

UNIT 7: Ethnographic accounts

Module 4: Ethnographic Accounts of the Chin

OBJECTIVES:

After reading this module the students will be able to

i) understand the ethnographic account of the Chin.

ii) know the marriage and family system of the Chin.

iii) know the inheritance, political organization, social stratification, religious practices etc of the Chin.

SUMMARY:

Chin is a Burmese word and is used by the Burmese to denote all hill tribes. The Chins live mainly in western part of Myanmar. They are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. They are found in the Indian states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. The Chins are of the Mongoloid race whose forefathers were believed to have been migrated from central China.

Their population is approximately 450,000. There are around 52 sub-tribes among the Chin. Majority of the Chins are Christian, though there are Buddhist and animist Chin people. The Chins are known to be honest, tolerant, brave and religious people.

TEXT:

Introduction

Chin is a Burmese word and this word is supposed by some authorities to be a corruption of the Chinese *jen*, meaning 'a man'. It is used by the Burmese to denote all hill tribes. The Chins live mainly in western part of Myanmar. They are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. They are found in the Indian states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. The Chins are of the Mongoloid race whose forefathers were believed to have been migrated from central China.

According to Grierson, Chin language belongs to Burmese branch of Tibeto- Burman group under Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. Chin language is otherwise known as Kuki-Chin group. Meitei, Thadou, Ralte, Paite, Zahao, Chiru, Rangkhoh, Mallan, Sukte, Sho or Khyang, Khami, Mru, Asho,

Zou, Lai, Pankhu etc. have the Chin affinity.

In the present discussion, the ethnographic account of the Chins particularly Myanmar is given.

Kin Groups

The Chins have patrisibs and patrilineages. Lineages are ranked according to the rank of the mother but this is not always the case. Lineages of shorter line are localized, either in one or two villages or in one or two wards of a larger village composed of wards. These localized lineages are usually named. Descent is patrilineal.

The kin terminologies are given by Lehman as under:

Fa, FaBr

Mo, MoSi

FaSi

MoBr, MoBr So

- 'pa' - 'nu' - 'ni' - 'pu'

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MoBrDa

FaSiSo, FaSiCh

eSb, parallel cousin of same sex yoSb, parallel cousin of same sex Sb, parallel cousin of opposite sex

Marriage

- 'pi'

- 'tu'

- 'u'

- 'nau'

- 'far'/'tar'

Most of the Chin marriages are monogamous. However, polygyny which is largely a practice of the aristocrats and wealthy commoners is also generally permitted. The incestuous rule of the Chins restrict them to marry children, parents, parents' siblings, siblings, half-siblings, immediate parallel cousins or close agnatic collaterals. The unit of exogamy is a major segment of a sib, thus permitting sib endogamy. Many Chin groups prefer marriage with a real or classificatory mother's brother's daughter. According to Stevenson, endogamous unions accounted for 81 percent out of 165 marriages.

Family

According to Stevenson, the normal

household unit is the nuclear family. Joint

family is rare among the Chin. The

constitution of the Chin family is influenced

by the laws of inheritance and also by

marriage customs. They are patrilocal in

residence. Only the youngest son or the

only son living with the parents even after

marriage inherits and enjoys all the paternal property. But sometimes the public opinion

forces him to share the property with the brothers keeping a larger share for him. Father or

husband is the head of the family and represents the family in all social or religious matters.

Property is earned through the joint labour of husband and wife. The grown up children also contribute to it.

Inheritance

Among the Chins, sons inherit their father's property. In some, inheritance is by

primogeniture, in others, by ultimo geniture, elsewhere by a combination of the two.

Inheritance of the father's house is commonly by ultimogeniture. Among the northern chins,

if there are sons by major wives, those by minor wives may not inherit except as they

received a settlement in their father's lifetime.

2 . Political Organization

Formal political institutions at the village level are

largely absent among the Chins of southern Myanmar.

The wards within a village may in fact be at war with

one another. There are no regular village-wide

political offices. There is usually one person in each

settlement or ward who acts informally as leader.

Some northern Chins have chiefs and village councils and elected headmen. According to Lehman, the office of headman is hereditary. A chief is essentially a headman whose power in his own village derives from his connections and landholdings beyond his village. To the groups within the area of a chief's power, Lehman applies the term "realm". Realms cut across ethnic and linguistic lines and are generally unstable. They are subject to the fortunes of war and intrigue.

Social Stratification

Individual household among the Chins achieve differential status by the performance of ungraded feasts of merit. Sibs are stratified into aristocratic and commoner. Both upward and downward mobility do occur. A wealthy commoner household may achieve aristocratic status by repeated marriages into higher ranked lineages. It cannot however thereby inherit the office of headman or chief. Similarly, an aristocratic son of a minor wife and his descendants may sink in the social system. The two ranks in traditional Chin society below the rank of commoner- bondsmen and slaves were war captives and their descendants. Bondsmen were in position of debt and dependence vis-à-vis wealthy and powerful persons.

Warfare

The Chins seem to have been headhunters. They regarded human heads as one of the motives for warfare. This was not true for most of the Chin groups. The heads were on occasion taken as an aftermath of a raid. The chief aim of Chin warfare seem to have been booty slaves and revenge. Wars were not prosecuted with any great vigor, although they sometimes were favored and losses were generally slight. When first contacted by the British, Chin settlements were engaged in almost constant fighting among themselves and in raids on lowland Indians and Burmese.

3 . Religion

The indigenous religion is characterized by belief in a variety of spirits. There is a creator, below whom are spirits or perhaps classes of spirits, who have human characteristics and are concerned with mankind. There are spirits which are concerned for the welfare of local, field, village, family, etc. Another large class of spirits, sometimes termed malevolent is said by Lehman to be regarded as capricious rather than malicious. Souls of the living and ghosts of the dead are called by the same word. Some are responsible for good fortune among men; others cause illness and misfortune. Large numbers are Christian. In some areas, however entire villages have been converted to this international religion. Nativistic movements have appeared.

Practitioners

Among some groups hereditary priests receive a portion of the sacrifice and are given an amount of agriculture yield each year by their fellow villagers. In return they conduct sacrifices on behalf of the entire community. In still other cases, priests are appointed by a chief. These may also be seers who determine the required sacrifice by feeling the patient's pulse and also conduct the sacrificial ceremony.

Ceremonies

The central act of Chin ceremonies is the sacrifice, the chief means of establishing relations with the super natural. They sacrifice usually a fowl or pig or at the greater ceremonies, a mithun is accompanied by ritual recitations, feasting and sometimes dancing. Reasons for sacrificing include curing, maintenance of the game supply and ensuring status in the after life.

The Chins attribute illness to malevolent spirits. Medical remedies are much less important than sacrifices.

4 . Soul, Death and After Life

The Chins conceive of the after-life as a plain of heaven and a village of the dead. All ghosts go to the village of the dead. Admission to the plain of heaven is based upon achievements in feasts of merit and celebration during the deceased's lifetime. Ranks attained in life are maintained by the ghost.

Some Chins cremate. But most seem to dispose the dead by burial in a cemetery outside the village.

Conclusion

The Chins are affiliated to the Mongoloid race and believed to be descended from central China southwards and settled in the present Chinland. The chin probably came to Myanmar in the late 9-10 century A.D. Most of the Chin people moved westward and settled in the present Chin state around 1300-1400 A.D. Their population is approximately 450,000. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. There are around 52 sub-tribes among the Chin. At present majority of the Chins are Christian, though there are Buddhist and animist Chin people. The Chins are known as honest, tolerant, brave and religious people. This distinctiveness of the culture indicates that the Chins are one of the indigenous people in their own land.

GLOSSARY:

1. Chin : A Burmese word used to denote all the hill tribes in Burma. They are one of the largest ethnic groups in Myanmar. The Chins live mainly in western part of Myanmar.
2. Sino-Tibetan : The Sino-Tibetan languages are a family of some 250 languages of East Asia, Southeast Asia and parts of South Asia, including the Chinese and Tibeto-Burman languages. They are second only to the Indo-European languages in terms of the number of native speakers.
3. Monogamy : A form of marriage where an individual can have only one spouse at a time.
4. Polygyny : A form of marriage where a man can have two or more wives at one time.
5. Exogamy : It is a social arrangement where marriage is allowed only outside of a social group. The social groups define the scope and extent of exogamy and the rules and enforcement mechanisms that ensure its continuity.
6. Endogamy : It is the practice of marrying within a specific ethnic group, class or social group.
7. Primogeniture : It is the law or custom which permits the first born to inherit the entire property of the family.

8. Ultimogeniture : It is the law or custom which permits the youngest born to inherit the entire property of the family.

FREQUENTLY ASK QUESTIONS:

Q.1. From which language has the word 'Chin' been derived?

Ans: Chin has been derived from the Burmese word.

Q.2. Write in brief about the warfare system of the Chin?

Ans: The Chin regard human head as one of the motives for warfare and the heads were on occasion taken as an aftermath of a raid. The chief aim of the Chin warfare seem to have been booty slaves and revenge.

Q.3. Write briefly on the indigenous religious practices of the Chin?

Ans: The indigenous religion of the Chin is characterized by belief in a variety of spirits. There is a creator, below whom are spirits or perhaps classes of spirits, who have human characteristics and are concerned with mankind. There are also spirits which are concerned for the welfare of the village, family etc.

Q.4. What kind of marriage system is prevalent amongst the Chin?

Ans: Amongst the Chin, monogamy is largely practiced however at times they practiced polygyny too.

Q.5. What do you know about the inheritance law of the Chin ?

Ans: Among the Chins sons inherit their father's property, however in some inheritance is by primogeniture and in others by ultimogeniture and sometimes by a combination of both.