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## Rethinking Religious Conversion

### Missionary Endeavor and Indigenous Response among the Zo (Chin) of the India-Burma Borderland

Pum Khan Pau, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

#### Abstract

In the late nineteenth century Christian missionaries landed in a remote corner of India-Burma to seek converts in a “heathen” land, known as Chin Hills, now Chin State of Burma. The Christian mission was an extension of the American Baptist Mission, which had already been working in different parts of Burma and among different ethnic groups since the arrival of Adoniram Judson in 1813. This paper explores how the “incoming message” brought by the missionaries coped with a well-entrenched indigenous society and cosmology, and examines the role played by a contemporaneous indigenous socio-religious reform movement, spearheaded by Pau Cin Hau, in the conversion of the Zo (Chins) to Christianity. It argues that it is not historically correct to look at conversion only from the perspective of the “agents” without an in depth study of traditional belief and practices. In the case of the Zo, a careful analysis needs to be done because of the existence of an indigenous movement vis-à-vis the Christian mission.

#### Introduction

During 1-4 April 1999, Chin State (hereafter known as Chin Hills), a hilly state in western Burma bordering India, which was once called “one of the most Godless places on earth” (East: 60), celebrated one hundred years of Christianity. It was attended by thousands of Zo (or Chin, as they are known officially in Burma today) Christians from different denominations from different parts of Chin Hills to not only mark the centennial of the arrival of the first missionaries but also to witness the wonderful transformation of their lives

by the Gospel. The celebration was held at Haka where the first missionary couple, Arthur E. Carson and his wife, established their headquarters in 1899 to become the launch pad for more than five decades of America Baptist Mission (ABM) activities in the hill tract. The Carsons had already worked in Thayetmyo in upper Burma before they were assigned to the Zo of the hills.

The ABM mission among the Zo was part of the larger mission already underway in Burma. Eighty-six years before the Carsons came to Chin Hills, in 1813, Adoniram Judson (Roebuck: 239-44; see Judson) brought the Gospel to Rangoon, Burma. Judson started the ABM among the Buddhist Burmans in Lower Burma and then moved to Ava in Upper Burma in 1823. He later worked in Amherst and Moulmein and thus established the ABM in different parts of Burma. There were ABM endeavors among different ethnic groups such as the Mons, Karen, Kachins, Chinese, Indians, Shans, Lisus, Nagas, Lahus, Was, Akhas, and Pa-o (see Sowards and Sowards).

The road for the establishment of the ABM in Chin Hills in the late nineteenth century was paved by the British, who annexed the hill tract in early 1890s following the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-86). Following on the heels of colonial soldiers, the earliest missionary attempt among the Zos was reportedly made by the Roman Catholic Mission in 1891, which also had its sway in Burma (Thang: 47). The Roman Catholic Mission was, however, prevented by colonial officers, due perhaps, to the fact that such activities could provoke indigenous reaction to the ongoing military campaigns in the hills or, at worst, to the fact that the authorities did not favor the Roman Catholic Mission. It was the ABM that was later granted entry and started work late in the 1890s.

Robert G. Johnson, one of the later ABM missionaries among the Zos, in his article in the *Burma Baptist Chronicles*, divides the story of Christian missions in the Chin Hills into four periods. He calls the first phase (1899-1908) “the Entering Church,” the second phase (1908-1924) “the Emerging Churches,” the third phase (1924-1941) “the Edification of the Churches,” and the last phase (1942- the present) “the Energised Churches” (Sowards and Sowards: 383-97). Though this classification of periods may be disputed, the present paper covers primarily the first three phases, up to the mid-twentieth century. I combine Johnson’s first three phases into a period of “sowing and struggling” because the period witnessed missionary endeavors in sowing and planting the Gospel while it also encountered challenges not only from indigenous beliefs and practices but also from an indigenous movement spearheaded by Pau Cin Hau, who tried to reform the traditional socio-religious life. In fact, both the Christian mission and the Pau Cin Hau movement aimed at religious conversion, but they differed in their methods and approach. The common problem they faced was the indigenous cosmology. No matter how well the missionary was psychologically and professionally prepared for his mission, he could not simply set aside the indigenous cosmology and focus on conversion. The religion the missionary sought to introduce was in competition with a well-entrenched indigenous cosmology. Similarly, although the Pau Cin Hau movement was indigenous in nature, it could not overlook the indigenous religious framework.

Today the Zo are an important ethnic group of Burma. They are predominantly found in Chin State. They are also found in the Lushai Hills, now Mizoram, Manipur, and other

parts of northeast India. Colonial rulers often referred to them as Chin, Kuki, or Lushai and their area settlement as Chin-Lushai Hills primarily due to their common ethnicity and because of their geographical proximity. According to the 1904 *Linguistic Survey of India* (see Grierson), the so-called Chin-Kuki-Lushai people of Burma-India-Bangladesh borderland belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burma family. Apart from dialectical similarities, the culture, traditions, folklore, and folk songs of these tribes point to a common ancestry. It is interesting to note that apart from the officially recognized colonial terms such as Chin, Kuki, etc. there are also numerous local tribal names by which they are known. The most common and acceptable nomenclature, although not yet accepted by all the constituent tribes, is Zo. The term Mizo in Mizoram (India) and Zomi in Burma and part of Manipur (India) are basically adopted from the term Zo (See Vumson; Khai).

Although the Lushai Hills (1894) and Manipur (1896), where large number of Zo tribes are found today, witnessed missionary work ahead of Chin Hills, this paper does not study Christian missionary activity in all three areas. Rather, it gives particular attention to the Zos of Chin Hills chiefly because of the occurrence of a unique contemporaneous indigenous socio-religious reform movement, the Pau Cin Hau movement, which was not found in other Zo settlements. In the absence of any substantial study about the relationship between indigenous cosmology and the two contemporaneous religious movements, this paper is an attempt to rethink and critically analyze the process of conversion of the Zo to Christianity, with special emphasis on Chin Hills. It seeks to consider the importance of the “incoming religious message” (Horton 1993: 315) vis-à-vis the one that came from the indigenous movement and examines the response of the people to those “messages” (Eaton: 244).

### **Two-Tiered Cosmology: Zo Belief and Practices**

The Zo people have a very rich tradition. There are certain favorable conditions that prepared and shaped their tradition and cosmology. A brief study of the society that existed before the advent of colonial rulers and missionaries gives a clear picture of how Zo tradition was shaped. According to tradition, the Zo people migrated in waves from the Chindwin valley in Burma to Chin Hills sometime prior to or in the sixteenth century (Lehman: 25). Some moved from this hill tract to the Lushai Hills while others moved beyond that and scattered among what is now India’s northeastern states and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

Once settled in the hilly terrain, their history began to change. Separated by mountains and deep gorges, they became isolated from one another, politically, culturally, and linguistically. They became clannish and sectarian. Zo mountain top settlements were heavily fortified; inter-village warfare, led by a chief or headman, greatly shaped their worldview. Villages were economically self-sufficient with shifting cultivation as the basic means of subsistence, and they had never developed sustained trade relations with their neighbors. Their society and culture, which the missionaries and colonial rulers were later to encounter, had, in fact, developed during the long period of their political and cultural isolation in the hills. Such a culture was closely intertwined with a well-entrenched traditional cosmology.

Centuries of Zo cultural isolation ended with the British annexation of Chin Hills in the late nineteenth century. It was not only the beginning of the end of Zo sovereignty but also

the commencement of significant changes in their socio-religious and cultural life largely due to combined the colonial-missionary efforts.

Without a lengthy discussion of the society, I turn to the Zo cosmology. According to Zo tradition the cosmos can be divided into three realms: *vantung*, *leitung*, and *leinnuai*. *Vantung* is the realm above the sky, equivalent to heaven, *leinnuai* is the under-world, and *leitung* is the flat surface of the earth, the natural world, what is inhabited. *Khua* is the equivalent of human society in the inhabited world, but appears to have deeper meaning. It is used to characterize the atmospheric world, such as *kbualum* (warm climate), *kbuadam* (cold climate), *kbuasía* (rainy), and *kbuaþha* (good weather). “All these usages,” according to Sing Khaw Khai, “suggests that the idea of *Khua* is related with the atmospheric world or the material world as well as the secular world being spirited with somewhat like cosmic energy” (106). This cosmic energy is therefore deified as *Khuaþing*, which is considered the controller of the world under heaven. Sing Khaw Khai further says:

*Khuaþing* exists as against *Khuaþak* (the light). The suffix *þing* is literally “dark” and *þak* is “light” in the literal sense of matter. Darkness means the absence of light or the state of being invisible. In that sense *þing* appears to denote the invisibility of the deity. Hence *Khuaþing* symbolizes the Invisible. In the Tedim usage, this idea is described as *Mub manþte*, meaning divine being. So it is derivable that *Khuaþing* represents the divine being that controls the *Khua*, the innate world. (The Tedim believe that if the “Invisible” is seen, the one who sees it would die. So it may be said that the *Khuaþing* is the divine being that controls the *Khua*, the innate world (106).

*Zinmang*, the poetic form of *Khuaþing* in Tedim, which represents evil spirits and controlled the *Khua*, must be propitiated or bribed to refrain from doing the particular harm of which each is capable. There is also the spirit of the village, the spirit of the family or clan, all of which were prone to do damage and inflict suffering (Carey and Tuck: 195-96). Altogether there were fifty-four kinds of spirits (Khai: Appendix VIII). There were divergent beliefs among the different Zo tribes regarding the number of spirits and the term used for them. Carey and Tuck observed: “The Hakas (Laimi) and other southerners believed that there is a God (Kozin), who lives in Heaven. He is capable of showering blessings on them, but as he is able to trouble them in every conceivable manner they propitiate him with sacrifices” (195).

While believing in numerous deities, the Zo people also believed in the existence of a Supreme Being. This was first noted among the “Khyen” tribe in Arakan by Lieutenant T. A. Trant, who wrote about them in 1828: “Only one trace still exists of supreme authority, and is in the person of the *Passine* (*Pasian* in Tedim), or head of their rude religion” (264). In regard to the term used for the Supreme Being, a recent Zo theologian writes: “They believe in the existence of ‘Supreme Being.’ All goodness is ascribed to Him. They address Him by a neutral name Shah. In religious rites they address as male and female (Shahpa or Shahnu)” (quoted in Pau 1995: 56). Thomas Herbert Lewin’s record of a Khyeng’s belief regarding the Supreme Being adds further nuance:

We have two-gods: *Patyen*; he is the greatest; it was he made the world [sic].  
He lives in the west, and takes charge of the sun at night. Our other god is

named *Kbozing*; he is the patron of our tribe, and we are specially loved by him. The tiger is *Kbozing's* house-dog, and he will not hurt us, because we are the children of his master (126-27).

Lewin was of course writing of the Zos in the Chittagong Hill Tracts; nevertheless, its relevance in Chin Hills is undoubted. A recent Zo writer put it this way: “Zo believe in a supreme God or *pathian* (*pasian*). God is good. He gives health, richness, children and other human wishes. God is never cruel and hurts people. Therefore Zo people never sacrifice or offer anything to appease God” (Vumson: 16).

It is interesting to note that the term *Pasian* was used as an object of sacrifice to *Zinmang* or *Khuazing* during the pre-Christian period. For instance, a Tedim ritual invocation says: “*ka pasian na taii in, ka lungzai na taii in,*” which means, “let my *pasian* be well fed, let my *lungzai* be well fed” (Khai: 117). The sacrifices were meant to please the *pasian* or *zinmang*. Here the terms *pasian* and *lungzai* represent the deity of the sacrifice. *Lungzai* is used as the symbol of *Khuazing*. Sing Khaw Khai says that gradually, the term *pasian*, rather than *lungzai* or *khuazing*, were identified with the Christian God (117). How it has been adapted to represent the Christian God today is a matter of interest discussed in the later part of this paper.

The Zo cosmic conception resembles the two-tiered structure proposed by Robin Horton with regard to African cosmology. The lower tier consists of the lesser spirits, which are concerned with the affairs of the local community and its environment, i.e. with the microcosm. An upper tier consists of a supreme being, concerned with the world beyond the local community, i.e. with the macrocosm. While the lesser spirits “will be the primary guardians of morality, and will be the objects of constant approach by human beings,” the Supreme Being “will have no direct association with morality, and will seldom be approached by human beings” (Horton: 101).

The main focus of Zo sacrifices and rituals was directed to the lesser spirits *Khuazing* or *Zinmang*, which constitute numerous deities. These spirits included *inn dawi* (household spirit) and *gam dawi* (country spirit). Numerous sacrifices were offered to spirits capable of helping man, whereas those harmful to human beings were propitiated and appeased. Erik Cohen says,

the spirits are part of the world of everyday life, as “real” as stones, trees or human beings. Good and, particularly, bad luck – e.g., sickness, death, drought or harvest failure – are generally ascribed to the spirits. To prevent such calamities the spirits have to be ceaselessly worshipped, propitiated and appeased. This ritual activity, in turn, reinforces the plausibility of their existence (343).

There were three main categories of Zo sacrificial and propitiatory rites: personal rite, household rite, and communal rite. While the first two rites were sponsored by the individual household and managed by the head of the house, the third category concerned the village as a whole and its management was overseen by the village priest (Stevenson: 157). The spirits that inhabited places in the countryside were personal or common spirits and communal rites associated with them were called *Tual biakna*. One of the most important household rites was the ancestor worship of *Pu-sha biakna* in Tedim, often described as *Pu-sha* or *Pa-sha*,

the chief god of all the household gods. It was a sacrificial ritual directed to the deceased parents or forefathers who were believed to have interest in the daily life of the family or clan. The consequences of failure to observe this ritual were always disastrous. The literal meaning of *biakna* is worship. Scholars with a theological background argued strongly against worship of the spirits. According to Sing Khaw Khai, *davi* (demon) is not worshipped, but is propitiated through sacrificial offering (159). The clan priest administered the *pusba biakna* by recounting the names of the pedigrees of successive generations. In fact, it is not the ancestors that blessed the ancestor, writes Sing Khaw Khai, but it is the *Sba* (the personal spirit of man) that blessed them. Other household gods included *Innteeke* (host spirit), *Bangkua* or *Bangtung* (the front door spirit), *Sumtawng* (the ground yard spirit), and *Muibiak* or *huanbiak* (the kitchen garden spirit) (Khai: 161-62). There were also types of priests: the clan priest, the household priest, and the village priest.

The greatest household ceremonial rite was the *Ton'* feast or Feast of Merit. It was known as *Bawi-lam* and *Khuangcavi* in the Haka area. *Ton* was of two kinds: *Sialtang-sut* and *Sialkop-gawb*. It was a much more elaborate offering to the *Pusba biakna*, which took several days to perform during which a large number from one's own village as well as from neighboring ones were fed and entertained. Sacrifices were made to all sorts of beings. The major sacrifice, however, consisted of the ritual slaying of one or more *mithuns* (an Indian bison, an important domesticated by the Zo). The sacrifice was to go to *misikhua* (the abode of the dead). It was believed that when the individual who performed the sacrifice died, he would have those *mithuns* with him in the *misikhua* (Khai: 132; Carey and Tuck: 196).<sup>1</sup> The sacrifice was a validation of status in the eyes of the living public (Lehman: 178-79). In terms of the economic liabilities, the communal rite imposed a serious burden on the household budget because, unlike the other two, no household that contributed to the expense of this rite received a reciprocal distribution of meat. Zo cosmology was, therefore, closely intertwined with social and economic activities.

### The American Baptist Mission in Chin Hills

The Zo people encountered both British colonial rulers and Christian missionaries in the last decade of the nineteenth century. With the objective to open up the Chin-Lushai hill tracts, which separated British territories in Assam and Upper Burma, British soldiers conducted a series of military campaigns from late 1880s (see Pau 2006). A multi-pronged assault, code-named Chin-Lushai Expedition (1889-1890), resulted in the defeat of Zo resistance and annexation of their land. Thenceforth, Chin-Lushai Hills became part of the British India administration.

Following on the heels of colonial soldiers, the first missionary couple, Arthur E. Carson and his wife from the American Baptist Mission, arrived in Haka, the headquarters of colonial administration in Chin Hills, on 15 March 1899. "It was the plan of the Board,"

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<sup>1</sup> Tradition has it that the dead go to the dead village through a gate between the earth and the dead village. This celestial gate is guarded by a mythological being named *Shab-nu* in Tedim, *Sa nu* in Matupi. The dead has to appease *Shab-nu*, the celestial gatekeeper, to be permitted to pass through the gate to the *Misi-khua*. Traditionally, the killing of at least one animal is required for a person's funeral ceremony. Two pieces of the liver of the sacrificed animal are offered to the dead to bring with him to his abode.

wrote Laura Carson, wife of the first missionary, “to form a chain of missions working both ways from the new station which we were to open up connecting with our Lower Burma Missions in the Southeast and with those of Assam to the Northwest” (145). In this way mission activities grew apace with the expansion of colonialism. The significance of opening up the previously unadministered and unexplored Chin-Lushai hills for colonial rulers and Christian missions lay in the fact that it acted as a connecting link between their stations in Burma and India. How far this really served their purpose is another matter, but it brought remarkable changes among the indigenous Zo people.

Under the umbrella of Pax Britannica, Christian missions employed education and medical health as important tools to spread the Gospel to the “animist” Zos. The first mission school was opened at Haka in 1900 amidst strong opposition from a Burman sergeant of the Military Police. Despite all adverse situations, missionary education policy continued to press on and by 1905 there were altogether four schools with an attendance of 132 pupils (Johnson: 64-65, 66).

Giving equal importance to education, Arthur Carson mentioned in his letter to the Mission Board in America the need to start medical activities to “unlock the hearts of this simple people as no other could.” In 1920, Dr. Erik Hjalmar East, a Swedish born American medical doctor, arrived in the hills with a strong conviction “to break down the influence of the priests and the witch doctor” (East: 309). Dr. East started giving treatments to sick persons, distributing drugs to villages, and at the same time preaching the Gospel. Dispensaries were opened in important villages. In 1904 alone, treatments were given to 4,000 patients. That year was remarkable as Thuam Hang and his wife, Dim Khaw Cing, and Pau Suan and his wife, Kham Ciang of Khuasak village, became the earliest Zo converts from “one of the most Godless places on the earth.” On hearing this great news Dr. East, who later baptized the couples, jubilantly exclaimed: “Truly, when this letter came from Schwe Zan, Mrs. East and I laughed and cried and shouted: ‘the King of Glory had surely made His entrance into the Chin Hills. The bells of heaven were ringing as the Shepherd brought home the lost sheep.’ It was too wonderful!” (60-61). The medical mission continued until 1915, after which the missionary endeavor leaned more towards education.

In spite of the fact that Christian mission activities had been carried out under the umbrella of the British government, much of the rivalry and opposition, particularly during the early phase, came from the government. The British allowed the missionaries to do their job so long as they did not meddle with governmental interests. There is no evidence to suggest there was direct colonial-mission collaboration, albeit the missionaries greatly depended on the government for their security and safety. Disappointed with the lackadaisical attitude of the government, Dr. East wrote:

The whole thing goes to show that even here, among wild tribes, the powers that be representing a [sic] Christian Missionaries are not always as they should be; but on the contrary try to block their work wherever possible by veiled diplomatic tricks, for such I am sure this was. But we have no right to blame the British Government, as in the far flung provinces it usually depends upon some unfriendly sub-officials who must elevate himself by

hindering such as are willing to rescue the perishing and care for the dying (194).

Christian mission activities also felt the heat of the First World War. The war was not actually fought in the hills, but the uprising in the Haka tract during 1917-19 was a direct result of the war that, in turn, affected mission activities, especially the progress of education. This was clearly shown by Mission statistics in 1924; there was only one secondary school and six primary schools with a total of 295 students (Johnson: 480-81). The post-war period, however, witnessed a complete turn-around in government attitude towards mission activities, particularly in regard to education. In 1925, missionary Joseph Herbert Cope was appointed by the government to become honorary Inspector of School. A new policy of streamlining education was set in place under the aegis of the government. This marked the end of the dominance of the mission school. Except for three primary schools, all the mission schools were absorbed by the government. The Burmese script and language was dropped altogether and replaced by the Roman alphabet and vernacular language. Cope was commissioned to write textbooks from primary to the fourth standard in local dialects on all subjects taught in the schools for the three subdivisions of Falam, Haka, and Tedim. He ultimately wrote thirty-five textbooks and readers in six different Zo dialects on different subjects such as geography, hygiene, science, history, and arithmetic. What Cope achieved in practical terms was the reduction of over forty dialects into three *lingua franca*, namely: Tedim, Falam, and Haka (Go 1981: 66). Missionary activities were again interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, resumed after the war, and finally came to an end in the 1950s when the government of Burma prohibited foreign missionaries from working in the country. By this time Christianity was firmly rooted in Chin Hills.

### **Indigenous Reform Movement: The Pau Cin Hau Way**

The “incoming message” from the missionary was not only in competition with the indigenous cosmology, it also conflicted with a contemporaneous indigenous socio-religious movement pioneered by Pau Cin Hau. The Pau Cin Hau movement was believed to have originated as a sort of revelation from God through the prophet Pau Cin Hau, which developed slowly into a religious movement against indigenous socio-religious belief and practices. A similar movement occurred among the Nagas in Manipur and Nagaland under the leadership of Jadonang during this period. The Pau Cin Hau movement was, however, different from the Naga movement because the latter took on a nationalistic character while the former was strictly limited to socio-religious reforms. The Pau Cin Hau movement appeared at a time when the Zo people were heavily burdened with traditional wealth-consuming rituals and sacrifices, and it became significant because it appeared when Christian cosmology posed serious challenges to traditional Zo cosmology. Whether the Pau Cin Hau movement offered an alternative religion to Christianity is a matter of debate. The movement caused serious problems in the early stage of evangelism. However, according to Robert G. Johnson, “The Pau Cin Hau prophet movement has not had lasting impact on the Baptist churches in Chin Hills” (401).

Born in 1859 at Tedim in northern Chin Hills, Pau Cin Hau had been involved in prophesying about the future since his boyhood. He once prophesied about the destruction of Khua Cin, Chief of Kamhau, and his *inn ka*, which was believed to have been fulfilled

when British forces stormed into Tedim in 1899. According to E. Pendleton Banks, an American anthropologist who conducted field study in Chin hills in the early 1960s, “Pau Cin Hau had earlier acted as disciple to a prophetess named Pi(an honorific) Nuam Dim, daughter of Hau Zui” (39).

As a result of the British expedition, Khan Lian, the father of Pau Cin Hau, and his family fled to Lailui, a nearby village. It was during his refuge at Lailui that Pau Cin Hau suffered serious illness for about fifteen years (1888-1902), during which he claimed to have received a series of revelations from God. “From the year 1900 onward,” described Pau Cin Hau, “in dreams and visions I received a series of communications which I hold to be divine and are the foundations both of my alphabet and my religious teaching” (Bennison: 217). His many successive revelations included visions of heaven, features of western civilizations such as railways and steam-ships, struggles between nations and races, visions of an Englishman who taught him letters, the Almighty God riding a horse to gather many races of people, and God’s command to abolish *dawi* (evil spirit) sacrifices. His family resorted to all possible means to invoke the healing touch of the demons or nats for the restoration of Pau Cin Hau’s health, all of which were in vain. In one of his visions Pau Cin Hau saw God, who called him by name and asked if he would worship him. Pau Cin Hau thus said: “I had faith in him and in a moment was cured from my illness of fifteen years. During those years for the cure of that illness I had paid the sum of Rs. 400 in making sacrifices or various kinds of animals to the nats or demons. The cure of God was complete and cost nothing” (Bennison: 217).

The fifteen years of his prolonged-illness was a turning point in the life of Pau Cin Hau. He became a preacher-reformer propagating what he had received from his visions, moving from one village to another. These visions became the central theme of his teaching in his public ministry. He stressed four main areas: healing ministry, exorcism, teaching the people to worship God, and teaching writing with a new script, which worked quite effectively among the people. Of the seven rituals mentioned by Banks, the curing ritual or healing ministry was the most significant one often performed by a *palik* or *Pa-leik-thas*, an elite group of the movement (Bennison: 44). The *Palik* or *Pa-leik-thas* (policemen) were also known as *Khutdompa* (men who feel the pulse). They wore red headdresses, because it was believed that as all bad characters shun the police, so also all evil spirits will shun the sick person as long as the *Palik* is present in his red headdress. They were numbered from three to six per village. The *Paliks* were offered *Zu* (local rice beer) as a form of payment. Other practices included prayer for the sick, construction of a *Sangbuk* (church), celebration of drinking *tuisiang*, praying and casting out demons in the name of God, and maintaining a membership record.

A significant achievement of Pau Cin Hau was the invention of a new script in accordance with what he believed was a revelation from God. There was no mention of the new script in either the 1911 or 1921 Census of India reports, but in 1931 the original script of 1,050 characters was reduced to 21 consonants and 7 vowels plus tonal signs. The script was employed in the translation of *The Sermon on the Mount* by Pau Cin Hau, with the help of Thang Cin Kham of Tonzang (Bennison: 194). The invention of the script earned Pau Cin Hau the name *Laipianpa* (the script-creator) and hence his religion *Laipianism*. Some people

knew this movement as *Beeltung Muut Pawl* simply because the leaders blow inside an empty *zu*<sup>2</sup> pot while praying.

Within a short span of time, Pau Cin Hau and his followers carried forward the movement from Tedim, the place of its origin, to Falam, Haka, and beyond the western and northern borders, overcoming language and cultural barriers. An official record in 1931 estimated that there were 35,700 adherents to the movement, including 26,000 in Tedim and 9,700 in Falam (Bennison: 218). According to Stevenson, almost the entire Zanniat tribe had been converted to this cult and about 27% of the whole population of Falam professed allegiance to it in 1936 (162). After Pau Cin Hau died in 1948, the growth of the movement slowed considerably; government statistics estimated about 40,000 followers in 1960 (Banks: 41).

Having turned himself from a mere prophet to a leader who spearheaded a socio-religious reform movement among the Zo people, Pau Cin Hau needs to be analyzed in light of burgeoning missionary activities. Did Pau Cin Hau spearhead an indigenous response to the Christian mission by defending the core Zo traditional values and providing an “alternative to Christianity,” or was he a “forerunner of Christianity” like John the Baptist in the Bible? (Go 1985: 15)

### Indigenous Response to “Incoming Messages” Re-Examined

In light of the above developments, it is imperative to examine the Zo’s view of the Christian mission and the Pau Cin Hau movement respectively and to analyze how each responded to the new or reformed religious beliefs and practices being offered to them. Statistics of the early three decades of the twentieth century show that the Christian mission lagged far behind the Pau Cin Hau movement in terms of adherents (only 10,000 Christian converts in contrast to 35,700 followers of Pau Cin Hau). However, this was reversed by the middle of the twentieth century. Pau Cin Hau’s teachings were initially more acceptable to the people than those of the missionaries. But, what really favored the Pau Cin Hau movement?

Initially, the Zo people considered Christianity a foreign religion brought to them by the Whites and they were suspicious of what they considered the White’s religion. Medical and educational missions, intended “to open the mind and heal the body,” did not yield the fruit expected by the missionaries. The Zo were prejudiced against anyone who claimed to be a medicine chief but could not cure all chronic troubles with a pill or by rubbing something on two or three times. In fact, they only sought the help of a medical doctor when they had no other option. “They come to us as a last resort,” lamented Dr. East, “when hope, means and strength are absolutely gone.” Greatly disappointed by the sullen attitude of the people and their response, Dr. Woodin, who succeeded Dr. East, reported in his letter to the Board in 1914: “The medical work continues the same as before . . . the few cases in the hospital have been unsatisfactory, most of them have been forcibly removed at critical times to be taken to

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<sup>2</sup> *Zu* is a fermented rice beer commonly drunk by the Zo people. It was a very important part of their life, especially common in festivals, rituals, and on any special occasion.

their villages for sacrifice. I consider the eleven hundred rupees expended for medical work worse than wasted” (quoted in Johnson: 273, 327).

Poor school attendance during the early period was attributed to the economic disadvantage of sending children to school and the prohibition of education for girls. Children usually helped their parents in the field. Sending them to school therefore amounted to losing their service. Interestingly, the Zo people saw no value in the education of women. According to them girls had to work in the fields and in the home and so could not be spared. Educating a girl, they believed, was nonproductive, for they thought girls would only get married, have a family, and be occupied in agricultural and domestic chores. They also believed that educated girls would not be properly submissive to their husbands.

The slow pace of growth in education was also due to the chiefs’ considerable opposition to school and their apprehension about its impact. The chiefs’ desire for education without Christianity was unambiguously told by the chief of Seipi to the Superintendent and Dr. East: “*Chong In Kadu Vantsung Jesu Kan dulo. Ar le vock Kan tshoi lo a stshun Kan thi lai, she ranga Jesu thornng Kan dub la*” (school I want, the Heavenly Jesus I don’t want. If we do not sacrifice chickens and pigs we die, therefore, I don’t want the Jesus custom) (East: 193). A recent writer says:

. . . formal education at the onset did not seize the fancy of the people and the state schools were abominations to the arrogant Chin chieftains. To them this education business was nothing less than a form of coercion, a virtual seduction towards change of religion, culture and tribal customs. The chiefs especially feared the prospect of losing their customary tributes (Pum: 75).

The chiefs felt that education and Christianity unloosed the people from the burden of slavery (Johnson: 345) and other compulsory traditional dues.<sup>3</sup> A disappointed chief strongly warned against and reacted to Tang Tsin’s conversion to Christianity:

You need not tell me anything about God, and you cannot worship Him and live in this village. You know that if you do our own gods will be angry, and 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 (Carson: 184).

In spite of strong objection of the chiefs to “education with Christianity,” which was viewed as a deliberate intrusion on Zo traditional beliefs and culture and loss of power and prestige, the missionaries were adamantly opposed to separating the two. The standpoint of

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<sup>3</sup> According to Joseph Herbert Cope, a missionary based in northern Chin hills: “The Christian does not sacrifice nor does he hold drunken feasts, whereupon, according to the law of the land, they are excused from paying the dues. This has stirred the chiefs to a high pitch of excitement. They are demanding to know where all this will lead. Unless the government comes to their rescue and makes new rules they will soon be receiving little *shilla*. At the same time the heathen see what the Christians are doing and they want to do likewise. Therefore, wherever I go someone wants to know if they can stop this *shilla* payment. The chiefs are contemplating raising a defense fund and carrying the matter up to the Crown if necessary. It is a hindrance to our work. With the chiefs feeling this way they try in every way to keep people out of the Kingdom (of God)” (Johnson: 345).

the Christian mission was, “We would not for a moment consider any school without religious teaching and that our prime object was and is to spread the Gospel, and while doing so, we are willing to educate the people also” (Johnson: 293-94). The failure to convert the chiefs and headmen to Christianity, on whom the entire Zo society depended not only politically but even in religious matter, thus retarded the growth of Christianity.

What seemed to have made the Zos more obdurate to Christianity was the missionary teaching itself, which meant for them cultural change. Conversion to Christianity, according to the missionaries, not only meant a change of religion, but also should have an immediate impact on the cultural life of the people. The cultural changes that were expected of converts included abandonment of the tradition of drinking *Zu* and sacrifices. It must be noted that *Zu*, being an essential part of Zos everyday life, had played a meaningful role in rituals, festivals, and other occasions. Zo people believed that 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*. Attempts to abolish *zu* drinking were thus seen as a force to undermine Zo tradition and sacrifices. Religious conversion, from the missionary perspective, meant discarding what is traditional and adopting Western culture.

Pau Cin Hau, on the other hand, offered a religion that could easily adapt with the indigenous culture. Though he strongly attacked the excessive and wealth-consuming rituals and sacrifices, he allowed the people to drink *zu* (rice-beer), and to continue practices of traditional singing and dancing, all of which were part of the Zo traditional lifestyle. Pau Cin Hau deliberately refrained from disturbing what the Zo people had highly valued in their cultural life. In fact, the Pau Cin Hau movement appeared at the time when the Zo people had been overburdened with costly sacrifices and ancestral worship. He was able to abolish the fear of and sacrifices to spirits, as he clearly said:

Our Chin (Zo) ancestors worship various kinds of nats, such as house nat, forest nat, water nat etc., altogether fifty-four in number. Those who have believed and wish to enter my religion came from far distant villages and invited them to visit them. Together with a little band of disciples I made it my custom to accept their invitation and on entering a house or village after praying to God would destroy completely the articles used for making sacrifices to the nats and whereas sufferers had previously, like myself, had to pay large sums of such sacrifices our only charge was a nominal sum to cover traveling expenses. Sometimes it seemed as though some of my more hasty or unintelligent followers were themselves possessed by demons after such visit but after praying to God they speedily became normal again (Bennison: 194).

The abolition of holding extravagant feasts and wealth-consuming sacrifices to propitiate evil spirits was well received by the socially restricted and economically overburdened people. It visibly improved the condition of the people as Pau Cin Hau claimed:

One wholesome effect of my teaching is that where formerly many who had nothing went into debt to obtain sacrificial offerings and so could neither afford to buy food nor pay their taxes, my followers being free from such expenses are in much better circumstances (Bennison: 218).

An official report of 1912 further commented: “The material prosperity of the Chins in the Northern Hills is being much increased owing to the teaching of a Sokte prophet, Pow Chin How, who preaches against the sacrifices of animals” (see National Archive of India 1912). One negative impact of this growth, albeit less significant, according to Stevenson, was on agriculture. According to his observation: “The villagers having lost their fear of the *ti buai*, or evil spirits of the springs, proceeded to cut down for firewood the large shady trees which animism had preserved over all their village springs” (45).

In short, we can say that while Pau Cin Hau strongly attacked sacrifices to spirits and some of the Zo social practices, he also tried to work with traditional practices and to adapt to them. A recent study thus contends: “This cultural adaptability and conversion without destroying the cultural barriers proved to be effective in the spreading of *Laipianism*” (Pau 1995: 117). Interestingly, in due course, with the growing threat of evangelism, *Laipianism* “became a truly nativistic movement, a rallying point for the conservative and anti-foreign elements in Chin society” (Banks: 55).

The second half of the twentieth century, however, ushered in an upsurge in missionary activities that resulted in a complete turnaround in the whole gamut of Zo conversion to Christianity. Several reasons may account for this. Like the Pau Cin Hau movement, missionary teachings also gradually penetrated the traditional sections of Zo society. This was largely due, on the one hand, to the persistent efforts of the missionaries in tandem with Karen teachers who accompanied them in the hills, and on the other hand, to the active involvement of early Zo converts. The increase of Zo converts and their participation in evangelical activities effectively removed the earlier apprehension that Christianity was a religion of the Whites. With the growth of local churches, regional associations, such as the Tedim Association, the Falam Association, the Haka Association, and the Matu-Kanpetlet Association, the “new message” took a major leap forward. The formation of the Zomi Baptist Convention in 1954 ensured the continuation of evangelism even in the post missionary period.

The changed attitude of the chiefs towards education and missionary activities further enhanced the growth of Christianity in Chin Hills. As mentioned above, the chiefs had hitherto opposed education and modern medical treatments provided by the missionaries. But with the passage of time, colonial missionary efforts gradually eroded this barrier. The offer of education first to chiefs and their children in government-run schools was instrumental in the change. Eventually, the chiefs no longer saw Christianity as a destructive force but as an acceptable alternative source of health and power, which paved the way for the conversion of the common people.

Language and literature played a role in the conversion of the Zo. They were devoid of any existing script save the one invented by Pau Cin Hau, which at that stage was in a preliminary form and did not appeal to the people as a whole. The introduction of a Romanized script by Joseph Herbert Cope in collaboration with the colonial government (1925) overshadowed the indigenously invented script and gave new impetus to the development of Christianity. The new alphabet, in Kamhau dialect in the northern hills, was so easy that it took only seven days to learn. It became popularly known as *Ni Sagih Lai* (Seven Days Script).

The contribution of Pau Cin Hau movement appears to have been, albeit inadvertently, overlooked. The Pau Cin Hau movement has too often been viewed as an “alternative religion” to Christianity and little attempt has been made to unearth its contribution to the growth of Christianity, particularly its role in the reorientation of Zo cosmology. In fact, Pau Cin Hau never intended to facilitate the growth of Christianity, nor was he directly opposed to it. But by strongly attacking costly traditional sacrifices and rituals, Pau Cin Hau not only unloosed his followers from socio-economic obligations but also freed them from the fear of the lesser spirits, which they believed were associated with traditional sacrifices. In this way Pau Cin Hau broke the boundary of the microcosm (lesser spirit) and enhanced the importance of the macrocosm in Zo cosmology (Supreme Being) (Dena: 87). The removal of the fear of *Zinmang* or *dawi* (spirit) paved the way for the easy access of Christianity to Zo beliefs.

An interesting development is Pau Cin Hau’s emphasis on one God. By strictly emphasizing a single god, which they called *Pasian*, in place of the numerous spirits, Pau Cin Hau and his followers successfully reoriented, albeit inadvertently, Zo cosmology in line with Christian cosmology. *Pasian*, as mentioned above, represented the object of sacrifices offered to the lesser spirits or *Zinmang*. It was often suffixed with *te* (plural form) as *pasiente unau* (pasiente brother). A popular myth in Zo, called the *Nei No* myth, portrays the *pasiente unau* living divinities. A recent scholar believes that it “represented a living divinity and it looks like the messenger of a higher dwelling somewhere in the celestial space, but not in the highest” (Khai: 118). The 1931 census of India noted that followers of Pau Cin Hau addressed *Pa-Chiem* (an erroneous form of *Pasian*) when they prayed. The term *pasiente unau* was later developed by Pau Cin Hau into *Pasian* to refer to the Supreme Being. The *pasian* employed here cannot mean “evil spirit” since Pau Cin Hau strongly condemned the microcosmic world of the Zos. Sing Khaw Khai thus states: “Since that time onwards, the *Pasian* in tradition was distinguished from all other forms of divine beings where *Pasian* stood for God and all other living divinities were collectively referred to as *Dawi* . . .” (117-18).

## Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that conversion to Christianity among the Zo people was the outcome of half a century of missionary endeavors, but in light of the above discussion, one cannot underestimate the advantages that Christian missions gained from the simultaneous indigenous movement spearheaded by Pau Cin Hau. Christian beliefs challenged traditional Zo beliefs in lesser spirits. The Pau Cin Hau movement, largely because of its cultural adaptability, effectively crushed the lower tier (microcosm) of Zo cosmology and reoriented it in such a way that the Christian God could easily fit into the upper tier (macrocosm) and, eventually, replaced Zo traditional religion. One would rightly say that the early success of the Pau Cin Hau movement facilitated the growth of Christianity. This, however, does not minimize the influence of the “incoming message” of the Christian proselytizers. This study of the changes in the indigenous Zo religious framework supports Horton’s “intellectualist theory,” which removes the role of missionary agents from center stage and stresses the importance of the indigenous culture and its response.

It would not be historically accurate to look at an indigenous hill tribes' conversion to Christianity only from the perspective of the "agents" who brought the "message." It is important to understand the society and traditional cosmology of the indigenous people in the "new environment" where the missionary was to seek converts. More importantly, the present study shows that the existence of a "unique" indigenous movement alongside the Christian mission is essential to an in-depth analysis of the process of conversion.

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