

FAITH AND IDENTITY: THE MAKING OF ZOMI CHRISTIANS
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Introduction

The Zomi of Chin State in northwestern Myanmar—once considered as “one of the most godless places on earth,”¹ —have become a people deeply identified with Christianity, almost to the extent that “Zomi” and “Christian” are synonymous. Christianity, which came as a stranger they called a “foreign religion,” has not only stayed among the people of Zomi as a guest but made it home, and given rise to the new identity called the Zomi Christians.

This paper, historical and narrative in nature, explores how this transformation occurred and traces the process through which Christianity became embedded in Zomi society. It begins with a brief introduction to the Zomi people and their collective and integrative identity, followed by an account of the arrival and establishment of Christianity among them. The central discussion focuses on the making of Zomi Christians—a dynamic process involving both faith and culture, along with its accompanying missteps, challenges, and ongoing negotiations. This study focuses primarily on those from Chin State (also called Chin Hills) in Myanmar.

The Zomi and Their Collective and Integrative Identity

The Zomi are one of six major tribal groups under the umbrella of Chin, one of the eight major national races in Myanmar.² Although the Burmans refer to them as Chin, a name later adopted and used officially by the British, they prefer to identify themselves as Zomi.³ They spread in three countries: Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar.⁴ Their widespread settlement makes it difficult to determine their total population.⁵ Today, the Zomi have also migrated and established communities in different parts of the world.⁶

Tracing their exact origin is challenging and several theories have been proposed. However, Zomi historian Vumson asserts that, “through historical linguistics, archeological findings, and ethnic relationships, it is now accepted that Zo belong to the group of people identified as Tibeto-Burmans.”⁷

Traditionally, Zomi social and political organization was structured under the authority of a chief who exercised both political and judicial powers. Each tribe had a chief who ruled over

¹ E. H. East, *Burma Manuscript* (Yangon: C. Thang Za Tuan, 1996), 60, quoted in Pum Khan Pau, “Rethinking Religious Conversion: Missionary Endeavor and Indigenous Response among the Zo (Chin) of the India-Burma Borderland,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2012): 1.

² Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2003), 17-19.

³ Vumson, *Zo History* (Aizawl, India: Vumson, 1986), 3.

⁴ JM Ngul Khan Pau, *When the World of Zomi Changed* (Aizawl, India: Tualsuak Publication, 2025), 1.

⁵ Pau, “Rethinking,” 2-3.

⁶ “History of the Zomi,” Zomi Education Centre, Taman Cheras, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://zeccheras.cfsites.org/custom.php?pageid=47432>.

⁷ Vumson, *Zo History*, 26.

multiple villages, and each village had a headman who governed according to the chief's orders. Chieftainship was hereditary, though customs differed among clans as to whether the youngest or eldest son inherited office. It was, however, almost impossible for a daughter to inherit her father's position.⁸

In a typical Zomi household, the father is considered the head of the family. However, the father does not wield strict authority but instead involves his wife and children in decision-making, including buying and selling property. The parents' role includes providing not just food but also wives for sons and husbands for daughters.⁹ The father discusses daily family plans during mealtime as the family gathers around the table. It is the father who assigns each family member their responsibilities, such as working in the fields, tending animals, or participating in social work. Therefore, when the family is prosperous, it is credited to the good management of the father.¹⁰

Marriage is considered a sacred union between two individuals. Cohabitation outside of marriage is seen as a significant disgrace, to the point where families face social exclusion.¹¹ The Zomi highly value togetherness, generosity, and sharing. This principle is expressed in the proverb, *hawmsiam nungta, nebup puksi*, meaning “the one who shares lives a good life; the one who eats alone dies.” Honesty and moral integrity are equally esteemed, believed to bring blessings upon individuals.¹²

Zomi culture is collectivist, emphasizing “group above self” and they do almost everything together as a whole village, including selecting agricultural sites. This collective spirit developed out of necessity for survival and protection against outside threats, such as nomadic people groups in the past. This collectivist cultural identity later contributed to their initial reluctance to embrace Christianity because doing so involved risking their lives.¹³

Sharing possessions is also a common practice expressed in stories and tradition. A well-known legend tells of two brothers, Thangho and Liando, who divided a very small seed of millet. Stories like this, with moral lessons, are told by parents and grandparents to children and grandchildren to teach important values.¹⁴

Singing and dancing are seen as the most beautiful parts of Zomi culture, and they play a key role during feasts and festivals. They share their feelings of happiness, sadness, joy, success,

⁸ Vumson, *Zo History*, 8-9; Pau, *When the World*, 23.

⁹ H. N. C. Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes* (Bombay: The Times of India Press, 1970), 107.

¹⁰ Gin khan Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture,” *Zomi Daily*, May 31, 2009, <https://zomidaily.com/zomi-life-and-culture-rev-dr-gin-khan-nang/>.

¹¹ Vumson, *Zo History*, 15.

¹² Chin Khua Khai, “Dynamics of Renewal: A Historical Movement Among the Zomi (Chin) in Myanmar” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999), 59.

¹³ Pau, *When the World*, 21, 135-136.

¹⁴ Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.”

and failure through songs.¹⁵ When chiefs or village elders need to decide on issues of war and peace, they prefer to create a song instead of explaining it to the village council.”¹⁶

Religion and culture are inseparable in Zomi society, shaping social norms, ethics, and identity. As Ling notes, “Culture and religion together form an important part of Chin society.”¹⁷ The word *Phunglam*, which means “ways of life,” comes from the root word *Phung*, meaning “culture,” and this term *Phung* is deeply religious, almost equivalent to religion itself.”¹⁸

Traditionally, the Zomi worldview reflects what Nang describes as a “dichotomical dimension of spirits,” which includes belief in a Supreme Being, *Pasian*, and numerous spirits called *dawis* (demons).¹⁹ *Pasian* is regarded as a good and benevolent Creator, to whom the Zomi never offer sacrifice,²⁰ as they do not need to appease, while the spirits (*dawi*) or devils are believed to be everywhere, in the sky, on earth, in springs, trees, caves, mountains, streams, houses, and even in the human body, causing sickness and misery. Therefore, to appease these spirits and prevent harm, the Zomi performed various sacrifices and rituals.²¹ Due to their belief in spirits, the Zomi’s traditional religion is considered Animism, which, Nida and Smalley define as, “a belief in spirits, including the spirits of dead people as well as those that have no human origin.”²²

Because of these beliefs, sacrifices and rituals occupied a central place in Zomi life. Rituals are performed when moving to a new village or house, cultivating new fields, or facing illness.²³ Rituals such as *pusha*,²⁴ *Tual Biak*,²⁵ and childbirth²⁶ are integral to their spiritual and social life.²⁷

¹⁵ Za Tawn Eng, “Traditional Music of the Chin People,” in *Chin: History, Culture, and Identity*, ed. K. Robin (New Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors, 2009), 69. 69-74.

¹⁶ Vumson, *Zo History*, 14.

¹⁷ Za Uk Ling, “The Role of Christianity in Chin Society,” Chin Human Right Organization, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.chinhumanrights.org/the-role-of-christianity-in-chin-society/>.

¹⁷ Pau, *When the World*, 16.

¹⁸ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 21.

¹⁹ Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.”

²⁰ Vumson, *Zo History*, 16.

²¹ Vumson, *Zo History*, 16.

²² E. A. Nida and W. A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 5.

²³ Vumson, *Zo History*, 16.

²⁴ Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.” *Pusha* is a family ritual traditionally known as ancestor worship. The term is a combination of two words, *Pu* meaning grandfather or ancestor, and *Sha* meaning spirit.

²⁵ Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.”; *Tual Biak* is a yearly community worship held in March, where the entire villagers participated in offering a sacrifice of a pig to spirits for agricultural fertility. The pig’s head is displayed on a post in the village center.

²⁶ Stevenson, *The Economics*, 157; Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.” A *childbirth* ritual involves inviting a priest who kills two chickens and offers them to spirits, symbolizing the child’s introduction to spiritual guardians.

²⁷ Pum Za Mang, “Chin Diaspora Christianity in the United States,” *Theology Today* 80, no. 2 (December 2023): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405736231172682>.

This is the reason some outsiders believed the Zomi were worshipping spirits. However, they were not worshipping them out of devotion but acting out of fear to prevent harm or misfortune. A political officer, Carey, and his assistant, Tuck, who studied the Chin people extensively, clarified that the assumption that the Zomi worship the devil was incorrect.²⁸

Feasts and festivals were not only central to the Zomi's communal life but were deeply intertwined with their spiritual worldview. These celebrations carried both religious and social significance.²⁹ They were held in times of both joy and sorrow. A successful hunt or a visit from a relative would be celebrated, and in all these feasts, *zu* (rice beer) played a central part. As Vumson observed, "Zo culture is very much connected with *zu* ... if Zo culture should be symbolized by anything, it should be *zu*. *Zu* represents one of the main characteristics of the Zo people. ... the size of a *zu beel* (zu pot) corresponded to the depth of one's relationship. The closer the relationship, the bigger the *zu beel*."³⁰ It is therefore not surprising that when the missionaries first arrived, one of their earliest impressions of the Zomi people was their drunkenness.³¹

The Zomi worldview, shaped by the constant interaction between their religious beliefs and cultural practices, formed an integrated way of life. Their collective identity, shaped by rituals, feasts, festivals, and interdependence, created a society where religion and social life were inseparable. This integrative and collective life, however, would later face deep tension and transformation with the introduction of Christianity.

The Arrival and Reception of the Gospel

The first encounter of Christian missionaries in the Chin Hills took place on 15 March 1899, when the pioneer missionary couple, Arthur E. Carson and Laura Carson, from the American Baptist Mission, arrived in Haka, along with a Karen evangelist named Thra San Win.³² Their journey was difficult, but the greater challenge lay in their work among the Zomi people. Mrs. Carson vividly described their early experiences in *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*: "The long and dangerous journey to Haka, the difficulties of transporting to that remote and almost inaccessible fastness in the mountains the necessary household goods and supplies for a year, the curiosity and inquisitiveness of the natives about seeing for the first time a white woman, the long efforts to overcome the suspicions and prejudices of uncivilized and savage tribes."³³

²⁸ B. S. Carey and H. N. Tuck, *Chin Hills: A History of the People, Our Dealings with Them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of Their Country* (Aizawl, India: Tribal Research Institute, 1976), 195.

²⁹ Vumson, *Zo History*, 13.

³⁰ Vumson, *Zo History*, 12-13.

³¹ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History* (Falam, Myanmar: Zomi Theological College, 2012), 40.

³² Pau, "Rethinking," 6-7; Chin Khua Khai, *The Cross Among Pagodas: A History of the Assemblies of God in Myanmar* (Baguio City: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2003), 57.

³³ Laura Hardin Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs: Personal Memoirs of Life and Work As a Pioneer Missionary Among the Chin Tribe of Burma* (New York: Baptist Board of Education, 1927), vi.

The Carsons worked tirelessly, using different strategies to evangelize the people who were not only untouched by the gospel but also were isolated from the outside world. They learned the Zo language, introduced medical services, education, development, hygiene, and pastoral care ministries.³⁴ All of these contributed to the gradual acceptance of their presence.

From Suspicion to Embrace

Initially, the people were resistant to the new religion, calling it a foreign or white people's religion. They were suspicious about everything the missionaries did.³⁵ Many also worried that worshipping this foreign God would anger the spirits, resulting in sickness, failed crops or death. One early convert, Tang Tshin, a young married man, faced direct confrontation from his village chief, "They tell me you are worshipping the foreign God. You cannot do that and live in this village. ... You know that if you do our own gods will be angry, our crops will fail, our cattle will not reproduce, our children will die, and all kinds of trouble will come upon us. You have either got to renounce this foreign religion or be driven from the village."³⁶

Despite these challenges, after six years of faithful labor, the missionaries found their first converts, two couples by the names Pu Pau Suan and his wife Pi Kham Ciang and Pu Thuam Hang and his wife Pi Dim Khaw Cing in Khuasak village, Tedim sub-division. They were given water baptism by Rev. Dr. E. H. East³⁷ on 11 May 1905³⁸ during the Carson's furlough to America. Mrs. Carson reflected:

During our absence in America, through Dr. East's efforts, two fine men and their wives at Tiddim had become Christians and been baptized—the first fruits of our work in the Chin Hills. One, Thuam Hang, was a remarkable man, heir to a tribal chieftainship. Recognizing the fact that as a Christian he could not lead his people in their heathen ceremonies, nor follow their drunken customs, he relinquished his right to the chieftainship which would have made him a rich man, and became—and still is—a humble preacher of the Gospel on the munificent salary of six dollars a month.³⁹

Following this, on the 1st February 1906, seven more people from Khuasak got baptized, and on the 17th February 1906, the first Chin Christian Church, Baptist Church, was born among the Siyin tribe of the Zomi in Khuasak village with eleven people.⁴⁰ The task of nurturing this

³⁴ Gin Khan Nang, "Zomi Christianity and Cultural Transformation" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2010), 12, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; 90; Vumson, *Zo History*, 142.

³⁵ Pau, "Rethinking," 10.

³⁶ Carson, *Pioneer Trails*, 184.

³⁷ A medical doctor and Rev. Erik Hjalmar East, a Swedish born American, arrived in the Chin Hills on 21st March 1902 as a result of the Carsons request for the need to start medical activities to unlock the hearts of the people in his letter to the Mission Board in America. Pau, "Rethinking," 7; Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 51.

³⁸ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 57.

³⁹ Carson, *Pioneer Trails*, 180.

⁴⁰ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 57-58.

infant church from the ancient Animism and old way of life was compared to “walking or traveling during a rain storm at night with only a candle light to guide one’s way.”⁴¹

Rev. Robert G. Johnson, the last American missionary in the Chin Hills, described it poignantly, “What a weak little church! How insignificant it must have seemed to the mass of pagans around them and how mighty were the forces of spirit worship and sinful lifestyle that these converts have to face.”⁴²

Yet, this small beginning marked the dawn of a transformation that would reshape the entire Zomi society. As Kham observed, “religion plays an important role being closely intertwined with everything—from planting of the crops to births, marriages, deaths and festivals.”⁴³ Thus, conversion was not simply a matter of personal belief but a public, cultural break.

The early converts faced severe persecution from their own communities, led by local chiefs. As Pau noted, “Opposition and persecution were a daily affair to the converts.”⁴⁴ They were disowned by their family and relatives, who called them “worshippers of a foreign god.” Pau Suan and Thuam Hang’s houses were burned by their villagers, and their fields and crops were destroyed. Despite this, they held onto their faith, and Thuam Hang faithfully served as the pastor of Khuasak Baptist Church until he was in his eighties.⁴⁵

Many early converts endured physical abuse, torture, and death for their new faith. The chief would assign Christians to deliver messages to distant villages, especially on Sundays and Christmas, as punishment for abandoning traditional beliefs. This constant harassment and difficult treatment led Christians to leave their villages. In some cases, they were asked to leave the village by the chief. Christians who left their villages either way started a town known as Nahnuai, which became a center of refuge for the persecuted Christians.⁴⁶

Amid their trials, they shared their faith with their families, relatives, and clan members by traveling from house to house and from village to village, so that by 1927, the membership had increased to 1,241 and there were three ordained preachers. By 1937, the membership reached 4,000 with ten ordained and fifteen not-yet-ordained preachers.⁴⁷ During World War II, when all missionaries left their mission fields until the war ended, the number of believers continued to increase, and by 1949, there were 18,000 Christians in the Chin Hills.⁴⁸ By the

⁴¹ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 58.

⁴² Robert G. Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission* (Valley Forge, PA: Robert G. Johnson, 1988), 130, quoted in Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 59.

⁴³ Cin Do Kham, “The Untold Story: The Impact of Revival Among the Chin People in Myanmar (Burma),” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1, no. 2 (1999): 206-207.

⁴⁴ Pau, *When the World*, 21, 135-136.

⁴⁵ Pau, *When the World*, 140; Ni Kong Hong, “The First Converts in Chin Hills,” *Siyin Online Magazine*, May 17, 2013, 6, <https://www.scribd.com/document/142097824/The-First-Converts-in-Chin-Hills-Ni-Kong-Hong>.

⁴⁶ Pau, *When the World*, 136-139.

⁴⁷ Kham, “The Untold Story,” 213.

⁴⁸ Khai, *The Cross*, 59.

1960s, when the country got independence and all missionaries were once again forced to leave the new nation, more than half of the Zomi population already embraced Christianity.⁴⁹ In 2019, 95% of the Zomi identify themselves as Christians.⁵⁰ Today, the Baptist denomination is the largest Protestant group both in the country and within the Zomi community.⁵¹

The Making of Zomi Christians

The embrace of Christianity had a profound and immediate impact on the lives of the Zomi people, whose *Phunglam* or “way of life” also meant one’s religion.⁵² Thus, the change of religion is not merely a change of belief, but a change in one’s way of life. In fact, this was what the chiefs were most afraid of, more than misfortunes, loss of crops, and disasters they might face.⁵³ As Pau observed, “The Chiefs were not primarily against the message of the Gospel, but the result of that message. When a person became a Christian, he acted differently and cut himself off from the regular social activities.”⁵⁴ The making of Zomi Christians thus involved both theological and cultural dimensions. It is a process of discerning which elements of their traditional life to abandon, to preserve, or to transform in light of their new faith, while remaining a Zomi at the same time.

Abandoning (Nusia)

The process began with the abandonment of rituals and sacrifices associated with their traditional religion, which were seen as incompatible with the Christian faith. Rituals like *pusha*, *Tual Biak*, and childbirth—once central to Zomi spiritual were discontinued and replaced by prayer. The Zomi, once known for their numerous sacrifices to appease spirits, became a people of prayer, turning from the fear of sprits to faith in God. In times of sickness, families now invite pastors and deacons to pray in homes, which is called *Inn Thunget*; “inn” means house and “thunget” means prayer. Prayer has taken the place of rituals and sacrificial ceremonies and has also relieved the Zomi from the burden of costly animal sacrifices to evil spirits.⁵⁵

The Zomi Christians abstained from drunkenness, lying, stealing, cursing, and swearing. They no longer took part in festivals where *zu* was the main focus.⁵⁶ A well-known revival song captures this transformation: “*ka dawndawn zu te tun ken dawn non keng*,” which means, “I no longer drink the *zu* I used always to drink,” and it is still sung from time to time during revival crusades today.

⁴⁹ Khai, “Legacy of Hau Lian Kham,” 100.

⁵⁰ Jason Bollinger, “For the 1 (The Zomi Story),” Links International, October 30, 2019, <https://www.linksintlusa.org/linksblog/forthe1>.

⁵¹ Khai, “Dynamics,” 129; “Myanmar Baptist Convention,” World Council of Churches, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/myanmar-baptist-convention>.

⁵² Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 21.

⁵³ Pau, “Rethinking,” 12.

⁵⁴ Pau, *When the World*, 138.

⁵⁵ Nang, “Zomi Christianity,” 185-186.

⁵⁶ Kham, “The Untold Story,” 213.

Preserving (Kemcing)

The making of Zomi Christians did not involve rejecting all aspect of Zomi culture. Rather, it included preserving certain traditions and values that aligned with Christian faith, enriching them with new theological meaning. For instance, the sacredness of marriage which was deeply respected in traditional Zomi society gained even deeper significance as Christians came to understand it as part of God's divine design.

Likewise, the communal and relational nature of Zomi life was retained. The emphasis on community over individualism resonates with the life of the early Church, embodying love for God and one another. Values such as honesty, integrity, and hospitality, once upheld for social and moral reasons, were now embraced as discipleship and following Christ.

Transforming (Thakbawl)

Beyond abandoning or preserving cultural elements, Zomi Christians also reinterpret and transform traditional expressions of life and worship in light of the gospel.

Communal Feasting into Christian Fellowship Meals: The inseparable nature of worship and feasting in the Zomi culture, where religious activities were always accompanied by feasting, found new life in Christian practice.⁵⁷ This Zomi-ness also served as a unique expression of Christian faith and worship by the Zomi. Thus, important Christian religious events such as Christmas (*Lungdam Bawl*), New Year (*Kum Thak*), and Easter (*Thawhkik Nipi*) are celebrated not only with worship services but also with communal meals. This became one of the ways Zomi Christians express their newfound faith with their cultural distinctiveness.

Importantly, this unique expression of Zomi Christians had also become a missiological strategy as the Zomi Christians would invite their Burmese Buddhist neighbors to share in their community meals, which also allowed them to hear the good news.

Khuado Pawi (Khuado Festival): Perhaps the most profound transformation is seen in the *Khudo Pawi*, the most significant festival among the Zomi. This festival takes place in October and lasts for three days, from Friday to Sunday. Historically, *Khudo Pawi* (Festival to ward off evil spirits) has been celebrated since time immemorial, its origin remaining unknown, and it is still a myth as to how this festival began.⁵⁸ Just as in the other festivals, drinking and merrymaking were a great part of this festival.⁵⁹

This festival is also called the Year-break Festival (*Kumkhen Pawi*), marking the end and beginning of the year; it is also known as the Harvest Festival, since it is celebrated immediately

⁵⁷ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 237.

⁵⁸ H. Thangtungnung, "Zomi Traditional Festivals and Sacrifices: An Analytical study," *The Tribal Tribute*, 2018, <https://www.tribaltribune.com/index.php/volume-6/mv6i4/zomi-traditional-festivals-and-sacrifices-an-analytical-study>.

⁵⁹ HP News Service, "Tedim Chin Students Celebrated Harvest Festival," *Highland Post*, November 27, 2023, <https://highlandpost.com/tedim-chin-students-celebrate-harvest-festival/>.

after the harvest—a time to give thanks to the giver of plentiful crop harvests.⁶⁰ During this festival, villagers will also come together to host communal gatherings and offer sacrifices for the blessing of their benefactors in the coming year. They will sing folk songs and dance folk traditional dances.⁶¹ Also, during this festival, a prediction about the coming year is made to determine if the year will be good and fruitful. It is also called the Cleaning Festival, a time for cleansing from spirits that bring sickness, misfortunes, etc.⁶² The festival is also called the Lighting Festival (*Meidet Pawi*). During this event, villagers chase away evil spirits by lighting *meilah* (fire flames) and using weapons.⁶³ In this way, this festival holds many meanings and meaningful activities in the lives of the people and their community. The numerous purposes and significant activities associated with this festival may also be why it is difficult to trace its origins.

Today, this meaningful festival has become a unique expression of Zomi Christian identity with new meaning. The Zomi continue to celebrate *Khuado Pawi*, also retaining the name, to preserve their Zomi-ness but in such a way that also expresses their Christian-ness by reinterpreting it into a thanksgiving celebration to God for his blessings and a time to entrust the coming year into God's hands. Previously marked by the consumption of *zu*, it has now become a unique expression of faith and unity among Zomi Christians. Joint church worship services and activities across different denominations in the village are organized during this festival.

The traditional gathering of relatives around pots of *zu* has transformed into a gathering of both near and far relatives around Jesus, sharing testimonies of God's goodness, encouraging each other in faith, counting blessings, and enjoying fellowship, not only as Zomi but also as Christians. Importantly, during this festival, younger generations are reminded of the tradition, helping them understand their unique identity as Zomi and teaching them how God rescued the Zomi from the fear of spirits.

Missteps, Challenges, and Ongoing Negotiations

It must also be mentioned that the process of becoming Zomi Christians was not without its flaws. In the long journey of negotiating between the demand of their newfound faith and their traditional way of life—deeply rooted in Animism—the Zomi had also lost some of their Zomi-ness.

The missionaries, though sincere in their desire for transformation, unintentionally dismissed important aspects of Zomi culture as entirely pagan. It seemed that to the missionaries, conversion from Animism to Christianity meant rejecting all traditional customs and adopting the Western ways.⁶⁴ Also, in their zeal to bring transformation, following a few decades of rapid

⁶⁰ J. Thang Lian Pau, "Khuado Pawi," *Zomi Newsletter, New Zealand* 1, no. 1 (October 2010): 3-20, <https://www.scribd.com/document/40040844/zomi-thuthang>.

⁶¹ Thang Deih Lian, "Zomi Worldviews: Beliefs and Practices," in *Mission in Context: In Search of Asian Strategic Communication of the Gospel*, ed. Thang Deih Lian, 1st ed. (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2018), 143-144.

⁶² Pau, "Khuado Pawi."

⁶³ Thangtungnung, "Zomi Traditional Festivals and Sacrifices."

⁶⁴ Pau, "Rethinking," 12.

growth, many local church leaders in the Chin Hills practiced whatever the missionaries taught, often regarding it as the only right way.⁶⁵

The Zomi's rich cultural expression, particularly their love for singing and dancing, was also replaced by the Western form of worship as missionaries considered them as evil and related to their Animistic background. Khai observed, "Missionaries introduced Christian songs in western styles of singing. Hymn books were printed and used in worship services. Tonic solfa was taught in the churches. Thus, western tunes slowly replaced the rich heritage of Zomi poetical song, particularly in Christian circles."⁶⁶ This shift is viewed in two contrasting ways: some see it as a loss of cultural heritage, while others consider it a genuine and necessary adaptation of the gospel. Today, Zomi Christians have come to favor Western-style music and instruments, viewing them as more refined than traditional forms.⁶⁷ Yet, as Ross rightly notes, "It would have been better if the missionaries adopted the indigenous forms of expressing one's deep feelings which would have depicted Christianity as being more congruent with Chin culture."⁶⁸

Zomi historian Vumson expressed his lament over this cultural displacement:

Being a Christian however means the ruination of all knowledge of authentic Zo folklore, folk songs and even Zo ways of eating and drinking. It is similar to cutting oneself off from Zo culture, as if such an action were excusable in a Zo. It is ridiculous for a Zo not to know anything about Zo culture, but this is exactly what is happening. Zo Christians are no longer to take part in any Zo cultural or social functions, nor are they expected to perform traditional ceremonies or sing love or even ancestral and historical songs. The only celebrations sympathized with by the church are Christmas, New Year and Easter. Thus, Zo grow up in an environment of a foreign culture, where knowledge of their own culture is regarded as non-Christian. A Zo is deprived of his [or her] natural heritage through his puritan Christian upbringing.⁶⁹

He further criticized the missionaries' strict prohibition of zu, which had long been a vital part of Zomi diet and culture. "Zu played a very important function in the Zo culture," Vumson wrote, "as the importance of celebrations had been measured by the number of pots of zu consumed. ... Zu had been one of the most nutritious elements of the Zo peoples' diet. There is a scarcity of rich nutritious food products in Zo country, and the prohibition against drinking *zu* was an act of arrogance by the missionaries."⁷⁰ In light of his argument, however, it is fair to note drawing from Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16, that zu itself might not be inherently unclean or sinful; rather, as Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 5:18-20, it is drunkenness that Scripture discouraged.

⁶⁵ Kham, "The Untold Story," 215.

⁶⁶ Khai, "Dynamics," 143.

⁶⁷ Khai, "Dynamics," 143.

⁶⁸ Denise Ross, "Development of Local Theology of the Chin (Zomi) of the Assemblies of God (AG) in Myanmar: A Case Study in Contextualization" (PhD diss., The University of Birmingham, 2019), 92.

⁶⁹ Vumson, *Zo History*, 146.

⁷⁰ Vumson, *Zo History*, 146.

Furthermore, since the Zomi people have historically been marked and shaped by rituals that deeply influenced both individual and communal life, it may be worth reflecting on how Christian rituals can likewise be meaningfully practiced within families and communities today. Zomi Christians could cultivate intentional practices of faith within the home and the church that offer a redemptive continuity with their ritual heritage—replacing fear-based traditions with grace-filled expressions of worship and community life that continue to shape and strengthen the Zomi identity in Christ.

This sense of religious and cultural superiority deeply wounded the Zomi, who had already endured similar treatment under the Burman government, which dismissed their history, culture, and identity. In both cases, the Zomi experienced pressure to conform rather than being affirmed in their God-given distinctiveness.

At the same time, certain traditional worldviews continue to shape how Christian faith is lived and expressed among the Zomi today. For example, resistance to women’s leadership in some churches and even among respected Christian leaders reflects both enduring cultural hierarchies and specific theological interpretations. In traditional Zomi society, women were often regarded as inferior to men, as reflected in the saying, “*Gawlsia leh numei ki khek thei*,” meaning “a broken fence can be exchanged for a woman.”⁷¹

Similarly, fragments of the animistic worldview still seem to persist in how some Zomi Christians interpret suffering. The belief that misfortunes such as illness, untimely death, or financial hardship result from displeasing the spirits has sometimes been reinterpreted in a Christian context. When bad things happen, they are seen as signs that God is displeased. Such lingering beliefs reveal that the making of Zomi Christians is still an ongoing journey. The process of spiritual and cultural transformation continues, as the Zomi seek to live faithfully as both fully Christian and fully Zomi.

Conclusion

The making of Zomi Christians was not a single event but a long and ongoing journey of transformation that began when the Zomi first embraced the Christian faith. This process has involved affirming what is good and biblical, rejecting what hinders true worship and devotion to God, and transforming identity-shaping cultural elements into meaningful expressions of faith.

In doing so, the Zomi have learned, to a great extent, to live out Christianity in a way that allows them to remain Zomi—faithful to who God created them to be as a unique people group and fully Christian at the same time, echoing the truth that “Christianity calls all persons to become who God has called them to uniquely be.”⁷²

Nevertheless, the journey is not yet complete. The making of Zomi Christians remains an ongoing process that calls for more profound and continued transformation—redeeming aspects

⁷¹ Nang, “Zomi Life and Culture.”

⁷² Mark A. Maddix, “Living the Life: Spiritual Formation Defined,” In *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm*, ed. Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 15.

of Zomi-ness that are yet to be redeemed, while confronting lingering worldviews that still hinder the full expression of Christian faith. The hope and calling of the Zomi Christians, then, is not to choose between being Zomi or Christian by sacrificing their Zomi identity for the Christian faith, or their Christian faith for Zomi-ness, but to be fully Zomi Christians.

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