the mithun (bison). Now the bride price has been converted to monetary value which is Rs 420. The bride price is paid to the girl's family by the boy's family. It is believed that in the current scenario, it is not the amount that is considered important but the values of continuing tradition of Mizo society. According to Mizo tradition, marriage can be solemnized only after '*man hlan*'. The '*manpui*' is paid to the father or the closest male relative which is usually around Rs 100 or more if the bride has been given a parting gift (*thuam*) by her natal family. '*Mantang*' is a price paid to extended family members or close associates of the family. According to Gangte (2016), the bride prices under '*mantang*' are as follows

- 1) Sumhmahruai: This is the marriage price which is received by father or brother. The amount paid to the sumhmahruai is Rs.20/
- 2) Sumfang: This is usually received by the bride's father or brother which amounts to Rs.10/-.
- 3) Pu-Sum: Pu-sum is paid to the bride's maternal family, particularly the mother's father or brother. The amount of Pu sum is Rs. 10/-.
- 4) Pa-Lal: Pa-Lal is the price which is paid to a person whom the bride regards as her father figure. This person is responsible for providing a fowl and pot of rice beer (not practised anymore) or its equivalence in monetary terms for the marriage. The price under this category is Rs. 10/-.
- 5) Ni- Ar: This is the bride price which is given to the bride's father's sister (bride's aunt). The amount is Rs.10/-.
- 6) Nau-Puak-Puan: Nau puak puan is given as a token to show sisterly bond between the bride and her elder sister or her caretaker when she was a baby. It is paid only to women and not men. This bride price depicts the appreciation of the elder sister or her caretaker during younger days when she was carried in the back in a puanpuak (a piece of cloth that is used to carry babies in the back. The price is Rs. 5/- (Gangte, 2016)

Besides these, additional prices like the '*thian man*' (lit. friend's price) have been added. Even though the prices are given in the above, in practice, many people may not follow it. It is usually the case that more amount would be given. But the amount of bride price that the groom's family gives to the bride's family is fixed at Rs 420 and not subject to change.

A closer analysis into the bride price indicates male domination and patriarchy in Mizo society. Since only male relatives of the bride get the '*manpui*' or the main bride price, it shows the authority of male over female. And this authority passes on from the

bride's family to the groom's family. In addition, the amount itself varies among genders. Hence this shows that men hold higher positions in Mizo society compared to women (Gangte, 2016).

The third step of marriage ritual after the adoption of Christianity is a wedding inside the church. Per mentioned, after '*Palai tirh*' and approval of the marriage, the wedding date is fixed. '*Man hlan*' happens two or three days before the wedding ceremony. The main focus of marriage ritual is the ceremony in the church where the marriage gets officiated by a minister or a church Elder.

There are different localities in the city/town and each locality has different churches. Since the society is inter denominational, each locality further has their own denominational churches. With the patrilocal nature, the couple gets their marriage officiated in the church of the groom. In terms of dress code, the bride usually wears a white gown or the traditional *puan*, i.e. *puanchei* with a white top. Men usually wear a formal suit.

A common trend in the contemporary context is that wedding reception happens right after the wedding ceremony in another hall of the church. Succeeding this is the wedding feast which is also prepared and served in the church compound. The feast sometimes happens simultaneously with the reception. Weddings usually happen in the afternoon at 1:00 PM or 2:00 PM and its duration is usually an hour.

After this, the fourth step of marriage ritual happens, which is the '*Lawi*'. This is a ceremony where the bride enters the groom's home accompanied with the '*lawichal*'. *Lawichal* is a male figure who is appointed by the bride's family to safely escort the bride to the groom's home. According to the Mizo Customary Law (2005), before entering the groom's house the *lawichal* is expected to say "*Kha fanu fapa kan rawn lawipui e*" to the parents of the groom who would wait at the doorstep for the bride. Even though the direct translation of this would lose its essence, it could translate to "Here I present you your new daughter". After saying this, the bride is handed over to the groom's parents and the bride has entered the husband's home or she has '*lawi*'. Hence the marriage ritual is complete. It is important to note that the bride must bring '*pawndum*' or the funeral cloth along with her when she lives with the husband to wrap his body at his death.

There are other forms of marriage which are called *inru/tlandun* that would mean eloping. Here, the consent of the family is not taken. In many cases the girl is taken back to her home and a wedding happens after it without other rituals. It is considered embarrassing for the family in society. Here, they are excommunicated by the church for six months. The same is the case if the girl gets pregnant before marriage. In such cases, '*biakin hawnga inneih*' which literally translates to 'opening the church for marriage' cannot happen and they get married in another hall in the church. For the Pentecost, weddings can happen inside the church.

There are a few instances where the husband resides in the home of the wife. This matrilocal system is called '*makpa chungkhung*' and men have often been ridiculed for this in society. This shows how some men have also been targeted under patriarchy. According to the Mizo Marriage Bill (2014), '*fan*' is when a man leaves his house and starts living with a woman in the woman's house as husband and wife. This happens without any marriage ritual involved. '*Luhkhung*' is when a woman leaves her house and starts living with a man in his house as husband and wife.

A recent phenomenon that has been added, which we might call an extension or fifth stage is the 'after-party'. This is not practiced by all. It is practiced by those who can afford to have a party and it usually involves live bands, dancing and alcohol. Perhaps, it is taken from western wedding reception parties. If we assess closely, it could be a mixture of both western and traditional mizo ceremony where *zu* (rice beer) was made part of marriage rituals. With Christianity condemning the intake of alcohol, the 'after party' became a space where the younger generation could express marriage rituals in a less rigid, more casual manner.

### **Changes in Mizo marriage ritual: Christianity and Westernization**

The annexation of the Lushai Hills in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century by the British Empire paved the way for the British Christian missionaries to expand their mission. Before the British came to the land, the Mizos lived in small and isolated hills in clusters and often raised warfare with one another. Initially, the British never showed interest in the hilly land even though they occupied neighboring areas like Cachar and Burma. They claimed the Mizo tribes to be 'irreclaimable savages'. It was around the 1850s that the tribes started to encroach on the British plantations mostly in Cachar. There were several raids and many were killed from both sides. It was the attack on Alexandrapur and the kidnapping of a six year old Scottish girl Mary Winchester or Zoluti (alias Mizo name) which had prompted the British to annex the hills. (Strom, 1980)

The presence of the British made a transition in the religious beliefs and practices of the tribe. Initially, paganism was dominant and there was an animistic worldview among the people. In 1894, J.H.Lorrain and F.W.Savidge introduced Christianity as a new religion which replaced animism. It was believed that when the British left India, around 90% of the Mizos had already become Christians (Lalrinmawia, 1995). According to the 2011 Census, 87.16% of the population in Mizoram are Christians. Further, Christians form the majority in all the districts of Mizoram (Census of India, 2011)

It was observed that *man hlan* and *lawi*, which typically happens outside the church, has influences of Christianity. During the ceremonies, bible reading and prayer plays an important role, although not most important. The *man hlan* commences with bible reading and ends with people reciting the Lord's Prayer. Even during the *lawi*, the bible is read after the bride enters the house with the *lawichal* (a male figure who escorts her to the groom's house) and ends with everyone reciting the Lord's Prayer.

During the *man hlan*, one of the most significant observations was the use of objects to portray tradition. When the 'man/price' (Rs 420) of the woman is counted, it is kept on a *thlangra*. A *thlangra* is an indigenous winnowing tray which is used by the Mizo tribe. Recently, a new trend emerged where the *thlangra* is covered by a white cloth as a means of decoration. This could signify the influence of a foreign influence on the traditional practice.

An interesting observation in one of the '*man hlan*' or the bride price ceremony was that in the speeches, they would often say "*Lei a ni tawh*" meaning "She has been bought". Additionally, one of the speakers stated "*Lei ni tawh mahse, kohhran in a la pawm lo.*" Meaning "Even though she has been bought, the church has not approved their marriage yet." This means that they consider marriage rituals incomplete without the approval of the church. The use of the word '*lei*' or 'bought' especially brings out the status of women as objects that can be bought and sold.



During the marriage ceremony in the church, it was observed that the ceremony was more westernized and there was a limited portrayal of Mizo tradition. Mizo tradition was manifested in the form of women wearing the traditional *puan* (wraparound), although the bride usually wears a white gown. Hence it was observed that in the marriage ritual, within the traditional practice, influences of Christianity could be seen. Bible reading and prayers seems to play an important role in both the man hlan and the lawi.

The influence of Christianity meant the influence of Western notion of morality since it was the Welsh missionaries who had spread Christianity among the Mizos. With Christianity came western influence. This can be seen in the marriage ritual. With reference to a Mizo wedding, one of the respondents stated

No one ever said there should be a wedding cake during marriage. But since it is there in the white man's wedding, we have a wedding cake . . . we never wore white gowns and suits during weddings, but since we have adopted the white man's wedding, we wear them. All these do not come from us. We are just taking it in from outside.

Many of the respondents mentioned that they could not identify tradition with the wedding ceremony happening in the church. Although this is so, most of them got married in white gowns and suits. Through this, identity gets reinforced in the western standard.

An interesting observation was the use of the word '*more developed race*' when talking about western or the white people who Mizos generally call '*sap*'. The respondent stated

I believe we are copying the more developed race when it comes to marriage. We are copying the sap (white people) style in everything.

The above statement meant that they consider themselves inferior to the western people. Even though this is so, all of the respondents mentioned that this western influence can bring a threat in terms of their identity.

In the case of marriage ritual, one of the respondents mentioned the role of the woman's body called the *Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl* (MHIP) on the belongings the bride must bring to the groom's house. He mentioned that at a certain point of time, the bride was expected to bring a number of belongings beyond their means. He compared this to dowry. But with the intervention of the MHIP, the issue was solved and this was not practiced anymore. Hence the influence of structure on identity is evident from the interviews

Another important factor is the use of objects as resistance. The significance the *khuang* (drum) has in reinforcing identity is subtle yet very apparent. Since the *khuang* is an instrument which is popularly used in singing, the traditional aspect of mizo society is manifested via singing in churches during wedding ceremonies. This is complemented with western instruments like keyboard, drums, guitar, etc. The amalgamation of the two acts as a reinforcement of the tradition and the western.

The *khuang* acts as an important instrument and is symbolic since it manifests the tribalization of Christianity. One respondent even mentions that worship is incomplete without the use of the *khuang*. Another respondent stated

Whether it is emotional or rational, *khuang* elevates how we practice our Christianity. It elevates the way we praise God. Beyond being symbolic, it gives us the spiritual aspect.

Not only do people associate the *khuang* as being symbolic but the *khuang* also represents the spiritual aspect of religion. It can be understood that spirituality is closely associated with mizo tradition. In another instance, during *lawi*, a song is sung and *khuang* is also being used. Hence the *khuang* plays an important role in the contemporary marriage rituals. The *khuang* has been regarded as a symbol of resistance and the preserver of mizo tradition despite numerous influences like Christianity and westernization. Thus one of the respondents mentioned

Something as simple as the *khuang* has played a major role in preserving our culture. We can say that something which has been lost has been revived through the use of it.

In contemporary Mizo marriage ritual, we can thus find how social change influences how marriage has been and is being practiced. Two major forces are Christianity and westernization. Even though this is so, use of artifacts like *khuang*, wearing *puan*, etc. has been instrumental in resisting changes and reinforcing indigenous identity.

## CONCLUSION

An explanatory case study on contemporary suggests that the changes in society brought about by Christianity and westernization also changed the way contemporary marriage ritual has been practiced. We can understand that it goes beyond changes in structures but changes in ideologies. There is the need to protect identity on one hand, and on the other maintaining equilibrium by adapting to these changes. Much research is needed on the intricacies of this cultural and social change since this paper mainly focuses on explanatory context of the shift in practices.

## References

- 1) C. Nunthara. (1996). *Mizoram Society and Polity*. Indus Publishing.
- 2) *Census of India Website : Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India*. (2011). [www.censusindia.gov.in](http://www.censusindia.gov.in). <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html>
- 3) Chitta Ranjan Nag. (1993). *The Mizo Society in Transition*. South Asia Books.
- 4) Desai, M. (1995). Towards family policy research. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 56, 225–231.
- 5) Dokhuma, J. (1992). *Hmanlai mizo kalphung*. J.D.Press.
- 6) Gangte, M. (2016). Gender and Customary Law: A Case Study of Mizo Tribe in North East India. *Indian Anthropologist*, 46(1), 17–30.
- 7) Lalrinmawia. (1995). *History and Cultural Identity*. Spectrum Pubs.
- 8) Shakespear, J. (1912). *The Lushei Kuki Clans*. Cultural Publishing House.
- 9) Sriram, R. (1993). *Family studies in India: Appraisal and new directions*. Sage Publishers.
- 10) Strom, D. (1980). *Christianity and Cultural Change among the Mizoram*. Missiology.
- 11) The Committee on Mizo Customary Law. (2005). *Mizo Hnam Dan (Mizo Customary Law)*. Law and Judicial Department, Govt of Mizoram.
- 12) Vanlalchhuanawma. (2006). *Christianity and subaltern culture : revival movement as a cultural response to westernisation in Mizoram*. Indian Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge.