



Research Article

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Christianity and Lai Marriage: Is Tradition Giving Way to Modernity?

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Abstract: This study investigates the shifting dynamics of marriage preferences among the Lai people, with a focus on the impact of Christianity. A sample of 200 participants, drawn from the dominant *Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran* (LIKBK) Church in Lawngtlai district, provided valuable insights. The research aims to ascertain the extent to which the Lai community has diverged from traditional marital practices. The findings reveal a significant paradigm shift, wherein a syncretic form of marriage, blending Christian and traditional elements, has become prevalent. This hybridised marriage practice underscores the complex interplay between cultural heritage and Christian influences.

Keywords: Lai, Marriage system, Lawngtlai, Mizoram, LIKBK

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INTRODUCTION

Located in the southernmost extremity of Mizoram, the Lai tribe inhabits the Lawngtlai district, which shares international borders with Bangladesh to the west and Myanmar to the south. The district is bounded by Lunglei to the north and Saiha to the east, with the Thega (Kawrpui River) and Kaladan River demarcating its western and eastern boundaries, respectively. Spanning an area of 2557.10 km² (Census of India, 2011), Lawngtlai's topography is characterized by mountainous and hilly terrain, punctuated by a narrow strip of low-lying riverine plain along the Chamdur Valley's western flank. The region is prone to landslides, particularly during the monsoon season. Dense, pristine forests dominate the western part of the district. Notable rivers include the Kaladan, Tuichong, Chhimtuipui, Ngengpui, Chawngte, and Tuiphal. Approximately one-third of the district's population relies primarily on agriculture, employing traditional shifting cultivation methods. A smaller proportion of the urban populace engages in stable employment, encompassing state government services, banking, education, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Lawngtlai was formally designated a district on 18 September 1998 and serves as the headquarters of the Lai Autonomous District Council. The Lai people, a prominent ethnic group within the Zo-ethnic continuum, are known by various designations, including 'Pawi' in Mizoram, 'Chin' in Myanmar, and 'Shendus' in Bangladesh (Doungel, 2010: 8-9).

METHODODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both exploratory and descriptive approaches. A sample size of 200 was determined using the Cuemath sample size calculator, drawn from a total population of 30,692 LIKBK church members. The sample was stratified into seven distinct sub-groups: Pastor Wing (n=3), Church-Elder (n=20), Women's Wing (n=50), Youth Wing (n=27), Men's Wing (n=17), Women Theologians (n=3), and General Body (n=80). Additionally, respondents were categorised into three residential locales - core, periphery, and rural - to examine geographical variations in marriage pattern preferences. Data collection entailed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, wherein survey data was coded and quantified, while content analysis was conducted on secondary materials, including church records, newspapers, pamphlets, and existing literature from books and journals. The main objectives of the study include:

- To study the choice of marriage among the Lai people.
- To study the impact of Christianity on the Lai marriage system.
- To study the changes and continuity of tradition Lai marriage practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the Lai traditional marriage customs, marriage proposal and arrangement were typically overseen by a 'Bialamkaltu' (Palai/mediator), often

chosen from within the family circle in ancient times. These intermediaries exercised great care in selecting suitable life partners, ensuring that the chosen bride and her family met certain criteria. They avoided individuals and families afflicted by undesirable traits and circumstances, such as 'hnamnei' ('khawhring' in Mizo), a covetous spirit known for causing severe stomach cramps unless its demands were met. Additionally, they steered clear of descendants of individuals with criminal backgrounds, like murderers, thieves, or habitual liars. They also sought to avoid unions with families who had experienced unnatural deaths, such as sudden or accidental demises referred to as 'sarhi.' Moreover, they refrained from considering women from families associated with adultery or slavery ('Bawi' or 'sal'). (Kompa, 2018:210).

Following the introduction of Christianity, monogamy became the prevailing form of marriage among the Lai community. However, in ancient times, polygamy was practiced by chiefs and noble men. While a man was permitted to have multiple wives, only the children of one specific wife, known as the 'Nutak,' were entitled to inheritance rights. To designate his preferred wife, a husband underwent a ceremonial ritual called 'Arnak' with her, ensuring that she became his primary or favored spouse, and their offspring would inherit his property. The other wives were referred to as 'Nuchhun,' and their children had no claim to their father's assets. (The Pawi- Lakher Autonomous Region Inheritance of Property Act,1959; Vanlalringa.B, 2012:28).

The prevalent form of marriage among the Lai community is known as Taitipur, which involves the mediation of a 'Bialamkaltu'. In this arrangement, the bride's maternal grandfather, referred to as 'Pucing', often hosts a large feast for the entire community, typically involving the slaughter of four or more pigs. As a customary response, the bridegroom reciprocates this gesture by slaughtering pigs of similar or sometimes even greater in size and number, a practice known as 'delh'. However, this custom was primarily observed among the affluent members of society till today. Another form of marriage is known as 'Rawlti' or elopement which remains prevalent commonly in tribal communities. This type of marriage occurs when the parents from both sides oppose the union. In such cases, the mediator may facilitate the marriage by visiting the girl's house with a gift known as 'Hmaitlam'. This offering, usually provided by the boy's parents, is typically valued at no less than one thousand rupees (₹1000) in today's time and serves as a token of apology for any offense caused to the girl's parents. It is important to note that this gift is separate from the bride's price. In the past, the bride-price varied among different clans, and there was no fixed amount. For instance, the daughter of a chief might command a higher bride-price, often in the form of a pair of mithun (known as se nupa), while commoners' bride-prices tended to be lower. This tradition still persists today, with bride-prices continuing

to differ from clan to clan. To establish a standardized system, the Lai Autonomous District Council implemented fixed marriage prices outlined in the Lai Hnam Draft Bill of 2009, which was redrafted in 2020 (Lai Customary Law and Practices, 'Lai Hnam Dan', 2020) which remain in effect till today. These prices are as follows:

- Manpui/Mantung (Main price): (a) Phunthawh Ruangdir - Rs. 1000.00 (b) Phunthawh Bel - Small jar
- Pu Man (Marriage price for the maternal uncle): Rs 1000.00
- Mantang/Manhranh (subordinate price): (a) Pa man (Marriage price for the bride's father's brother) - Rs 500.00 (b) Ta man (Marriage price for the bride's brother or her maternal or paternal cousin) - Rs. 500.00 (c) Nu man (Marriage price given to the girl's mother's sister) - Rs. 300.00 (d) Ni man (Marriage price given to the sister of the girl's father) - Rs. 300.00
- Mantesep (additional prices): (a) Kawi man (Marriage price given to the best friend of the bride's father or grandfather) - Rs. 100.00 (b) Maw man (Marriage price given to the girl's best friend) - Rs. 150.00 (c) Tang phah puan (Traditional cloth given to the sister of the bride's father) - 1-piece (d) Charsut phawi man (Price given to the bride's unmarried sister) - Rs. 200.00 (e) Upa chaw (Price given to a mentor in fixing and distributing the bride-price) - Rs. 200.00

The Lai people has been deviated to a considerable extent when it comes to marriage practices after the advent of Christianity wherein the typical practice of Lai marriage has been partially supplanted by the Christian institution of Church marriage, blending it with some traditional form of marriage practices. The choice of mixed marriage is still the first preference (56%, 112 persons) as shown in Figure 1.

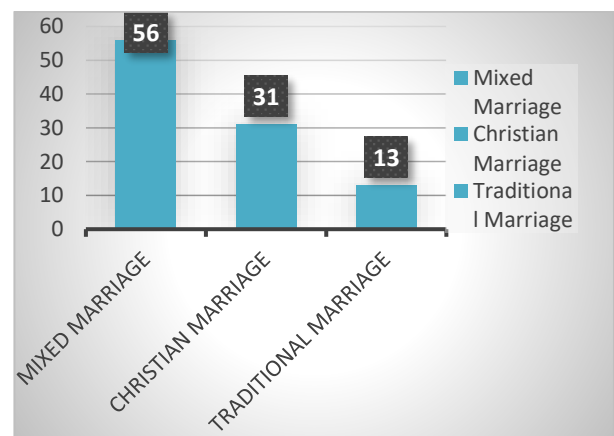


Figure 1: Overall Respondents' Percentage on Choice between Mixed, Christian and Traditional Marriages
Source: Field data

Mixed Marriage 112 persons (56 %)
Christian marriage 62 persons (31 %)
Traditional Lai marriage 26 persons (13 %)

Mixed Marriage

The main reasons for choosing the mixed form of marriage have been attributed to the still lingering of traditional culture in the minds of the Lai people that they could not completely detach from as was mentioned in the quotes:

In the present era, we commonly follow modern Christian marriage customs, although some aspects of the traditional Lai marriage system, notably the notion of bride price, persist. However, the bride price is now typically less extravagant compared to earlier times, typically ranging around Rs. 5000/- or more, with variations in specific amounts among different clans. Clan members come together to collectively decide the suitable bride price for a particular circumstance. Hence, there remains a fusion of Christian marriage practices with elements of traditional Lai marriage. (Mrs. K.C)

Christian Marriage

However, 31% of participants with a frequency of 62 prefers the Christian Marriage. The reasons for choosing the Lai traditional marriage as mentioned below truly depict the typical Lai marriage practices which makes them unique from all other tribes in Mizoram. The transition from the Lai traditional marriage system to the modern Christian marriage system marks a significant cultural shift from a highly stratified, class-based selection of life partners to a more egalitarian and free approach. Historically, the Lai system mandated that individuals marry within their social class, reinforcing rigid societal divisions. In contrast, the modern Christian era, influenced by Christian values of equality and individual choice, allows greater freedom in selecting life partners irrespective of social status. This change promotes social equality and personal autonomy, highlighting the positive impact of Christian principles on marriage practices and societal norms as was mentioned by one respondent as:

I am inclined towards the modern Christian marriage as the Lai traditional marriage system was marked by a highly stratified system in selecting life partners, where individuals from the chief clan were expected to marry within the same clan, while those considered as slaves were obligated to marry only within the slave class. In the modern Christian era, we enjoy greater freedom in choosing life partners, and this positive change is attributed to Christianity." (M. Lalkhama)

In the pre-Christian era, families were extremely cautious in selecting life partners, ensuring that the chosen bride or bridegroom's lineage was free from 'khawhring' (possessed by a greedy evil spirit),

murder, robbery, or unnatural deaths (Sarathi) as was mentioned by another respondent as:

In the pre- Christian era, every family were very cautious when it came to selection of a life partner. They would see to it that the descendants of the chosen bride or bridegroom were free from 'khawhring' (Hnamnei or possessed by a greedy evil spirit), murder case, robbery or persons who died due to sudden and unnatural death (Sarathi). Christianity has changed this rigid marriage system and we are no longer as cautious as before." (Hmangaihzauva)

This meticulous scrutiny aimed to maintain social and moral purity within the community. However, with the advent of Christianity, these rigid criteria have significantly relaxed. The Christian influence has shifted the focus towards individual choice and the intrinsic worth of the person, reducing the emphasis on ancestral background and allowing for greater freedom in marriage decisions. This evolution reflects a broader move towards personal autonomy and away from traditional superstitions and rigid social norms.

A Christian Church marriage, with God and the Church as witnesses, is perceived to strengthen and enhance the durability of the union compared to traditional Lai customary marriage, as was mentioned by one religious person as:

In today's world, we normally practice a Christian Church marriage as God and the Church being the witness of the Marriage. I feel that this church marriage makes the marriage stronger and more durable as compared to Lai customary marriage. (M. Lalthuamlia)

The preference for modern Christian marriage over traditional Lai marriage is influenced by its cost-effectiveness and the reduction of socioeconomic disparities in marriage ceremonies and mate selection. Unlike the traditional Lai system, which often involved elaborate and expensive rituals that highlighted the gap between the rich and the poor, Christian marriages offer a simpler and more inclusive approach. This relative relaxation in both the financial burden and social stratification makes modern Christian marriages more accessible and appealing to a broader range of people, promoting equality and reducing financial strain, as was rightly mentioned as:

I prefer the modern Christian marriage because it is less expensive and the gap between the rich and poor in terms of marriage ceremony and mate selection is relatively relaxed as compared to the traditional Lai marriage. (Lalthakima)

The shift from traditional Lai marriage customs to modern Christian marriage practices has brought about significant cultural and social changes. Traditionally, Lai

marriages were characterized by rigid social stratification, meticulous scrutiny of lineage, and elaborate, costly ceremonies. With the advent of Christianity, these norms have been replaced by more egalitarian and less expensive practices, emphasizing individual choice and equality before God. This transition has reduced the socioeconomic disparities associated with marriage and promoted stronger, more enduring unions by placing the Church and God as central witnesses. Consequently, many Lai individuals now prefer Christian marriages for their inclusivity, affordability, and alignment with contemporary value.

Traditional Lai Marriage

Interestingly, 13% with a frequency of 26 have chosen the traditional marriage system over the Christian marriage or the Mixed form of marriage. One notable

quote as mentioned by a typical Lai man, expressing his high sentiments over the Lai tribe is presented as:

As a Lai tribe, I still prefer the traditional Lai marriage system over the Christian marriage as I don't fancy wearing a western dress in the Church wedding and even in my marriage ceremony, me and my wife, we were wearing the typical Lai attire. It would be beneficial if the LIKKB initiates a church guideline promoting the use of Lai attire during weddings. (Mr. L.S)

Additionally, it is found that from the sub-group division of the respondents, the women theologians (100%) opt relatively higher among the other sub-group for traditional form of marriage. (see Figure 2)

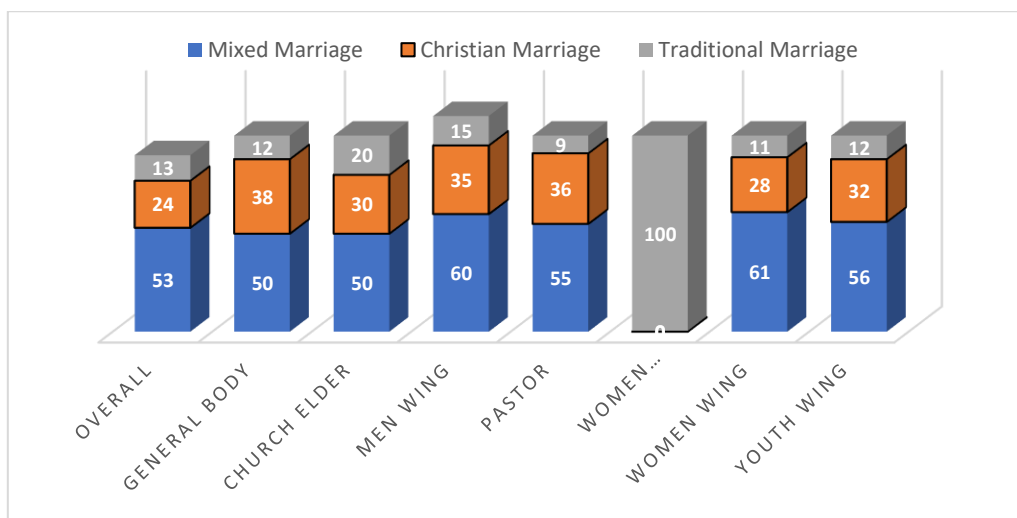


Figure 2: Classification of participants based on the sub-group
 Source: Author's Calculation

The main reason for choosing this traditional form of marriage, despite being an educated women theologian, has been mentioned by one respondent as:

I am still favouring the traditional Lai marriage practice of sending mediator to the parents asking for the bride's hand and giving bride-price as per the customary law. As an educated woman. I feel that we should strictly adhere to the Lai traditional marriage

system, as this practice signifies that woman are highly respected in our society (C. Lalrawngbawli)

Upon careful observation of the church-elder group, it is also noticed that the percentage of undergraduate church elders belonging to rural areas (See Table 1) opted for traditional form of marriage which are relatively high in number as against the other criteria of division.

Table 1: Percentage of participants response from Church Elder sub-group

Marriage Preference	Overall No (%)	Male No (%)	Core No (%)	Periphery No (%)	Rural No (%)	Graduate No (%)	UG No (%)
Mixed Marriage	5 (25)	5 (25)	2 (25)	1 (17)	2 (40)	1 (20)	4 (26)
Christian Marriage	5 (25)	5 (25)	2 (25)	2 (33)	1 (20)	1 (20)	4 (27)
Traditional Form	10 (50)	10 (50)	5 (50)	3 (50)	2 (40)	3 (60)	7 (47)
Total	20 (100)	20 (100)	9 (100)	6 (100)	5 (100)	5 (100)	15 (100)

Source: Field Data

The main reason for choosing the traditional form of marriage as mentioned by one church-elder, belonging to a typical Lai village in Sangau was that:

I still find value in the traditional Lai marriage system. Among the Lai people, we continue the practice of presenting a bride price called

'Phunthawh' as the principal amount. In situations where there's an elopement, we provide 'Hmaitlam' to the bride's parents as a form of compensation for any perceived defamation to the girl and her family. In rare cases where the 'Hmaitlam' is not accepted, the marriage cannot proceed. The role of the maternal uncle ('Pucing') remains significant, and a designated mediator is dispatched by the groom's parents to seek the bride's hand in marriage. The maternal uncle may set specific demands for the bride price, and on occasion, he might even sacrifice three or more big pigs to feed the entire community. If this occurs, the groom's side is expected to match this gesture by slaughtering an equivalent or a greater number of pigs known as 'Delh.' These customary practices persist today, especially among affluent families that makes our Lai culture unique. (C. Lalawmpuia)

This study culminates in the finding that the Lai people adhere to a syncretic marriage practice, blending traditional custom-bound unions with modern church weddings. Notably, the payment of bride price and the role of mediator (palai/bialamkaltu) remain integral components, resilient to significant alteration by Christian influences, despite the ubiquity of church marriages in contemporary society. Furthermore, a locality-based disparity in marriage preferences emerged, with rural residents exhibiting a stronger inclination towards traditional marriage practices, thereby fulfilling the study's objective of investigating geographical variations. Moreover, a comparative

analysis with the pre-Christian era reveals a significant diminution in the financial burden associated with marriage. This adaptation underscores the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and modernizing influences. The introduction of Christianity has led to cultural erosion in the *Lai* community, replacing traditional customs and practices with Church activities, and marginalising indigenous social control mechanisms, resulting in a decline of *Lai* cultural heritage and identity, exemplifying (Gramsci,1970; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994) cultural hegemony.

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