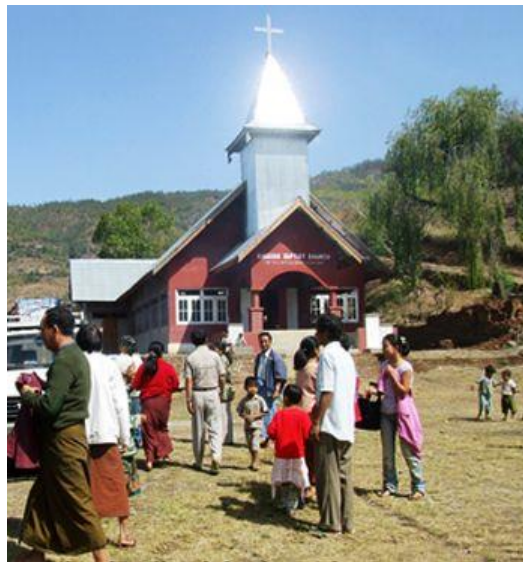


Conversion of the Chin in Burma: The Creation of an Elite



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August 2007

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Contents

Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	7
I. History.....	9
A. Geography and Ethnography	9
B. Brief Political History	11
C. Brief Religious History	16
1. The Missionaries	16
2. The Traditional Religion.....	19
II. Reasons for Conversion	22
A. Colonial Power and Modernity	22
1. Writing System	24
2. Worldview.....	25
B. Rationalization	28
C. Cost/Benefit Ratio.....	30
III. Creation of an Elite through Identity Construction.....	32
A. Identity Construction and the Role of Ethnicity	32
B. Identity Politics	35
C. Ethnic Classification of Zomi and Chin.....	38
D. Separate Identity from the Burman.....	40
E. Separate Identity from Other Chin.....	41
1. Rejection of Zomi Identity	41
2. Missionaries in Tedim.....	45
IV. Power for the Elite	48
A. Prophet's Power	49
1. The First Convert	50
2. The Capital of Conversion	51
B. Using Christianity on the World Stage	53
V. Conclusion: Identity Politics and the Creation of an Elite.....	56
References.....	60

Abstract

The northern Chin of Burma have a high conversion rate to Christianity. Using academic studies, interviews, political writings and missionary accounts, this thesis describes the various reasons for conversion, such as a shift in worldview (Hefner), rationalization (Geertz, Bellah, Weber) and cost/benefit ratio. In this case study, conversion seems to have fulfilled its central purpose for the Chin in creating an elite, a small group endowed with power. The converted Chin have achieved this role first by separating themselves externally from the Burman and internally from other Chin, and then by using the particular role of Christianity in the world to gain financial and political power. Externally, the separation from the majority, the Buddhist Burman, was a rejection of Burman rule. Internally, both the Tedim and Hakha, two administrative divisions of the Northern Chin Hills, tried to keep conversion exclusively to themselves, thus yielding the “prophet’s power” or *Heilbesitz*, as Weber referred to it, for themselves. Part of the Christian mission in the Chin Hills was to teach locals how to preach and convert their fellows. This is referred to as Indiginization. Growth of Christianity occurred once Indiginization took place and the Chin began to participate in the worldwide Christian movement. Also, needless to say, the locals understand the culture and language much better than the missionaries and in this way are able to reach more potential converts. Nowadays, the Chin use the Christian platform to raise world sympathy for the political situation in Burma, solicit funds to support Christian causes, and to gain legitimacy. The success of Christianity as a gateway to the world stage and power can be measured by the fact that some Chin go so far as to claim that the Chin were “chosen by God,” and it is their mission to convert the world. The thesis concludes that by converting to Christianity, the Hakha specifically have managed to elevate themselves as the elite of the Chin. This elite status allows the Hakha to represent the whole of the Chin on the world stage.

Preface

Researchers in the social sciences often choose their course of study for very personal reasons. And although there is an argument for objectivity over subjectivity, these studies, I believe are not necessarily tainted by personal perspectives. The mere fact that a social scientist is close to the subject matter may actually improve the study. I believe this to be a fact in my case, at least in terms of the Chin. That is to say, both the process of conversion and its relationship to identity politics described below was not a personal experience of mine. In this way, I contend that my study was as objective as possible. Still, the fact that I am Chin does play a role in the larger framework. That is, I truly care about the future of all of the Chin and/or the Zomi, as will be addressed later. In this way, I was able to delve into the material and note my observations with a clarity that I may not have achieved had I not been personally involved.

My father, Vum Son, passed away unexpectedly in September of 2005. Although I grew up with Chin refugees living in our home before getting political asylum or moving on to take care of themselves, I was very much uninvolved. In fact, I was mostly annoyed. Footprints on toilet seats, buckets in bathtubs and the slaughtering of animals in our backyard became the bane of my existence as a teenager. Then, there were the all-night prayer sessions. My father, a staunch atheist, participated in these Bible meetings and even seemed to enjoy them. But my sister and I were always looking for opportunities to escape. My father was very active in Chin politics. During the 1980s, my father worked on oil rigs and in his spare time studied Zomi history. He published *Zo History* in 1986. Soon, however, he was engrossed in Chin Politics. He referred to his activism work as his “hobby.” Of course I was aware of his activities, but I had created my own life and, to some degree, achieved comfortable middle class. In fact, when he died, I was planning on returning to university to do a degree “for pure enjoyment.”

After his death, I learned that my father was to take a trip to India to “visit his friends” as he always told us. Not having met these friends, I decided to take the trip on his

behalf. I thought it would be a way for me to manage my grief. Little did I know that this trip would be life-changing for me. I simply wrote some emails to my uncle and to the other few Chin I actually knew. They assured me that everything was taken care of that I was to take a flight to Delhi and wait. I did so. Two Chin, whom I did not know, picked me up and off we went to Aizawl the capital of Mizoram.² They quartered me into a hotel and the next morning I met them at 4:30 am for a trip into the jungle. This ‘little’ trip took 15 hours and took us, illegally, through the mountainous jungle of India into Manipur where the First Chin National Assembly was held at a rebel insurgent camp. For some reason I was not concerned even when, during the trip, I was told to hide under a blanket when driving through villages, because no foreigners were allowed in that part of the world due to all kinds of insurgencies.

Nonetheless, I arrived in the jungle and was allotted a very nice hut. I realized my father had been taking trips such as this one for decades. While I thought he was site seeing, drinking tea with friends or shopping in the markets, he was engaged in dangerous political activities. It made sense to me, then, that he never encouraged me to participate in politics with him.

The National Assembly was attended by all kinds of Chin from Tedim to the southern Chin State. Differing groups were also represented, student groups, women’s groups, health organizations, and political groups. The meeting was held in Burmese. I do not speak Burmese but managed to spend those hours observing the people. I quickly came to realize that most of the powerful leaders were Hakha. Among the Chin at the assembly was a nice young activist from Falam. Her English was impeccable and she answered all my questions regarding the leaders and such. I learned that it was true, the Hakha were in most leadership positions and thus had a strong hold on Chin Politics worldwide.

¹ Zo or Zomi is an ethnic tribe that was divided at Partition when the British colonists return British India. The Zomi are divided into Burma, India and Bangladesh. The Zomi are elaborated upon further in the text.

² Mizoram is a state in Northeastern India. Its most differentiating attribute from most of India is its majority ethnic tribe, the Mizo and the fact that it is a Christian state.

After I left the jungle, I was stranded in Aizawl due to bad weather conditions. My father had managed to gain some distinction in Mizoram due to his work on first identifying the Zomi as one people and second for having created the “Zo Reunification Organization” (ZORO)³ in Mizoram. Hence, I had time on my hands and thus met Mizo who worked with my father. Like in the jungle, I felt a certain kinship with these people. Upon my return to Europe I decided to learn as much as possible of my father’s work.

Just a few months later in July, I was invited to tour Scandinavia to visit resettled Chin. I eagerly agreed. I joined the delegation, which was made up of political leaders. All of them were Hakha. Sakhong, one of the delegation members was clearly the unspoken leader and his having obtained a Ph.D. in theology in a Western country (Sweden) apparently gave him a great deal of credibility. I had a translator and was taken aback by the religious rhetoric. They spoke about the Chin’s responsibility to show the rest of the world their piety. They were to send remittances home and although many planned on making a life in Rangoon once democracy were to come, Sakhong insisted that they first build a house in Hakha. There were other incidences that surprised me. In fact, on my tour, I expected to meet people from my own ethnic sub-group, the Sizang.⁴ I did not. In fact, I quickly realized that no matter which country we visited, the resettled Chin were always Hakha. The leaders, who of course, communicated in English with me, kept referring to Hakha as “Chin language.” I thought it strange. I was suspicious. When I returned that summer, I had already enrolled in this Master’s program with the explicit plan to study the history of the Zo. I was encouraged to address the conversion and identity politics issues from a contemporary perspective. My own curiosity also pushed me along these lines. Hence, the thesis below is the amalgamation of my experiences of late and my realization that in order to be effective for the whole of the Zo, academic endeavors are necessary. Therefore, I elected not to participate in the identity politics and thus activism for the Chin.

³ See: <http://zogamonline.com>

⁴ The Sizang are part of the Tedim tribe. Tidim is one subdivision of the Northern Chin Hills. This will be addressed later in the text.

Introduction

Religious conversion of 'tribal' peoples offers a rich opportunity to study many anthropological aspects of a peoples at a critical stage of flux in their cultural evolution. In addition to comparing their 'before' and 'after' conventions, attitudes, and lifestyles, reasons for conversion reveal a treasure-trove of underlying social dynamics, contextual pressures and opportunism. As converts form new social groups, ethnic identity comes into question, and historical facts take on new significance in different contexts.

One such case is the conversion of the Northern Chin of the Chin Hills of Burma, who practiced animism until the arrival of Christian missionaries during the British colonial period. While conversion was slow at first, complex external and internal struggles spurred on conversion to an impressive 90% today.⁵ Being the smallest minority in a Buddhist state which was haphazardly thrown together by the British, the Chin have felt keen persecution and oppression by the ethnically, religiously, and historically different majority ethnic group, the Burman, who comprise two-thirds of the country's population. Within the Northern Chin State, there are three primary subdivisions: Falam, Tedim and Hakha, who have all been competing for recognition and domination of the Chin Hills for centuries. The Hakha, particularly, have used conversion to gain political power.

This thesis examines the central question of why the Chin converted to Christianity, and furthermore, how have the Chin, specifically, the Hakha used Christianity to gain political power. This thesis will demonstrate how the Hakha have used Christianity to separate themselves externally from the Burman and how they separated themselves internally by rejecting their shared ancestry with the Zomi identity. In so doing, they have created a Chin elite that is now extremely active in politics on the world stage. They manage to first, represent themselves as the only true Chin and second, have managed to gain support using Christianity and thus the desire for democracy in order to receive funding from Western organizations occupied with such issues.

Social Science literature on the Chin is limited. Much of the literature is out-dated or written from a theological perspective. Hence, I have utilized a plethora of sources from linguistic science to the records kept by British colonial administrators.

⁵ It is difficult to determine the exact number of Christian converts. Most figures are between 90-98%. See Kham (1999) in references and http://www.chro.org/index.php/facts_and_arguments/34m (visited August 3, 2007)

I. History

A. Geography and Ethnography

There are three primary subdivisions in Northern Chin State: Falam, Tedim and Hakha. The Chin are one of seven officially recognized ethnic minority groups in the Union of Burma.⁶ The Chin are a part of the larger ethnic group, Zomi, who were divided at the Partition of British India in 1947.⁷ Borders were drawn on a map and the Zomi suddenly found themselves separated by rather arbitrary divisions and thus came to occupy Burma, Bangladesh and India where they are known as the Chin, Kuki or Bawm and the Lushai or Mizo respectively Mizo, the Bawm and the Chin respectively (Lehman 1963, Vumson 1986)⁸.

The two maps below depict British India before and after the Partition of 1947. The Zomi occupied India, Burma and Bangladesh.



Figure 1. British India before Partition

Borders were drawn dividing the Zomi into India, then East Pakistan and Burma and resulted in the map below.⁹

⁶ The other six are: the Mon, the Wa, the Shan, the Karen, the Kachin and the Arakense

⁷ At Partition, the British divided the formally known colony as British India into India, Burma and Bangladesh

⁸ Dr. Vumson published his book under his immigration assigned name. Later, once he obtained United States citizenship, he changed his name to Vumson Suantak. Hence, he published articles under: Vumson, Vumson and Vum Son Suantak.

⁹ <http://freespace.virgin.net/andrew.randall1/india.htm> (site visited July 30, 2007)



Figure 2. Burma, India and Bangladesh after Partition

The Chin of Burma occupy Chin State, which lies in the mountainous region along Burma's western border with India and Bangladesh, extending almost the whole length of Burma from north to south. Chin State is approximately 250 miles in length and 90 miles in width. A 2005 census suggests that the current population in Chin State is close to half a million¹⁰. As already mentioned, within Northern Chin State are three subdivisions, Hakha, Tedim and Falam (Lehman 1963). This paper will focus on the Hakha. According to the numbers, Hakha has the smallest population, yet appears to be the most visible, vocal and politically active inside and outside Burma.

¹⁰ Based on a personal conversation with Chin activist and Constitutional lawyer, Andrew Lian, Esq., July 3, 2007



Figure 3. Map of Chin Hills

This third map illustrates the position of the Chin Hills to the Northwest bordering India and Bangladesh.¹¹

B. Brief Political History

Like much of Southeast Asia, the Chin Hills were subjected to British Rule, which lasted from 1824 to 1947. Before British Rule, Burma was made up of several differing ethnic groups, the Burman who occupied the lowlands and ethnic minority groups around the flatlands in the “center.” Most of these ethnic groups occupied the mountainous areas around the central flatlands. These consisted of the Chin, of subject here, and other ethnic groups. The British referred to the entire region as Burma and hence the ethnic minorities, including the Chin, became to be known as “Burmese.” This, however, was a political term. None of the ethnic groups considered themselves now nor then “Burmese.” In this text, the term “Burmese” refers to the all of the ethnic groups inside the borders of “Burma” whereas Burman

¹¹ <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/myanmar.pdf> (visited August 4, 2007)

refers just to the majority ethnic group occupying the flatlands. The British managed to colonize Burma and thus the Chin Hills through numerous Anglo-Burmese Wars.

The first of these Anglo-Burmese wars was a result of friction between Arakan in Western Burma and British-held Chittagong in the north. The British defeated Arakan in 1785. In 1823, Burmese forces crossed the frontier in an attempt to reclaim Arakan. The British responded by sending a navy expedition. In 1824, the British simply took Rangoon. The next twenty-five years were marked by relative peace. However, the British wanted and managed to occupy all of lower Burma. The third Anglo-Burmese War lasted just two weeks in 1885. British troops entered and took Mandalay, the then capital of Burma (Kelly 2003, Lehman 1963, Vumson 1986). On January 1, 1886, Burma officially became part of the British Empire. Rangoon was made the capital of the province. Although resistance continued, the British began to cultivate the land and Burma became the “rice bowl” of Asia (Smith 1999, Fink 2001). That is, Burma became the largest exporter of rice in the world. However, the people themselves were not profiting. Instead, in order to cultivate their land, they were forced to take loans from Indians at high interest rates. Hence, the Burmese economy grew, but the profits went primarily to the British.

Discriminatingly the British excluded Burmese from serving in the military and from government positions (Vumson 1986, Sakhong 1998, Sakhong 2000). Ironically, when Burma became part of British India and because they neither served in the military nor in government positions, some Burmese won the opportunity to study in London. With their educations, many of which were in the philosophy of law and politics, they soon realized that they could campaign for reform back in Burma. By May 1930, several student movements sprang up all over Burma advocating independence from Britain. When two popular students, Aung San¹² and U Nu were expelled from University in Mandalay for refusing to reveal the author of a controversial essay attacking the University officials, tension among students grew. The two popular student activists, Aung San and U Nu both joined the political

¹² Aung San is the father of Nobel peace price winner, Aung San Suu Kyi held under house arrest for the past 16 years in Rangoon

movement, Thakin¹³ that was in direct opposition to colonization. In response, British India politicians granted a new constitution in 1937, which allowed the Burman some power within the government. The ethnic minorities however remained without power. In fact, the Shan, Kachin, Karenni and Chin States were referred to as “frontier areas” and were administered separately by the British (Fink 2000, Smith 1999). In other words, the ethnic minorities, literally, were neither present nor participated in political discourse with the British nor with the Burman.

Aung San became a general and due to his popularity was unofficially made Prime Minister after Independence. That is, although he was not officially recognized as Burma’s new leader, he was, if you will, ‘the people’s Prime Minister.’ Aung San recognized the fact that the ethnic minorities deserved participation and thus considered their special status. At Partition in 1947 the Union of Burma was formed by the Panglong Agreement¹⁴ which read that the Union of Burma be an amalgamation of several independent kingdoms, chiefdoms and formerly proud nations. Bogyoke Aung San¹⁵ drafted the Union of Burma’s Constitution in 1947. In the constitution, he promised the non-Burmans equality and autonomy. However, Bogyoke Aung San and his entire cabinet were assassinated just months later. A communist party took control over the Union of Burma. The draft constitution was amended, betraying both the letter and spirit of the Panglong agreement (Vum Son, 1997). In a 1962 *coup d’état*, the Union of Burma became a military dictatorship under General Ne Win.¹⁶ Still, the Chin and the Burman did not have much contact. Being in the remote areas of the hills, the Chin were isolated from the valley-dwelling Burmans. General Ne Win and most Burman had never been to the Chin Hills themselves. The Chin, being mostly subsistence farmers may not have had much to offer General Ne Win, hence, they lived in relative peace. ‘Peace’ that is, until Ne Win needed land and labor to make a profit in the drug trade. He would soon wreak havoc in the Chin Hills.

¹³ Thakin literally means “master”. Aung San and his followers adopted this term to state that they were the “true masters” of Burma—not the British. The Thakin movement was against colonization and pro-independence

¹⁴ For the actual document see: http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/panglong_agreement.htm (visited August 4, 2007)

¹⁵ Boykote is Burmese for “General”

In the late 1970s, Ne Win planted opium in the Chin Hills as it had been done in Shan State twenty years earlier. A Shan drug lord, Khun Sa worked in conjunction with the military to smuggle the opium out of the country.¹⁷ Ne Win soon recognized the potential profit to be gained from the Chin Hills; he would use Khun Sa's business plan. Ne Win's Army officers profited by transporting the drug across and/or out of Burma. For the first time, the Chin were targeted by the military dictatorship who used forced labor to build infrastructure, tend to the opium fields and transport the drugs.

The Chin were further targeted under this regime through sham elections. In order to take population surveys of the "mountain villagers" they were forced to buy their goods at designated cooperative shops which carried no coffee, sugar or milk because the authorities said that hill people did not need such luxury items. When a customer came, he would be asked for a list of his relatives. The names were collected by the regime and mock elections were held using the names. The Chin were aware of the mock elections and realized the detriment of Ne Win's regime on their every day lives, both politically and actually (Fink 2001).

The Chin were not the only victims of Ne Win's administration and methods to control the people in the Union of Burma. For example, Ne Win's administration targeted universities creating strict curfews and outlawing assemblies. The economic reforms created by the regime also created havoc in the country, and when people began to starve due to high export taxes, Ne Win simply limited imports stunting agriculture and the economy as a whole (Fink 2001). The Chin as well as other ethnic minorities and Burmans themselves, began to retaliate against the Ne Win's regime. Numerous protests sprung up in Rangoon's and Mandalay's universities. Needless to say, the regime's methods were disastrous from the start. The calamitous economic

¹⁶ For more reading on the coup de tat, read for instance, Martin Smith (1999) *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, John Latimer (2005) *Burma: the Forgotten War* and Desmond Kelly (2003) *Kelly's Burma Campaign: Letters from the Chin Hills* (also used as a reference for this thesis)

¹⁷ For more reading on Khun San read for instance: Heyman, Josiah McC. (ed.), *States and illegal practices* (Oxford and NewYork: Berg, 1999)

situation both in the major cities as well as in the ethnic minorities' regions would soon lead to serious unrest.

Many students at the universities both in Rangoon and Mandalay were from ethnic minorities by this time. While the physical distance between the Chin in the Hills and those studying in Rangoon remained far, psychologically they were very much connected. One means of connection was through radio broadcasts. Fink (2001) explains that during this time, more people than usual tuned into BBC reports which were held in Burmese and in English. At the end of July in 1988, a BBC correspondent, Christopher Guinness visited Rangoon and interviewed a student who called for a nation-wide protest on the numerologically auspicious date of August 8, 1988. Many ethnic minorities carried banned flags featuring Boyoke Aung San, who was especially appreciated by the ethnic minorities because he had promised them autonomy and/or participation in the Panglong agreement. The Chin, as well as other ethnic minorities joined the general uprising against the military dictatorship, which is now referred to as the "8-8-88" uprising and which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives when the military began shooting into crowds of protesters. Actual figures are not available, but it is estimated that thousands of civilians were killed by the military that day.¹⁸

Of the Chin students studying in Rangoon who participated in the uprising, several hundred were killed and imprisoned in Insein Jail for Political Prisoners. After their release many of these Chin fled Burma in fear of the government and sought asylum in other countries.

Thus, the Chin have been betrayed, invaded, and persecuted by the majority ethnic group, the Burman, who are also Buddhists, whereas the Chin have been historically animists. The next sections trace the religious history of the Christian conversion of

¹⁸ By 1988 foreign journalists were banned from Burma, hence actual figures are unavailable. Some reports from inside Burma suggest that as many as 10,000 civilians were killed, while others put the number between hundreds and thousands. <http://www.burmawatch.org/med-1999-09-06.html> (visited June 16, 2007), <http://freeburmacoalition.blogspot.com/2005/01/freedom-will-be-air-borne-burmese-and.html> (visited June 16, 2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2993196.stm> (visited June 16, 2007), <http://www.newint.org/issue280/uprising.htm> (visited June 16, 2007)

the Chin, which will later be described in context as one way of separating themselves from the oppressive Buddhist Burman.

C. Brief Religious History

1. The Missionaries

There are dozens of texts chronicling the Christian conversion of the Chin as early as 1899. American Baptists were sent to the Chin Hills to convert the people and arrange indiginization¹⁹ of the locals. That is to say, it was the missionaries' eventual goal to teach the locals to teach and preach the Bible and to be able to adapt Christianity to local contexts. In this way, once the missionaries left, the Church could prosper on its own, without the help of foreigners. Also, the church could grow in that locals would convert each other at, perhaps, a higher rate than foreigners who did not fully understand the mentality, culture and language of their subjects.

The first missionaries, Arthur and Laura Carson, arrived in 1899, sent by The American Baptist Church. The relations between missionaries and colonial administrators were one of mutual respect. While was not part of the colonial administrators' task to convert the Chin, they supported the missionaries when able. Because of the conditions in the Chin Hills in 1899, colonial administrators erected makeshift houses that also served as checkpoints for themselves. The Carsons were allowed to utilize these checkpoints on their journey. The Carsons were first sent to Hakha, the capital. In Laura Carson's diary, dozens of accounts of the Chin Hills inhabitants were described as their being "natives" and "very drunken exceedingly savages and head hunters," and "filthy beyond description," and as "pagans and heathens." In his two volume book, *The History of The American Baptist Chin Mission*, Johnson (1988) suggests that Laura Carson may have been referring to the Wa, notorious headhunters, on their way through Burma from north to south. That is, Johnson implies that the Chin were, in fact, not as uncivilized as other tribes in Burma at that time. Upon arrival in Hakha, the Carsons managed to rent a house built by colonial administrators in Hakha City.

¹⁹ According to Dictionary.com, Indiginization is defined as follows: to adapt (beliefs, customs, etc.) to local ways.

Laura Carson soon returned to the United States to join her children, leaving Arthur Carson alone in the Chin Hills. During these three and half years, he managed to procure several acres of land from the British and to build a four-room schoolhouse and a five-bedroom residence. Being the sole non-Chin, he soon became proficient in the language. When the schoolhouse opened in 1900, however, only one Chin pupil attended. Arthur Carson's diary reports say that upon hearing of the opening of a Christian school, a Burman police officer sergeant came to Hakha in December, 1899, and immediately began to work against the Baptist mission. He began promising potential Buddhist students free clothing and food. Johnson refers to these promises as "lies" (Johnson 1988:65) since, according to Johnson, no such Buddhist schools existed. In addition, Chin were told that if they did convert they would certainly be denied the opportunity to participate in any kind of political discourse in the future (Fink 2001). It might seem odd that the Burman were already beginning to persecute the Chin even though just a few Chin considered conversion. In this way, perhaps, even the non-converts felt persecuted by the Burman. Nonetheless, the mission school received little support from the Chin and experienced religious persecution by the Burman, a fact that would continue and thus create much distance between the Chin and the Burman for the next hundred years.

In 1902 the American physician, Dr. E. H. East arrived in Hakha along with two Karen missionary teachers. The Karen Baptist mission had been established in 1800 and was successful enough to open a theological seminary at Insein in Rangoon. The Karen Baptist Mission was established first in India. Because of the War of 1812²⁰ between the United States and Britian, India, which was a British colony, expelled the Americans who then moved into Burma's Karen State. By the time the Johnsons arrived in the Chin Hills nearly a century later, the Karen mission was very much established (Johnson 1988).

East, along with the two Karen missionary teachers, managed to build two schools, one in Hakha and one in Tedim, a hundred miles to the north. According to Johnson

²⁰ During the war of 1812 between Britian and the United States, all members of "enemy" states, such as the United States, Germany, etc. were expelled from the British colonies in India. For an interesting and personal account read for instance, *Seven Years in Tibet* by Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian, who was

(1988:66) the Tedim school soon closed to due lack of students. Still the school would remain for future preaching and teaching. At the same time, Arthur Carson began doubting his mission in Hakha. In the four and half years of his establishing the mission, not a single person was converted. Before a furlough in 1903, he wrote to Dr. Barbour, the foreign secretary in Boston that although he is at his wit's end, he would trust that God would soon be realized and people would convert. This was to become reality. Soon after Carson returned to the United States on furlough, four people were converted in Tedim through the efforts of Dr. East and his two Karen colleagues. The first Christian converts, then, came from the Tedim area. Robert Johnson speculates that the Tedim Chin may have heard the Gospel from Mizo coming from the Indian side since Tedim is logistically closer to India than Hakha. In any case, the news of conversion thrilled missionaries; they truly believed in their mission and believed God blessed the American Baptist Mission (Johnson 1988).

Other American Baptists followed; most went to Hakha where the mission, in terms of infrastructure was most established. Johnson (1988) began translating the Bible into the Hakha Chin dialect. He notes in his correspondence that the Chin did not have words (and thus concepts) for “hell,” “heaven,” “sin,” “forgiveness,” “repent,” “pray” and no word at all for “love.” Nonetheless, literacy was born in Hakha. There is a myth regarding an earlier writing system referred to as “magic letters.” However, little evidence exists to substantiate this myth. The “magic letters” myth will be discussed in the following chapter.

Rev. Robert Johnson's *History of the American Baptist Church* details the seven generations of missionaries who lived and worked in the Chin Hills from 1899 to 1960. During those years, Hakha was the center of the Baptist mission. However, missionaries also traveled to and lived in the Tedim area. Because the first missionaries indiginized the Tedim and because converted Karen baptized the first Chin there, it is implied that Tedim Chin soon felt they could continue the mission without the help of Western missionaries. Hence, most missionaries made Hakha their primary residence.

forced out of India and thus returned to Tibet because he was considered an enemy of the British empire.

2. The Traditional Religion

Before the arrival of the missionaries, the Chin practiced a form of animism. The Chin believed in one supreme God or “pathian.” For the Chin, God was good. He was never angry or cruel. Therefore, the Chin never made any sacrifices to appease Him. At the same time, Chin feared spirits (*dawi, huai, khuazing*). These spirits lived in the sky, the trees, the soil, caves, mountains, streams, houses and the human body, but also preferred specific sites. These tended to be specific mountains, lakes and caves. Also, each village had a site that housed many of the spirits. Spirits were powerful and had enormous strength. They could transform themselves into anything but preferred to take on the body of a snake. Spirits were generally bad. They brought sickness and misery unless treated with the utmost respect. When moving into a new village or house, sacrifices must be made to show respect to the spirits. These sacrifices usually involved the slaughtering of an animal. The spirits are then offered just a piece of the animal, a leg or internal organs like the liver. The family, along with the priest, then, consumes the rest of the animal and dinks *zu*.²¹ The priest would solidify the ritual by reciting verses handed down from one generation to another via oral tradition. A typical sacrificial prayer of the Chin before conversion to Christianity is described by Strait (in Cope Sau 1933:108)²²:

“Come Rung, come Met, see what we have prepared for you; a fine pig with the proper spotting, freshly made liquor, and pounded millet from this year’s yield. Look now at the gift and grant us our petition. Please send us rain at the proper time that our fields may yield well. Keep sickness from our village, and other hazards. Grant unto our hunters skill in the chase, that our houses may add new skulls to the collection [...] If there has been error in making this sacrifice, if we have failed in any way to follow the details of our custom, overlook our blunder and grant us our desires.”

²¹ *Zu* is a traditional liquor made of rice. The Chin believe that *zu* is an integral part of their culture and customs. Later it was hypothesized, by a Chin health worker, my own grandfather, that after conversion when Chin stopped consuming *zu*, the result was smaller generation in physical stature. That is, the *zu* was said to strengthen the immune system and thus produce healthier offsprings. In fact, my own grandfather converted to Catholicism after this realization because they allowed consumption of alcohol.

The notion of spirits taking on human or animal form was very salient to the Chin. In fact, Vumson (1986) recorded one specific incident where “evil” spirits were fought with arms. A young woman in Buanman village disappeared frequently, especially during the night. She explained that a spirit had forced her to become his lover. The spirit had taken on the body of a snake and would assault her sexually. On one such a night, villagers shot bullets into the cave where the woman was believed to have been taken. After a rain of bullets was shot into the cave, the young woman came out unscathed. Inside, the villagers discovered seven dead snakes—presumably one was her spirit lover.

The Chin also believe that reincarnation is possible, albeit, only if death is violent and instantaneous.²³ Vumson (1986) reports a story where a child was born with a scar and explicitly accounts how he had been hurt during a war as a soldier in a previous life. According to Vumson (1986) the little boy was said to be speaking of things he could possibly not have known. As the child grew-up he often recounted the story. However, he eventually became a priest and could not reconcile the notion of having been reborn and being a Christian. Hence, his he and his family hired a priest to recite sorcery verses, which made him forget about his previous life. If the person is not reborn, he remains a spirit and lives forever. Importantly, spirits maintain their social status within the community forever. Dozens of other stories of reincarnation exist. However, since most Chin convert to Christianity, most of the said reincarnated are unable to reconcile the two differing belief systems, reincarnation and the existence of spirits and Christianity. Hence, the retelling of the stories are discouraged by the overwhelmingly Christian community (Vumson 1986). Yet, as stated above, sometimes animist priests are sought out to recite sorcery verses to help the reincarnated to “forget” their previous lives. Needless to say, this is a fascinating case of syncretism which ought to be addressed in another paper.

²² Cope Sau’s MA thesis to be published.

²³ Although not addressed here, these spirits are referred to as *Nats*. For an account of *Nats*, read for instance the fictional novel set among the Christian Karen of Burma entitled, *Saving Fish from Drowning* by Amy Tan, 2006 for an interesting account of syncretism.

In any event, the above prayer and stories illustrate that animism was practiced by the Chin. Although some scholars, including Chin theologians, argue that the Chin prayed to one supreme being even before conversion (Sakhong 2001), and therefore, that Chin animism was a precursor to Baptism, the above is a clear indicator that they had numerous spirits to which to pray. Therefore, the assumption that Chin animism was a precursor to Baptism cannot be substantiated.

II. Reasons for Conversion

In this chapter I will argue that reasons for conversion of the Chin are abundant and that most social science perspectives are applicable in the case of the Chin. This section examines the role of colonial power, rationalization and cost/benefit ratio on the conversion of the Chin.

A. *Colonial Power and Modernity*

Keyes (1996) addresses the relationship between colonialism and conversion. He argues that colonialism creates favorable conditions for Christian missions. The presence of missionaries and the conversions of natives were in-line with European expansion and thus the conquest of non-European territories. Religious conversion, in some cases allowed easier subjection of the local population (Keyes 1996, Salemink 2005).

It is logical to reason that colonialism created conducive conditions for missionaries: they charted territories, built roads and transit buildings, set up communication channels, and named regions and ethnic groups. For example, as mentioned previously, the Carsons rented colonial administrator housing, which offered some Western-style amenities, such as latrines. On a larger scale, the colonists and missionaries introduced modernity and a new world view to indigenous peoples, concepts that would change their perspectives of the world and their place in it, paving the way for conversion.

Colonial powers brought modernity to their colonies. They brought construction techniques and created infrastructure; they brought hygiene and education; they brought world languages, writing systems and world religions. In the case of the Chin, the missionaries translated the Bible and thus, invented a writing system using Roman letters for the local language. Also significant for the Chin was the introduction of a new world view based on Christianity, which was wholly different from the familiar and hated “Burman” Buddhism.

Generally, the British were mostly appalled by the state of the Chin. And although they, themselves, were not engaged in missionary work in the Chin Hills, they thought

a new sense of law and order was good and just for the Chin (Reid 1893, Carey & Tuck 1932). One British officer, Lt. Col. A.S. Reid reported that, “The [Chin] men were perfect savages in appearance, and, beyond a blanket... were in a state of nudity as far as the conveniences of society were concerned” (Reid 1893:193). Macaulay’s famous address *Minute on Indian Education* of 1835 reads: “These are the systems under the influence of which the people of [British] India have become what they are. They have been weighed in the balance, and have been found wanting. To perpetuate them, is to perpetuate the degradation and misery of the people. Our duty is not to teach, but to unteach them - not to rivet the shackles which have for ages bound down the minds of our subjects, but to allow them to drop off by the lapse of time and the progress of events” (in van der Veer 1996:4). One former colonial administrator, Major-General Ian Lyall Grant, MC writes in a forward of Desmond Kelly’s father’s biography, “The task [of Norman Kelly]... would be to win the hearts and minds of isolated communities and to introduce them to the benefits of education, modern medicine, and law and order” (Kelly 2003:xiii).

The British sentiments on modernity did not seem to extend to religion. Perhaps it is because the majority of the Burman already practiced Buddhism; perhaps they believed that like in India, local religion ought not be criticized in that it would hamper further expansion into Southeast Asia. In fact, Anderson (1983) states that the British East India Company was hostile to the mission because, “[they] did not want the natives to learn Western ideas – particularly the subversive revolutionary ideas of the Gospel. They could lead to unrest, disturbances, even revolt.” (quoted in Sakhong, 2000:200) Other than the British’s attempt to outlaw the Hindi ritual of *sati*²⁴ and the animist headhunting rituals of the Chin and the Wa²⁵ in the northeastern region of Burma, they generally did not interfere with local religions (Stein 2001, Sakhong 2000). That is to say, British colonial administrators did not encourage proselytizing the Burman who were already practicing Buddhists, a world religion. Like in India, this would have antagonized the Burmans, hence it was discouraged.

²⁴ *Sati* is a Hindi ritual where a wife throws herself onto the funeral pyre of her dead husband. This is not only a religious ritual but is also strongly enforced as a cultural practice.

²⁵ The Wa are located in the Northeast of Burma and borders Thailand. Generally, the Wa are the only ones notorious for headhunting, but the Chin engaged in human headhunting as well.

However, it was the missionaries who came through colonial power that brought a writing system and a new world view in the form of Christianity that truly brought modernity to the Chin. The missionaries used all of the conceptions of superiority (modernity) left in place by the colonial power to make their religion appealing. Thus, they brought conversion as a way to modernity for the Chin.

1. Writing System

One of the most basic aspects required of modernity is a writing system, which allows communication and the recording of history. In the case of the Chin, oral tradition had numerous purposes from recording ancestry to passing down priests' verses that had proved "successful" in animist rituals. Still, there is a myth regarding a lost writing system. Much like the Karen²⁶ of Burma, according to Zomi tradition, the Chin had carried a book made of leather (Sakhong 1998, 2000, Reid 1912). In this book, it is believed, are "magic letters." But because the Chin did not properly take care of this book, it was eaten by a hungry dog and the Chin writing system was lost. A colonial administrator Shakespear recorded another such story in 1912. This story also deals with magic letters and how written language of the Chin came into being (Sakhong 2000:77):

When the Sun came back to the earth, the Chin ancestors realized that while they had lost their written language, the Burman language which was written on stone had turned into the 'magic of letters'. Moreover, while the sons of Burman spoke the same language, the sons of Chin spoke different dialects because their common language was eaten up together with the leather by the hungry dog. Thus, the ancestor of the Chin prepared to make war against the Burman in order to capture 'the magic of letters'. Although the Burmans were weaker and lazier, the Chin did not win the war because 'the magic of letters' united all the sons of the Burma. Since the sons of Chin spoke different languages, their fathers could not even give them the war order to fight the Burman. It was for this reason that the Chin broke into distinct tribes and speak different dialects.

The above stories are indicative of the importance of having a written language. It also illustrates the reasoning of why the Chin believe they speak differing languages while the Burman all speak Burmese. Perhaps this is an indicator of an inferiority complex that was to be restored by the missionaries who translated the Bible into local dialects and thus created a written language for the Chin using Roman letters. To take that further, the colonial administrator, Shakespear, reports yet another story told among the Mizo. Shakespear is quoted by Sakhong (2000), “I was told he (the white man) had received the knowledge of reading and writing – a curious instance of the pen being considered mightier than the sword” (Sakhong 2000:77). That is, nowhere in the research for this thesis was such a mythical book mentioned in relation to the Chin as Sakhong contends. Either way, the notion of the writing system is central in that it gave the Chin a means to participate in the modern world. Further, unlike their previous traditional religion where rituals were rather arbitrary, the Chin now had a text, the Bible, which prescribed means of living and conduct. Also, it was this writing system which used Roman letters that allowed the Chin to learn English, both written and verbal. This was of great importance in that the Chin were able to study in London. It was an important aspect to modernization. That is to say, social scientists in the business of studying conversion tend to relate it directly to modernization (van der Veer, 1996).

2. Worldview

John and Jean Comaroff (1991: 199) studying South African conversion during colonization describe the process as, “a revolution in the habits of the people... a time sense and social self-control well-suited to the disciplinary demands of the ascendant industrial order” (in Hefner 1998:88).

Revolutionary doctrines are not only sets of belief systems but reorder the universe for the individual as well as the community, society and the world as a whole. Scholars occupied with conversion often argue this connection. They contend that these new ways of being and thinking are in-line with progress. Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1947) believed this connection to be true and of great importance. He believed

²⁶ The Karen are another ethnic minority, which were converted to Christianity. Karen State is located

the process to be rather linear; conversion leads to modernity hence social progress. Weber forwarded several theories, one of which was the theory of the “Protestant Ethic” where he argues that conversion is at the heart of the spirit of capitalism. Lehman (1963) explains that the Chin very much appreciated new and novel items. In fact, they often engaged in trade with Burman in order to obtain novel objects. Although they did not acquire wealth, per se, the newly acquired objects were a form of symbolic wealth and thus used as bride prices, for example. The Chin did not have much to offer the Burman other than insect larva, baskets and corn husks for cheroots.²⁷ This type of trading proliferated at the turn of the century. I argue that the Chin engaged in a form of capitalism, whether for actual or symbolic profit. Either way, it does fit into the model of the “Protestant Ethic” as argued by Weber (Gerth and Mills 1947) and contributed to a change in worldview.

The following Chin conversion narrative is but one example of conversion and thus a changed worldview. “A father whose son was suffering from tuberculosis of the spine. Thuam Hang, the father had sacrificed dozens of animals and participated in numerous chanting rituals.” Johnson (1988) describes this account as a case of, “...Dr East had cured not just physical pain but [the Chin] social and spiritual suffering as well” (Johnson 1988:100).

East describes such a change in worldview or decision to view the world differently. Sakhong (2000) highlights a story of a man whose son had been ill for a long time. In order to appease all kinds of spirits, animals were sacrificed again and again. His home was full of skulls. Besides being a haunting and grizzly sight, it also reminded the man and everyone involved, that the spirits were not appeased and that more animals needed to die in order to, perhaps, save the man’s son. The preachers, often in vain, tried to persuade the man to realize that spirits did not exist and that the sacrificing of animals simply resulted in his adding yet another skull to the growing collection. Finally, the man, literally and actually exhausted, elected to trust the preachers and give the Christian God a chance. The narrative follows (Sakhong 2000:219):

on the eastern border to Thailand.

²⁷ Cheroots are cigars and still smoked today.

Tum Harm (Thuam Hang) spent some days in thinking and was with the teacher who taught him to pray to the God who made heaven and earth. One day when his whole being was in agony for his boy, he filled a corner of his blanket with stones and sat down before the heads and skulls and began to talk to them. He said, "So if I touch you, you will kill me. So if I touch you, you will kill me!" He was agitated and his whole body had beads of perspiration all over it when he, full of fear, sprang to his feet, and taking stones from his blanket struck every single skull with a stone. That done, he sat down to die! When death did not come he said, "You are a lie; I will worship the God of heaven.

In this way, this man converted to Christianity by realizing the ridiculousness of killing animals and then hanging their skulls inside his home to appease angry, invisible and overly demanding spirits.

The Chin theologian Sakhong (2000) who uses the above conversion narrative to make his point writes (Sakhong 2000:219):

In present Chin society where the social meanings of Christianity are both widely shared and deep felt, the conversion stories of Thuam Hang and others have become not just individual experience and the memory of inner transformation of the self, but a collective memory of communal experiences and a shared history of the transformation of society through collectively reproduced historical narratives. When individual memories of a conversion experience and inner transformation of the self become conceptualized and emotionalized by the entire society as a collective memory, socially constructed narrative practices produce a new meaning in life and a new identity for the people.

Like Sakhong, Hefner (1993) argues that conversion is an all-encompassing phenomenon that impacts not only individuals but also the social sphere, politically

and morally. The converted often take on a new worldview. This changed worldview is significant in that the individual sees him/herself as having changed and the perceived value of others changes as well.

Van der Veer (1996), Hefner (1993) as well as Comaroff & Comaroff (1991) insist that conversion is a part of modernity, a matter in which to fit into the civilized world. Thus, one begins to participate in the civilized culture. Central to conversion is the notion that in order for individuals and communities to accept and adhere to a new world religion, their worldview must be changed. In other words, along with a change in worldview comes modernity.

B. Rationalization

It may be argued that rationalization is close to modernity, but in the case of conversion, it takes on another meaning, important enough for “rationalization” as related to religion to be addressed in a separate section. Hefner (1993) summarizes three leading scholars on conversion to world religions. He discusses Geertz, Bellah and Weber and states that all three argued that the driving force behind world religion is rationalization.

Another important element of rational theory is that in order for conversion to occur individuals as well as communities must possess the ability, intellectually and the desire, emotionally to seek rationality over irrationality. Hefner states that Weber contends that conversion from traditional religions to world religions is due to the rationality of world religions which human beings require making intellectual sense of the world. To take that further, traditional religions approach problems of meaning through magic and superstition. The world religions, on the other hand, offer “comprehensive responses to the ethical, emotional, and intellectual challenges of human life” (Hefner 1993:7). The missionaries brought with them the Holy Bible and promptly translated it into the local language (Johnson 1988). This gave the Chin a clearly prescribed way of conduct and belief system. Chin traditional religion, although organized to some degree, was also rather random. How to appease a spirit was not necessarily prescribed. The above account of animistic rituals are a perfect example, animals are sacrificed to appease a spirit, but if the spirits remains ungratified, another ritual must be performed. Hence, the Chin would engage in rituals with the hope of pleasing spirits but were never sure their actions would be

successful. Thus, there was an unclear relationship between actions and consequences. Whenever human beings are subject to uncertainty and feel a lack of control over the environment and lives, anxiety results. Perhaps a more detailed definition is that anxiety is the result of anticipated helplessness, due to an individual's lack of control in predicting, controlling, or obtaining a desired outcome in a personally relevant future situation or context (Barlow, 2000). Henceforth, Christianity with its doctrine may provide a sense of predictability not previously experienced by the Chin.

Hefner contends that drawing on Weber's argument, Bellah (Hefner 1993) argued that traditional or primitive, as he referred to, religions are steeped in the 'here and now' thus offer little intellectual reasoning. Traditional religions view the self and the world as closely connected in that the psychological, even physical boundaries between the self, both physically and psychologically are weak and thus, often, indistinguishable. Further, traditional religions require little intellectual speculation or reflection and thus offer only *ad hoc* solutions for understanding meaning. Hefner explains, like Weber, Bellah believed that traditional religions are concerned with rather superficial issues such as long life, health, children, healthy crop defeat of enemies and other rather mundane concerns (Hefner 1993). According to Hefner, Bellah argued that world religions offer an entirely different perspective of reality. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, albeit based on very different belief systems, all share the notion that there is a transcendental realm "vastly superior to that of everyday reality" (Hefner 1993:8). Before conversion, it was unclear what happens to the deceased. Some were reborn, others remained in a spirit world forever, and the Chin did not have any notion of redemption or heaven (Vumson 1986, Sakhong 2000, Johnson 1988). Bellah, according to Hefner (1993) argued that 'redemption' is a concept wholly different from traditional religions. Accepting a transcendental reality forces believers to evaluate their own actions and those of others in light of higher ideals and, of course, more serious consequences. It is this notion that, according to Bellah, creates tensions that create social reform. This 'revolutionary' new worldview shatters, according to Weber and Bellah, the primitive society. In this way, world religions have the power to redefine the world rather than the world being passively accepted, as do traditional religions. Boldly Bellah further argues that traditional religions suppress individuals' freedom forcing the acceptance of the status

quo. By converting to a world religion, the “tight grip of tradition is loosened laying the foundation for human freedom” (Hefner 1993:9).

C. Cost/Benefit Ratio

Clifford Geertz also addressed the difference between world and traditional religions and is in agreement with the rational perspective, that traditional religions tend to be steeped in myth and magic whereas world religions have a much more accessible logical framework and were more generally phrased (Geertz in Hefner 1993:10). Geertz’s argument is not unlike Weber and Bellah.

Hefner points out, however, that Geertz takes it one step further by arguing that individuals make decision not just for intellectual or emotional reasons. He argues, in fact, that these reasons are based on a cost/benefit ratio. Adhering to a traditional religion that, for example, expects frequent and thus costly sacrifices of animals, for instance, causing individuals to seek out a world religion simply because it is cheaper: one does not have to sacrifice precious livestock. Further, according to Ngo (2005)²⁸ who studies Christian conversion of the Hmong in Vietnam, argues that women often convert before men because of this said cost/benefit ration. In her fieldwork, Ngo learned that some women prefer a world religion because it prescribes that individuals rest on Sunday and that one man may only have one wife. Hence, it makes sense for them to convert to a more agreeable religion. Ngo argues that these women make a rational decision rather than converting for deep spiritual reasons. Salemink discovered a similar attitude in his study on the Highlanders of Vietnam going so far as to argue that the rituals are simply no longer “fun” and that life-cycle rituals, in a changing world, are disconcerting rather than comforting given that the people percieve they can simply not pay their due respect to the spirits and forever are, “...morally (and often materially) indebted” (Salemink 2003:19). Also, in Salemink’s fieldwork (2003) he reports of an interview with a man who candidly admits that when Highlanders do not have livestock to sacrifice when someone is ill, they simply send that person to the health station.

²⁸ Masters dissertation to be published.

As for the Chin, Laura Carson wrote in her diary, “Why, my corn was more than twice as tall as theirs (the land was rich, never having been tilled) and my pumpkins were huge, while theirs were not bigger than my double fists. The people tell me secretly that my God is greater than theirs because He gives me much better crops than they get” (Carson, L. 1927:184).

Furthermore, the elimination of animal sacrifices, for example, does benefit the individual and the community in that precious sources of food are not “wasted.” Johnson (1988), addressing the cost of animal sacrifices writes, “[It] seems obvious that many ...reforms were an improvement over old animistic customs since... followers were free from the fear of the evil spirits and the expensive and constant sacrificial system which was a major cause of the poverty of the Chins” (Johnson 1988:393). A Chin theologian makes a similar observation (Kham, 1999):

If any misfortune such as illness, ominous dreams, etc., occurred, the affected person offered to the appropriate spirits sacrifices of animals ranging from chicken to a mithun or a buffalo. The Chin people had lived in extreme fear of the spirits. If sacrifice made to a particular spirit proved to be ineffective then one spirit after another was tried until the whole series of sixty-eight spirits had been offered sacrifice to. In this way a sick person often became impoverished for life.

Finally, as mentioned in the brief history, British occupation wreaked havoc in the Chin Hills. Wars and other hardships had reduced the Chin to a miserable existence. People were sick and dying. They were unable to sacrifice and appease evil spirits that they believed caused their misery. Hence there was no remedy. “It was at this time, when the... Chin were facing such profound social and religious crisis, that they encountered Christianity” (Sakhong 2000:190). Thus, colonial power and modernity, rationalization, and cost/benefit ratio reasoning paved the way for conversion.

III. Creation of an Elite through Identity Construction

The previous chapter demonstrated how the conversion theories of Hefner, Geertz, Bellah, and Weber explain at least some of the reasons for the massive conversion of the Chin. This chapter examines another, purely opportunistic reason for conversion: the creation of an elite. The Hakha of the Chin have managed to separate themselves from the Burman and also from other Chin, creating a small group of closely-related people who monopolize Chin politics. The next chapter focuses on how this elite has then used Christianity to accumulate power. First, however, this chapter addresses identity construction and the role of ethnicity, identity politics, ethnic classification of Zomi and Chin, and how the Hakha have separated themselves from the Burman and other Chin, all in an effort to create a small, exclusive group.

A. Identity Construction and the Role of Ethnicity

Very generally speaking, there are two schools of thought regarding ethnicity, which is one aspect of identity. The first is “primordialism,” which contends that a person’s ethnicity is dictated by the need and desire of belongingness to some sort of kin group, and that it is usually linked to language, and that language therefore shapes thought. A language is learned in a community and thus each community thinks differently. Further, primordialism is inevitably tied to a nation or nationalism. It is implied, in this way, that ethnic identity from the perspective of primordialists is fixed and remains unchanged; there are clear-cut and enduring boundaries between groups. Hale (2004:460) explains that:

The primordialist image of ethnic groups may be likened to various stones constituting a “wall” that is society... Each group has its particular constitutive features (cultures, traditions, histories, physical traits, language, repertoires, religion, etc.) that also do not change and that tend to be quite consistently distributed within the group. Extended kinship relations are usually said to be the critical element that holds each group together and imbues it with its emotive power.

The second school of thought is that of “constructivism.”²⁹ Constructivists argue that, in fact, ethnicity is constructed for specific purposes (Anderson 1983, Barth 1969). Barth (1969) argues that the boundaries defining ethnicity are not steadfast. He argues that defining features of an ethnic group are not kinship lines or specific language and cultural aspects. Instead boundaries are perceived. In this way, group membership changes over time as individuals develop and create new traditions and new ways of life. Religion and, of course, conversion to a new religion is part of this process. Needless to say, modernization impacts ethnicity. From a political perspective, then, group identity is often formed by state policies and plays a large role in forming groups where, perhaps, no group consciousness existed before. Barth (1969) argues that these identities are rather fluid whereas Anderson (1983) contends that once these identities are constructed, they remain largely unchanged.

Primordial theory does not seem to fully explain ethnicity. It suggests language, culture, and traditions as defining factors, but societies that do speak the same languages, practice the same, even just similar traditions and cultures, do not necessarily consider themselves to be of one ethnicity. More often than not, ethnicity is chosen for political reasons. Allan and Thomas (2000) give the example of Bismark’s Unification of Germany. Bismark insisted that the German people think along bloodlines. He was not concerned with other tendency including, but not limited to, religion. This is significant because Bismark attempted, and to some degree successfully managed to, create a primordialist version of ethnicity that was rather artificial (Allen and Thomas in Jenkins 2005).

Appadurai (1996) also addresses the unlikely nature of primordialism. He writes (Appadurai, 1996:140):

All group sentiments that involve a strong sense of group identity, of we-ness, draw on those attachments that bind small, intimate collectivities, usually those based on kinship or its extensions. Ideas of collective identity based on shared claims to blood, soil, or language

²⁹ Constructivism is often referred as Instrumentalism and Circumstantialism. Constructivism is used for this paper.

draw their affective force from the sentiments that bind small groups. This deceptively simple thesis has certain special qualities that serve to be noted. It is usually cited to account for certain aspects of politics, notably those that show groups engaging in various forms of behaviour that in terms of the model are considered irrational.

I am in agreement with Appaduria that primordialism does not explain ethnicity and identity construction. The Chin are a perfect example. That is, ethnicity and thus identity is constructed only if “we”-ness is necessary. Only when one group finds it necessary, especially for political reasons, to differentiate themselves from another group do they construct an identity. This “other” group may have been blood related, or they may even share a common language. Still, for political reasons, new identities are constructed. Anderson (1983) argues then, that these are rather steadfast once constructed. This is rather doubtful. Identities are fluid and are very context dependant. Given the situation, then, identities are apt to change.

Also, the strong Zomi identity among Chin in Burma, Mizo in India and the Bawm in Bangladesh may appear to be primordial. However, this identity was not salient until after Partition. So, I argue that the Zomi identity is very much constructed for the same reasons the Hakha have constructed their Chin identity. Interestingly, both the Hakha and the Zomi share a very strong Christian identity. In fact, 99% of Mizoram is Christian.³⁰

Evidence for both theories are found in the case of the Chin. Their conversion to Christianity and the Hakha’s “decision” to separate themselves from the Burman as well as other Chin (as shown in the next sections) are both examples. More poignant is the fact that the Hakha refuse to accept the notion that they belong to the larger Zomi tribe. Interestingly, identity politics, which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter is highly applicable. Thus, the Hakha have constructed an ethnicity and thus a new and separate identity as their environment changed and modernity through Christianity was introduced to the group.

³⁰ for more information see for instance Mizoram’s own official website: mizoram.nic.in (last visited August 2, 2007)

Zomi identity needs to be addressed as well. That is, given that there are strong arguments for Zomi ethnicity, one may argue that this is a rather primordial position. However, it is argued here that although references are made to the ancient, if you will, Zomi tribe primordialism cannot fully explain the reasons for Zomi identity. In fact, like Chin identity, Zomi identity is constructed and thus accepted for political reasons different from those of the Hakha Chin. This by no means suggests that Zomi identity is just constructed. In fact, it is partly imbedded in primordial tendencies but not defined by it.

Christian conversion, for the Hakha, has played a major role in this identity construction in that they believe themselves to be different, even superior when compared to other Chin. Huntington in Allen and Thomas (2000) discusses the role of religion which is highly applicable in terms of why the Chin converted to Christianity. He writes, “religions give people identity by positing a basic distinction between believers and non-believers, between a superior in-group and a differing and inferior out-group” (Allen and Thomas 2000:502). Without doubt this is true for the Chin and especially the Hakha. This issue will be addressed in more detail in the “Identity Politics” section that follows.

B. Identity Politics

Truly Christianity changed the value system as well as the worldview of the Chin. Conversion allowed the Chin to participate in the wider world. Theologians, both Chin and otherwise (Sakhong 1998, Sakhong 2000, Cin Do Kham, 1999) argue that conversion occurred not for political or social reasons, but in fact for theological reasons. Whether that is the case or not, one cannot deny the benefit the Chin enjoy by being part of the world religion of Christianity. In this way, identity politics as described by Eriksen is highly applicable.

According to Eriksen (2002) there are general features to identity politics that “seem to be universal” (2002:158). First, there is competition over scarce resources. This scarcity may not be actual but in fact, may only be perceived such as political power. The competition is for hegemony and/or equality. Resources, according to Eriksen, should be interpreted in a rather wide sense and usually refers to political power,

wealth, status, or recognition and symbolic power. Secondly, Eriksen argues that “modernization actualizes differences and triggers conflict” (Eriksen 2002:159). Third, Eriksen argues that groups “are largely self-recruiting” (Eriksen 2002:159).

First, the role of scarce resources in identity politics is significant. Resources, as argued by Eriksen may not be actual, but be perceived. In the case of the Hakha Chin, they perceive political power as scarce and therefore engage in direct competition with other Chin over these resources. One such example is Sakhong’s previous membership in the Chin Forum, an organization with the primary objective of drafting a Constitution for Chinland.³¹ The Chin Forum is primarily funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).³² The NED is a non-governmental organization dedicated to providing funds for groups or organization trying to achieve democracy in their given countries. They have supported the Chin Forum for nearly a decade. When Sakhong left the Chin Forum and became the leader of the Chin National Council (CNC), he attempted to take over the constitutional work. In fact, he wrote an email stating that the CNC would now take over and that the Chin Forum must abstain from any kind of constitutional drafting.³³ This is just one example of the competition over resources. This incident also demonstrates that political power is essential in the quest and reasons for identity politics.

Secondly, Eriksen argues that modernization triggers conflict. This has been demonstrated as well in that the Hakha separated themselves once the missionaries began conversion. And conversion, as has been stated, is the precursor to modernization (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1947, van der Veer 1996, Salemink 1998).

Third, argues Eriksen is that these groups tend to be self-recruiting. This is also true for the Hakha. The stronger they become politically, the more they become exclusive. First, they become exclusive in terms of the creation of an elite kinship. Interestingly, primary figures in modern-day Chin activist politics are Lian Uk who is Sakhong’s uncle and one of the first drafters of the future Constitution of Chinland. Sakhong’s

³¹ The Chin Forum is currently drafting its fifth draft. Sakhong was a member but resigned as of 2006. For more information see: chinforum.org

³² For more information see: www.ned.org

³³ Sakhong’s email is available upon request

brother-in-law, Bawi Lian, is the Chairman for the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)³⁴ and co-author of "RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION: A Campaign of Ethnocide Against Chin Christian in Burma." Bawi Lian's younger brother is romantically tied to the Coordinator of the Women's League of Chinland (WLC).³⁵ Sui Khar is also a cousin of Sakhong's and is head of the Chin National Front (CNF).³⁶ Further, because the Hakha have emerged as leaders, they have come to represent the Hakha on the world stage. In this way, they have managed to smuggle groups of Hakha out of Burma into Malaysia, for example. In Malaysia, the Chin Human Rights Organization is active in promoting refugee rights and eventually obtaining political asylum for Hakha refugees in Western countries. That is, another element in identity politics, according to Eriksen is the self-recruiting nature of one dominant group. In some cases, including this one, it may be argued that those transnational "kin" work and support the elite transnationally. The subject of transnationally in relation to the Chin ought to be addressed in a different paper in that it is highly applicable.

One last point must be made, William Merril and Charles Keyes emphasize conversion need not reformulate one's understanding of the ultimate conditions of existence, but it always involves commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new or reconceptualized social identity" (in Hefner 1993:17). Thus, the entire community is impacted and shifts in power occur from individuals such as leaders to a higher "rationalized" means of understanding the world and identity of the self and of others.

In the last two sections, I have discussed identity construction and identity politics, and some examples of the Chin were briefly mentioned. The next two sections explain the ethnic classification of the Zomi and the Chin and how the Hakha have used identity construction to separate themselves from the Burman and from other Chin, in contrast to accepted classification. In terms of identity politics, this separation is a clear case of identity construction for political gain.

³⁴ For more information see: www.chro.org

³⁵ The mentioned kin relations are difficult to document. However, Lian Uk was translator to Professor Lehman who is, to some degree, aware of these relationships (personal communication via email. See transcripts attached)

C. Ethnic Classification of Zomi and Chin

The term 'Zomi' meaning, 'Zo People' is derived from the generic name 'Zo', the progenitor of the Zomi. Although the literature is limited regarding the Zomi or this nomenclature, several authors argue that the Zomi are one large tribe that was divided during Partition. There is some consensus that they are now known in Burma, Bangladesh and India as Chin, Kuki or Bawm and the Lushai or Mizo respectively (Lehman 1963). Subsequently the British employed these terms to christen these 'wild hill tribes' living in the 'un-administered area.' Colonial administrators eventually made these assigned titles legal. However, according to colonial records and oral history, they have 'always' been the Zomi (Vumson, 1986).

Two British administrators, Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck who placed the Zomi under a modern system of administration wrote, "Those of the Kuki tribes which we designate as 'Chins' do not recognise that name... they call themselves YO (ZO)...and YO (ZO) is the general name by which the Chins call their race." (Carey and Tuck 1893:3) Another European writer, Sir J. George Scott also claimed that, the Zomi never called themselves by such names as Kuki or Chin or Lushai. He wrote (quoted in Vumson 1986, 2004, Lehman 1998):

The names like Kuki and Chin are not national, and have been given to them by their neighbours. Like others, the people do not accept the name given by the Burmese and ourselves; they do not call themselves Chins, and they equally flout the name of Kuki which their Assamese neighbours use. They call themselves Zhou or Shu and in other parts Yo or Lai.

The classification system employed by colonial administrators who often looked to the Burman for help in categorizing the ethnic minorities, were flawed at best and serves a means of historic revisionism at worst.

³⁶ See Chin National Front: www.cnf.org.

There are several ongoing debates about Chin classification. The debate of Chin ethnicity is addressed by several disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics and even genealogy. Chin themselves argue about classification and categorization of themselves. As mentioned above, Vumson (1986) argues that the Chin are a subgroup of the Zo (Zomi), which were divided after Partition. Within the Union of Burma, however, there are the sub groups of Chin: Tedim, Hakha and Falam. Tedim Chin, overwhelmingly accept the notion that they are a subgroup of the Zomi whereas Hakha Chin reject the notion that they are part of the larger ethnic group, the Zo. This rejection is primarily due to political reasons addressed below. Still, most academic scholars agree that, in fact, all of the Chin are part of the larger group Zo.

The debate on the identification of Chin falls into two primary camps. One camp believes that in Burmese the word for “basket” is similar to “Chin” and that because the Chin, being subsistence farmers carried baskets through the mountains were thus referred to “people who carry baskets,” a derogatory term. This perspective is accepted by a large group of Chin, especially those in exile now living in India who consider themselves part of the larger Zomi ethnic group.

Other scholars, that is scholars outside the discipline of theology, such as the Burma expert and linguist Lehman (1963) argue that Chin in Burmese means “ally” or even “friend.” Lehman contends that before colonization, the Burman and Chin worked closely together during Shan invasions and thus, became allies. A contemporary theologian, Sakhong (1998) argues that no one “assigned” the name Chin. He argues, instead that “Chin” was adopted because the people emerged out of a cave called “Chintlang” cave. Sakhong rejects, or at least does not address the notion that Chin are just one subgroup of the Zomi. In fact he argues against it. In his text he provides a graph where the Zomi are but one subgroup of the Chin (Sakhong 2000:83).

In this section I will argue that Chin converted in order to separate themselves externally from the majority, the Burman as well as internally from other Chin. First, they separated themselves from the majority Burman who are overwhelmingly Buddhist. Lehman (1963) writes, “By and large the Chin have not become Buddhists, though Buddhism is the religion of the Burman civilization, and to be Burman is very

synonymous with being Buddhist. Christianity is a definite force in the Chin Hills” (Lehman 1963:219).

As previously mentioned, the he first several years of missionary work brought few converts. While the reasons are unclear, it may be argued that when the missionaries first arrived, few Burman were present in the Chin Hills. Only after colonization and the colonial administrators’ recruitment of Burman local administrators, did the religious persecution begin. Sakhong (2000) highlights an incident when a Buddhist Burman military soldier ordered erected crosses destroyed. This caused the Chin to realize that conversion would separate them from the Burman Buddhists. It is not stated by Sakhong as such, but perhaps it also gave the Chin the opportunity to more closely identify with the missionaries, the “white man” and thus with modernity. As Lehman (1963) wrote, for the Chin, being Buddhist was synonymous with being Burman. After the realization that the Burmans were strongly opposed to Christianity, conversion rates increased significantly.³⁷ This persecution and thus Chin commitment seem to be positively correlated. The more persecution, the more conversions appeared to have occurred.³⁸

D. Separate Identity from the Burman

Weber argued that the elevation and codification of religious doctrines occurs through the efforts of religious communities to distinguish themselves from rivals. They do so to “make difficult the transference of membership to another denomination.” (in Hefner 1993:11) This is certainly true in the case of the Chin. The Burman majority practiced Buddhism. The mission gave the Chin the opportunity to distinguish themselves from the Burman. In this way, the new religion offered the Chin the opportunity to change worldviews and to reconceptualize identity, as Sakhong (2000) argues above.

Lehman (1963) writes, “Political identification with Christianity, with the Church, gave the Chin a basis for treating the Burman on more or less equal footing. The Chin

³⁷ Will fill in source during re-write

³⁸ Actual data does not exist. However, several Chin experts argue this point and thus it is based on personal conversations such as with Andrew Lian, Salai and Kipp Kho Lian (July 6 and July 8, 2007 respectively).

are traditionally animists, and as such are particularly looked down upon by traditional Burmans. To appear to the Burman as people with a literate and sophisticated cultural tradition, the Chin had, so to speak, two choices: to become Buddhists in the Burman mould, or to adhere to some other world religion. The first course was unacceptable to most Chin because it would have amounted to giving in to the Burman, so the Chin took the second course” (Lehman 1963:219). In fact, Burman soldiers are given promotions and even sums of money to marry and thus convert a Chin to Buddhism (Zahau 2006).

Finally, as Saleminck states, “By embracing a ‘modern’ world religion that is seen as antithetical to the current political regime, Highlanders redraw and reconfirm their ethnic boundaries even while changing the substantive contents of an important part of their culture, i.e. religion” (Saleminck 2003:2).³⁹

Lehman above has already conjectured the separation of the Chin from their oppressors, the Burman Buddhists through conversion to Christianity. However, an even more subtle separation of the Hakha from the other Chin has not yet been identified. The next section investigates how the Hakha have separated themselves, by rejecting their Zomi identity, and claiming to be the first converts and keeping the missionaries in Hakha.

E. Separate Identity from Other Chin

As mentioned in the introduction, Northern Chin State is made up of three primary regions, Falam, Tedim and Hakha. This section demonstrates how the Hakha have separated themselves from the rest of the Zomi, and claim to be the true ‘Chin’ (Sakhong 1998, 2000).

1. Rejection of Zomi Identity

In this section I argue that the Hakha reject their Zomi identity. The primary text I will refer to is that of Lian Sakhong, a theologian and political leader. Lian Sakhong is Hakha and his texts clearly define the general consensus among the Hakha. This

³⁹ Draft: “Enclosing the Highlanders: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders.” Quoted with permission of the author.

consensus is not only reflected in Sakhong's books, but is also, to a significant degree, dictated by him. That is, among the Hakha, Sakhong is somewhat of a hero.⁴⁰ And whatever he suggests is taken as truth by other Hakha, many of whom are not educated and thus neither have the opportunity nor the desire to disprove their hero's claims. That is to say, Sakhong is offering up truth by authority. Whatever he says simply must be true given his status, degree and acceptance of him by the western world. In fact, just recently Sakhong managed to win the esteemed Martin Luther King award in Sweden.⁴¹ Unfortunately those allotting the prize are not educated in Chin matters and thus do not realize that Sakhong is revising the history of the Chin people. Nonetheless, I will address Sakhong's arguments and using Chin scholars will prove the fact that the Hakha are separating themselves internally from other Chin.

Although it has been well established that all of the Chin are part of the larger Zomi tribe (Vumson 1986, Lehman 1963, Carey and Tuck 1893, Kelly 1998, Reid 1929, Chawngunga 1996) the Hakha seem to dismiss this notion. Sakhong (1998, 2000) clearly argues that the Zomi are a sub-branch of the Chin (Sakhong 2000:83). Throughout his text, he continues to take this position as is demonstrated by the statement, "Dr. East made several trips not only among the... Haka areas, but even further north to... Tedim where the Zomi tribe made their home" (Sakhong 2000:213). Clearly, this demonstrates that Sakhong, a Hakha, rejects the notion that the Chin are part of the larger Zomi tribe. He goes even further, referring to the Tedim as Zomi and not Chin widening the gap even further.

On February 20, 1948, the Chin people were given their own representative government in Section V of the Constitution of Burma (Vumson 1986). Section V states that there be a 'special division' of the Chins. Sakhong, however, contends that the Chin were not fully represented. That is, he states that these special divisions

⁴⁰ http://boxun.com/hero/2007/Burma'sChinese/4_1.shtml, <http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/dakay.asp?ID=71959&ad=6/14/2007>,

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/doemoff/religion/acqlists/relijun.html> (all sites visited August 6, 2007)

⁴¹ For an interesting account of his winning the award, see for instance:

http://enburma.org/enc/enc_info/ENC_General_Secretary_awarded_Martin_Luther_King_Prize.pdf (visited August 6, 2007). Also, for the actual acceptance speech delivered by Sakhong see:

http://enburma.org/enc/enc_info/The%20Martin%20Luther%20King%20Prize%20Acceptance%20Speech.pdf

were a problem for the Hakha because they were not represented. In fact, the Chin were seen as one people and thus there was no need for a special “Hakha” seat. To take that further, a “special seat” was also not set up for the Falam, because, again, the Chin were considered one ethnic group, unlike Sakhong’s argument that the Tedim (Zomi) are in fact, just a sub-branch of the Chin. Also, Sakhong's statement is rather odd given the fact that by then, all Northern Chin⁴² namely, those in the divisions of Hakha, Falam and Tedim were officially considered Zomi by then.

Sakhong also manages to imply that the Tedim are different, perhaps not as “strong” as the Hakha. The following may be interpreted in a number of ways. I, however, argue that the purpose of the description is to create an image of the Tedim that is not only different from the Hakha, but also implies that they are docile and without ambition or strength. Sakhong describes an elaborate hunting ritual performed by the Hakha part of which was to hunt and then sacrifice an animal. He elaborates on the hunting skills of the Hakha in immense detail describing the ferociousness of the rituals as well as the community’s support, mainly the women and elders who sing, chant and dance in anticipation of the return of the hunting expedition. The ritual sounds elaborate, loud and all-encompassing with strength and the power to control their environment through the hunting ritual. Sakhong (2000) then compares it to the Tedim area rituals. He mentions, literally in a three line paragraph that, “In the Tedim area of the Zomi tribe, instead of performing a hunting expedition they collected honeycomb for the celebration...” (Sakhong 2000:123). Collecting honeycomb seems rather docile and weak when compared to a ferocious hunting expedition.

In another chapter, Sakhong (2000) discusses the Anglo-Chin War. He argues that the Tedim benefited from the war at the expense of the Chin or Hakha (terms he falsely uses interchangeably). He writes, “In my hypothesis church growth during this time [circa 1919] was mainly the result of the fact that the Zomi tribe had gone to Europe as part of the labor corps instead of fighting the war in Chinram⁴³” (Sakhong 2000:251). This is taken out of context. Vumson (1986) explains that in 1917, “The British demanded, one thousand men from each of the administrative subdivisions of

⁴² There are also Southern Chin (Zo) tribes that fell under the same umbrella. These, however are not of subject and hence are not mentioned in this paper.

⁴³ According to Sakhong, Chinram is an area comprised of Mizoram and the Chin Hills of Burma.

Falam, Haka and Tedim” (Vumson 1986:134). That is, Sakhong states that Zomi went to Europe and thus did not participate in the Anglo-Chin war and only the Hakha fought. Again, this is a clear demonstration of how Sakhong claims that first, the Hakha are not Zomi and that it was the Hakha who fought for their homeland.

Sakhong continues by arguing that the Zomi converted to Christianity while in Europe although the missionaries had been trying to convert them for over 20 years. Again, this is incorrect, because the Tedim church was successful in and around the same time as the Hakha mission (Johnson 1988). Further, Sakhong writes about the Zomi (i.e., Tedim in his terminology) who went abroad, again omitting the fact that Hakha went abroad as well in equal number, “These professional soldiers not only converted *en masse* to Christianity, they were apparently better off economically than their friends who stayed behind...” (Sakhong 2000:254). Here Sakhong basically accuses the non-Hakha of having abandoned the Chin Hills during war. This is not only untrue but also a gross case of historical revisionism. Sakhong’s argument takes a further turn in that he suggests that the Zomi (Tedim) became the new role models for the Chin. He states on page 254 that: “After a course of fifty or so years, their [Tedim] professional army (which in normal times had nothing to do with political power) was empowered by General Ne Win’s regime, and as a result the rulers of the Chin State from 1962 to 1988 (from Major Son Kho Lian in 1962 to Lt. Col. E.K. Kim Ngin in 1988) came from army officers of the First Chin Hills Battalion, the Zomi tribe in general and Sizang in particular. They controlled the Chin Baptist Church as well, especially the Zomi Baptist Convention” (Sakhong 2000:254).⁴⁴

That is to say, Sakhong suggests that the Tedim were in collaboration with General Ne Win, the brutal military dictator of Burma. This implication or rather accusation is strong and devastating in that it has been well documented that Ne Win and his military were cruel and abused the ethnic minorities in the Union of Burma.⁴⁵ Sakhong takes this accusation further when he suggests that modernization of the Hakha was hampered by the fact that they did not take orders from the British and elected to fight the domestic war. To quote him, “In, they [Hakha] were the ones who

⁴⁴ The Zomi Baptist Convention was created for all the Zomi including the Hakha who, as mentioned, are part of the larger Zomi tribe.

⁴⁵ See for instance Martin Smith’s “Burma: Insurgency of Ethnic Minorities.”

rejected British orders and fought the domestic war instead of going to Europe” (Sakhong 2000:254). He clearly paints a picture of the Hakha being loyal and pious to their homeland and to God and Christ. Worse, he suggests that Tedim Chin are opportunists who lack either loyalty and true piousness. Either way, this again is a gross misrepresentation of the truth, at best, and revisionism of history at worst.

Like Sakhong, most of the Chin who reject the notion that they are part of Zomi are those originating from the Hakha division of Chin State which is also its capital. That is, although there is a large movement for political and social unity of the entire Chin, the Hakha set themselves apart by claiming the above.

2. Missionaries in Tedim

Apparently, even as far back as the time of the first missionaries, the Hakha realized the power of coveting conversion and Christianity for themselves. They were able to keep the missionaries in Hakha and now, falsely, claim to be first Chin converts.

It started when as mentioned in Chapter II, when most of the missionaries went to Hakha since it was the capital of Chin State. They did so because although the British were not part of missionary work, they had set-up a British colonial administration station for themselves in Hakha. Hence, there was a modicum of infrastructure such as a house and occasional means to communicate with the outside world. For example, mail to the outside world was regularly sent and received in the colonial station of Hakha. According to diaries of both missionaries and colonial administrators, Hakha was more conducive for living and surviving in the Chin Hills than the other two divisions. Still, after the Carsons, other missionaries went to Tedim. There they quickly indiginized locals. In fact, as mentioned previously it was a Tedim who first converted and was baptized (Johnson 1988).

When the Johnsons, the last missionaries before all missionaries were expelled in 1966, arrived in the Chin Hills after a furlough, they planned on setting up a school and church in Tedim. Their request, however was denied. Johnson (1988) does not address the reasons. In fact, even a personal interview with Mrs. Johnson shed no real light on the reasons. Instead, she said that she did not want to “gossip” but that the Hakha were more accepting of foreigners whereas the Tedim preferred their own

local, indiginized, preachers. ⁴⁶ Perhaps the Tedim recognized the fact that the Hakha and the missionaries had created close ties by then and thus may not have trusted the missionaries. Perhaps it is fair to assume that it was the Hakha who communicated to the missionaries that they were “not welcome” in Tedim. Either way, for some reason all the missionaries remained in Hakha. This served the Hakha quite well in that they were able to rise above and beyond the other Chin and claim to be not only the first converts but also the most aligned with the prophet’s power or *Heilbesitz*⁴⁷ as Weber refers to it (in Gerth and Mills 1947).

I have clearly demonstrated that the Hakha separated themselves, internally, from the other Chin. They separated themselves first by claiming that they are not part of the Zomi tribe and that their histories are very much different. Different in that the Zomi or Tedim went abroad to fight along side the British during the WWII whereas the Hakha stayed behind to support their own homeland, the Chin Hills. In this way, the Hakha also differentiate themselves from outsiders, mainly the Burman and also the British colonizers. First, they differentiate themselves from the Burman by converting to Christianity and by taking on a writing system utilizing Roman letters. More significantly, however, this separation externally served the purpose for the creation of a Hakha elite, in that they claim that unlike the Tedim, the Hakha did not support the British and thus, kept their own identity, much to their own disadvantage (Sakhong 2000).

Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities (Anderson 1983); the Chin in the Chin Hills did create a new community: one of Christianity. Albeit Sakhong argues that Zomi were not Chin, he does make an important point when he writes, “As Christianity and Chin-ness became an inseparable phenomena in a new Chin society, Christianity or the church also played a very important role in the people’s social and political lives, not just their religious lives, as they adapted to multi-ethnic/multi-religious environments which the Chin had never faced before” (Sakhong 2000:358) In other words, Chin self-awareness and common identity,

⁴⁶ Personal communication via telephone with Mrs. Johnson, May 5, 2007

⁴⁷ Max Weber used *Heilbesitz* in this way, “das Anliegen des Galvinismus, den Heilbesitz, die Gottesgemeinschaft durch Christus, durch eine entsprechende Erneuerung des Lebens zu seiner

especially after the colonial period, mirrored Chin political identification with Christianity. “This political identification with Christianity was very important for the Chin, even for non-converts” (Sakhong 2000:358).

Auswirkung kommen zu lassen." The English translation is as follows, “the concern of galvanism, to effect the *Heilbesitz*, the association with god, by respective reformation of life.”

IV. Power for the Elite

The previous chapter demonstrated a carefully constructed effort of the Hakha to separate themselves first from the Burman and then from other Zomi, resulting in a Hakha elite. This section examines how this elite has used Christianity to gain political power within Burma, specifically by creating a new Christian community, the Hakha have vied for leadership of the whole of the Chin. They have further parlayed their Christianity to gain attention and power on the world stage.

According to Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1947) and his later followers, conversion is simply a means to gain power over and/or within a community, whether it is political or economic. Weber's notion of the prophet's power and the fact that there is potential political gain by using religion is demonstrated in the Chin case as well. That is, many of the political leaders inside as well as outside the Chin Hills are trained theologians.

Weber argued some sort of interdenominational conflict must exist for conversion to take place. Hefner quotes Weber, "[there must exist] a struggle between various competing groups and prophecies for the control of the community" (Weber in Hefner 1993:11). In this way, Weber argued that competing doctrines are necessary and that individuals and groups' leadership struggle for control and power must exist within the community. In this way, then, the attributes necessary for leadership in any given community are redefined.

Further, Weber believed that there are other influences as well. He strongly believed that a certain amount of tension and complex interplay of circumstances and ideals must exist in order to come to a rationalized decision regarding conversion. He argued that rationalization is not simply a cost/benefit issue for the potential convert, but that religious leaders such as priests also have an agenda, to maintain power and status privileges by "their commitment to the abstract truth of religious ideals" (Hefner 1993:11, Gerth and Mills 1947).

As mentioned previously, Burman Buddhists persecuted converts early in the missions. Before the Buddhists objected however, many Chin suffered persecution

from other, non-converted Chin. Laura Carson reports about a convert Thang Tsin who converted and was baptised by Rev. Carson in 1906 (Sakhong 2000). When announcing that he had become a Christian was beaten by the village chief. Thang Tsin did not waiver in his new belief system, henceforth his house, his farm and even his wife were taken from him by the village chief. Thang Tsin, according to Laura Carson remained a Christian. She writes, “His case was taken up to the government by the missionaries, and the chief who ordered him beaten was fined and Thang’s property, liberty and wife were restored” (in Sakhong 2000). Obviously, new leadership orders was evolving, where the chief had lost much of his power and the Christians were not only able to overturn his ruling, but were able to punish the chief.

A. *Prophet’s Power*

In a traditional religion, elders are often leaders. More often than not, men are leaders. With conversion, however, the earliest converted or the most pious and devout can become leaders. Further, strangers bringing the new religion, although of different ethnicity, nationality and race may suddenly have the power to lead a community through the new doctrine. In any event, eventually, the belief system, along with the leadership will be institutionalized religious ideals.

Another important factor in conversion, according to Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1947), is the one who brings the new religion to a community. Weber discussed, extensively, the notion of the prophet whose voice is one of anti-traditionalism. This prophet, who must also be charismatic, convinces the community that he has the ultimate world vision and demands immediate and complete conformity of the community to his set of ideal truths. He becomes the voice of the redemptive social world, has *Heilbesitz*⁴⁸ or the prophet’s power. This is certainly true in the case of the Chin who, after more than a century, still herald the first missionaries that came to the Chin Hills. In fact, the Chin also herald their own indiginized ministers in high esteem. One such minister was Hau Lian Kham. Several biographies have been

⁴⁸ Max Weber used *Heilbesitz* in this way, “das Anliegen des Galvinismus, den Heilbesitz, die Gottesgemeinschaft durch Christus, durch eine entsprechende Erneuerung des Lebens zu seiner *Auswirkung* kommen zu lassen.” The English translation is as follows, “the concern of galvinism, to effect the *heilbesitz*, the association with god, by respective reformation of life.”

written about his life.⁴⁹ In an article, *Legacy of Hau Lian Kham (1944-1995): A Revivalist, Equipper, and Transformer for the Zomi-Chin People of Myanmar* published in the Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies, Chin Khua Khai writes, “Kham arose as a giant of faith” (Khai 2001:100). Khai continues by giving a brief account of Kham’s life and his Christian work among the Chin. Khai also writes that Kham was successful because he was able to take lessons from the Bible and put it into the context of the Chin Hills, i.e. Indiginization. Finally, Khai closes the article by writing, “He could say as Paul did, ‘I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith’ (2 Tim 4:6 NIV)” (Khai 2001:107). Clearly Hau Lian Kham was such a modern day prophet in the Chin community. He brought Christian Renewal to the Chin Hills in the 1970s. Before him, there were the American missionaries. While in the Chin Hills, the missionaries indiginized local converts to teach and preach the Bible. In this way, the prophet power moved from western Christians to locals.

1. The First Convert

Being the first converts for the Hakha is important in that they are able to yield that prophet’s power. Also, it creates legitimacy in the religious as well as the political realm. For example, as I explained earlier, Sakhong claims that the Tedim went to Europe instead of defending their homeland, the Chin Hills. Further, according to Sakhong they were converted when they saw European Christians in Europe whereas the Hakha converted in the Chin Hills and also stayed to defend their homeland. This strongly implies that the Hakha are not only more pious in that they quickly recognized that Christianity is the one true religion, they are also more loyal demonstrated by the fact that they rejected going abroad and refused to take orders from the British.

The Hakha claim to be the first converts and thus were the center of Christian activity in the Chin Hills. In Hakha the Chin Hills Baptist Association was formed and according to Sakhong (2000), they invited the “Zomi tribe of the Tedim area” whom

⁴⁹ Most of these biographies are written in differing Chin dialects and were not read by this author. For a brief history of his life see Chin Khua Khai’s article, “Legacy of Hua Lian Kham (1944-1995): A Revivalist, Equipper, and Transformer for the Zomi-Chin people of Myanmar” in Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies 4/1, (2001) p. 99-107

they historically mistrusted. But because the Hakha had become devout Christians, they were able to share their Christian faith with the Tedim. To support this change, Sakhong quotes Johnson, “The Hakas were used to calling the Sizang and Kamhau by the appellation ‘Thaute’, a derogatory term, and could not understand how Christians could accept these Thaute as brothers. The superstition that the Teddim are people possessed the power of the evil eye was still strong, and so the Haka tended to shun them” (Sakhong 2000:227).⁵⁰ Truly he paints a picture of the Hakha as being simply “better” people than the Tedim. They are better because they are more pious, have stronger values and are kinder in that they invited the Tedim whom they did not trust to join them in their church.

2. The Capital of Conversion

Sakhong, a Hakha himself, refers to Hakha dialect as “the Chin language” in Chapter VI although he mentions the differing dialects in Chapter I (Sakhong 2000). In this way it is implied that Hakha is the only “real” Chin language. He explains that the “the Chin language” was adopted all over the Chin Hills in its missionary schools. In this way, explains Sakhong, the village chiefs attended school as did their children and, “Thus, the conversion of this new generation of the ruling class spearheaded not only church growth after the war but a change in society as well.” Sakhong continues, “...the emergence of a Chin elite based on professional soldiers and teacher-cum-preachers also contributed in many way and means for church growth...” (Sakhong 2000:232). Thus Sakhong tries to argue that Hakha was not only the first Chin to convert, but that they were the elite in the Chin Hills. After his statements, he continues to suggest that only after the Hakha converted, established schools employing “the Chin language” did the Church expand into Tedim. In fact, Tedim had been converted first and/or simultaneously. Tedim was also first to indiginize locals to teach and preach (Johnson 1988). Hence, Sakhong grossly misrepresents history by implying and outright stating that the Hakha are superior. In fact, Johnson recalls, “It was a mistake to have opened the mission station at Haka. Teddim would have been a better site. This view was expressed gently while Arthur Carson lived, but after his death East⁵¹ became much more blunt in saying that Teddim would have

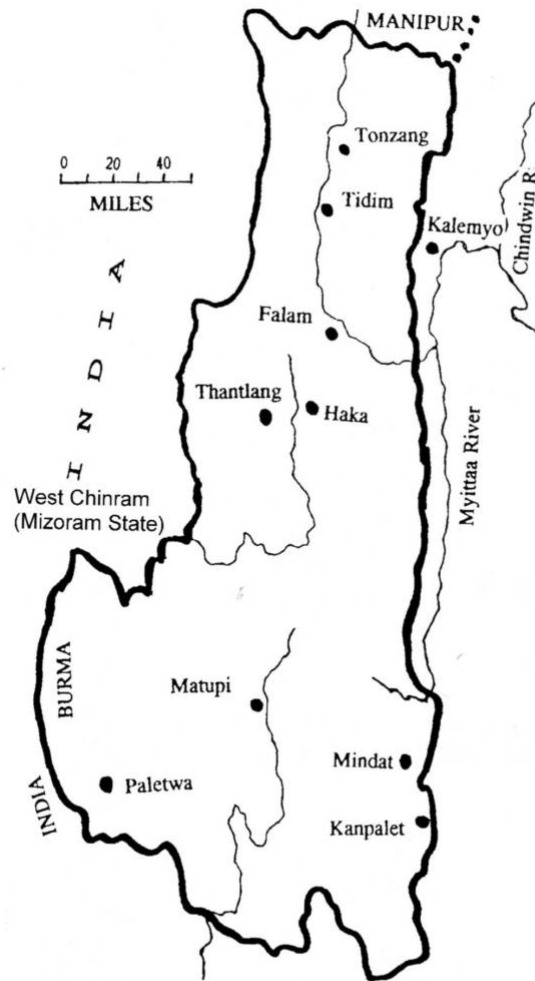
⁵⁰ The Sizang and Kamhau are part of the Tedim area

⁵¹ Dr. East established a medical mission in Hakha when the Carson’s “failed” to convert. East did manage to convert through his medical mission.

been a better choice and that American Baptist Missionary Union ought to open a second station at Teddim and take advantage of the northern openness to change and conversion” (Johnson 1988:239). Still, Sakhong continues to argue that Hakha was the center of conversion. Sakhong contends that it was Laura Carson who did not wish to open a second station in Tedim. According to Sakhong she said that all missionaries should, “...stay in Hakha, the center of Chinram” (Sakhong 2000:234).

Claiming that Hakha was the capital of conversion is important to Sakhong, because according to Sakhong (2000), the concept of power and its legitimacy is sacred. That is, the Chin believed that when one settles in a place that is occupied by benevolent spirits and if those spirits allows a person to take on political power, it is because the spirits mandated it so. The person taking on political power was usually a patriarch chief who belonged to a specific clan and was thus, “ritually clean.” Sakhong takes this argument further by contending that there are aristocrat clans that, “...their power was a mandate from the guardian god Khua-hrum” (Sakhong 2000:103). And almost all of the aristocrats were usually the direct descendents of the founder of a particular clan or a particular settlement. One specific family, the Za Thang family who originated in Hakha was said to rule all of the central part of the Chin Hills. Sakhong states, “Haka, where the ruling chief lived, became the principal village...and all its satellite communities became the... community of Haka.” (Sakhong 2000:103) “According to tradition,” writes Sakhong, “...the Za Thang family of Hakha was blessed with an abundant life. They increased in numbers and performed many successful rituals. They ruled the villages and communities, which covers the present Chin State of Burma. That is, Sakhong once again marginalizes that Tedim and Falam. Interestingly he uses previous notions of spirits and their blessing a specific family, the Za Thangs and a specific settlement, Hakha. Although he does not implicitly state is as such, but this is a case of syncretism at its best. Certain families are accepted by spirits, hence they are special and ought to be appreciated and trusted. Also, it is suggested, as is in traditional religions that blessings run along kinship lines. Thus, families are chosen. He implies this to be true for Christians as well and in his theological dissertation infers that the Chin (or Hakha) were chosen by God. Furthermore, Sakhong literally, puts Hakha in the center of Chin State, psychologically as well as literally. Given the map of Chin State, this is again a gross

misrepresentation.⁵² Below is a map of Chin State taken from Sakhong's own text. It appears that they "dots" indicating the cities were hand-drawn onto the map. Still, without doubt, Hakha is not in the center of Northern Chin State.



B. Using Christianity on the World Stage

To date, those in the business of Chin politics tend to stem from the Hakha region. Thus, they are the elite and most are in exile living all over the world. These leaders also use Christianity as a means of representing the Chin community both inside and outside of Burma. Conversion and political gain are very much interdependent in terms of the Chin. There are dozens of non-governmental organizations campaigning for Chin Human Rights, Chin Refugee Rights, Chin Women's Rights and so on.

⁵² As mentioned in the introduction, this paper is concerned with Northern Chin State which is comprised of three major subdivisions: Tedim, Falam and Hakha. The map illustrate the location of

Hakha Chin almost exclusively lead these organizations. Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong wears “several hats as he himself acknowledges.”⁵³ He is general secretary and leading member in the following organizations.

Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC),⁵⁴ United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD),⁵⁵ Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD),⁵⁶ Chin National Council (CNC),⁵⁷ Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee (FCDCC),⁵⁸ National Reconciliation Program (NRP)⁵⁹ and the Chin Forum whose task is to create draft Constitutions for the future independent Chinland.⁶⁰

After Sakhong resigned from the Chin Forum which had been drafting versions of the future Chinland Constitution for the past decade, he initiated a new non-governmental organization (NGO), the Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee (FCDCC). I argue that he did so in order to take over the drafting of the Constitution, and thus receive funding, from the National Endowment for Democracy which is currently funding the Chin Forum for their constitution efforts.

The Hakha have also sought funding from Christian aid organizations, such as the Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW),⁶¹ an international organization headquartered in London and supported by The Baroness Cox of Queensbury in the British House of Lords. CSW's two primary on-going projects are Burma and Nepal. The advocate for Burma is Benedict Rogers. Rogers is the author of *A Land Without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma's Karen People* and *Carrying the Cross: The military regime's campaign of restriction, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Burma*. His most recent project is the plight of the Chin. In fact, CSW is recommending that

these three divisions and clearly Hakha is not in the center of Northern Chin State

⁵³ <http://www.shanland.org/politics/2007/king-laureate-calls-for-state-building-in-burma/> (visited July 24, 2007)

⁵⁴ See: Encburma.org

⁵⁵ See: Encburma.org

⁵⁶ See: Chinland.org

⁵⁷ See: Chinland.org

⁵⁸ See: Encburma.org

⁵⁹ See: Encburma.org

⁶⁰ See: Chinforum.org

⁶¹ for more information see: csw.org

the Department for International Development in the UK (DFID)⁶² budget for Burma increase from 8 – 16 British pounds annually.⁶³ CSW, with Benedict Rogers as the advocate for the Chin, took Chin, i.e. mostly Hakha activists⁶⁴ around Europe and North America last year to meet members of Parliament in London, members of Parliament in Berlin, to speak at the U.N. in Washington D.C. and Government officials in Canada. Around this time (June 2007), Sakhong, representing the Ethnic National Council managed to get an audience with the United State’s first lady, Laura Bush where he represented the whole of the “Chin.” Members of the Chin Forum, for example, were unaware of his visit to the White House.⁶⁵

Christianity has opened the doors for the Hakha to appeal to a world audience on the behalf of their “Christian” rights. The role of being a persecuted religious group has gained the Chin worldwide attention, such as reports in the following publications: BBC Asia,⁶⁶ Religion and Ethics: News Weekly,⁶⁷ Christian Today,⁶⁸ Christian Freedom International, ⁶⁹ Global Security,⁷⁰ and Christian Persecution Info – Asia.⁷¹

⁶² for funding schemes see: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/funding/#countries> (visited August 3, 2007)

⁶³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmintdev/uchurma/uc0202.htm> (visited August 3, 2007)

⁶⁴ I was also a member of this delegation and only one of the two non-Hakha Chin

⁶⁵ Chin Forum members did not know of this visit. Based on personal communication with Salai Kipp Kho Lian (July 7, 2007)

⁶⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/burmese/forum/story/2007/01/070126_csw_christian_persecution.shtml (visited August 3, 2007)

⁶⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week934/feature.html> (visited August 3, 2007)

⁶⁸ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/chin.launch.campaign.against.burmese.christian.persecution/2039.htm> (visited August 3, 2007)

⁶⁹ <http://christianfreedom.org/blog1/category/burma/> (August 3, 2007)

⁷⁰ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/burma.htm> (August 3, 2007)

⁷¹ <http://www.christianpersecution.info/archive/asia/2/> (visited August 3, 2007)

V. Conclusion: Identity Politics and the Creation of an Elite

To answer my own thesis question as well as subquestions: Why have the Chin converted to Christianity? How does their conversion fit into current theoretical models? How have the Hakha used identity politics to separate themselves into an elite? And how have the Hakha managed to gain power for their elite group? I argue that as this thesis has described the conversion theories of modernity, rationalization and cost/benefit ratio account for Christian conversion of the Northern Chin of the Chin Hills of Burma, but the prevailing and most potent reason has been to gain political power for a small group. The Hakha used Christianity first to separate themselves from the ruling Buddhist Burman. Then they separated themselves from the other Chin, even purporting that they are the “real” Chin and the other Chin are a sub-group called Zomi, when in fact, according to most scholars (Vumson 1986, Lehman 1963, Carey and Tuck 1893, Kelly 1998, Reid 1929), the truth is the opposite: the Chin are a sub-group of the Zomi. In other words, the Hakha Chin are “othering” other Chin subgroups such as those from Tedim and Falam, which is part of identity politics, as argued by Eriksen (1993). Having separated themselves into a small group, the Hakha have used conversion as a tool to gain political power by assuming the prophet’s power and using international organizations for financial gain and worldwide attention.

In this quest for political power, they have resorted to revisionist history and redefining their ethnicity as part of identity politics. The efficacy of conversion to gaining political power can be seen by their zealous claims of being “Chosen by God” (Sakhong 2000), and their mission to show the world their piety (speech given to resettled Hakha in Ergesund, Denmark and Stavenger, Norway in July 2006.)

By converting to Christianity the Hakha, through identity politics, have managed to obtain power and thus create an elite. Unfortunately, the rest of the Chin suffer in that they are given virtually no support and manage without funding organizations. Further, because no writing system existed before the arrival of missionaries, the Hakha have managed to, literally, re-write history.

In a globalizing world, the Chin are not the only people to convert to a major religion. Much literature focuses on the impact and consequences of conversion. Obviously, new belief systems replace old ways of thinking. Behavior is typically reflected by this changed worldview. Rituals such as human headhunting are abolished. Savage rituals are replaced by Christian rituals such as prayer and kindness toward one's neighbors. Hygiene and issues concerning the body are also changed. Individuals learn "civilized" means of consuming food and manners of dress such as the covering up of the body's sexual parts is introduced.

The Hakha, as I have demonstrated, had an additional reason to convert and that is the creation of an elite. It is unclear whether the Hakha had planned their eventual rise among the Chin, whether they had more ambitious traits, if you will, or whether at some point along the way, the positive consequences, that is, the creation of an elite through identity politics deserved further exploitation by the Hakha. Either way, most often than not, Christianity is considered a positive change when it replaces animism. The cost, however, for the Chin is extreme.

First, the Hakha are managing to distance themselves from the Buddhist Burman. Given the media and other reports, this is understandable. However, the evil does not lie in Buddhism, it is the regime that abuses the peoples. Thus, although the Chin Hills were arbitrarily given to the Burman, defiance was not necessary. If, for example, the ethnic minorities had chosen Buddhism and not Christianity, would they have had more power in the Burman government today? By first separating themselves from the majority Burman, they were set-up to be marginalized. The second separation was that of the Hakha Chin from all other Chin. Again, this resulted in their having created an elite, however, I question how differently the political matrix would have appeared today had the Chin united as one group. The Hakha purport to have united, but little is known about the other Northern Chin and even less information is available about the additional Chin in the South. Third, the decision to deny the Zomi ancestry also had negative impacts. If, the Hakha and thus all the Chin, had united with the Zomi, their power and presence may be much more recognized in the world stage today. The conditions were rather conducive for unity. The Zomi of Mizoram, for example, as ought to be addressed in another paper, converted to Christianity before the Chin in Burma. The entire state of Mizoram is

said to be Christian, as I mentioned in this paper. Thus, this unity could have paved a different road for the Chin, politically, ethnically, and actually in terms of their position on the world stage today. Instead, the Hakha elected, if you will, to proceed independently. They honed in on their potential power and thus reap the benefits, to some degree at the expense of the other Chin. And the identity politics continue. Further, those obtaining degrees in theology are highly respected in the Hakha community and almost always pursue political careers. Also, applying for seminaries is one way of obtaining sponsorship from western countries. As I have mentioned, nearly 90% are converted to Christianity already. It seems rather fruitless to continue and produce preachers unless, of course, the quest is much larger and that is the conversion of the world. Nonetheless, although the Hakha have managed to carve-out a specific position for themselves, there are many more Chin who are left behind.

Although statistics are difficult to obtain, it is my experience that most Chin abroad are Hakha. Their transnational network is growing. Again, this ought to be explored in another paper. In any event, western funding organizations and most of the world appears to be unaware of the intense identity politics occurring among the Chin. Even activists occupied with Burma are not aware of the internal difficulties. They are not aware that when a Hakha mentions, “Chin language” that Hakha is omitting half a dozen or more differing dialects and/or languages spoken by other Chin. When success of resettled Chin is celebrated by Burma activists, they are seldom aware that it is the Hakha who are being resettled and that most Chin are left behind to suffer under Burma’s military regime. No minority group is homogenous, as Eriksen argued (1993), this is by no means a ground breaking statement. Still, in terms of the Chin it remains unrealized by the public.

The most devastating in this process, however, is not that the Hakha are employing identity politics or that non-Hakha Chin are left behind. The most devastating fact is that the Hakha are rewriting Chin and thus Zomi history. I cannot, with confidence, say that any part of revisionism may be considered positive. Hence, as I wrote in my preface, I believe that in terms of the Chin, academic endeavors must be pursued in that only scholars are able to present, with some assurance, the truth and current reality of the state of the Chin---their pasts as well as their present conditions and positions. Only by understanding the process described in this thesis from a social

science perspective can the Chin dilemma be effectively and more importantly ethically argued.

I close this thesis with a photo below. It is but one example of the success enjoyed by the Hakha. From left to right, one Karen preacher, a Burma representative, another Karen, the United States' first lady, Laura Bush, Dr. Lian Sakhong and a United States Congressman. Interestingly, although the photo is that of the "Burma Ethnic Nationalities Council", only the Karen and one Hakha Chin is present—all other ethnic minorities of Burma are not present. Interesting is also the fact, that it is the Chin and the Karen who predominantly have converted to Christianity and now use their position to gain support from the western world!



Mrs. Laura Bush meets with members of the Burma Ethnic Nationalities Council delegation Tuesday, June 12, 2007 at the White House, to discuss the current conditions in Burma. While in Washington D.C., the delegation also met with officials at the U.S. Department of State and members of Congress. From left to right are Stephen Dun, foreign relations advisor to the Executive Committee of the Karen National Union; David Eubank, director of Burma Initiative; Naw K'nyaw Paw, member for Karen State, Ethnic Nationalities Council; Lian H. Sakhong, general-secretary, Ethnic Nationalities Council and Congress Joseph R. Pitts of Pennsylvania. White House photo by Shealah Craighead

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