



Lai Chieftainship: A Relic of the Past or a Vital Part of Cultural Heritage?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the traditional Lai chieftainship system in southern Mizoram, Northeast India. It investigates the historical administration and transformation of the chieftainship, culminating in its abolition. Through empirical research, this study assesses the perceived benefits of abolition among the Lai people. Findings reveal that while the majority view abolition as beneficial, the legacy of Lai chiefs continues to hold significant cultural and political influence, particularly in India's early democratic elections. This research contributes to understanding the complex dynamics of traditional governance systems and their modern implications.

Introduction

The Lai indigenous community is primarily found in Mizoram's southernmost district, Lawngtlai. Its international borders are shared with Myanmar in the east and Bangladesh in the west. It was designated as a district on September 18, 1998. The district is notable for having one of the highest minority population concentration areas in India in its western belt. Lawngtlai District is one of the most economically backward districts in Mizoram. According to the 2011 census, the Lai district has a population of 1,17,894. The Lais are called by different names in different places such as 'Pawi' in Mizoram and Manipur, 'Chin' in Myanmar and 'Shendus' in Bangladesh (Doungel, 2010:220). The Lais, being the most backward tribes in Mizoram are facilitated with Autonomous District Council on

29th. April. 1972 known as Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

The Lais are the Mongoloid people of the Burmese stock who migrated and settled in south-eastern part of Mizoram. They are believed to have been originated from the southern China as they are of the same stock as the Lusei (Mizo) and other zo-ethnic tribes. The Lais were the first among the Mizo tribes who moved out of China. They settled in the Hukong Valley in Myanmar in around 400 A.D. (Lehman,1980:18). From the Hukong Valley,they further moved southward to the Chindwin Valley (Laitanga,1998:8). A prominent local historian by the name Hengmanga observed that the Lai settlements in the Chin Hills of Myanmar occurred during the period of 1300 - 1700 A.D. (Hengmanga,1980:12). After they settled in the Chin Hills of Myanmar for a considerable period of time, some of them began to move towards the present habitat in the later part of the 18th century (Bawitlung, 2012:8).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the Lai chieftainship, drawing a stratified random sample of 401 participants from Lawngtlai district's population of 117894 lakhs as of 2011 Census of India. Participants, including pastors, women theologians, church elders, deacons, and youth wing, and men's wing members, were categorized by gender, residence (rural/urban/peripheral), and educational attainment. Data collection combined primary sources (interviews) and secondary sources (church documents, books, memoirs, and research articles). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic and content analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Lai chieftainship's historical significance, cultural impact, and contemporary relevance. The main objective of the study pertains to the question on whether abolition of chieftainship was beneficial for the society or not.

The Tradition Lai Chieftainship Structure

In *Pawi (Lai)* society, chieftainship was hereditary, with the customary practice dictating that the eldest son would inherit the chieftainship (Lehman, 1980:18). Prior to the arrival of British colonists and Christianity, the Lai people had already entrenched the institution of chieftainship within their society, a tradition that had been established prior to their migration to their current location. *Falam and Halkha*, regions predominantly inhabited by the Lai, rose as the two preeminent chiefdoms in the Chin Hills

during this era. In fact, the Lai chiefs were renowned as the most daring tribe, displaying a penchant for warfare. They stood out among the Zo-ethnic tribes as the sole group to possess a distinctive knife called the '*Kingkot*,' specifically crafted for guillotining enemies in battle. (Interview with Mr. *Zothanpuia Hauheng* on 12th 8.2023,12:30-1:45 PM, College Veng, Lawngtlai). The feud between *Falam* and *Halkha* frequently sparked inter-tribal wars, which spilled over into multiple regions such as the *Chittagong Hill Tracts*, *Arakan*, *Chin Hills*, and the *Lushai Hills*. This combined territory eventually gained recognition as the *Falam-Halkha* 'realm', where various sub-tribes of Lais were said to have established settlements. According to Carey and Tuck, the *Falam* Lais claimed the most dominant chieftdom within the entire Chinland region, solidifying their status within the *Falam-Halkha* 'realm'. (Carey and Tuck, 1976:34-35). The Lai chiefs of *Falam* and *Halkha* demonstrated their authority by levying taxes and collecting tributes from villages situated within the *Falam-Halkha* 'realm,' showcasing their dominance. This encompassed the imposition of taxes even on the *Sailo (Lusei)* chiefs, who held the paramount power within the *Lusei* clans. Historical records indicate that the year 1894-1895 marked the conclusion of tax payments by the *Sailo* chiefs to the Lai chiefs, signaling a significant shift in power dynamics. (Doungel, 2010:1-11). Lunghnema (1993:79) further emphasised that the *Luseis* paid taxes to the *Pawis (Lais)*, highlighting the supremacy of the Lai chiefs in Mizo history. This assertion underscores the considerable influence wielded by the Lai chiefs, arguably making them the most powerful chiefs in Mizo history.

In ancient times, each village had a separate Chief which acted as the head of the state. The village administration was in the hand of the Chief and justice was dispensed by him along with the help of his ministers or villages elders (*Upa*). All the civil and criminal cases were tried and decided by the Chief. The cases were usually tried in the Chief's house (*Bawitlung*, 2012:11). The judgement made by the Chief and his Elders were final and unchallengeable. He is the supreme law. He appointed all important officials in his village and such officials are usually drawn from his relatives. The Chief while dispensing his justice must act and consult the customary laws and practices. However, note must be taken that the Chiefs were never autocratic but benevolent ruler (*Chinzah.S.R*, 2003:26). One of the most significant privileges of the Chief was the right to keep slave (*Bawi/sal*). There were five chief's clan, namely; *Chinzah*, *Hlawncheu*, *Zathang*, *Hlawnchhing*, and *Tlangchhan* who migrated to their present territory of Lawngtlai. Of these clans, the *Chinzah* were notably the most dominant. (*Bawitlung*, 1997:20).

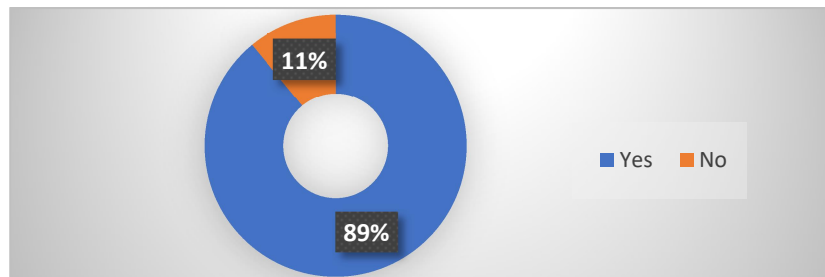
Abolition of Lai Chieftainship

With the British intervention in Lai territory by 1889, the power of the Lai Chiefs began to erode steadily. By 1890, the British had decisively routed all the Lai Chiefs wherein they suffered a crushing defeat in the hands of the British, thereby establishing their hegemony over Lai lands. Following the formal abolishment of chieftainship in the *Pawi-Lakher* Regional Council (PLRC) area on 5th April, 1954 (Doungel, 2010:5), the chiefs were thus recognised merely as the agents of the colonists. The British colonial rule had a profound impact on tribal chieftainship, as the British administration recognised and manipulated tribal leadership to consolidate their power. They imposed their own systems of governance, creating new roles and authorities that undermined traditional tribal leadership structures. Many tribal chiefs were co-opted or replaced by British-appointed leaders, leading to a decline in traditional authority and cultural autonomy. The British also introduced new laws and policies that eroded tribal rights to land and resources, further weakening tribal chieftainship. This disruption of traditional leadership and governance systems had long-lasting effects on tribal societies, leading to cultural disintegration, political fragmentation, and economic marginalisation. (Elwin, 1964; Chaudhuri, 2013; Singh, 2019). This study aligns with the previous statement, examining the impact of Christianity on Lai chieftainship, similarly to how British rule affected tribal chieftainship.

Is Abolition of Chieftainship Beneficial? Investigating Public Opinion

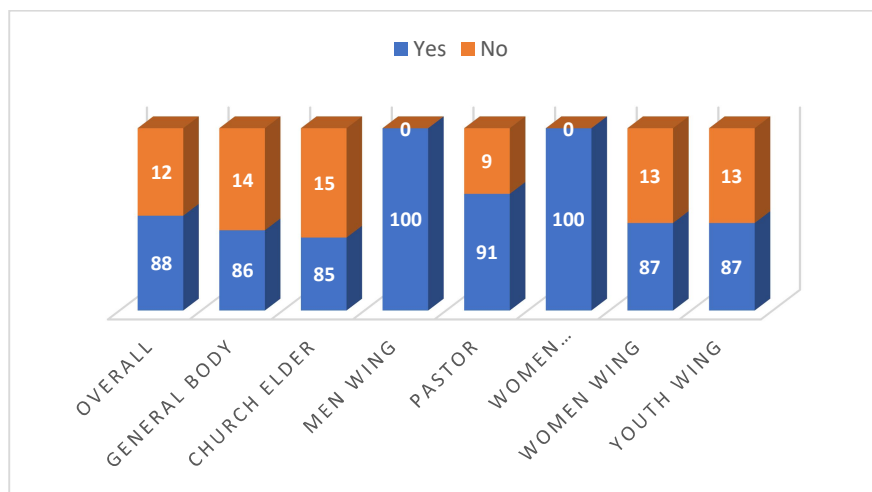
Lawmsanga (2020:79) posited that the elimination of chiefs had both positive and negative ramifications for the Mizo society. While some chiefs were noted for their harsh treatment towards their subjects, others were regarded as benevolent. Followingly, the research endeavors to determine the populace's perception of whether the abolition proved advantageous for society, specifically within the framework of Lai community. As such, the research finding indicates that majority of the respondents (89%, 355 persons) find the abolition of chieftainship beneficial, whereas few participants (11%, 46 persons) do not support the abolition of chieftainship. (See Figure 1). The classification of respondents in the bases of sub-groups (see Figure 2), as well as gender, locality, and educational attainment (see Figure 3) yield similar result, whereby the respondents belonging to all sections and categories commonly agree that abolition of chieftainship was highly beneficial for the society.

Figure 1: Overall Participants' Opinion on Abolition of Lai Chieftainship



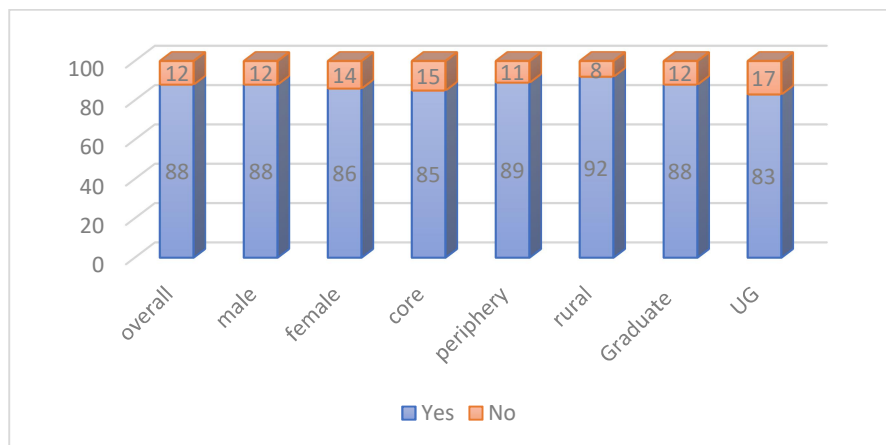
Source: Field Data

Figure 2: Classification of participants based on the sub-group



Source: Field Data

Figure 3: Classification of participants based on gender, residents, and educational attainment



Source: Field Data

The primary rationales cited by participants, predominantly composed of elders representing various sub-groups such as church elders, men's wing, and women, who possess a deep understanding of their history due to their advanced age, and their advocacy for the abolition of chieftainship, revolve around several key points. These include denunciations of chief tyranny, critiques of the inflexible social hierarchy evident in traditional marriage structures, and concerns regarding the aftermath of chieftainship abolition, particularly the emergence of political strife and mudslinging which are quoted as follows:

Abolition of chieftainship was very beneficial for the society as most of the chiefs were autocratic and his subjects were under his mercy. Even in the matters of life and death, no one dared to question his judgement. Society was marked by rigid social stratification in term of marriage and choice of lovers, orphans and widows were almost outcasted by the society. Christianity has providentially dismantled all these rigid social structures. (Mr. Vanlala, church-elder)

The above quoted resourceful respondent went on saying how terrifying the ancient chiefs were, saying that:

Our forefathers in the pre-Christian era were very terrified of the Chiefs that they never dared to show off their wealth like necklaces, healthy cattle, pigs or hen. The phrase 'Lal hlaulo thi' (wearing simple necklaces or other ornaments that would not offend the Chiefs) had come into being due to the said reason. In case if the Chief noticed those goods, he may forcefully snatch them away. (Mr. Ringa, Church-elder)

One direct advantage of the abolition of chieftainship as mentioned commonly by the respondents is the subsequent abolition of slaves, as stated by respondents as:

I do believe that Christianity had played a leading role towards abolition of slavery in our society. A British Christian missionary by the name Dr. Peter Frazer was really against keeping slaves and made an appeal to the British Government and in course of time, the institution of slaves/bawi was finally abolished on the 29th, October, 1915 by an Order of Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberland. Moreover, some of the Chiefs who had embraced Christianity felt that it was not compatible for a Christian to keep 'bawi' and they, thus, gradually set them free. (Mr. K.H.)

There were five types of slaves (Bawi) which was prevalent in the Lai chieftainship (Bawitlung, 2012:10); they were 'Tlaihsal/ Khihsal' (war captives), 'Chhungkhungsal' (a resaleable slave), 'Rawlduhbawi' (One who seeks refuge to the Chief due to sickness, poverty etc), 'Rothensal' (One who seeks refuge due to fear of murder or revenge from the enemies) and 'Tuangchhuaksal' (Inherited

slaves). With the abolition of chieftainship, the chief no longer engaged in war nor raids, and this had led to the gradual forceful possession of slaves, as was mentioned by one astute respondent as:

Another positive outcome of Christianity was the abolition of slaves (sal/bawi). In olden days, the main source for possessing slaves was through war. Keeping war-captive slaves was strongly condemned by the British as well as the missionaries. Consequently, by the British declaration of a ban on inter-village war, even the war-captives were no longer found in our society. (Mr. Bawihlung)

Despite the minority representation (only 11%) of participants advocating for chieftainship, their perspectives warrant acknowledgment. Their primary arguments assert that the abolition of chieftainship has exacerbated social issues such as addiction, individualism, and misuse of freedom, which is quoted as:

The embrace of Christianity has, in some cases, led to lack of courage among individuals. Unlike our forefathers, there may be a reluctance to actively protect our land. The earlier Lai chiefs were notably brave in safeguarding both the land and the tribe, and there is a perception that this sense of bravery may have diminished with the influence of Christianity. This change in perspective may be attributed to shifts in cultural values and societal norms associated with the adoption of a new religious belief. (Mr. Biaka, Cheural village)

Moreover, a decline in loyalty and attachment to the land as a consequence of chieftainship abolition was highlighted by one respondent, which is put forward as follows:

Christianity, while bringing about positive changes, could be considered as one of the factors contributing to the rise in crimes within society. With the influence of Christian missionaries, teachings emphasising love, forgiveness and respect for humanity have emerged. This shift in values, coupled with the abolition of chieftainship and the establishment of a democratic state, has promoted individual freedom and the propagation of human rights to a fault. Since Christianity preaches forgiveness, there are instances where criminals are left unpunished and this has further led to increase in the frequency of crimes. Despite countless positive outcomes, the transition may have also played a role in the challenges society faces, including an increase in criminal activities. (Mr. Thanga, Lungtian village)

Following the abolition of chieftainship and the introduction of Christianity into Lai society, a notable shift in authority structure occurred, where the authority of chief was supplemented by British rule, albeit still characterised by autocratic and hegemonic practices in judgment. However, upon thorough

examination of the advantages and disadvantages of abolishing Lai chieftainship, it becomes apparent that its abolition is undeniably beneficial for Lai society. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the abolition of chieftainship does have its drawbacks, even which Christianity cannot eradicate such evils, as was rightly avowed by one respondent as: ‘*Abolition of Chieftainship advocated by Mizo Union had given birth to unethical and mudslinging political party system. Christianity may give us internal peace in the mind, but we are still struggling over such external problems which even Christianity cannot curb away.*’ (Mr. Lalbiakchhungi)

Conclusion

Echoing (Elwin, 1964; Chaudhuri, 2013; Singh, 2019) arguments that Christianity and the British colonists led to the disruption of traditional leadership and governance systems that had long-lasting effects on tribal societies, leading to cultural disintegration, political fragmentation, and economic marginalisation, the traditional Lai authority structure has likewise been impacted by Christianity, with British hegemony replacing traditional Lai chieftainship. This has resulted in a loss of traditional leadership and governance practices. However, it is noteworthy that with the abolition of the institution of Lai chieftainship, a new era of modern administration is paving the way, which has led to the advancement of the Lai society, as was evidenced from the respondents’ narratives. Interestingly, the legacy of Lai chieftainship continues to shape the political landscape of the Lai community, with prominent leaders like Mr. Manghmuna Chinzah, Lallura, and C. Lalsawmzuala drawing from their ancestral lineage to influence contemporary politics. As descendants of esteemed chiefs, their leadership roles in the Lai Autonomous District Council demonstrate the lasting impact of traditional leadership on modern political dynamics. By acknowledging and respecting this legacy, better comprehension can be attained pertaining to the complexities of Lai politics and the importance of traditional leadership in shaping their modern political landscape.

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