



A THREATENED IDENTITY:

Social Structure and
Traditional Leadership
in Cho Chin Society
before Christianity

Salai Myochit



Understanding
Myanmar's
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REPORT
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Foreword

The Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) Fellowship program, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, is designed to enhance knowledge of Myanmar's development processes, strengthen the capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to actively engage the study of development policy and practice. The fellowship seeks to promote sustainable academic exchange and dialogue among researchers from Myanmar, Thailand, and other GMS countries. Under this program, 30 fellowships have been awarded to mid-career researchers in their respective areas of social and economic transformation, agricultural, environment and climate change, health and health care systems, and social media and innovations.

Myanmar is undergoing an exciting time of transformation on many fronts after decades of isolation. Outsiders have a only limited understanding of the complexities and dynamics of this transformation and the depth of change taking place—affecting the social, environmental, economic, and governmental spheres, and directly impacting the livelihoods and practiced culture of the peoples of Myanmar. How are they actively taking part in their country's developmental process, and in the face of what obstacles? In this pivotal moment of flux and change, Myanmar's need for both mind- and man-power to help fill the gaps of data and research on critical development issues has never been greater.

This report, "A Threatened Identity: Social Structure and Traditional Leadership in Cho Chin Society before Christianity" is one attempt to fill this gap. The author, Myochit—himself an ethnic Chin—conducted a focused ethnographic study of several Cho communities

in Chin state. As an insider, he had direct access to community elders and a unique position of familiarity with the cultural context he was researching, coupled with awareness of the "outsider" perspective. In exploring the oral history of the Cho Chin people before converting to Christianity in the 1960's and 1970's, he drew on village elders' and leaders' living memories. Aside from preserving the oral history of Cho Chin traditions and rituals, this research provides deep insight into the leadership and social structure of a people who relied on a community-based, collective way of subsistence. The central role of the *mithun* is unique and fascinating. An ox-like species of cattle, mithun were not draft animals, but held for their role in the Cho Chin economy, due to their central position in sacrificial rituals. Possession of mithun conferred status and power. This research—recording the vanishing rituals and practices of the Cho people and culture, community values, and identity—is all the more precious as they are now threatened by modernization, globalization, and the government policies of modern Myanmar.

The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) hopes to make a meaningful contribution to the push for new knowledge on development in today's Myanmar—training a new generation of academics and scholars who will continue their own quests forward with their research on Myanmar's development issues. This new body of knowledge gained and the league of new, well-trained researchers exiting the UMD fellowship program will be of importance to Myanmar as it transitions to democratic governance in an ever-more globalized world.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD
Director, RCSD

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My deepest gratitude goes to my family for their prayers and support. Last but not least, I am also indebted to my friends who gave me advice for the research. My sincere appreciation goes to those whose names are not included for all of their assistance.

Abstract

This paper is about the Cho Chin people who live in the southern part of Chin State in Myanmar. The Cho are traditional swidden agriculturalists with an oral-based culture. Based on field interviews with several Cho elders, this paper explores Cho oral history and traditional social structure prior to the cultural transformations that occurred with the arrival of Christianity in the 1960s and '70s. In particular, the paper focuses on traditional Cho leadership. Drawing on the memories of living elders, the research helps to maintain oral history and facts about Cho life that have nearly been lost.

The paper includes general information about Cho Chin people and their ways of life, including marriage practices, kinship relations, and traditions of gift giving. It explores traditional Cho cosmology and the origins of Cho traditions of animal sacrifices and feasts, especially mithun feasts. The heart of the research is a study of traditional leadership, focusing on the two groups of leaders: the sacred leaders called *ngtaiyü*, and secular specialists or chiefs known as *pikhawng ngnamtai*. While describing the roles and responsibilities of these various leaders, the paper shows how Cho people lived together collectively, dependent on each other for their subsistence. I argue that Cho unity was a sacred value of the community. The paper describes Cho people's lives, their distinctiveness, and identity.

The last chapter briefly describes how Cho peoples' lives have changed in the past few decades due to Christianity, government policies of Burmanization, and processes of modernization. I discuss the decline of Cho leadership and the weakening of Cho unity. I argue that, due to various factors, Cho unity, distinctiveness, and identity are now under threat.

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1

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction

This paper is a study of Cho Chin social structure and traditional leadership. The Cho Chin are an ethnic minority group living in the southern part of Chin State in Myanmar. In this paper, I seek to document the way of life of Cho people before Christianity was introduced and became an important cultural force in the area in the 1950s. Research was carried out in 2013 and 2014 by collecting oral histories from key Cho informants, including Cho elders who remember the past well.

In this paper, I will explain about customary power relations and the different kinds of traditional leaders who managed Cho Chin communities. In fact, there were two main categories of traditional leaders: a group of shamanic, sacred specialists known as *ngtaiyü*¹ leaders, and a group of secular headmen called *pikhawng ngnamtai*, chiefs whose authority derived from their skills in hunting and warfare. I will describe the roles and importance of each group, how these leaders gained their status in the community, and the relations between these leaders and the people of their communities. My main research question is: How did traditional leaders manage Cho Chin communities prior to Christianity? In pursuing this

1. Unless noted otherwise, all such terms in this paper are in the Dai dialect of Cho Chin.

question, I also consider the entire picture of Cho social life. Thus, the paper will also discuss many kinds of rituals and sacrificial activities, because rituals and festivals played an important role in the traditional community life of Cho people.

Finally, the paper will describe how rituals and traditional leadership practices have changed in recent decades, not only due to the rise of Christianity, but also because of other factors such as government policies prohibiting festivals and face tattooing among Cho women. I will consider the future possibilities for the Cho community if their traditional rituals and other practices are completely lost. What will the society be like? Will it be possible for Cho Chin to maintain their distinctive identity in the future?

My main argument is that traditional leadership played a crucial role in Cho Chin social structure in the past. It was an essential part of Cho identity and unity before the introduction of Christianity. It is my hope that documenting ways in which traditional Cho social structure functioned in the past may help the community to maintain a sense of Cho identity for the future.

The Research Problem

Cho Chin people live in and around the areas of Kanpetlet and Mindat townships, as well as some parts of Matupi and Paletwa townships, in the southern part of Chin State, Myanmar. Cho people were traditionally swidden (or shifting) agriculturalists, and many continue this as their main source of livelihood. Traditionally, Cho people practiced many types of rituals, festivals, and cultural activities. Moreover, they had their own systems of traditional leadership distinct from other ethnicities.

Before Christianity, the Cho people had their own values, beliefs, and worship practices. Their way of life was more dependent on nature than that of people in northern areas of Chin State where development and Christian missionaries had reached earlier. The Cho had little experience with money, but mithun (*Bos frontalis*)—a partly-domesticated species of highland cattle—played an important role in their traditional economy. Their clothing was made of natural materials, and they used pots made of glutinous

yellow earth and plates made of wood. The Cho also had their own local knowledge. They knew how to cure a variety of illnesses with plants and how to forecast the weather for success in agriculture. Traditional knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Although they did not have a writing system, they had traditional learning methods. People respected the knowledge of the elders and followed the discipline of the community. Cho people lived by their own ways of thinking.

Because southern Chin State is an isolated area, Cho people were able to maintain their traditional ways until about the middle of the twentieth century. The influences of Christianity brought many social impacts to Cho communities. The first Christian missionaries reached a Cho community in the Mindat area around 1950. However, this was a preliminary mission and Cho people did not accept Christianity at that time. Another group of missionaries arrived in the Kanpetlet area in approximately 1965. The missionaries mostly came from northern Chin State. In the 1970s, Christianity began to spread as a new religion in Cho villages. By the 1980s, many Cho communities had accepted Christianity, and Christian churches started to appear in Cho villages.

Since Christianity has become a prominent part of Cho society, ways of thinking and ways of life have changed. However, it is still possible to learn about traditional Cho culture by speaking with elders in the Cho community who experienced life before Christianity.

There are challenges related to pursuing this research. Because Cho literacy levels are relatively low, it is difficult to find books or records. Some documents from the British colonial period still exist today, but these are simply administrative records that do not contain information about local traditions. Today, the only way to learn about the traditions of Cho people is to collect oral history by interviewing elders and learning old folktales and songs.

Cho history and traditional culture exist primarily in the memories of some elders. However, these memories are fading. When the elders of today pass away, it will be a tremendous loss for the entire Cho community. Historical information, traditional knowledge,

and distinctive cultural sensibilities will disappear. For these reasons, I have undertaken this project of collecting and documenting Cho oral history.

Research Objectives and Questions

This research focuses on Cho social structure and traditional leadership, but also considers a comprehensive picture of Cho social life before Christianity. The project has four main research objectives:

1. To examine traditional leadership systems in Cho communities before Christianity;
2. To explore features of Cho social structure in relation to cultural beliefs and practices;
3. To record and document the memories of Cho elders;
4. To examine how traditions and rituals have been lost, potentially threatening the identity of Cho people.

As I have mentioned, my focus is on Cho beliefs and practices in the time “before Christianity.” However, Christianity arrived over several decades, coming to different areas in different years, so it is impossible to define an exact time point.

Methodology

Research for this project was carried out between October 2013 and August 2014. I used qualitative methodology consisting primarily of in-depth interviews. I had five main informants who were Cho elders, as well as ten additional informants. In addition, I investigated material artifacts, such as ancient *lung-sum* tombs containing pots of human bones and animal skulls hanging at the entrances of houses. Another source was secondary materials from secular and religious writers and historical records.

To conduct the research, I visited several villages in Kanpetlet Township, namely: Saw Chaung, Laymine, Komine, Masatui, Pusa,

Hmawlonglon, Khayaing, and Choyaing. I also visited the towns of Saw and Mindat.

U Naing Om, one of my key informants, moved from Kyanglayhlen Village in Mindat Township to Komine which is near the town of Kanpetlet. Other key informants also moved to Kanpetlet from other villages in the township. Therefore, Kanpetlet Town was my main base while I was conducting my research. I could travel from there to all the villages where my key informants were staying.

I visited southern Chin State four times over the course of three months. Much time was required for travel, but I tried to spend at least two days in each village. I met with each of my key informants three times, visiting them one-by-one, place-by-place. Usually, I spent two days in a village on each trip, but each time I was in Khayaing Village, I stayed for four or five days. In fact, I was born and raised in Khayaing Village and lived there until 2003. My family moved to Kanpetlet Town in 2003, after which I rarely visited Khayaing until I began this project.

As my research relied on oral history collected through interviews, I recorded all my interviews and also took notes on the important details. Occasionally, my interviewees talked for more than an hour without taking a rest, especially when explaining traditional beliefs. I did not interrupt my informants when they were so motivated to speak about the traditions. I thought it was better to allow them time to recover the whole picture from their memories. However, I took notes so I could raise questions once they had finished. I found my questions helped the interviewees to recall details. As a result of my questions, their memories came to be extended.

There were some challenges due to the fact there are several different dialects of the Cho language. I speak the Dai dialect, but some of my interviewees were from the Mūn, Mkang, and Ngra tribes—all sub-groups or tribes of the Cho Chin group. Almost all the interviews were recorded in local dialects, but sometimes, due to dialect limitations, I had to use the Burmese language to ask my questions. They also sometimes preferred using Burmese language.

I kept the interviews on both my recorder and my computer to

secure the data. I transcribed most of the interviews in local language, but Burmese language is also used for some parts as recorded. Actually, these communities are currently in the process of refining their writing systems and usage. My transcription would be not easy for other people to decipher because I typically use my own creative transcriptions to some degree. Writing systems of Cho tribes are based on the Roman alphabet.

In collecting my information, I conducted interviews with speakers of four different dialects: Dai, Mūn, Mkang, and Ngra. My information comes from different regions, and while usage is mostly similar, the terms are not exactly the same. For example, the names of festivals, rituals, and spiritual beings. As I am Dai, I prefer to use Dai terms and spellings.

Other limitations to the research are related to religion. I am a Christian, and all my key informants had converted to Christianity by the time of the research. Therefore, the information and explanations I collected may be partly influenced by a Christian context. In writing about what I learned, I sometimes conceptualize the stories through a Christian understanding.

Another limitation is that most of my key informants are men and the information could be influenced by a male perspective. Last but not least is the limitation of language. I am unable to precisely present the entire narrative of every interview because English is my third language.

Description of the Field Site

The research field is the southern part of Chin State, especially Kanpetlet and Mindat townships. There are several subtribes or clans in this region who consider themselves Cho people. Therefore, the name 'Cho' in this research refers to members of the Daa Yindu, Dai, Mön, Ngra, and Mkang tribes. Uppu is another tribe in the Cho group, but I did not interview anyone from the Uppu community.

The area where I conducted this research is still a very remote and underdeveloped region. The people in these townships depend on shifting cultivation (called *klouma* in the Dai dialect) for their daily food. Until about fifteen years ago (about 2000), it was possible to produce enough rice for one's family with shifting cultivation. However, now the people in most villages in the area are struggling to grow enough rice. One villager told me that, in the past, he always had enough rice from farming. Although he did not earn money, he was not so worried because his family had enough rice. However, nowadays, people face food crises. Decreasing rice production is due to climate change and the increasing numbers of insects that destroy crops. Although people work the whole year in the sun and rain, they are unable to get enough rice for themselves.

In 2011, the previous military government in Myanmar changed to a partially civilian government. Since then, there has been some road construction in the area, so people have started to use motorcycles for transportation. Traveling by foot is very difficult among mountain ranges. Traditionally in the Cho community, people had to travel on foot, carrying commodities such as salt, soap, and rice from town to the village on their heads or shoulders. A woman I spoke with remembered that in 2007 and 2008, when nearly all the crops were damaged due to an ecological crisis, she had to purchase rice in town and experienced great difficulty carrying it to her village.

There are very few clinics in Cho areas. Some people still use natural medicines from the forest. I also experienced that in my childhood: when I had health problems, I used indigenous medicines. If someone from the village has a serious health

condition, he or she has to be carried to hospital by neighbors or family members. The paths connecting towns are still very rough.

Figure 1 Map of research area



Derived with permission from a map by Human Rights Watch (HRW) © John Emerson/HRW 2008.

In southern Chin State, there are some villages that contain only ten or fifteen households. If there is no school, children have to join schools in other villages or towns. There are primary schools (grades 1 to 5) in most villages, but when children get older, they

need to go to larger villages for middle school and high school. There are many families who cannot support their children's schooling, and so they keep them home on the farms.

Some youths pass their matriculation exams, but they are unable to continue to university because it costs considerably more than high school. This is a common problem in this region. As a result, many youths (including those who could not finish their basic education) want to go abroad to work, especially to Malaysia. Some who leave send money back to their parents to support other school children in the family. However, migration to Malaysia for work is very risky and full of worries and problems. Migration to Malaysia is mostly illegal, so some migrants travel by boat or ship. Some migrants unfortunately disappear during the storms their boats encounter. Migrants who live in Malaysia or Thailand still face substantial difficulties and discrimination. They have to live in a new community without knowing the local language. The migrants have to work for the minimum wage. Some migrants get caught in situations of debt-bondage because of unethical brokers.

In this region, the villages are mostly built on the mountainsides. Houses are built of bamboo and wood. Visiting this area, one observes traditional styles of house building, and many handmade things, including plates, pots, and cups. Despite these vestiges of the past, there are many traditional cultural activities and evidence of past lifestyles that are now nearly lost.

Domestic and international NGOs have been operating in Cho areas since the early 2000s with development and poverty reduction programs. When I entered villages in the Cho area for this research, I saw some water projects, sanitation programs, and new bridges and schools. I also learned that villagers often spend many days in meetings related to NGO projects and their implementation. Some people I spoke with in the villages were not satisfied because the more time they had to spend in meetings, the more work there was left to do in their farm plots. One villager from Hmawlonglon said that the NGOs are welcome and good for the community, but the activities take too many days. He said, "I cannot go to my farm land regularly and I will not harvest

enough rice for my family. It is a problem since the NGO activities cannot provide for our daily food."

It is difficult to say whether NGO activities create benefits for villages or not. In my opinion, there is a gap between the goals of NGO projects and the outcomes in the community. In theory, the project activities are good. In reality, often the conditions in the community are not well matched to the NGO projects.

Key Informants

I would like to introduce my five key informants and explain their qualifications as my respected interviewees. First is U Naing Om.² He is 70 years old and currently lives in Komine near Kanpetlet Town, but previously he stayed at Kyanglayhlen Village in Mindat Township. His tribe is Mön. U Naing Om is from a well-known, high-status family (or clan), as his father, grandfather, and forefathers were shamans or sacred leaders called *ngtaiyü*. Villagers believed that only *ngtaiyü* had the ability to hear and communicate with the creator god (I discuss this further in chapter 4.) U Naing Om's distinction is that he can remember many oral traditions that others are unable to recall. As he grew up in a *ngtaiyü* family, he knows a lot about the functions of sacrifices. He converted to Christianity and served as a Christian missionary in the Cho Chin area for a few years in the 1990s.

Second is Mnai Xung. He is 80 years old and is also an expert in oral traditions in the community. His tribe is Dai from Kanpetlet Township. His clan name is Ngyäing and he lives in Khayaing Village. He is respected and thought of as an expert in memories of the past. Therefore, he is able to influence discussions about historical events and defeat others in debates about traditions. Because he is able to read and write Burmese language, he had an opportunity to work at a government office for a short period during the Socialist era. However, around 1955, he quit his work

2. I have not changed the names of my key informants as they are well known people in the community and changing their names would not disguise them. I have received permission to quote them and use their names.

with the government, and since then has been working as a traditional farmer (practicing *kloma*, shifting cultivation). He told me:

I had many opportunities to work at government offices when I was young because not many people could speak and read Burmese language at that time. But I did not want to serve the government. I was conservative and favored tradition, so I gave up my job. I went back to my village because I much more love the traditions and ways of life of the people in that area than getting a salary from the government. (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014)

Mnai Xung is Christian, but he does not hold Christian beliefs very strongly. What I appreciate about Mnai Xung is his clear, rational explanations about Cho traditions. He also knows and can explain clearly about the complicated genealogy of his Ngyäing clan who dwell in five villages in the area. He knows the names of 23 generations of Ngyäing, which he calculates is equivalent to around 500 years of local history. He keeps an old notebook and he sometimes consults his notes during conversation. He keeps records about which family group owns which parts of the land and how they got these plots. He keeps clear records about his farm lands and bamboo plots so his descendents will know which land is theirs.

As I am from his family group, I was happy to spend days listening to Mnai Xung discuss what he knows. In fact, he was looking for someone to make records of our traditions. He is getting old, so he was very happy to talk with me. I also had the opportunity to read his records.

Another of my key informants is Naing Kawk. He is 80 years old but he remains active in his garden. He is also of the Dai tribe, and his clan is known as Yang. He lived in Yamcai Village in Kanpetlet Township for nearly eighty years, only recently moving to Laymine near Kanpetlet Town. He told me his parents celebrated mithun festivals (which will be explained in chapters 3 and 4) hundreds of times, and consequently his family had a high social status. Both Naing Kawk and his wife, Hning Phway, are experts in ritual traditions. They have also celebrated hundreds of mithun festivals,

they told me. What I honor about them is their ability to explain via traditional songs. They are very good at performing traditional songs. The songs they perform may be about Cho cosmology, beliefs and myths, historical facts, or genealogies. Traditionally, Cho people have learned past events and beliefs as songs so that they are easier to remember. Both Naing Kawk and his wife are Christians, but neither is a strong member of the church.

The next of my interviewees is Naing Mtup from the Ngra tribe. He is 65 years old. He is not only an expert in oral traditions, but also knows a lot about modern history as well. If we ask people from the Ngra community to explain about their history or descendants, they will typically refer to Naing Mtup. What I respect about him is his ability to compare similar traditions among different Cho tribes. As he was one of the first persons to learn the importance of historical information following his time at missionary school in the 1980s, he has collected many historical records since. Currently, he lives at Laymine Village in Kanpetlet Township and serves as pastor at Laymine Baptist Church.

My last key informant is Kui Xung, who is 75 years old. He is my father and he also knows and remembers many traditions. He was the first convert to Christianity in the Khayaing Village in 1975. He experienced many criticisms from villagers at that time. He shared with me what he experienced, and he compared his life before he became Christian and after. He discussed the different reactions and responses of people in the community toward the new religion called Christianity. He told me about the atmosphere of the community during the time the Christian religion entered the village. This information follows in chapter 5.

My father plays a traditional instrument called *lengla*. It is similar to a flute, but it is played by blowing air from the nose. The sound of the *lengla* is heartbreaking. The sounds have meanings, but only elder people are able to understand.

I also worked with ten additional informants. Five of them are women: Hning Kui, age 56, who lives at Pusa Village; Bu Paing, age 60, from Khayaing Village; Lee Kui, who is 70 years old; Shen Mnai, my mother, who is 67 years old; and Hning Phway, who is the 70-year-old wife of Naing Kawk (mentioned above). All of the

female informants are from the Dai tribe. My key informants recommended that I interview them. These women are very good at singing traditional songs because they were responsible for performing the songs at festivals in the past.

I also interviewed five additional men. They are Thanglaw Kui, Thang Shing, Om Yo, Dr. Bawi Kung, and Mnai Naing. Thanglaw Kui is from the Mön tribe and lives in Mindat Town. He is 60 years old and he is skillful in divination by egg. Thang Shing is also from the Mön tribe. He lives in Saw Town and is 80 years old. Om Yo, Dr. Bawi Kung, and Mnai Naing are informants from Yangon who all work at Christian churches. All of the informants in Yangon have a Christian background.

2

THE CHO CHIN PEOPLE

Who are the Cho Chin?

There are many tribes, subtribes, clans, and dialects in Chin State. Even though there are numerous tribes and dialects, there are only four major language groups. These four main groups are Lai and Zo in the northern part of Chin State, and Cho and Khumi in southern Chin State.³

According to government reckoning, there are 53 tribes or “races” comprising the Chin ethnic group. However, most Chin people do not accept the government’s method of counting and categorizing people. Indeed, most Chin people do not use the term “Chin” as the umbrella term: rather, in each distinct sub-group, people have their own terms to express their larger group identity (i.e. Cho, Lai, Zo, or Khumi, respectively). This situation is adverse for attempts at fostering unity among various tribes in Chin State.

“Cho” is the inclusive umbrella term used by the Daa Yindu, Dai, Mūn, M̄kang, N̄gra, and Uppu tribes. Cho people live in the southern part of Chin State, in Kanpetlet, Mindat, and some parts of Matupi and Paletwa townships.

3. Cho, Lai, Zo, Khumi and A sho were the main language groups according to Rosang (2013). A sho Chin people currently live in Magway and Bago Regions and Rakhine State. A sho people are distinctive because they are not highland people, like the other Chin groups.

The question of where the Chin name came from is controversial. According to Lian Sakhong (2009), “Chin” comes from *chinlung*, which means a cave, probably a sacred spot located in the original homeland of the Chin people. Sakhong suggests this place is likely near the Chindwin River, where the Chin people set out to begin their migration to the mountains. Sakhong translates the word “Chin” as “people or a community of people.”

My informant Mnai Xung also explained that the Chin people dwelled for several generations in and around Chindwin River. It is therefore likely that the name “Chin” relates to the river.

According to the scholar F.K. Lehman (2009), the term “Chin” first appears in some stone inscriptions of the Pagan-era King Kyanzittha made in the Chindwin Valley around 1100 AD. However, the spelling of that inscription was different. He suggests that the contemporary word “*chin*” probably derives from the older term “*chang*,” which means people or human beings. In fact, people in the Cho community still use the word “*chang*” or “*ngchang*” to refer to themselves as humans.

Various historians and scholars have suggested that Chin people originally lived in and around Chindwin Valley and then spread to different places (see, for example, Rosang 2014: 171-173). Mnai Xung explained that in the oral history of Cho people, there are place names indicating the regions or places from which people migrated, such as Tuicakyup (in Burmese: Yesakyo), Pupa-mcung (Popa Taung) and Thihlang (Thiilen). Mnai Xung said: “The reason we migrated from near the Chindwin River was because of war in that region. We did not want to face fighting, we did not love war or pain, so we left our land and property for peace.” He explained me that the reason for traveling up to the mountains was also to avoid the fighting (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014).

According to the Chin historian Rosang (2014), the term “Chin” likely derived from the pronunciation of Yaw people (an ethnic group closely related to Burmans). Cho and Yaw people lived near each other for several generations in the Yaw area. (The Yaw people lived, and still live, in present-day Magway and Sagaing Regions.) At that time, Yaw people, who speak a dialect of Burmese, called the Cho people “Chang” because that was the word Cho

people used to call to each other in friendly or informal situations. As I said, Chang actually means “human.” The Yaw pronunciation of “Chang” sounds like “Chin.” Later, “Chin” became the Burmese word for these people (in fact, Yaw people today still pronounce “Chin” as “Chang”).

Sing Gay Sing (2012), a Cho Chin writer living in Mindat Township, suggests that the Cho were formerly Pyu people. He wrote this in a popular article in a Burmese language publication published in 2012. He explained that the ancient Pyu people, who left archaeological sites that predate Pagan, have disappeared from the historical record. However, there is some evidence of similar cultural practices between Pyu and Cho people. Pot-tombs with human bones, necklaces, and bracelets have been discovered at ancient Pyu sites near Pyay (near the Ayeyarwady River). Cho prepared tombs in this way, with human bones and ornaments. Moreover, there are Cho words that are similar to Pyu words in inscriptions, especially names for everyday objects, such as rice and water. Because of these details, some think that the modern Cho people descended from the Pyu. In fact, I was told that some Cho people in Mindat Township declared their race as Pyu in the 2014 national census.

Possible Origins of the Term “Cho”

In my interviews with Naing Om and Mnai Xung, I learned there are three possible origins of the term “Cho.” One possibility is that before Cho people started moving out of the Chindwin Valley, there were two groups of people. One group wanted to live in the plains, while the other group wanted to move up to the mountains. In Cho folktales, the first group were called “*do khaw om khai*” (roughly, “stay in flat place”; *do* in the Dai dialect means flat land), while the second group, the people who intended to climb the hills, were called “*cho khaw ei khai*” (“occupy a high place”; *cho* means higher place.) In this way, the people who live in the hills became known as “Cho.” In the Dai language, the term “Cho” refers to all the Chin who are highlanders.

In other sayings and folktales, Cho people claim that they came

from above—that is, from the sky or heaven—by the power of the creator god at the beginning of time. In Cho language, heaven is *khan-khaw*, so Cho people call themselves *khan-ngchang*, which means “people from heaven.” *Khan* and *Cho* are interchangeable, so people use both *Cho-ngchang* and *Khan-ngchang* when they claim a proud position for themselves. Because of this, some people think the term Cho derives from the creation myth.

The third possibility is that the “Cho” name and identity were cultivated for political purposes in the 1960s, in the early years of Burma’s socialist era (1962-1988). Before 1962, people in the southern part of Chin State used their tribal group names, like Dai, M Kang, and M ün, to identify themselves. However, political leaders wanted to create a strong platform for political unity, so they promoted the name Cho and encouraged the tribes to accept this as a general name. At the same time, Chin historians and Burmese writers also began to use the term Cho to refer to tribes from Kanpetlet, Mindat, and some parts of Matupi and Paletwa. In this way, “Cho” became a recognized, collective name.

History of the Cho People

As mentioned above, in Cho oral history, it is said that Cho people migrated into their current homelands from the lower plains now inhabited predominantly by Burman people, such as the Chindwin Valley and present-day Sagaing and Magway Regions. When referring to their original homelands in their folktales and folksongs, Cho use the old names for places and towns. For example, in Dai, Pagan is called Phukan-khaw (*khaw* means “place”), Pakokku is Phaihphuk-khaw, Mount Popa is Pupa-mcung (*mcung* means “mountain”), Yesakyo is called Tuicakyuk, and Thiilen is Thihlan-khaw (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014).

Cho tales and songs also refer to their migration routes and events that occurred along the way. Oral history points out that there were two kinds of migration: following along rivers or along mountain ranges. There were main four streams and a river that were used as migration routes, namely: Hngilawng, Sawlawng, Pelawng, Hmawlawng (the four streams), and Phunglawng (the

river, known as Laymyo in Burmese). The mountain ranges included Mpuichum-mcung, Kyawk-mcung, Khawnu-mcung, and Mawpi-mcung (interview with Naing Om, 2014).

It is difficult to calculate how long it took Cho people to travel from their original homelands in present-day Sagaing and Magway to their current localities in the hills. According to Mnai Xung, his Ngyäing clan began travelling to the mountains 23 generations previous, or about 500 years ago. The clan founder was Sailengma, who lived somewhere in the Yaw area. He was the eldest of five brothers. According to Cho inheritance practices, only the youngest brother inherits land from his father for farming and foraging. As Sailengma was the eldest, he could not inherit land, so he decided to go to the mountains with his slaves in order to find new land. According to oral history, Sailengma's other four siblings traveled to other regions and founded other clans. The oral history of the Ngyäing clan does not include many details about the other brothers.⁴

Mnai Xung told me that when he was young, he experienced oral presentations and folksongs by elders that mentioned that Cho people missed their native lands. Cho people know about their history of migration from songs and tales. There is also archaeological evidence in the form of stone tomb markers called *lung-sum* and ceramic pots which contain human bones and artifacts (necklaces and bracelets). These ancient *lung-sum* can be found along the migration routes that Cho people followed.

Although the British annexed Arakan (now known as Rakhine) in 1823, they did not arrive to the Cho area until 1896. Cho people in the hills were not affected much by colonialism. As a result of British colonialism, there were some roads developed for traveling by horse. Some Cho villagers might have been forced to work on these roads. Still, the area was mostly undeveloped and

4. According to Mnai Xung, the five brothers were: Sailengma (the founding father of the Ngyäing clan), Xongxengma (who settled in Longshew area), Sawmangma (who settled in Saw in the Yaw area), Yawmangma (who stayed in the Yaw area), and Calangma (who settled in the Salin River area) (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014).

transportation between villages was difficult.

Under the British system of indirect rule, certain local men were appointed as administrators. They were called village headmen in colonial documents. However, according to Mnai Xung, these headmen were not very effective in managing multiple villages spread over a large area because of poor transportation and lack of communication between villages at the time. Reverend Mar Ling (2014), a Cho scholar and pastor, notes that there was one well-known, powerful leader named Thang Cing who served as headman under the British. He was respected not only as a headman, but also as a traditional chief. He belonged to and managed a very large community along the Phunglong River and collected taxes for the British government. U Naing Om said that some headmen were so powerful in their administrative areas that villagers were made to carry them from one village to the next.

A leader named U Vumtu Maung led the Cho people to oppose the British colonialists. Kanpetlet was the center of colonial administration for the southern region of Chin Special Division; British officers also used to go there to relax in the cooler climate. On 20 February 1939, there was a meeting between colonial officials and local people. Cho people protested at the meeting, shouting and brandishing their knives and arrows. The main reason for the protesting was that local Cho people were displeased with British policies restricting self-government and traditional Cho practices. The British officers fled to Magway Region (Thein Pe Myint, 2013).

When he was younger, U Vumtu Maung had the opportunity to study in a monastery and he became a Buddhist. At that time, there were few Buddhists in the Cho community. The anti-colonial movement in the 1940s introduced Buddhism to the area, as Buddhist missions were encouraged by activists such as U Vumtu Maung. Buddhism was strongly rooted in the nearby Yaw area (Yaw people, as previously noted, are closely related to the Burmese) and spread from there to the Mindat area (Thein Pe Myint, 2013). In the northern part of Chin State, the British government supported Christian missions. Christianity was introduced in northern Chin State beginning in the early 1900s,

but did not spread to the areas of the Cho community until fifty-to-seventy years later.

During the World War II era, there was fighting among the Cho and the British soldiers in Kanpetlet and Mindat. The British government eventually captured the local activist who encouraged others to oppose the colonial power.

Burma regained independence in 1948. However, the Cho community was not much affected by this because the Cho area was so isolated. The ways of life of Cho people did not change much between the era of British colonialism and the parliamentary democracy era (1948–1962) of the Burmese government. During this period, there were some political campaigns in the Cho area; elders still remember and talk about those days. If one village supported a party, the primary school from another village would be moved to that village. In the next election, the school might be moved back, as political parties vied for votes, Mnai Xung told me.

From 1962 to 1974, under the rule of General Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), policies that imposed changes to traditional Cho practices were implemented. The government prohibited the tattooing of faces of Chin women and also advocated that people stop their mithun sacrifices and feasts because these traditions required significant expense and property. During the Socialist period, the government located and recorded Cho villages that were previously unknown to authorities.

Also under the BSPP, the government made the teaching of local languages in schools illegal. The government initiated an ambitious program to teach basic Burmese language to adults in the Cho community. My mother Shen Mnai told me that she participated in this program, but the training period was short and not very effective. The government initiated the program as an attempt to increase the Burmese literacy rate in the country.

Christianity arrived in the Cho area in the 1970s and had major impacts on life in the community. As some families became Christian, there was conflict between different groups and the unity of the community was lost. I will describe these changes in detail in chapter five.

3

CHO PEOPLE BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

In this chapter, I will describe Cho Chin ways of life prior to the impact of Christianity. I will discuss Cho farming practices and subsistence; kinship systems and marriage practices; how communities managed conflict; and traditional Cho cosmology and spiritual beliefs. I will also discuss mithun festivals and their purpose in Cho society. This general information about Cho life will make it easier to understand the social structure and traditional leadership system, the main focus of my research, which I discuss in the next chapter.

Cho Subsistence and the Importance of Unity

Cho communities before the arrival of Christianity were very remote and isolated. Because of the lack of development, many villages and communities did not communicate with each other. There were conflicts between villages, and kidnapping and slave-raiding were also practiced. Consequently, villagers feared outsiders. There were security agents in every village. People were afraid of traveling alone and instead traveled in groups with knives, spears, arrows, and so on. However, inside the village, people lived and worked together closely for mutual benefit. Village inhabitants usually all belonged to the same general clan, but in a village there might be several subgroups of that clan.

The main means of subsistence for Cho people was (and continues

to be) swidden agriculture, called *klouma* in Dai. Cho people plant mainly rice and corn, together with complementary crops and vegetables that can grow alongside the primary crops in the same plot. In their agricultural cycle, Cho people start clearing their plots for farming in January and February. In April, before it starts to rain, the trees and brush are burned off, which brings nutrients to the soil. Crops are planted in May, while October and November is harvest time. Traditionally, the process included many communal activities. There was a group meeting for dividing up and choosing the plots of farm land, and planning for group activities such as burning brush or building fences.

Every event in the agricultural cycle was accompanied by ritual activities, such as small animal sacrifices to celebrate the preparation of the farmland or the building of a fence. These ritual activities were led and managed by the traditional sacred leaders, called *ngtaiyü*, with the community participating.

An important feature of *klouma* agriculture is that people shift their farming land from one area to another each year. Around Cho villages, there were large areas of wild forest, so there was enough available land for all. Except for clearing farmlands, and collecting materials for the construction of houses, people were not allowed to cut down the forest. Children were taught that the forest was inhabited by spirits. People had their own environmental ethics and good habits, such as controlling the spread of fire when burning off fields, and taking only dry wood for firewood. They planted special trees near the houses in the village.

In a village, each sub-clan had its own farmlands that they passed down from generation to generation as inheritance. Although some individuals owned land, most farmlands were owned collectively by the family group (sub-clan). Farmlands could be sold and lent to other families for farming. The forest area that was not used for farming was held communally by the whole village. A family without farmland to plant might be allowed to use some of the communal land. The group of Cho traditional chiefs under the leader *pikhawng ngnapmtai* would make this decision: not every family would be allowed to do so. Once a family started to farm the new areas, that land would be theirs to

pass on to descendants. (The roles of the traditional chiefs will be described in more detail in the next chapter.)

During every activity, people in the village had to listen to directions and orders from their chiefs. People farmed together in the same general area in a group; no family-group could farm separately because they needed to share labor for difficult tasks. Labor exchange was very common during the growing season. Cho people worked together on their farm plots, in rotation, working on one family's plot after another. If a family could not finish its activities, others in the community would come to their aid. These collective activities helped the community to become unified.

In addition to farming, Cho people also raised chickens, dogs, and pigs. They hunted and fished, and they foraged in the forests for wild vegetables, berries, and tubers. Hunting and fishing were also collective activities.

Figure 2 Mithun (*Bos frontalis*)



Cho people also bred mithun, a species of partly domesticated highland cattle (*Bos frontalis*). As mithun lived in the forests, the owners marked signs on their ears in order to differentiate them. Owners would feed salt to their animals to develop familiarity

with them: the mithun recognized and would come to their owners. Mithun were highly valued as they were used for the most important sacrifices and festivals, as I will discuss below. They were never used as draft animals.

Cho people exchanged labor and lent rice and livestock for each others' festivals or activities. People had their own ways of calculating and exchanging things. For instance, a small chicken was equal to a day's labor. A small pig was exchangeable for two small chickens or a blanket. If one family came to help another family with a farming activity, the second family was obligated to help the first family in farming or house building.

Cho people were very dependent on one another: the unity of the community was necessary for its existence. The essence of Cho unity was the people's dependence on one another and their collective dependence on their natural environment.

Kinship, Marriage, and Gift-Giving

Cho Chin society is patrilineal. Upon marriage, a wife becomes a member of her husband's clan, and all of their children do as well. Once two clans have intermarried, then there is a preference for intermarriage to continue between those clans in subsequent generations, with men from one clan marrying women from the other. Marriages may be arranged to achieve this ideal. In Cho society, people may not marry within their own clan. A clan is exogamous until at least nine or ten generations have passed and the clan has gotten very large, consisting of many sub-clans. At that point, it is permissible to marry someone in the clan but from a different sub-clan.

Upon marriage, the groom and his family make a brideprice gift to the bride's family. They usually give several mithuns to the family, and these are distributed among her family members. In return for the mithuns, the wife's family gives traditional blankets to the husband's family. They also hold a feast for the husband's clan during which two pigs are slaughtered. The groom's family also

provides some dogs and chickens for the feast.⁵

In general, village and clan relationships are marked by gift giving. Whenever relatives visit, the family has to prepare animals for the guests. The kinds of animals killed for a visitor depend on the kin relations between host and guest. For example, if I visit my brother, who is my clan-mate, I eat ordinary household food. If I visit my sister's house, she and her husband (who belong to a different clan) will kill and cook a chicken for me. That chicken must not be eaten by my sister's family because it was intentionally killed for me. In return, I must offer gifts like clothes to her family before I leave their house. Similarly, if my sister and her husband make a special visit to our father's home, for example to receive a blessing, we must kill a pig for them. They will also bring dogs and chickens to slaughter for the ceremonial feast.

Mithun, as I said, are especially prized. My sister and her husband can give me a mithun as a gift, but, if they do, I must give them many traditional blankets in return. When a mithun is given as a gift, it is for breeding purposes, not for immediate slaughter.

By engaging in these gift-giving practices, Cho people understand and enact the structural relationships among them. Many of these gift-giving practices are still followed today in Cho communities.

Managing Conflict

Gift giving helps to solve problems and conflicts in the community. If someone accuses someone else of unethical behavior, such as stealing or adultery, and the accusation is wrong, then the one who made the accusation must make amends by slaughtering pigs and offering traditional beer called *ju*. The one who was accused

5. There are complex rules about who can eat the meat. The pigs provided by the bride's family can be eaten by everyone in the husband's clan and the women in the bride's clan. The men in the bride's clan cannot eat it, but they can eat the dog and chicken meat provided by the groom's family. This is related to the marriage rules that link these two clans. The women can eat the pig-meat because it is understood that they are potential wives to the men in the groom's clan.

may kill a chicken to demonstrate that the problem has been resolved. In a more serious situation—for example, if someone has been killed accidentally—then the compensation to that person's clan will be much greater, potentially including many mithun and gold ornaments. These ornaments must be kept; they cannot be sold or given away. The parties will also have an agreement not to speak of the matter again. For example, the clansmen of the one who committed the act cannot boast about what happened as this would insult the other family. If this agreement is broken, then the family of the one who was killed will immediately avenge their clansmen's death and kill someone belonging to the other clan.

In the past, if someone in a community acted unethically or immorally—stealing or committing adultery, for example—then he or she would be apprehended by the people in the community and punished with the permission of his or her family members. If someone severely wronged the entire community by, for example, disobeying an order of the *ngtaiyü* (the sacred leader), he or she would be killed by agreement with his or her relatives (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014).

Long-standing feuds between sub-clans or clans might start over a particular situation and continue for many generations. People would remember if their ancestors did not receive full compensation for a mithun gift, for example. Until today, there are some old feuds that are not yet resolved and still being negotiated among clans in the Cho region. These old conflicts mostly come up for discussion when marriages are planned, because Cho elders recall and review the relationships between the different clans prior to the wedding feasts.

Relations between Villages

Some Cho villages had a long history of intermarriage between members of their clans. Other villages had histories of conflict and bad feelings due to raids or disagreements over farmland, or because someone from one village went to another village, died, and infected villagers with his disease. Violence could erupt over such things.

Figure 3 An old *sepawng* where mithun were killed



Mnai Xung said that, in the past, there was also kidnapping. People would be caught and sold as slaves to masters in distant areas, for example, to “Mpa” people (Burmans). Kidnapping happened between some villages, especially when there were unresolved disputes between them.

In some cases, disputes between villages occurred because of misinformation. In these kinds of events, the traditional chiefs, including *pikhawng ngnapmtai*, might try to negotiate to solve the problem without revenge killing. They would do this by performing traditional folksongs. Upon hearing these old songs, villagers involved in the dispute would remember and understand where they came from, their migration routes, and the things they had done in the past. According to Kui Xung, communities that were strangers to each other would start to relate based on their shared history; they became able to recognize one another. On the other hand, if one group had done misdeeds along its migration route, the elders would keep it secret and not speak about it to their descendants because if the information spread, that group might be asked to give compensation for their ancient misdeed.

Figure 4 In Khayaing village, houses are built by bamboo and wood covered with thatch.



Today, there are some cases of old conflicts that people still remember but rarely talk about. This is partly due to the influence of Christianity, as missionaries taught the people it is not good to talk about past issues, and also because of the lack of certainty about what actually occurred.

I learnt from Mnai Xung that according to oral history there was fighting between the Ngyäing clan in Khayaing Village and another community that was likely Mpa (Burman). Some people who were thought to be Mpa kidnapped women from a village near Khayaing Village. Villagers from Khayaing helped to take revenge against Mpa people. With the help of Khayaing villagers, one person from the Mpa group was captured. The place where that person was killed is known as Mpa Pa Lusuk Nak (“Burman-man-head-drop-place”). Likewise, there are some other names of mountains and places based on events in Cho oral history. For example, there is a mountain called Mlum Ak Nak Mcung (“Heartbreak Mountain”; in Burmese, Yin Kwe Taung) located on the border between Cho

land and Burman land, where, it is said, a woman who was kidnapped by Mpa people died because she missed her children.

In oral history there are several stories in which people from other villages come to Khayaing Village to request help from the Ngyäing clan to deal with someone who is immoral and unacceptable to the community. Some Ngyäing leaders go to the other village and apprehend the deviant man. Ngyäing people received some assets like mithun or traditional blankets in return for their assistance.

Traditional Cho Cosmology

Before Christianity, Cho people had their own distinctive belief system. Some theologians and theology students assume that the belief system of Cho people before Christianity was animist. However, I do not feel that this is the best way to describe it. The term “animism”—which means belief in spirits that inhabit and animate natural objects and phenomena—does not fully capture how traditional Cho people experienced sacredness in their lives. In my opinion, some theology students use the term “animism” too broadly without thorough understanding of the original culture.

The Cho belief system is suggested by their myths about the creation of the earth, human creation, the relation between the creator god and humans, life after death, and so on. As the Cho people traditionally did not have writing, only elder people know these myths well, as they memorized them. Here I will discuss the traditional stories regarding origins of the universe, human creation, and life after death that I learned from my informants, and also from a few written sources that were produced recently. These stories help us to understand the concepts of god, heaven, hell, spirits, sacrifices, and offerings in traditional Cho society.

In traditional Cho cosmology, there was a creator god called Khanmhnammu in the Dai dialect. *Khan* means “higher place,” *mhnamm* mean “create,” and *nu* means “greatness” or sometimes “female.” In Mүн, the deity is called Khanpuhgui. *Puhgui* means “grandfather,” so the term means something like “grandfather from above.”

Khanmhnammu is understood as the supreme god who lives in Mawpi-khaw (Heaven).⁶ Cho Chin people believed that Khanmhnammu (or Khanpuhgui) created the universe, the earth, and human beings. He sent humans down to earth to produce descendants to populate the world. Humans were sent to hunt in the forests and to manage the land and living things, according to Naing Om. They were supposed to have many descendants and to have lots of sacrifices and festivals. However, life on earth was full of difficulties and human lives were short. (Life on earth was referred to as *hnupak khaw*, *mthanak gam ni*, “one-day-place-one-night-place.” One still hears this phrase at funerals, for example). Therefore, to encourage humans in their lives, Khanmhnammu prepared a place in Mawpi-khaw (Heaven) where they could live forever after they died.

According to oral tales, at the beginning of time, Khanmhnammu suspended the earth in the atmosphere with only three iron ropes. That is why human beings’ lives were short. However, the creator god hung Mawpi-khaw with eleven iron-ropes, beyond the space of the earth.⁷

At first, the earth was not a good place for humans to live because of the rough, dangerous terrain. To prepare the land, the creator sent his assistant Ksui Khaw Ksep with a big iron tool to make the land flat and smooth (Hlung Hung, 2013). However, as he was doing this, deceitful spirits named Ksung Im Kui and Nglak Lawng Mnai came to him and tried to distract him from his task. First, they lied that his child had passed away. However, he did not care and replied that he could have more children, and he kept on

6. The name Mawpi-khaw was used for “Heaven” in the traditional belief of Cho people. It refers to a place where people with good character arrive after death. After conversion to Christianity, the Cho people began to use Khan-khaw for “Heaven.” The Cho people rejected the old words that represented traditional beliefs after they converted.

7. I remember in about 1994, we felt an earthquake in our village. Everyone began shouting and exclaiming to Khanmhnammu. I learned from my mother that Khanmhnammu was testing to see if human beings were still living on the earth or not. If we failed to shout, the earth would be destroyed. She explained that the earth shook easily because it was hung with only three iron ropes.

shaping the earth. Then the spirits said, “Your wife has passed away; you must go back now.” However, he replied, “I can get a new wife,” and carried on with his work. The two bad spirits came again and said, “Your parents have also died.” This time, Ksui Khaw Ksep thought, “My parents are like god. I can never replace them, so I must go back.” Before he left, he quickly waved the iron tool to finish the work and make the rest of the hilly mountains flat, but his work was incomplete. As a result, Chin land has many mountains, but we can see some flat areas in between the mountain ranges. Following Ksui Khaw Ksep's work, various plants began to grow and animals arrived at the command of the creator. This story teaches us that while the creator god loved humans and wanted to make the earth a good place to live, the spirits were deceitful and worked against god's wishes.

In traditional Cho belief, there were many spirits on earth. They were named according to their respective locations. A spirit that lives at a big tree is a tree spirit, a spirit at a stone was a stone spirit (or cave spirit), a spirit that lived along the stream was known as a stream spirit, a spirit in the mountain was named mountain spirit, and so on (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014). There were also the two powerful spiritual beings mentioned in the previous story named Ksung Im Kui and Nglak Lawng Mnai. They could change themselves into various forms, so they were considered the masters of the spirits (Mar Ling, 2005). In Cho oral traditions, the spirits always try to mislead human beings and persuade them to do wrong things.

Regarding the arrival of humans on earth, my informants who were from different tribes had somewhat different versions of the story. My Dai informants related the story as follows:

Pang Long Yang Kui was the first man sent by the creator god to live on earth and look after the all creatures, plants, and animals. Khanmhnammu told him to build a fire and make smoke to signal his arrival. However, after he arrived on earth, Pang Long Yang Kui was trapped by the spirit beings Ksung Im Kui and Nglak Lawng Mnai and killed. After waiting for the signal for six days, Khanmhnammu sent his pet dogs to inquire about the situation. Learning

what happened, Khanmhnammu commanded the bad spirits Ksung Im Kui and Nglak Lawng Mnai to return the bones of the man they killed.

At first, Ksung Im Kui and Nglak Lawng Mnai did not want to return the bones of the first man and kept them, but the creator god ordered them, 'Unless you give back the bones of the man, I will cause trouble for you.' Afterwards, the bones were returned to the creator.

When the creator received the bones, he recreated the man to send him to earth again. The recreated man requested Khanmhnammu not to send him to the earth again because of the difficulties he had experienced. Instead of going to earth, he wanted to stay in Mawpi-khaw (Heaven) where Dim Long Sham Kui was. (Dim Long Sham Kui was also created by Khanmhnammu to live in Mawpi-khaw.) However, the creator god explained to Pang Long Yang Kui that he had to get married and have descendants on earth. He would live only a short period of time on earth and then he would return to Mawpi-khaw. Pang Long Yang Kui accepted this.

The recreated Pang Long Yang Kui returned to earth. He told Khanmhnammu that he did not want to live alone. Khanmhnammu told him to hug his knees as his wife and lover and he would receive a partner. By embracing his knees, Pang Long Yang Kui got a woman and they were the first family in the world, according to the Dai creation story. (interviews with Bu Paing and Mnai Xung, 2014)

U Naing Om (of the Mön tribe) told me a different and longer version of the story, in which the first human does several things against the creator-god's wishes, including sleeping with a woman before receiving permission to marry and performing a sacrifice with a deer instead of a mithun. He does all these things because of suggestions from a bad spirit. U Naing Om told me:

The creator god was very sorry about the beloved human's acts, and the sadness of the creator caused darkness to cover the whole world. The creator's tears caused a flood. That situation was called *tui jin müki*, *mliktui phuki* ("water-

weather-dark, river-flood”). Then the man regretted his actions, begging Khanmhnammu for a pardon. The creator-god heard the man’s confessions and forgave his inappropriate sacrifice. Then the sun appeared again. From that time on, the man and his descendants made their sacrifices carefully, and man and the creator-god had a good relationship again.

However, because of this, the bad spirits that govern the world became jealous. They killed the man, and when the creator god asked for the man’s bones, the spirits refused. Then there was fighting among the spirits and the creator god. Eventually, the spirits took out the bones they were keeping. At that time, the creator god asked all the animals to bring the bones to him. Among all the animals, only Vakok, the great hornbill, promised the creator to bring back the man’s bones.

True to his promise, Vakok carried the bones back to the creator. Because of this, Khanmhnammu was pleased and commended Vakok as an admirable, loyal animal.⁸

The creator received the bones of the first man and made him a human again. Khanmhnammu embellished the new man with new clothing, a headdress with feathers, and so on. Khanmhnammu was happy and made a great feast by killing animals, calling angels, playing music, dancing, shouting, and exclaiming with joy the success over death. (interview with U Naing Om, 2014)

In Cho oral traditions, there are stories that explain the origins of Cho funerary rites. In traditional Cho practice, the dead body is cremated. After cremation, people collect the bones of the dead and put them into an earthen pot, which is then set inside a *lungsum*, a stone circle with a flat stone set on top. Mnai Xung and Pi Bu Paing (both of the Dai tribe) told me the story of the first funeral. They explained:

8. Vakok, the great hornbill, is the Chin national symbol.

The first man, Pang Long Yang Kui, and his family lived happily on earth for many years. But then, unfortunately, Pang Long Yang Kui experienced the death of his son. He had no idea what to do. He asked Khanmhnammu, 'What should I do with this dead body of my son?' The creator told him to cremate his dead son and put the remaining bones in a clay pot. He also told him to have a great feast by killing animals and preparing *ju* (beer).

Pang Long Yang Kui followed Khanmhnammu's instructions. Then he asked the creator god, 'What shall I do with these bones?' The creator instructed the man to build a *lung-sum*, a flat stone set on top of a circle of rounded stones. Built in this way, there is space under the flat stone and the middle of the circled stones. Pang Long Yang Kui put the bones of his dead son into a clay pot and the pot was placed into the *lung-sum* and then closed. (interviews with Bu Paing and Mnai Xung, 2014)

According to U Naing Om, the *lung-sum* stones symbolized the creator god. Putting the human bones into the pot represented the short lifespan of a human on earth, while putting the earthen pot into the tomb represented the spirit returning to the creator, just as in the story of the first man on earth.

Regarding the afterlife, Cho people believe there are two possible places for the spirits of dead people. They are Mawpi-khaw and Kyepi-khaw.⁹ Mawpi-khaw is known as a good and happy place, very similar to Heaven in Christian belief. People with good character who prepared many mithun festivals during their lives will arrive here after death. On the other hand, Kyepi-khaw is a terrible place filled with hunger, torture, and cruelty, like Hell in Christian belief. People who made no sacrifices or ceremonies, and those who lacked sympathy and exploited others, would go to that place after death.

Cho people believe in Mawpi-khaw, but there are many steps or

9. In Cho cosmology, there are three places or realms. They are Ngthim-khaw (earth), Mawpi-khaw (a happy place), and Kyepi-khaw (painful place).

obstacles to reach there. After death, every human spirit must cross a great, dark region. They are confronted by two guardians, named Tui Xung Ling, guardian of the river, and Lam Kham Mnai, guardian of the path, and human spirits must ask them for permission to pass. Moreover, there are two roads for spirits to cross: one leads directly to Mawpi-khaw but is rough and full with brush, while the other road looks clear but is a place of ogres that will give the spirit trouble. In Cho funeral rites, there are various rituals to help the spirit of the dead face these obstacles and make their way to Mawpi-khaw. (Cho funerals are further described in chapter four.)

At the last gate to Mawpi-khaw, there is a checkpoint guarded by a female spirit called Mawnuawi. She is an old lady with a powerful whip made of thorns in her hand. She knows about the behaviors, activities, attitudes, morality, and charity of the people when they lived on earth and she decides whether it is appropriate for their spirits to reach Mawpi-khaw or not. She knows the past and present of the spirits and can decide their futures. She also refuses permission to the spirit of a person who died by an accident or violent death.

Mithun Festivals: The *Lokawh-Segawh*

Cho people believe that they have long history with mithun. Mithun are referred to in the oral presentations of Cho elders about the coming of human beings to earth. The old myths say that Khanmhnammu gave mithun to the first family so they could hold a sacrifice for the creator. The sacrifice was an important communication with the creator god, Khanmhnammu. A mithun sacrifice was a relationship between Cho people and the creator god.

According to U Naing Om, mithun festivals originated as “pure sacrifices” to Khanmhnammu. Khanmhnammu ordered man to make sacrifices by killing and then burning animals so that the smell of the sacrifice would reach to heaven. He said:

Sacrificed mithun had to be burned until the whole body was transformed to ash. These mithun sacrifices were only

made on the highest mountain in the region. The reason for doing the sacrifice on the top of the mountain was because it was the nearest region to god. In that way, the mithun essence would arrive to god, Khanmhnammu... After several generations, instead of burning the whole body, people began to cook and eat the flesh and burned only the mithun bones. (interview with U Naing Om, 2014)

According to U Naing Om, the original purpose of the sacrifice was to ask the creator to forgive our misdeeds. However, later, when people began to eat the meat, it was no longer a sacrifice of confession and became a festival to earn higher social status.

My other informants emphasized other features of mithun festivals in traditional Cho society. There were several different kinds of mithun festivals (as I will discuss below), but the most common and popular kind of mithun festival was called *lokawh-se* (or *lokawh-segawh*). “*Lokawh*” means to carry stone, and “*se*” refers to mithun. A *lokawh-se* festival was held when a family wanted to erect a *lung-sum*. As I said, the *lung-sum* was the place where a family would put a burial pot with the bones of a deceased family member after cremation. A *lung-sum* cannot be built unless a mithun is sacrificed, so whenever one sees a *lung-sum*, one knows that there was a great mithun festival.

Erecting a *lung-sum* tomb and holding a *lokawh-se* were very important because every dead person had to be cremated and their bones collected into a pot and placed under such a tomb. If a family did not hold the mithun festival to build the *lung-sum*, then when someone died, the person’s family would have to request to place the pot with bones in the *lung-sum* of relatives. So, every family tried to make *lokawh segawh* at least one or two times, as an obligation to the community.

U Om Yo explained to me that holding a *lokawh segawh* was necessary to have complete human status in the society.

If they didn’t hold a *lokawh segawh*, a family would not be thought as a family with human dignity or complete humanity. *Lokawh segawh* was very important for every family in the community. A family that had not celebrated

lokawh segawh was looked down on in the community. There were community events where people, especially men, could not join in if they had not held a *lokawh segawh* feast. So, every family tried to achieve that status by holding the festival at least once in their lives. (interview with U Om Yo, 2014)

If a family wanted to hold a *lokawh segawh* festival, they had to prepare for a year in advance. It was a costly event.¹⁰ In addition to providing a mithun, the family had to have other animals, such as pigs and chickens, and they had to prepare rice and traditional pots of beer (*ju*) for the great feast. The head of the sacred leaders, called *ngtaiyü*; the leader skilled in divination and prophecy, called *püiktu-ngtaiyü*, and the community chief, called *pikhawng ngnamtai*, were consulted to determine the appropriate date for the event. Once decided, the family would make a sign by erecting a wooden post in front of the house to show that a feast would be celebrated in the coming summer at that house. Every family in the village and relatives from other villages would be invited.

Then the father of that family would search for an appropriate flat stone near the stream. That stone would have to be carried by the people in the community to the *lung-sum* site, a relatively flat area near the village. The family also had to level the ground near their house for festival activities such as cooking, dancing, shooting arrows, and so on. About one month prior to the *lokawh-segawh* festival date, people, especially women and youths, would help the family by pounding paddy to prepare rice and also searching for fire wood. These activities were wonderful for girls and boys in the community.

10. Using today's prices, we can say the festival cost more than \$1,000 USD in total. A mithun cost more than \$400 USD, and there were other expenses for the feast including animals such as pigs, chickens, and for rice, traditional beer, and so on.

Figure 5 A mithun tied at the *sepawng*, soon to be killed



The *lokawh-segawh* lasted, on average, four days.¹¹ On the first day, *püiktu-ngtaiyü* made a divination for the beginning of the feast and *ngtaiyü* had to pray to Khanmhnammu. Some people made decorations for the family's house, while others went to the forest to get beautiful *hleng* branches to decorate the grounds around the house. On the second day, some men built forked wooden posts, called *sepawng*, where they would tie the mithun and pigs that would be killed. Some people who were expert in catching mithun would go to the forest and catch the animals. The *sepawng* were carved with traditional signs. These *sepawng* were very common in Cho communities, and people would count the number of *sepawng* in front of houses to know how many mithun feasts had been celebrated by the family. Also on the second day,

11. There were some differences among tribes, clan, and dialect groups. Some celebrated mithun feasts for four or five days. When I was a child (around 1997), I experienced a mithun feast that lasted only three days.

püktu- ngtaiyü, the father of the family and others in the village, including youths, would go to the stream to carry back to the house the big, flat stone they would use for the *lung-sum*. At the stream, the leaders sacrificed a chicken they brought with them, to appease the stream spirit for removing the stone. Some people played traditional instruments for dancing.

On the third day, work started early in the morning. A pig had to be killed for breakfast. Then people starting dancing one after another with traditional cloth on their shoulders. They danced the whole day long. People also told their family stories, especially about their ancestors' success in hunting and the mithun festivals they had held in the past. They played traditional instruments such as gongs, *lengla* (a kind of flute), and drums until it was time to kill the mithun. Before killing the mithun, people would dance in a line near the *sepawng* where the mithun was tied. The father of the family who was hosting the feast would also dance and proudly proclaim that, as he was able to host this celebration, he was a true man, not weak, but able to carry a stone and make a feast.

The music would stop momentarily when it was time to kill the mithun. Elder people who knew how and where to aim killed the mithun with arrows. When the mithun was dead, people would say words of praise. According to U Om Yo, they said things like:

'Oh, valued mithun, your goodness is here for us today. We take your life not because of a lack of sympathy but because of the work to be done for human beings. Please bring good fortune to our land and our family so we will be able to have more mithun in the future.' (interview with U Om Yo, 2014)

At the same time, people who were related the family would put valuable clothes and ornaments such as necklaces and bracelets on the mithun's dead body while others played a traditional dirge and told stories about the traditional relationship between mithun and humans. Then, people in the family lined up in a row, elder to younger. *Ng taiyü* would daub the foreheads of the people with the mithun blood, and he would bless the family to be healthy and prosperous.

Figure 6 Mphonim village: *lung-sum*, stone tombs used to hold pots of human bones



In the evening, people who were interested in hearing the genealogy of the host family climbed into the house. The father of that family, or a relative who really understood and could explain the genealogy from long ago to the present spoke to everyone. He explained which forefathers celebrated mithun festivals and which ones were expert in hunting and killed many wild animals. He explained that “we are a clan that completes our obligation as human beings”, and so on. Other people who joined the ceremony would also explain about each of their forefathers and what kinds of brave and respected persons were in their clan-group. A lot of people wanted to talk about their particular clan-group. It was a competition of knowledge. Youths listened to the words and practiced so that they would be able recite the stories when they were older. It was a learning method of the Cho community. At night, the head of mithun that had been killed that morning was hung on the wall of the house and men danced with knives in their hands in front of the mithun head.

The fourth day would be spent building the *lung-sum* at the site near the village and eating the rest of the mithun meat. Participants would also eat some meat from the head. To erect the *lung-sum*, rounded stones were set first and then the flat stone from the stream was put on those stones, so there was a hole or space underneath. That hole was where the burial pot would go.

In the evening, men and women would sing traditional songs and poems about the history and legends of *lung-sum*. At the same time, the performer of the song or story would hold and slowly drink a cup of *ju* (traditional beer). Some meat would be distributed to all households in the village. *Ngтайү* would get special meat from the animal, for example the liver and other prized parts of the mithun. At night, only the leaders and relatives of the family were at the host family's house. The sacred leader *ngтайү* would pray to the creator god Khanmhnammu and bless the family that hosted the festival.

An important part of the mithun feast was erecting the *sepawng* that was carved with traditional symbols. The carved symbols represented the Cho story of creation. For instance, there was a circle that represented the earth. There were some spots in the middle of the carving which represented the Cho people as they were from the middle of the earth. The carving would be done by skilled elders in the village. The carving represented a promise and a relationship with the creator god since long ago.

Cho people erected these *sepawng* whenever they held mithun festivals. If a family had held lots of mithun feasts, they would have many *sepawng* in front of their house. Having many *sepawng* indicated a family with a high social status.

Figure 7 After the mithun festival is finished, the heads of mithuns are tied and hung where they were killed.



Other Kinds of Mithun Festivals

Mithun festivals were held for many occasions in Cho society. There were several kinds of mithun festivals, each with its own reason and meaning. Mithun festivals always involved a big feast for the whole community.

There were five main kinds of mithun festival: *lokawh-se*, *khawkheik-se*, *imbawi-se* (or *ngthatha-se*), *yawksun-se*, and *phung-se* (*se* means “mithun”). I have already described *lokawh-se*, and I will discuss the others here briefly.

Khawkheik-se was a mithun festival celebrated for the purpose of blessing a new plot of farmland. *Khawkheik* means “sacrifice for farmland.” A *khawkheik-se* was necessary whenever a family was about to cultivate a large plot of land, more than seven acres in size, called a *khanbung*. Unlike a *lokawh-se*, a *khawkheik-se* only lasted two days. It was celebrated at home, and people in the community came to help the host family. (I will describe this festival in more detail in chapter four.)

An *imbawi-se* was held for the purpose of protecting a family's health and prosperity. *Imbawi* refers to the spirit in the home. (*Im* means "house" and *bawi* means "boss," so the *imbawi* was the boss of the house.) It was believed that if the house-spirit was happy, the family would be healthy and prosperous, so every family would try to hold this sacrifice. They could hold this festival even if there was no particular health problem or misfortune. It was very common for a new couple to hold an *imbawi-se* to be prosperous in the future.

On the other hand, a *ngthatha-se* was held if someone in the community was suffering pain or illness (*ngthatha* means to submit or send a sacrificial offering, especially in the case of illness). The sacred leader called *püiktu-ngtaiyü* would make a divination to determine the cause of the pain or illness and what sacrifice was necessary, such as pig, chicken, dog, goat or mithun. If a mithun was killed, the event was called *ngthatha-se*.

Figure 8 Hanging skulls of mithun and wild animals at the entrance of a house in a Cho community



A *yawksum-se* was a mithun festival held as part of a funeral service. *Yawksum* means "animal that is killed for a funeral." Various animals were killed and eaten at funeral services. However, slaughtering a mithun was a way to show how important and respected the deceased person was. A family that held a *yawksum-segawh* was thought to have a high social status. In addition, it was believed that sacrificing the animal at the funeral service would bring benefit for the person's journey in the afterlife.

A *phung-se* was a very interesting mithun festival held to appoint or recognize a new religious leader such as *ngtaiyu* or *püktu-ngtaiyü* ("*phung*" means appointing or recognizing). The *phung-se* was a collective festival. Usually the cost would be shared by the whole community, but sometimes the family of the religious leader would donate the mithun. A *phung-segawh* only lasted one day and there was not as much dancing and performing as at the other festivals. A *phung-se* festival had to be held whenever a new sacred leader appeared or was appointed by the community. After the *phung-se*, the person was legitimized and his status became higher than ordinary people.

4

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CHO COMMUNITIES

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, many theologians assume that Cho people were animists prior to Christianity. I am not convinced that this is correct. One problem with the “animism” label is that it does not recognize the importance of the creator god Khanmhnammu in traditional Cho cosmology and ritual practices.¹² Another point I would like to make is that in traditional culture, social unity was sacred in itself. Studying the culture, I have found many features that are not based on belief in spirits. There were many collective activities, shared values and practices in the society. I would like to propose that the traditional social structure itself was sacred.

Rather than discussing the belief system directly, in this chapter I will explain how the Cho social structure functioned. An important feature of Cho social structure was the system of leadership, which will be the main feature of this chapter.

In a Cho Village, there were two groups of leaders who managed and led the community. First, there was a group of spiritual

12. According to U Naing Om, the essence of traditional Cho belief was not worshipping spirits (animism), but rather valuing and loving the creator god Khanmhnammu. Cho people hoped to be delivered to the creator god after death. It is true that Cho people invited spirits at sacrifices, but this was to avoid the harm, sickness, and bad luck that spirits brought to the community, not because of worshipping them.

specialists known as *ngtaiyü*. They had a special ability to communicate with the creator god Khanmhnammu and with spirits, so one can think of them as like shamans. The *ngtaiyü* leaders were vital for the community and essential for accomplishing all the village's many activities. They led the necessary sacrifices and gave orders and suggestions about all community activities related to farming, hunting, marriages, funerals, illnesses, and so on.

The second group of leaders were those with special skills in fighting and hunting. The head of this group was called *pikhawng ngnapmtai*. These leaders' main responsibilities were providing security for the community and leading the community in collective activities such as hunting, fishing, and farming. They guided, corrected, and encouraged the people in the community to follow the orders and discipline of the *ngtaiyü* leaders.

I will discuss the roles and responsibilities of these various leaders in the community, the sources of their authority, the activities they were involved in, and how they worked together to manage the whole community. Exploring how leadership worked helps us to understand the most important, sacred values of traditional Cho society.

The Authority of the *Ngtaiyü* Leaders

A *ngtaiyü* is a special person who can communicate with the creator god Khanmhnammu and with spirits—hence, similar to a shaman. When the *ngtaiyü* performed a sacrifice, he invited the spirits to join and accept the offerings. *Ngtaiyü* could do spiritual things that ordinary people could not do. Along with special access to the spiritual realm, *ngtaiyüs* were also rich in traditional knowledge. They knew clan genealogy, traditional folksongs and tales, and how to perform rituals. The *ngtaiyüs* were highly respected and people in the Cho community listened to their orders and suggestions about everything.

My informant U Naing Om, who is from the Mön tribe, told me that his grandfather was a *ngtaiyü*. “It was believed that he had a relationship with Khanmhnammu. So, everybody in the village

followed his commands and orders,” he said. U Naing Om explained that *ngtaiyü* received messages from Khanmhnammu in dreams or in visions during day time. *Ngtaiyüs’* voices were powerful and people listened because it was considered sacred truth. *Ngtaiyü* leaders had to use their abilities and their messages from the creator god to help people and to work for the betterment of the community. According to Kui Xung, people could not quarrel with any *ngtaiyü*, because if they did, bad luck and bad things would arrive to the community.

The *ngtaiyü* leaders performed their duties as a committee. There were four members of the *ngtaiyü* group, and the specific skill or ability of each member could be understood by the prefix attached to their title. The four members were: (1) *ngtaiyü*, the head of the group, who was generally the most powerful and involved in most activities; (2) *khaw-ngtaiyü*, who specialized in the rituals associated with farming activities; (3) *mkyā-ngtaiyü* who was responsible for funeral rituals, to help the deceased move on to the afterlife; and (4) *püiktu-ngtaiyü*, the spiritual specialist who performed divination to determine the causes of illnesses and do healing.

I asked my informants how people became *ngtaiyü* leaders. As my informants are from different tribes, they had different experiences and practices. Informants from the Dai tribe emphasized that a *ngtaiyü* leader was chosen by the people in the community. However, U Naing Om, from the Mön tribe, and Naing Mtup, from the Ngra tribe, explained that, in their communities, *ngtaiyü* had to come from a particular clan. It was an inherited position that passed down from generation to generation.

Mnai Xung and Thang Naing Kok, both from the Dai tribe, explained that *ngtaiyü* was vital for the community and without him the community would not be able to function. A person who became a *ngtaiyü* was not an ordinary person, but someone with special abilities. This person had to know how to communicate with the spiritual realm, be an expert in traditional beliefs, have a higher social status, and recognize morality. He had to help and care for the poor in the community, have knowledge in speaking, and be good at prayers and giving blessings.

They explained that a *ngtaiyü* was nominated by people in the community based on his qualifications. Each community and village had to choose its own *ngtaiyü* leaders and the *ngtaiyü* had to be from that local community. After being nominated, the person was confirmed and legitimated with a big sacrificial feast called the *phung-se* (as previously mentioned, *phung* means “appointing” or “recognizing” and *se* means mithun). With this ritual, the person gained the authority to lead the community. Afterwards, he was recognized as a legitimate *ngtaiyü*, a respected sacred leader of the community.

However, the process was different in other tribes. According to Naing Om (Mün tribe) and Naing Mtup (Ngra tribe), in their tribes, a *ngtaiyü* always came from a particular clan. U Naing Om emphasized that the clan was appointed to the role by the creator god, Khanmhnammu. However, the individual still had to have the various characteristics of a *ngtaiyü* as mentioned above. If a person who inherited the *ngtaiyü* position lacked the skills and knowledge, he would be recognized as *ngtaiyü*, but someone from another clan or even another village would be asked to come and lead the sacrifices and activities instead.

In the Mün and Ngra tribes, as among the Dai people, a *phung-se* festival was performed to appoint the new sacred leader for the community. That festival had to be performed whenever a new *ngtaiyü* appeared or was appointed. An older *ngtaiyü* and also community chiefs would lead the activity.

As I mentioned in chapter three, the *phung-se* celebration was a bit different from other mithun feasts. It took only two days and people did not do as much dancing or singing. Sometimes, the cost of the *phung-se* celebration was shared collectively by the whole village, and sometimes the family of the new *ngtaiyü* would host the *phung-se* ceremony.

The Responsibilities of *Ng taiyü*

The Cho Chin people made many ritual sacrifices during the course of their daily lives. Sacrifices were crucial for the success of the activities of families and the community. *Ng taiyü* leaders

prayed and blessed the people, forests, and farmlands through sacrifices. There were different ways to perform sacrifices, and different animals—such as mithun, pigs, goats, dogs, and chickens—were killed, depending on the ritual's specific purpose. Sacrifices might be performed for the whole community in association with collective activities, or for particular families, for example, to bless their farm lands, to help someone recover from sickness, or to bring the family prosperity.

U Naing Om told me that without good words or a blessing from *ngtaiyü*, people in the community could not start any kind of work. It was strictly prohibited. *Ng taiyü* usually made the blessing at a sacrifice. Someone else in the community would kill the chicken or pig and the *ngtaiyü* would speak. If someone broke this rule, for example going to farm or building a house without the *ngtaiyü*'s blessing, then bad things like accidents, violent deaths, irregular weather, or diseases would arrive to the community.

The *ngtaiyü* was a very important part of marriage activities. It was believed that his blessing of the couple made a family prosperous and happy. As mentioned in chapter three, marriages involved great feasts for which the bride's family killed two pigs and the groom's family provided dogs and chickens. At this celebration activity, the *ngtaiyü* was responsible for blessing the new couple by reciting traditional words. Then, he took the blood of a pig and daubed the foreheads of the new couple.

Another activity at the marriage feast was the offering of meat to *imbawi-nu* (female house spirit; *nu* means female). The *ngtaiyü* placed a few pieces of cooked meat including liver at the *imbawi-nu* shrine which was built at the corner of the house.¹³ Both the bride's and groom's families had to give some meat or chicken to the *ngtaiyü* for his services.

There was one *ngtaiyü* in the community who was the head of spiritual affairs and took a leading role in all sacrifices. However, as mentioned, there were other *ngtaiyü* members, namely *khaw-*

13. My informants did not mention about offerings for Khanmhnammu during marriage activities.

ngtaiyü, *püktu-ngtaiyü*, and *mkya-ngtaiyü*, who specialized in rituals associated with farming, healing, and funerals, respectively. Now I will discuss some of main categories of ritual activity in Cho society, beginning with the rituals associated with farming, and then healing and later funeral ritual activities. Later I will discuss the roles and responsibilities of the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs.

Rituals Associated with Farming: *Khawceng* and *Khawkheik*

Sacrificial activities were an essential element in the traditional Cho system of shifting cultivation (*klouma*). Sacrifices were required at every stage of the agricultural cycle: when the community was dividing up farmlands, planting crops, celebrating new crops, at harvest time, and so on. *Ngtaiyü* and *khaw-ngtaiyü* were mainly responsible for these activities.

At the start of the cycle in approximately in January or February, Cho community members held the *khawceng*, which was a community meeting to select and distribute new farmlands. The *khawceng* activity took place at a flat area in the village. When the *khawceng* meeting was finished, the next activity was a blessing for the farmland in order to ensure good weather, avoid accidents, and have a bountiful harvest. On that day, the *ngtaiyü* led the spiritual activities. Some youths had to go to the farming land and bring back plants and leaves so *ngtaiyü* could pray effectively. People in the community would also kill an animal like a pig or goat and eat it together for dinner. It was a community event and everyone shared the expenses.

After the *khawceng* was over, families held individual sacrifices for their specific plots of farmland. Sacrifices for farmlands are called *khawkheik*. Each family would hold a *khawkheik* if they could afford it. Families would slaughter animals like pigs, dogs, goats, or even a mithun if their plot of farmland was very large. Mostly, the *khaw-ngtaiyü* led these processes, but other *ngtaiyü* leaders would also be involved. The *ngtaiyü* presided over the sacrifice of the animals, and special meat—that is, the more highly prized parts—from the sacrifice was set aside and prepared for him, like

a payment for his services. Relatives and family members had to join the sacrifice ceremony, while other families in the village could come to the event if they were invited. Everyone ate the meat from the sacrifice.

On that day, as part of the *khawkheik* sacrifice, some people (including *ngtaiyü*) had to go to the family's newly arranged plot of farmland to bring back pieces of wood, plants, leaves, grass, and so on. *Ng taiyü* or *khaw-ngtaiyü* would coat these pieces with the sacrificed animal's blood. The blood-coated plant material would then be kept at the family's house for the whole year. *Ng taiyü* invited spirits to give favor to the family, and not to harm the family members or their animals. It was believed that the spirits were pleased by the blood from the sacrifice. *Ng taiyü* or *khaw-ngtaiyü* also took the blood of the sacrificed animal and daubed the foreheads of the family members.

Hning Kui, a Dai lady from Pusa village, explained to me that it was especially important to perform *khawkheik* sacrifices when a family's farmland was quite large, over seven acres (called *khanbung*¹⁴), or if the farmland was considered a place of spirits. If a family tried to farm in a spirit-occupied area without doing any sacrifice, bad things like accidents and violent deaths would happen to the family or in the community, she explained (interview with Hning Kui, 2014). For some plots of land, it was necessary to perform sacrifices each year, because spirits were believed to occupy those farmlands. However, some farmlands could be cultivated without doing the *khawkheik* sacrifice.

Families that received a large plot (*khanbung*) at the beginning of the farming year certainly had to perform a sacrifice for it. For such a large plot of land, the family would usually sacrifice a mithun, and perhaps a pig as well. If the family could not afford to slaughter a mithun, it was acceptable to sacrifice only pigs or dogs. If the sacrifice was a mithun, the ceremony was called *khawkheik-se*, but the activities were not so different from the other *khawkheik*.

14. Hning Kui explained that two acres of farmland is called *hmungca*, around five acres is known as *hmungnu*, and a plot that is over seven acres is called *khanbung* (interview, 2014).

The purpose was to prevent spirits from causing harm by offering blood and raw meat to the spirits and cooked meat to Khanmhnammu, the creator god. The ritual was intended to bring good weather, to bless the land and ensure its productivity, and to pray for the wellbeing of the family for the whole year.

Ceasing Activities: The *Sawjeik*

In the agricultural cycle, another important event was the *sawjeik*, a special period of time in which people were not supposed to work or do any outside activity at all, and they were supposed to stay quiet. The *sawjeik* was generally during the hot season, at the end of May, before the first rains came. The specific start and end-times were determined by *ngtaiyü*. The *ngtaiyü* announced it in advance so that people could prepare food to eat. The *sawjeik* days were difficult to observe because of many restrictions, and preparing for these days was hard for a family.

My informants told me that in the ancient times, Cho people used to spend twenty days at home for *sawjeik*, but later, they started counting twenty-four hours as two days (including day and night), and the number of days of *sawjeik* became fewer. Some villages observed it for nine or ten days, and some for only five or six days. I also learned that if someone passed away during the period, the *sawjeik* could be ended early by the authority of *ngtaiyü* (interview with Naing Om, 2013).

Sawjeik was sacred time for Cho people. *Saw* means “weather” and *jeik* means “prohibition.” According to Naing Om, the *sawjeik* period was a sign of human beings’ relationship with Khanmhnammu through keeping quiet and not doing anything. However, Mnai Xung mentioned that Cho people could go hunting before the end of the *sawjeik* period, but they could not butcher and eat the animals during that time. Kui Xung told me that the purpose of *sawjeik* was to bring good fortune to the community in terms of healthy crops, good weather, and general health in the community.

It is interesting to note that when I asked about the meaning of the *sawjeik* period, none of my informants talked about spirits. In my

view, the *sawjeik* period is a good example of the community acting together as a collective, which is their highest value.

Another one-day *sawjeik* was observed later in the agricultural cycle, just at the time that cultivated plants became ready to eat. This *sawjeik* was for the purpose of asking Khanmhnammu for permission to eat the new crops. That activity occurred mostly in June when the crops or vegetables were ripe enough to eat.

Ngtaiyü always announced the *sawjeik* day in advance so that the families could prepare and also warn their children. If someone violated the rules—for example, if a child ate some fruit or vegetable in the field—before the end of the *sawjeik*, then *ngtaiyü* would end the *sawjeik* as soon as he heard that news. No family kept it secret. The reason is, if the rule was broken, misfortune would come to the village, like disease, accidents, or attacks by wild animals. Also, when these bad things occurred, *ngtaiyü* and *pikhawng ngnapmtai* would make inquiries and learn what had happened. People preferred to inform the leaders right away if the rules were broken.

Harvest Rituals

Another important ceremony occurred at the end of the harvest time when people moved back to their homes in the village, carrying their crops, after several months of living in huts on their farms. At that time, all the villagers celebrated with a big sacrificial feast called *mdumkui-phung*. *Mdumkui* means “sacred place” and *phung* means “plant.” Each village had a sacred place where the sacrifice was offered, typically a special tree. On that day, animals like mithuns or pigs were killed at the sacred place. People would also bring eggs to give to the *ngtaiyü* to offer to the spirits by hanging them in the *mdumkui* tree. The *ngtaiyü* would coat the *mdumkui* tree with the blood of the sacrifice. The *ngtaiyü* prayed using an ancient language, traditional songs, and proverbs. Ordinary people could not understand or speak the ancient language. The ritual was to offer thanks to the spirits and to the creator god, Khanmhnammu.

Community Gathering at the New Year

In traditional Cho society, the new year was celebrated in the winter season around the month of January. Naing Om told me how the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders and the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs would announce the event to the community. They would say: 'Today we all have to travel to the stream. We will celebrate a great festival, dance, eat special foods, and be happy. Please join without fail.' People would shout, 'If anyone in the village doesn't go to the stream, they will face bad things and be in trouble' (interview with Naing Om, 2014).

The purpose of the celebration was to purify the community for the new year by leading diseases, insects, and rodents out of the village and into the stream. *Ngtaiyü* leaders and community chiefs (*pikhawng ngnapmtai*) led the trip to the stream with orders and discipline for the people. The day before the new year celebration, each family had to take some plants and some crops they raised, as well as leaves of plants from their previous farms. In the morning of the celebration day, leaders performed a sacrifice with a pig, goat, or chicken. The animal had to be killed in the morning. After that, people began the trip to the stream. Some persons would be ordered to carry raw meat of the sacrifice and also some crops from the fields that they collected during the trip.

All the villagers, including children, had to follow the leaders. Along the way, people shouted happily to show what fun they were having, so that the insects and pests would follow them to the stream. Some people sang traditional songs and played instruments.

As the villagers approached the stream, people left the group, one by one, hiding away from the path. Finally, the remaining people arrived at the stream and threw the meat of the sacrificed animal and crops into the stream. It was believed that the spirits of the insects and pests that had followed them would stay in the area and not return to the village or farms. The people who had left the main path had to return to the village quietly, without saying anything. The villagers went back in different ways. People were not allowed to return along the main path because if they did, the insects, pests, and diseases would follow them.

As they returned to the village, everybody had to carry plants and leaves they picked so that the insect and pest spirits would not see them as they entered the village. Moreover, they needed to be quiet. When they reached their homes, they had to enter through the back side of their houses. In the evening of the next day, individual families would welcome the new year by killing animals like chickens and inviting *ngtaiyü* to share the food in order to have good conditions in the new year. These were small feasts (interview with Naing Mtup, 2014).

Healing Rituals

People in traditional Cho society had extensive knowledge of natural therapies using plants and herbs. Usually people used their own traditional healing knowledge for general illnesses. However, if an ill person's health condition failed to improve, then it was necessary for his or her family members to inform *püiktu-ngtaiyü*, the healing specialist. They requested *püiktu-ngtaiyü* to perform a divination to determine the cause of the illness, and also what sacrifice was necessary for the cure.

In Cho society, there were many restrictions and taboos. *Ngtaiyü* warned people about off-limits areas in the forest, untouchable great stones or trees, and places where one was not supposed to speak. However, sometimes people broke these taboos, perhaps entering an off-limits area unintentionally while they were practicing shifting cultivation. Cho people believed that this was the cause of certain illnesses. In such cases, *püiktu-ngtaiyü* had to perform a divination to find out exactly what happened, i.e. what violation of the discipline had occurred.

There were four kinds of divination: by ginger, bamboo, egg, or bow. Some *püiktu-ngtaiyü* only knew how to do one or two kinds of divination. Divination with egg was used for serious health problems. Divination with ginger was used when the matter was not so serious. The diviner would cut a piece of ginger root in half. Afterward, he put two pieces of ginger together on a sieve. After casting many times, he could finally make out the condition by observing the position of the ginger pieces. He could predict the

future and identify the proper animal to sacrifice (Hlung Hung, 2013).

After the cause of the disease was determined, the *püiktu-ngtaiyü* (diviner) would explain how to overcome the illness, i.e. with what kind of animal sacrifice (pig, goat, dog, or mithun). The ill person and his or her family members had to prepare the sacrifice as the *püiktu-ngtaiyü* ordered. As I mentioned in chapter three, the family might hold a *ngthatha-se*, which is a mithun festival for healing. In many cases, after the sacrifice, the ill person became better. Sometimes, however, the *püiktu-ngtaiyü* could not get any result from his divination, even if he used more than one method. In such a case, a cure was deemed impossible.

Regarding healing rituals, Naing Om emphasized that *püiktu-ngtaiyü* had a relation with the creator god, Khanmhnammu. *Püiktu-ngtaiyü* asked Khanmhnammu how to overcome the sickness or pains, and Khanmhnammu told him how to perform the sacrifice. The people knew that Khanmhnammu was very kind and good toward human beings. However, the spirits, who were the enemy of the god in Cho cosmology, were not pleased with humans' close relation with Khanmhnammu, so they brought bad things.

Sometimes, it was important for family members to find an animal of a specific color, such as red, black, white. If the family of a patient did not have an animal that color, then they had to borrow or buy it from another village. If the *püiktu ngtaiyü* said they must sacrifice a cow, it was very difficult because people in that region rarely had cattle.

Mnai Xung explained that there were two important aspects of a healing ritual. One was preparing the liver of the sacrificed animal as an offering to the creator god. Another activity was propitiating the spirit that caused the sickness by offering it raw meat and blood of the sacrificial animal, and also daubing blood on the ill person, or on his or her house, or perhaps on the tree or the part of the forest where it was believed the spirits had been disturbed.

U Naing Om explained that Khanmhnammu liked the essence of the sacrifice, which is why he was offered cooked meat. However,

spirits hungered for blood, so blood and raw meat were offered to the spirits that cause illness. The blood was needed to change the ill person's blood in order to overcome the illness.

Funerals for the Dead

While the *püktu-ngtaiyü* were responsible for leading healing rituals, *mkya-ngtaiyü* was responsible for praying and leading activities for the spirit of someone who has passed away (*mkya* means "spirit"). Funeral services were important both to comfort the family of the deceased and to ensure a good afterlife for the person who passed away.

When someone passed away, relatives had to spread that information, especially to the *ngtaiyü* leaders. In the village, it was not so difficult to learn the news as family members would shoot guns. (I remember in my village, we would know someone had passed away when we heard several gun shots.) Youths from the village would also travel on foot to other villages to inform distant relatives, which took some time.

Certain relatives of the deceased person were responsible for preparing the body, washing his or her face, and changing the clothes to prepare the spirit to travel to Mawpi-khaw (Heaven). The corpse was laid in the house on the opposite side from where the family slept. A long bamboo rod was hung above the head of the dead in order to hang traditional colorful blankets and valuable ornaments or tools. If the dead person was a man, they would put guns, bows, and arrows near the corpse; if the dead one was a woman, the materials would be bangles and necklaces. By looking at these goods, one could determine easily if the family was rich or poor. If the family did not have enough material to put near the corpse, sometimes relatives would help because the spirit needed these goods to be honored and respected in Mawpi-khaw.

When *mkya-ngtaiyü* arrived to the family's home, several rituals would take place. A girl from the family would kill a chicken near the corpse. It was called *mkya-ai*, or "spirit-chicken." Then a male relative would kill a dog. These spirit-animals were supposed to protect the dead person along the way to Mawpi-khaw. According

to traditional belief, a large tongue (*mleiphah*) is sprawled on the road to Mawpi-khaw and it would withdraw only if disturbed by something. When the spirit of the dead person approached, the chicken would peck at the *mleiphah* and the dog would bark at it, and it would withdraw, allowing them to pass.

The selected family members also prepared specially-cooked meals, packed in leaves, for the dead person to take on his or her journey, and relatives would prepare traditional *ju* (beer). The pot of beer was called *mkya-ju* ("spirit-beer") and it was to prevent the spirit from becoming thirsty on the way. *Mkya-ngtaiyü* would sprinkle beer and water on the body, the mat where the body lay, and the slaughtered chicken and dog. Then *mkya-ngtaiyü* would pray for the dead person's spirit, sending a message to the spirit to remember how to follow the path to Mawpi-khaw.

Sacrificing animals was a very important part of the service for the dead person and the family of the dead person. People in a Cho village would notice how many animals were killed for the deceased's funeral. The more animals that were killed, the more important the person was. Also, killing many animals showed the love of the other relatives for the person who has died, as well as their ability to kill animals for funeral services. If a mithun was killed for the funeral, the event lasted four or five days, Mnai Xung told me. If no mithun was killed, the funeral service was only two or three days' long. Meanwhile, relatives would come from all over the region and they would also bring animals to slaughter. All the animals would be cooked and shared by the villagers and guests.¹⁵

Throughout the funeral period, people would stay at the house of the dead family. People must not sleep, even at night. They spent the time playing music, dancing, and singing. They would sit around the *ju-kyung* (beer pot) and recount their family's migration

15. The kinds of animals that relatives brought depended on the family lines, clan lines, and marriage lines. For example, the family of the father-in-law of the dead person would bring a dog and a chicken, whereas the nephew's family would bring a pig and traditional blankets (interview with Kui Xung). Also, there were rules about how the meat would be divided up, and which relative could eat what, again determined by kin lines and marriage lines.

routes and genealogy. It was a competition to see who could remember the most.

Women often cried near the corpse. I remember when I was a child in my village, in 1994, someone passed away. One evening, I went with my mother to the house of the deceased. I observed people, especially women, crying loudly near the dead body and saying many things to his face that I could not understand. The words that the women used near the dead person were not ordinary ways of talking. I experienced the women's crying as very sorrowful and touching to my heart. I could not control myself and my tears fell as I heard the melody of the women's voices. I returned with my mother back to our home and asked her about the reasons for the crying and what exactly the women were saying.

My mother, who was an expert in crying-words, explained that if many women were crying over a dead body, it meant that that person's life was memorable and admirable. The crying showed how much they loved this person, and how much they did not want him or her to depart. About the meaning of the words, my mother said the women told the story of how the creator god sent humans to the earth and how much he loved human beings. They also counted the kinship relations (genealogy) with the dead person, and remembered good times they had spent with him or her. Moreover, the women reminded the dead person to resist the deceptions of spirits, and to follow the right way to god in *mawpi-khaw*. (heaven). They encouraged the dead person not to be sad or lonely, to bring messages to others who had died before, and to ask Khanmhnammu to keep sending his love and kindness to the people with the blessings of good weather, luck in hunting, and so on.

If a mithun was killed, there was a special program of activities known as *pipui pyan* (*pipui* is "grandmother," while *pyan* means "create"). *Pipui* was performed by a person who was secretly chosen by *ngtaiyü*. The *pipui* represented Khanmhnammu, although *pipui* means "grandmother." No one except *ngtaiyü* and *mkyangtaiyü* knew who this person was: he was covered with black color over the whole body so that others could not recognize

him. *Pipui* would come at midnight to the house where the funeral was taking place. *Pipui* had to go around the house of the deceased seven times before entering the home. At that time, people in the house of the funeral called and shouted to the figure: “*Pipui!* Khanmhnammu! Your son is crying, come and see him!” *Pipui*, painted in black, climbed up into the house and looked and held her “son.” Someone was chosen to act like a son in the house at that time.

The people in the house were very excited and asked questions to *pipui*, for example, about the weather in the coming year and other conditions for cultivating crops. *Pipui* answered the questions in a strange voice. Afterward, the *pipui* went to the dead body and wept. She performed a sad, traditional song with deep meaning for the dead, expressing sympathy and sorrow.

My informants explained that the *pipui pyan* (“creating *pipui*”) ritual was a way for people to understand and learn about Khanmhnammu, who could not be seen in a physical way. They were comforted at the funeral by the love of the creator god. *Pipui* explained that the afterlife for this person would be full of light and also the rest of family would have success in raising livestock and growing crops. The *pipui* blessed the people and the fields, and encouraged the family of the deceased person.

The Authority of *Pikhawng Ngnapmtai* Leaders

In addition to the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders, there was a group of secular specialists who had the authority to lead the people in the community. The head of this group was called *pikhawng ngnapmtai* (in Dai). In the colonial era documents, the British officials recorded the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* as the village headman or chief. Mnai Xung, who had experience of serving in government office during the Socialist era, explained this to me. Later, he said, the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* became known in Cho communities as “*suki*” (which means “headman”).

There were four leaders in this group. In addition to the head, *pikhawng ngnapmtai*, there were three lesser chiefs: *khawdo*, *aimukyu*, and *asiyang*. These four did not have separate

responsibilities but worked together as a group. Their main responsibilities were organizing security for the community and leading the community in collective activities such as hunting, fishing and farming. They also guided and encouraged the community to follow the orders of the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders—for example, during the *sawjeik*, or in the new year purification rituals previously described.

The *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs were nominated for their positions by the people in the community. These leaders were selected for their qualifications including traditional knowledge, hunting skills, and bravery, as well as their service to others. They had to have a high social status and be good at personal communication and leadership. The *pikhawng ngnapmtai* and the other lesser chiefs in the group could order villagers (especially men) to follow and assist them for the sake of security and other collective activities. However, in other circumstances, these leaders were just normal villagers.

***Pikhawng Ngnapmtai* Leaders and Village Security**

As discussed in chapter three, security was an important issue in traditional Cho societies. Sometimes, there was fighting between villages or between communities. There was also kidnapping in the region: people could be caught and sold as slaves to other distant areas. If someone from one village or community was caught and sold, Cho Chin people practiced revenge. They took life for life, man for man, woman for woman.

Because of the danger, when Cho people wanted to travel to towns or markets to buy and sell things, they had to travel with twenty or thirty people in a group. They always carried bows and arrows, spears, and knives to protect themselves (interview with Kui Xung).

Pikhawng ngnapmtai and the other members in the group were responsible for protecting the village or community from attack. They guarded village gates to keep a potential enemy from entering, and they checked around the village if there were any strange conditions. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* members would report

to all the villagers about their findings. If they found something irregular, people in the community would be warned to be careful in their goings and comings. Sometimes people were not allowed to go to their farm fields except in groups. The *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders would go with them with weapons to protect from enemy attack. They also carried a buffalo horn to blow in order to signal a warning. In addition, *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders kept watch for wild animals like tigers that would be dangerous for people and their livestock.

Naing Om and Mnai Xung explained to me what would happen if someone guarding the gates was killed or caught by enemies, or if someone in the village went missing, presumably kidnapped by a member of another community. First, the villagers had to find out where the lost person was taken. If they knew where the kidnapped person was taken, *pikhawng ngnapmtai* called an emergency meeting. First people would solve that problem traditionally, which means the other village had to compensate the family of the lost person. If the other village or community would not compensate as asked, the community would prepare for revenge.

Pikhawng ngnapmtai and the lesser chiefs listened to the people about what they thought about the issue. Afterward, the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders made a decision about pursuing revenge. When the village or the community decided to fight back against another village or community, the people had to drink an oath of traditional beer together, called *ju-kang*, according to Mnai Xung (*kang* means "oath"). They took an oath that they would not surrender and would fight with their lives until they achieved success.

I learnt from Kui Xung and Mnai Xung that sometimes, if a village did not think they could win their revenge, they would go to a third village to request help in fighting their enemy. In such a situation, *ngtaiyü* and *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders had to make a difficult decision, whether they would go and help, or not. They were not the only decision makers: the voices of all the concerned villagers were considered. Finally, after hearing the views of the people in the community, the decision would be made by three leaders: the spiritual leader, *ngtaiyü*; *püiktu-ngtaiyü*, who was skilled in prophecy; and *pikhawng ngnapmtai*, the secular

traditional chief. If there was disagreement among the villagers, then they would not go to fight. If they helped another village to fight against an enemy, their village would receive compensation, such as land or mithuns.

Naing Om also told me how distant villages communicated with each other when something important occurred among them. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* members divided bamboo and engraved the bamboo flats with signs that they would send to the other village. Afterward, a reply would be sent back, also a sign on bamboo. Sometimes, people sent arrows in important situations.

Collective Subsistence Activities: Hunting, Fishing, and Farming

There were many communal and collective events and activities in Cho society. The most common collective activities led by *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders had to do with hunting, fishing, and farming.

Hunting was highly valued in Cho society and almost all the men had hunting skills. Men with notable hunting skills were respected, and a successful hunt would promote someone's social status. Skillful hunters were more likely to become leaders in Cho villages. They would also be invited to other families' traditional feasts and they would be offered meat and *ju* (beer) as a mark of their higher social status (interview with Mnai Xung, 2014). To be a good hunter, one needed to be knowledgeable about the local geography and skillful in choosing hunting grounds.

Hunting was pursued both individually and collectively. Individual hunting was mostly done at night: men would wait for deer and other animals at feeding sites (for example, areas with fruit). Collective hunting was done during the day, with the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders organizing activities. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* members would call men together to hunt by shouting loudly throughout the community, and at least one man from each family would join. Then *püiktu-ngtaiyü* would perform a divination ritual to learn two things: if the spirit of the forest gave them permission to hunt, and what the result would be. *Püiktu* could foresee all the

conditions in advance. Therefore, bad results could be overcome by performing a sacrifice, according to Om Yo and Dr. Baw Kung. Om Yo told me about a particular hunt he remembered.

It was in 1975. We, villagers wanted to go hunting and so *püiktu* made his divination. *Püiktu* said: 'You will be lucky today and you will kill a female deer and a male deer. Although you will shoot another deer, you will not get it.' Then, when the hunting was conducted, the hunting group killed a female deer first. Then they shot a male deer but it continued and passed by the hunting ground, although it was shot, just as *püiktu* predicted. (interview with Om Yo, 2014)

After the divination, a meeting was held to discuss the hunting grounds. Everyone could speak and raise their opinions. The plans for the hunt would be decided at the meeting in detail. After making a decision about the grounds, there would be a sacrifice for the hunt, led by *ngtaiyü* and *püiktu*. Usually, a chicken was killed. The blood would be offered to the forest spirit and the meat was cooked and eaten by leaders.

In a Cho village, people knew about each other's hunting skills. Depending on their specific skills, individuals would take different positions, such as waiting or driving. The men who participated in driving would be responsible for making the wild animals run by shouting and blowing buffalo horns. Those who were waiting would be ready to shoot the animals. At that time, there were many wild animals in the forests so almost every hunt was successful.

After the hunt, the leaders distributed the meat to the community. They gave meat to families with only women and children or where there were only elder persons who were not able to hunt by themselves. Special meat from the best part of the animal was given to *ngtaiyü* as an obligation. Then the remaining meat would be divided equally among all hunters. One of the hunters would be selected to take the head of the beast and some extra meat. That person was expected to host a celebration that night with pots of traditional *ju* (beer). All the hunters would gather at night to celebrate.

In Cho society, hunters kept count of the number of wild animals they killed and competed with one another to show off their hunting skills. The hunter who hosted the celebration would hang the skull of the beast on the wall of his house. Young hunters were ordered by leaders to send meat to the families who were not able to take part when the hunters returned to the villages.

Collective hunting and sharing of meat helped to build unity in the community. In fact, individual hunters who killed animals by themselves would also follow this practice and share the meat with every family in the village. Also, if someone was accidentally injured or killed during a hunt, all families in the village would help by giving compensation to his family and helping them with farming and house building.

Whereas hunting was performed by men, whole families, including women and children, participated in collective fishing activities. Community fishing events occurred in the summer. Before fishing, *ngtaiyü* would lead a sacrifice for the stream spirit, usually by killing a chicken. *Püiktu* would also perform a divination. Then, the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders would tell people to prepare. The community had to prepare for fishing at least two days in advance, as each family was responsible for finding some roots of *chu* plants. The *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders would verify that each family brought *chu* roots. The *chu* roots were ground, rinsed, and then thrown into the stream. This made the fish dizzy so they would come up to the shallow part of the stream where it was easier to catch them with nets and baskets, or even by hand.

After catching the fish, people would divide up what they had collected, giving some to *ngtaiyü* as his special right and also to families with only elders who could not catch fish. The other fish would be divided among all the households of the village.

I experienced a communal fishing event when I was about ten years old (around 1998). I was very happy and excited at that time. People were coming and going, running, jumping, and shouting along the stream as they caught fish. I also remember that there was not an equal division of the fish. Families would keep what they caught. However, each family shared some with the families who could not join in the activity.

Pikhawng ngnapmtai chiefs also had roles to play in the many activities associated with *klouma*, shifting cultivation. When new farmlands were confirmed and divided, these traditional chiefs would make announcements according to the information from *ngtaiyü* leaders. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* reminded people in the community to follow the rules from the sacred leaders.

Pikhawng ngnapmtai chiefs had specialized knowledge of the geography and weather conditions. Before burning off the farm plots, the community had to make a firebreak, called *ksui*. They had to clear a path by taking out the dried leaves in order to keep the fire from spreading beyond the farm plots selected for cultivation. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* led this work. When the villagers started to build fences for the new farm plots, the leaders assisted with this as well, as they understood how to make fences more efficiently by using natural barriers, such as steep stream banks, where mithuns and other animals could not pass easily.

Even without leaders' admonishment, people in the community practiced a communal ethic and helped one another in their activities. If someone from a family helped another family with a day of work, it was understood that the labor would be reciprocated. As mentioned in chapter three, people would labor together in groups on various families' plots, rotating from one plot to the next. If a particular family needed help from the community, they could request assistance from others by preparing feasts for the helpers. At least one member from each family in the village would join because it was understood that any family could face a similar difficult situation in the future.

House building was another context in which there was a lot of collective activity. If a family wanted to build a new house, people in the community would help until it was finished. If there was a fire or a house was damaged by a storm, *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders would gather villagers together and rebuild the house for that family. These habits and values were an essential part of traditional Cho society.

To summarize, there were many communal activities in Cho society. These welfare activities helped people to understand their dependence on one another. The traditions and collective values

were fundamental to Cho identity. People were community-minded and had a strong sense of unity. Communal activities were both the essence and the meaning of Cho Chin people's way of life.

***Ngtaiyü and Pikhawng Ngnapmtai* Leaders in Mithun Festivals**

As discussed in chapter three, mithun festivals were important events for families and communities as a whole. Both *ngtaiyü* leaders and *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs were involved, and without these leaders, no mithun festival was successful. If a family wanted to hold a mithun festival but *ngtaiyü* leaders were not available, the date of the event had to be changed (interview with Kui Xung, 2014).

A family who wanted to celebrate a mithun festival had to go to the *ngtaiyü* head to decide the date before they could make any announcement. *Püiktu-ngtaiyü* would make a divination about whether the festival would be successful or not. The festival activities would be carried out based on the results of his divination. Before the festival, the family had to prepare for a whole year. They had to have enough rice, firewood, *ju* (beer), and other animals like pigs and chickens because these were required for the success of the festival.

Pikhawng ngnapmtai chiefs led the activities of the festival. They organized people to carry the stones for the *lung-sum* and to collect decoration materials such as *hleng* plants and *aungpnag* leaves. Moreover, community chiefs led people to find mithun for the sacrifice as the animals mostly stayed in the forest. People had to catch the mithun and tie it with a rope and bring it back to the village.

Another important task for *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs was to lead the meat distribution to every household in the community. Traditional chiefs would also ask somebody else to manage the people who were dancing, to decide the order of the dancers. They would put the traditional cloth on the dancer's shoulder to indicate it was his turn to dance. Almost all men danced and youths also participated in dancing activities. Women had their own style of dancing.

As I mentioned, when the mithun was killed, *ngtaiyü* would pray for the family and daub the forehead of family members with the blood of the sacrificed mithun. Then *ngtaiyü* had to tie fir leaves and *aungpang* leaves to the tail of mithun. He would pray and send messages to the creator god Khanmhnammu to accept the sacrifice. Adding fir leaves made the fire burn brighter so it was easier for the god to see, while the *aungpang* leaves spread the smell of the sacrifice to the creator (interview with Naing Om, 2014).

According to orders of *ngtaiyü*, people had to prepare two kinds of offerings: those for the spirits and those for the creator god. People prepared raw blood and meat for the spirits, and they cooked the best part of the meat including the liver and heart to offer to the creator god, Khanmhnammu.¹⁶ In addition, some special meat would also go to *ngtaiyü*. *Ngantaiyü* himself had to hang fir leaves and *aungbang* leaves on the house to clean the house. At the end of the festival night, *ngtaiyü* would visit the family that had hosted the festival and deliver blessings for the prosperity of that family.

Power and Authority in the Community

As I have discussed, sacred leaders and secular chiefs were authorized persons to lead the people of Cho Chin communities. Decision making was not in just one person's hand but distributed among these various leaders who worked closely together and also with the community. In part, their authority came from the community: as I have described, they were nominated to their positions by people because they exhibited the necessary qualifications of spiritual knowledge and high moral character. Although these leaders were powerful in managing activities, they only applied their power in service to the community. They rarely abused their authority.

16. I asked my informants what happened to the offering to Khanmhnammu. They said the meat was not left to rot. They said only *ngtaiyü* could eat this offering. However, this was separate from the special gift of meat to *ngtaiyü*.

Regarding their relative status, in general, *ngtaiyü* leaders were able to give orders to *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs. Naing Mtup explained to me that *ngtaiyü* leaders could order chiefs like *aimukyu* and *asiyang* to implement certain activities. However, when there was a security problem, the *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs were more powerful and important.

The *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders and chiefs worked together to manage the whole community. If there was a security problem, *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs had to inform the *ngtaiyü* leaders first before they informed the people. On the other hand, *püiktu-ngtaiyü* might use his divining ability to give warnings to *pikhawng ngnapmtai* chiefs about coming dangers. *Ngantaiyü* sometimes led some sacrifices to protect the community from diseases and afflictions. *Ngantaiyü* would use the blood of a sacrificed animal to coat plants around the community to appease spirits that might cause disease. The leaders worked together in these ways.

While decisions about certain activities were made only by the leaders, some decisions that concerned the whole community would be made only after everyone's voices were heard. For example, when dividing up the farm lands or deciding whether or not to take revenge on or raid another community, such as in the case of a murder, there would be a big meeting of all the village men. Women were not prohibited from these meetings but they rarely participated. After hearing the voices of people in the community, if the people were not in variance, the decision on how to proceed would be made by three main leaders: *ngtaiyü*, *püiktu-ngtaiyü* (who had divining ability), and *pikhawng ngnapmtai*.

With these two kinds of leaders, the Cho ways of life worked well. Their lives were meaningful. People in Cho communities had collective values, communal spirit, and a distinctive identity. The main reason the social structure worked well was because of the traditional legitimacy of the leaders. The people in the community nominated their leaders for their ability, performance, and service to the people. People in the community respected, listened to, and honored their leaders because the leaders did not abuse the authority they received from the community. Therefore, Cho community life functioned well before Christianity.

Discussion

Studying the influence and leadership of *ngtaiyü* leaders, I found that these sacred leaders were essential for the Cho community. People thought of these leaders as chosen by the creator god. Cho people were very dependent on the discipline and orders of the *ngtaiyü*. In all aspects of life, these sacred leaders were in high position. Most festivals and important activities could not be initiated without them. *Ngtaiyü* leaders were vital in all stages of shifting cultivation activities. Moreover, these leaders were responsible for community health and funeral services. Cho people had their own ways of comforting and encouraging the family of someone who had died with the “creating *pipui*” ritual. My research shows that these leaders had spiritual knowledge, great skill with interpersonal communication, and high moral status.

I have also showed how traditional rituals and festivals played an important role in the Cho Chin community. Cho Chin social structure was constructed by these kinds of meaningful activities, traditional festivals, rituals, and beliefs. When looking at the mithun festivals and other events, we can see that the leaders and specialists were effective because they were respected by the community and people listened to what they said.

Studying the roles of *pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders in Cho community, one can see the meaning and the essence of Cho ways of life. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders were very important for the safety of the community. Also, their leadership helped to create unity, mutual assistance, and shared welfare among the people. *Pikhawng ngnapmtai* leaders were involved in distributing meat, encouraging people to help one another, and pursuing collective work. These activities helped to create unity in traditional Cho society, and also allowed people to have fun and enjoy their lives. People realized their interdependence on one another. This system of leadership, social structure, collective values, and community unity can be understood as constituting the distinctive identity of the Cho Chin people.

5

CHANGES IN CHO COMMUNITIES

Traditional Cho culture was rich with oral history and traditional songs, stories, myths, proverbs, and poems. Although people in the Cho community did not record their history and traditions in writing, they managed to successfully maintain their practices. Although there were no formal forms of schooling, they had their own teaching and learning methods that enabled the passing-down of traditions from generation to generation.

In Cho Chin culture, traditional practices were intertwined with spiritual practices. As I have described, the community was managed by sacred leaders and community chiefs. As mentioned, Christianity reached Mindat and Kanpetlet townships in the 1970s. Today, there are still many people who remember the situation of the Cho people before the arrival of Christianity, as well as the effects of Christianity on traditional leadership.

There were three main factors that caused the Cho people to give up many of the rituals and traditions that they had maintained for generations, including conversion to Christianity, government policies of Burmanization, and modernization. In this chapter, I will briefly summarize how traditional leaders lost their authority in Cho communities as a result of these forces.

Christianity Arrives in Cho Communities

Dr. Bawi Kung, who was one of the first missionaries to the Cho community, explained to me that the first missionaries reached Mindat Town around 1950 and Kanpetlet Town around 1965. At first, it was very difficult for the missionaries to change the beliefs of the local people because they had been practicing and exercising their cultural system for generations and their beliefs and values were strongly rooted in their hearts. In 1972, Dr. Bawi Kung traveled to around twenty villages in Mindat and Kanpetlet townships and observed that there were only a few families in some villages who had converted to Christianity at that time (interview with Dr. Bawi Kung, 2014).

The missions were first established at the township level in the 1950s and '60s. Later, missionaries began to spread their work to the village level. I learned from Dr. Bawi Kung that the strategy of the missionaries was to explain that Christians did not need to make sacrifices for spirits or to hold mithun festivals because Jesus had already provided salvation for all human beings. As a result of these teachings, people in Cho communities came to accept the idea that their traditional practices and rituals were a false religion that had to be given up in order to lead Christian lives. For example, Christians practice burial rather than cremation. Therefore, the Cho who converted to Christianity no longer carried out the *lokawh segawh* mithun festival that accompanied the erecting of the *lung-sum* tombs.

My father, Kui Xung, told me that the first Christian missionary arrived at Khayaing Village in 1975. He was one of the first persons to convert in his village. At that time, there were only four families that wanted to be Christian. Others in the village discriminated against them. They scolded them for becoming Christian because it was strange and in opposition to their traditional beliefs. My father said that people provoked them for no reason. Sometimes, the villagers threw stones at the houses of Christian families. People derided them, saying that they had become Christians because they lacked property—that is, because they were not wealthy enough to carry out mithun feasts.

The other villagers rejected the converted families and drove them

out of the village. They forced the first Christian families to stay at a place near Hmawlawng stream where people usually got sick. They were not allowed to farm with the other villagers (interview with Kui Xung, 2014).

Similarly, Mnai Naing told me about a major argument that occurred in his village of Lon Imnu at the time Christianity arrived. He was young at that time, around 1975. There were two main opposing groups: the people who loved the traditions, and the people who preferred to change their practices to Christianity. That was the first break in the unity of the community. The newly Christian families no longer participated in traditional activities. They intentionally gave up the practices due to the teachings of the new religion. Christian families taught their children not to have meals at the feasts and festivals of the other villagers.

My father Kui Xung said that although there was a lot of oppression, the Christian families were taught by the missionaries about the importance of forgiveness. “We tried to forgive the other villagers for their actions. We did not make any sacrifices, but worshipped and prayed to God, which was much easier and more comfortable,” he said.

As my informants told me again and again, before Christianity came there was unity and mutual dependence on one another in Cho communities. Because of this, these kinds of disagreements and arguments in a community were very difficult for the leaders to manage. Moreover, the authority of the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders and the community chiefs did not extend to the new Christian families.

Over time, nearly all of the villagers became Christians for different reasons. By the 1980s, most Cho villages accepted Christianity. Unfortunately, more problems occurred because there were missionaries from different denominations, such as Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics. This was the second wave that broke the unity among Cho people. The activities of these denominations to recruit new members prevented Cho communities from retrieving their former unity and doing collective activities together again. However, my informants told me that people loved the coming of Christianity because this

religion prevented them from making lots of sacrifices in order to appease spirits.

There was quite a lot of misunderstanding among Christian missionaries regarding Cho traditions and rituals. From the missionaries' perspective, the mithun festivals and other rituals were forms of spirit-worship that were evil and did not help the people. The Cho people themselves did not fully understand the value of their feasts and festivals or their traditional unity. Because of the missionaries' teachings, people chose to give up many of their old practices. Naing Mtup said to me: "Actually, there was no need to give up some of our traditional practices as we became Christian, because those were traditional customs, not evil practices or bad spirits." However, Naing Mtup also pointed out that Christianity "connected us with the other parts of the world." Because of Christianity, people in Cho communities had more educational opportunities, including basic education and theological training.

Missionaries did not deem it important to conduct any research about traditional Cho beliefs before they started preaching their gospel. In my view, the missionaries ignored the real essence and origin of traditional practices of Cho people. They did not see that the mithun festivals and other rituals supported the unity of the group. The rituals reinforced the dependence of villagers on one another and affirmed the traditional leadership and social structure that allowed the community to work well together.

Other Factors Affecting Traditional Culture

Government policies also contributed to Cho people giving up their traditional values and practices. In the military-socialist era under General Ne Win (1962–1988), there were some announcements from the district level of the government administration in Chin State about sacrifices and festivals in Cho communities. Government officials disapproved of these practices because they cost a significant amount. It was said that the festivals caused people to be poor. At the state level, the government banned the traditional practice of tattooing Chin women's faces.

Moreover, one of the government's unwritten but thoroughly pervasive policies was to "Burmanize" other ethnic nationalities in the country. That is, the central government attempted to impose Burmese culture, values, and language as part of their project of nation building. Because of Burmanization, the traditions and cultures of other nationalities were not promoted and were thus weakened. After missionaries came to Cho communities, most of the villagers began using the Burmese language. Burmese is also the official language in schools and government offices, and local languages are excluded by the government. This policy has continued from the Socialist era to the present.

Nowadays, youths and children from Cho communities prefer communicating in Burmese language and many speak Burmese more proficiently than their local dialects. This is also weakening Cho culture and tradition. After having lost most of their traditional rituals, the Cho language is perhaps the last distinctive feature marking Cho people and their identity.

Last but not least, the processes of modernization have caused people to give up and then forget their traditional rituals and culture. As Cho people became aware of other cultures and ways of life, and as they connected with other, non-Cho communities, they developed ideas about business. Instead of performing mithun festivals, people began to raise mithun for sale. In these ways, people became less dependent on activities such as collective hunting and fishing and communal sharing of meat. At the present time, one hardly sees these activities that were once so essential to the cohesion of Cho communities.

Summary and Conclusion

When looking at the lifestyles of Cho people before Christianity we see that the community was well-managed by the leaders. The lives of the people in the community were shaped by tradition and by the orders of sacred leaders. The ritual practices and traditional activities were based on the Cho belief system, which included ideas about relations between human beings and the creator god, Khanmhnammu. The Cho people's beliefs, practices, rituals, and

traditions were their culture and way of life. These cultural beliefs and practices can be understood as essential to Cho people's distinctiveness and identity.

As I have described, Cho communities were managed by two main groups, sacred leaders and community chiefs. While the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders were the most powerful, the community chiefs also had their own responsibilities, and they had to implement orders from the sacred leaders as well. In Cho communities, power was distributed. For example, the *ngtaiyü* sacred leaders had to be nominated and legitimated by people in the community. The community chiefs also had to be chosen and confirmed by people in the community during important meetings. However, after this confirmation, all the people listened to what leaders said because they were highly respected persons. Although sacred leaders and community chiefs had authority, they rarely abused their authority in the community. Under customary law, if leaders committed mistakes, they were fined according to customary law.

We can see a kind of democratic principle in Cho society in terms of leadership and power allocation. Looking at the traditional economy, we can see Cho culture had some Communist ideas as well. People were very dependent on one another for security and there were collective activities, such as the sharing and distribution of meat throughout the whole community.

As I have described, Christianity reached Cho communities gradually over the course of several decades. The arrival of Christianity had a serious impact on the unity of the Cho people. Between 1950s and the 1980s, the authority of *ngtaiyü* (sacred leaders) and the community chiefs (*pikhawng napmtai*) declined. At the same time, community collective activities became less frequent because of missionaries' teachings and government policies, as well as market forces and capitalism.

Many social changes have occurred in the Cho community. Since the 1980s, people in Cho communities have given up and forgotten almost all of the rituals, festivals, and traditional practices that were once so essential to their lives. As I mentioned, Cho people are even losing their distinctive local dialects. Burmese language is becoming dominant in day-to-day speaking, especially among

children and young adults. There is a lack of opportunity to practice local languages and to teach and study local languages because of the government's language policies. Due to multiple obstacles, Cho people are still in the process of developing writing systems for their various dialects today.

These conditions raise important questions about the future of Cho people and Cho identity. In my opinion, the only way to sustain the Cho as a distinct people is to maintain efforts to promote their literacy. Much will depend on the policies of the government in Myanmar, as well as the commitment of local community leaders and activists. Without strong efforts by local social and political leaders and the national government to support and promote local cultures, the distinctive identity of Cho people will likely face extinction in the future.

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Key informants



Shen Mnai and Kui Xung (parents of the author)



U Naing Om



U Mnai Xung



U Naing Kawk and his wife

Additional informants

Dr. Bawi Kung

Mnai Naing

Thang Law kui

Om Yo

Thang Sing

Shen Mnai

Bu Paing

Hning Kui

Hning Phway

Lee Kui

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Salai Myochit is the youngest among six brothers and one sister. He completed BA degrees in history and social studies as a student of the liberal arts program of West Yangon University in 2010. Since 2010, he has primarily been involved in political work as one of the founders of the Chin National Democratic Party (CNDP). He has served as a secretariat member in charge of the youth department at CNDP for four years.

A THREATENED IDENTITY:

Social Structure and Traditional Leadership in Cho Chin Society before Christianity

The Understanding Myanmar's Development series is an exploration of the transformation taking place in Myanmar on multiple levels: social, economic, and political. In this series, RCSD hopes to realize the dual goals of both building up the body of knowledge on Myanmar and strengthening the research capacity of Burmese scholars in their study of development policy and practice. This volume is just one piece of the puzzle of development practice, as felt by the people and communities of Myanmar.

In this second volume of the series, Salai Myochit—himself an ethnic Chin—conducted a focused ethnographic study on several Cho communities in Chin state. With direct access to community elders and steeped in the cultural context that is the subject of his research, he set out to record the oral history of the Cho Chin people prior to their conversion to Christianity in the 1960's and 1970's. More than just cultural archival, this research provides fascinating insight into the social structure and leadership rituals of a subsistence, community-based society and people with unique practices of status and power, conferred by the possession of the ox-like mithun. This research is especially precious now as these rituals and practices are under serious threat from modernization, globalization, and the government policies of today's Myanmar.

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