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## Social Change and Vaiphei Society: A Geographical Study

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### Abstract

Previous research on tribes was analyzed as a community at a specific development stage, compared to the traits of what is termed "modern" societies. Tribes are perceived as missing contemporary characteristics and are frequently simplistically labeled as isolated, underdeveloped, and in need of integration into the mainstream. This stimulates the creativity of early societies residing beyond modern civilization. Numerous conceptualizations do not fully encompass tribal society when tribes shed their inherent traits and adopt characteristics of the referent society, whether caste or peasant, as tribal societies inevitably experience social and economic changes. The rise of industrial capitalism and globalization has eroded many established institutions, leading many scholars to claim that tribal sentiments persist only in areas where capitalism's expansion is either "delayed or distorted." The Vaipheis possess various unique social and religious customs that set them apart from other communities and related Kuki-Zo tribes. Historically, the Vaipheis held a profound and private respect for nature, reflected in their social and spiritual customs. They believe that nature, including the soil, forests, and rivers, is closely tied to their overall health. Every administrative, social, economic, and religious endeavor was closely linked to their customary and traditional practices. The research focuses on social changes within the Vaiphei community. Its context is based on data from the field survey, discussions with scholars and community elders, and relevant literature concerning the alterations in the Vaiphei socio-cultural and political systems.

**Keywords:** Christian missionaries, social change, socio-cultural, tradition, vaiphei, society, community

### Introduction

The initial documented history of the Vaiphei community started with the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century. The accounts of British expeditionary officers or agents and Christian missionaries during their time in Manipur constitute the earliest written documents, albeit presented from an etic perspective. Nevertheless, while these writings by Westerners represent the earliest significant records concerning the tribe, they possess certain limitations. They possessed their own preconceived notions, assumptions, and interpretations regarding what they had witnessed and documented. There is a high chance of being misled because of insufficient understanding of the native language. The lack of experience among the people in handling various inquiries from Westerners may have also played a role in the restrictions regarding those writings. Thus, documents were also gathered from native authors such as, Joseph Suantak (2010) <sup>[4]</sup>, Hanglianlal, and Kailianlal (2010) <sup>[7]</sup>, among others. They provided the foundation for understanding Vaiphei society from an emic viewpoint. Societal change requires time and occurs gradually. Numerous writings concerning the influence of Christianity on the tribes of the North-East indicate that swift transformations occurred following the British takeover of administration and the arrival of Christian missionaries. The shift from animism (indigenous belief) to Christianity represented a significant turning point for numerous tribal communities in the Northeast regarding their social and cultural transformations. Soilalsiam (2009) states that "In contemporary times, Vaiphei society is not merely regarded as traditional or conservative, as it is slowly being influenced by changing forces that have led to a significant transformation in the socio-economic, religious, and political aspects of life".

The chapter is organized into three primary parts: Catalysts of change, transformations in traditional society, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and their impact on reshaping Vaiphei culture.

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### The Socio-Cultural Context

Change is a natural phenomenon and change for the better is important for the development of people.

“Social change moves like an underground river, obeying its laws or those of economic change, rather than following the direction of political happenings that move on the surface of life,” writes Trevelyan (1942) in ‘English Social History’. Change for development requires continuity. In a changing society, this continuity is maintained by the social institutions and customs that they have. The changes that occurred in society did not happen on its own. There are agents that cause these changes. Some of those important agents that cause changes in the Vaiphei society are discussed in this section. The British colonizers did not have direct contact with Manipur until the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 which was signed between the British and Burmese after the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). According to the treaty the Burmese agreed to cede to the British Assam, Manipur, Rakhine (Arakan), and the Taninthayil coast of the Salween River. The second phase of the British contact with Manipur came with the Khongjom War in 1891 where the Anglo-Manipuri War ended with the Victory of the British in the Khongjom that war. The British captured all political powers and as a result, Manipur became a princely state in 1892. With this, the British did not control only the valley but expanded their influence on the hills. However, their influences could not be effective as controlling the hills from Imphal was not easy due to the lack of transportation and communication facilities. During the Second World War, the British needed a labour corps and demanded the same from the Kuki chiefs. The Kukis that lived in the hills of Manipur, having their chieftainship and system of administration did not agree with the idea of them going to France as labor corps during World War II. As a result, the British used force to get what they wanted while the Kukis under their chiefs rebelled against the move. This resulted in the Kuki-Rebellion or Anglo-Kuki War which took place from 1917-1919. After the incident, the administration system became intensified. Therefore, for better administration, the hills were divided into four sub-divisions, Churanchandpur, Tamenglong, Tengnoupal, and Ukhrul and the headquarters were at Imphal. The Political Agent of Manipur, who was also the President of Manipur State Durbar was given authority in 1919 to control the hills. This system had a great impact on the social life and administration of the hills.

Though the people in the hill did not have much contact with the other parts of the world, they were self-sufficient in their way with the resources provided by Mother Nature. They had their traditional administration in the village. They had their own customs and social institutions to take care of their society. However, things changed after the British took up different administrative policies and carried them out in the hill areas. F.S. Downs (1980), writing his analysis of the situation in North East India in general, describes what he called “traumatic change consequent upon British annexation”, as follows: The subjection of the tribes to an external political authority for the first time in their history; the introduction of an alien administrative and judicial system and the imposition of entirely new principles of authority and jurisprudence; the introduction of money economy and consumer goods such as mill cloth and kerosene lanterns which undermined the largely self-sufficient economies of the tribes and created new concepts of wealth; the development of modern communications including postal

system, roads and new forms of transport; the imposition of laws that seriously affected the traditional institutions.”

The introduction of the new transport system and communication did not affect only the traditional system of the tribals, but also their attitude and mindset. Their outlook began to change tremendously. The introduction of the new administrative system and the development of transport and communication had far-reaching impacts on the political, socioeconomic, and cultural systems of the people. For the Vaiphei society, in particular, all these were interconnected, and one cannot single out one from the other. For example, it is a custom that the eldest (in lineage, not in age) be chosen as the chief of the village. The chief was the head of the village administration. He needs to be exemplary in valor and wealth. As a chief he settles all cases in the village, acting as a magistrate. As the head of the village and head of the clan, he performs both administrative and cultural functions. The main economic activity of the Vaipheis depended on agriculture. The jhum field they cultivated must be approved by the chief of the village and in return the villagers pay a certain amount of the products to the chief. In this way, the village chief controls the people's administration, culture, and economy (Vaiphei, S, 2001) <sup>[1]</sup>. Likewise, there are many other interconnections between the political, social, cultural, and economy of Vaipheis. British influence greatly affected these traditional systems in Manipur Hills' administration.

### Expanded World View

The newfound religion had impacted every period of Vaiphei's life. Before Christianity reached the Vaiphei region, the Vaiphei tribal perspective was confined to a single village or, at most, a specific geographical location or location. Christianity has introduced the Vaiphei people to a new perspective, not just connecting them with the Indian nation but also with the global community. Being exposed to a different world, with unique economic systems, political philosophies, government structures, and educational and social infrastructures, separate from their isolated Vaiphei communities, was sure to change the perspective of the Vaiphei people. The Christian passport allowed Christians to be welcomed by other Christian communities worldwide. Christian missionaries facilitated interaction between tribal life, culture, and the indigenous Church with the global community, leading to a global unity in faith despite internal tensions and divisions stemming from theological and historical differences.

The formal education of the Vaiphei community began in 1910 with the arrival of Welsh missionary Watkin R Roberts, in response to an invitation from Thangkai and Lungpau in South Manipur. Following several days of extensive dialogue with the immersion in Duhlian translations of the Scriptures section and spreading the Gospel in Maite and nearby villages, Roberts went back to his Headquarters in Aizawl and asked 2 local Bible students -Thangkai and Lungpau -to oversee the fresh mission. On May 7, 1910, the two evangelist-teachers arrived at Maite village and established a Primary Mission School alongside their evangelical work (Prim, 1981) <sup>[14]</sup>. During the initial stages, teaching was basic and primarily focused on reading the Bible and learning to write, as education was primarily centered around teachings from the Bible. Because there was no age restriction, children and adults sat together and studied the subjects. Vocational training was not always a priority in mission schools. The primary focus of the vocational training provided was for the

growth and preparation of catechists, clergy, and other local workers involved in mission work. Consequently, many of the first educated Vaiphei individuals found employment in missionary roles with low wages. It seems that the formal education brought by the missionaries focused on religious teaching to benefit the missionaries rather than providing vocational guidance or improving the lives of the Vaiphei people. During that time, it was believed that elementary education was adequate for the missionaries' needs, so there was no push for implementing advanced education. For example, William Pettigrew, the initial missionary to arrive in Manipur and lead tribal education, believed that tribals did not need education beyond Middle English School grade. He believes that most people will be satisfied with a basic education focused on literacy in their native language for a long time (Salam, 2006) <sup>[2]</sup>. Additionally, educational goals were also narrowed down to simply achieving a means of living. The missionaries' attitude likely contributed to the limited education in Vaiphei during the early period, mostly focusing on a primary level. Until 1941, there were many primary schools but only 3 middle schools and no high schools in the hill area of Manipur where tribals lived.

In the Vaiphei regions, before Christianity arrived, Zu (alcohol) was seen as a necessary component in all major celebrations, gatherings, and rituals. Mrs. Grimwood's statement that "They have a drink made from fermented rice water which they refer to as liquor-Zu" is accurate (Grimwood, 1891) <sup>[12]</sup>. It was essential to offer Zu to the Village Chief and his Council of Elders when resolving disputes among the villagers. In the period before Christianity, drunkenness was common within the Hmar community. With the arrival of Christianity, missionaries in the Vaiphei society not only preached the gospel but also worked towards social reform by forbidding the drinking of Zu among new converts. Zu, a popular beverage, was closely associated with animistic rituals and other customs from their pagan past, creating an environment unsuitable for Christian spiritual development. The action taken by missionaries and Churches led to the slow decrease of Zu as a popular beverage for any event. Nowadays, the Vaiphei community has discovered Thingpi (Tea) as an alternative to Zu, and serving Thingpi to guests and visitors has become a cultural tradition for the Vaiphei people (Khaineimang, 2005) <sup>[3]</sup>. By banning Zu as a popular beverage that used up excess agricultural products like rice and corn in its production, more rice and corn are now used as everyday food for families, leading to economic progress in the community.

### Christianity and the Vaiphei culture

The influence of Christianity on Vaiphei culture and tradition is extensive. The arrival of Christianity caused a clash of cultures that impacted societal change. After a few years of converting to Christianity, numerous Vaiphei individuals adopted the new faith. Consequently, a lack of understanding arose between the new Christians and the traditionalists due to certain differences. The missionaries were accused by traditional lovers of weakening culture and disregarding old values. On the other hand, the missionaries and new converts believed that many cultural traditions of the early Vaiphei people were closely linked to old religious practices and viewed Zu as unsuitable for the Christian lifestyle (Joseph, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>. The new Christians were advised against taking part in festivals and cultural ceremonies like Thazing-Lap and other Kuts, as it was believed these activities could tempt them to return to their previous pagan lifestyles. It must be

acknowledged that the missionaries displayed certain weaknesses. They believed all ancient cultures were wicked without any exceptions. This occurred because they were unable to understand the significance and moral beliefs driving Vaiphei cultural practices. This resulted in the erosion of traditional cultural aspects, leading to misinterpretations. Surprisingly, converts have shown a habit of associating anything 'Western' with being 'positive and cultured'. This mindset led to the risk of complete disregard for Vaiphei culture and an imitation of Western culture under the guise of Christianity. With nearly all Vaiphei people embracing Christianity, traditional cultural practices are no longer present in Vaiphei society as they once were. Indeed, traditional cultural dances are now featured solely in cultural events and certain celebrations. In this way, the significance of Vaiphei cultural festivals, as well as other social events and entertainment, has slowly diminished to the point of almost being completely abandoned (Thanglianlal & Kailianlal, 2010) <sup>[7]</sup>. Today, the Christmas celebration, even though relatively new among the Vaiphei community, has become a central event surpassing traditional festivals in terms of participation and rituals.

As more Vaiphei people become literate and broaden their perspective, there is a growing belief that the Vaiphei cultural heritage should be revitalized in a redefined manner and align with Christianity while staying true to the teachings of the Bible. Today, even knowledgeable Church leaders approve of singing traditional songs and participating in traditional cultural events and dances if there are no pagan activities or worship of old religious elements. There is no harm in engaging in cultural activities if they are done for demonstration purposes rather than fully embracing the old religion. Development can occur through co-existence, adjustment, assimilation, and adaptation to changing circumstances. According to Joseph (2010) <sup>[4]</sup>, Christianity can thrive without eradicating the cultural practices and traditions of a community. The Vaiphei people's experience demonstrates that Christianity spreads more rapidly when it aligns with the cultural norms and traditions of the society.

### Better Management of Healthcare

During pre-Christian times, it was customary to cure illnesses by making bloody offerings to malevolent spirits through the village priest Thiampu. The Vaiphei people firmly believed that only sacrifices by the Thiampu could cure them of sickness and diseases, as they thought illnesses were connected to the spiritual or magical powers of a spirit or a wizard. The people's health was in a pitiful and wretched state, as described by a missionary: "Malaria was widespread in every location." Furthermore, Dropsy, internal parasites, Hookworm, Dysentery, Tuberculosis, and various other feared illnesses were present. Parents had many children, but over half of them died before reaching adolescence, while numerous mothers passed away during childbirth due to a lack of healthcare and superstitious beliefs. To improve the poor health of people, the missionaries provided medicine and worked to educate and provide medical care (Prim, 2005) <sup>[8]</sup>. They built hospitals and helped enhance both their mental and physical well-being. Founded in 1964 in Churachandpur, the Sielmat Christian Hospital and Research Centre is the healing mission led by Rochunga Pudaite under the Partnership Mission Society. In the beginning, the hospital had 25 beds and modern amenities to give compassionate care to the ill and the afflicted. Previously, the Vaiphei family used to have a big house where they housed all the family members and household items, as well as domestic animals

like cows, pigs, hens, dogs, and cats, with the animals kept in separate rooms.

Nevertheless, following the introduction of Christianity, missionaries and evangelists instructed the Vaiphei community on the importance of maintaining cleanliness in their daily routines. Health education in their curriculum includes taking care of illness, basic cleanliness, and first aid. There are improved ways of living. Today, mothers no longer chew food for their babies or feed them mouth-to-mouth due to hygiene concerns; instead, they prepare special meals and use spoons for feeding. A Society has been set up by some influential area residents in collaboration with the indigenous Independent Church of India (ICI) to offer essential health care and education services, with a specific focus on the tribal population, as per the 'Manipur Societies Registration Act. The 'Mualvaiphei Rural Health and Research Centre' was established in Churachandpur, Manipur in 1989 and officially started operations in 1990. A 'School of Nursing' named 'Bethesda School of Nursing' was established in July 1995 within this Society, to educate tribal young women and others in 'General Nursing' and 'Midwifery Course'. Additionally, a shortened program is available for missionaries. Ever since it was established, the Society has effectively raised public awareness about the dangers of drug abuse and managed a healthcare facility offering health screenings, pregnancy care, and pediatric services. Today, the Vaiphei people have abandoned their traditional method of using sacrificial rituals to cure diseases and have turned to using medicines for all types of illnesses. Yet, in certain remote Vaiphei locations, the traditional practice of using a hot iron to brand patients for ailments like goiter, stomachache, fever, or cancer continues, possibly because modern medicines and doctors are not easily accessible.

### Marriage

With the arrival of Christianity and the subsequent implementation of formal education by Christian missionaries, certain traditional aspects of Vaiphei marriage customs were unable to be preserved. Changes were made to align with marriage customs, resulting in a blend of traditional and modern Christian marriage. The basic structure of traditional wedding ceremonies remains largely unchanged by the new religion, with marriages now taking place in a Church where a pastor officiates instead of a traditional village priest. Zu's former role in marriage negotiations and on the wedding, day was now substituted with a modest marriage celebration and tea ceremony (Pakhuongte, 1983) <sup>[13]</sup>. Despite fully converting to the new faith, the involvement of Makpas as Palais in bride price negotiations is necessary before any Church activities. Hence, the conventional rules and societal responsibilities still hold significance in matters concerning the wedding ceremony. Therefore, it can be argued that traditional formalities are essential for any Christian marriage to occur. Nevertheless, the contemporary Vaiphei individuals residing in cities follow these traditional marriage traditions only as a formality, lacking their genuine meaning.

The marriage ceremony underwent a total transformation with the arrival of Christianity. All traditional wedding rituals have been abandoned. Currently, the Church Pastor officiates the wedding by reciting appropriate Bible passages, and the Thiampu (traditional priest) is not involved. The Pastor will now grasp a Bible instead of the traditional priest holding the fowl's neck. The wedding will take place in the Church with Church members and the families of the bride and groom present. The wedding dress and fashion are completely

influenced by Western culture. The bride previously wore bridal dresses, and the groom will be wearing a tuxedo. These dresses are a significant change from the traditional wedding attire worn in the past (Subha, 2009) <sup>[6]</sup>.

The arrival of Christianity has also introduced alterations in the practice of bride price. Currently, there is a lot of flexibility in the bride-price payment, and it is often viewed more as a symbolic gesture. In the past, paying the bride price in one installment was not allowed, but now it can be done. In the absence of Mithuns, cultural items like a necklace or traditional shawl can be exchanged between the parents of the boy and girl if they agree. Recently, Christian leaders have been protesting the practice of bride prices. A seminar was held in Churachandpur and Motbung, with more than a hundred leaders attending each session. The seminar noted that in some cases, poorer communities struggle with marriage customs like bride price and dowry. While some families say they don't require a bride price, they still expect gifts for their daughter, leading to various ways of requesting the 'man'. This indicates that the cost of the bride price has randomly risen to the point where the family of the bridegroom is being taken advantage of. This goes against our Christian beliefs. As Christians, we should cease or repair to ensure even the poorest can afford it. If someone is willing to give no matter what, they can give gifts and presents later, but not as part of the wedding festivities.

### Economic Life

Just like numerous other hill tribes in North-East India, agriculture serves as the primary source of livelihood for the Vaipheis, relying heavily on the monsoon season. Previously, the Vaipheis lived a wretched existence that was no different from that of nomadic people. Their livelihood relied solely on the outcome of agriculture. Food shortages frequently happen because of monsoon failures and damage to crops from wildlife and strong winds. During the famine, their survival relied on bamboo shoots, wild fruits, and edible roots found in the forest. Education was absent, and society relied on a barter system for trade. The scarcity of food due to land infertility results in mass migration. The dominant and oppressive behavior of the Chief is also a significant reason for people migrating between villages. Today, many people criticize migration culture as a significant cause of economic instability and villagers' hesitation to build large houses. Despite these disadvantages, the Vaipheis' economy is slowly getting better due to the introduction of Christianity and modernization. Before embracing Christianity, the Vaipheis' economy relied entirely on their agricultural goods. There was no excess and their income came from a very restricted source. Currently, many Vaipheis have shifted away from their traditional farming occupation and now rely on various other sources of income like Government jobs, private jobs, contract works, shops, and businesses. The economic status of Vaipheis has significantly improved compared to earlier times, with some even able to afford to send their children abroad for education.

### Socio-Cultural Life

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Vaipheis strongly adhered to cultural morals and restrictions that limited their freedom to move freely during their daily pursuits. Western culture has a significant impact on their customs, traditions, social and moral behavior, and their love and respect for others. Nowadays, individuals prefer to live freely and do not wish to be restrained by traditions and customs that they

perceive as restricting their liberty. The Vaipheis, who once took pride in their culture of head-hunting, had this practice eliminated by Christianity (Patil, 2012)<sup>[11]</sup>. Previously, a man who could defeat his enemies was held in high regard by society. Christianity also banned the making of traditional rice beer known as Zu, which held significant cultural importance previously. In the past, each household made its wine, and it was enjoyed by everyone, both young and old. Wine played a significant role in all celebrations and events, essential for any joyous or somber moment. However, nowadays tea has taken over as the drink of choice, replacing wine at all types of events. Consuming wine has not been eliminated, but the amount of people using it is very low nowadays. The funeral system in the Vaiphei society has undergone a significant transformation during the Christian era. Previously, the deceased individual would be bound to a post while seated, and the residents would dance in honor of them as an expression of affection and reverence. In addition, food items are placed on a plate over the grave for the deceased's soul to consume for a minimum of seven days, starting from the burial date. These customs are no longer observed in the Christian age. Taboos that were once strictly adhered to in the past are now deemed irrelevant. For example, the day of accidental death used to be recognized for many years in the past, but it is now deemed unimportant. Taboos that once limited individuals' freedom and movement are no longer observed.

Nowadays, the Vaipheis do not find the importance of taboos significant anymore, hence taboos have vanished. Christianity had an impact on the Vaipheis' system of chieftainship as well. The chiefs' power has decreased and their past privileges like paddy tax, meat tax, etc., are no longer important. The leader does not have the authority to remove anyone from his village at his discretion anymore. Nowadays, cultural celebrations like Bu Ai, Sa Ai, Gallu Ai, Lawm zunek, etc., are no longer observed. Nevertheless, these cultural celebrations do not go against Christian morals; it is modernization that has made these celebrations seem irrelevant. Furthermore, several games such as Kangkap, Suktumkhaw, Sialkal, Lut hiai hiai, and others are no longer observed in present times. Lawm, the institution of collective labor in the fields, and Sawm, the institution of communal living, were once crucial in primitive Vaipheis society but are now no longer in existence. The practice of dunking suspects in water to determine guilt is no longer used in the justice system because of insufficient evidence. Traditional accessories such as bracelets, bilkam, amber necklaces, and bamboo hairpins are no longer in style. Traditional musical instruments such as Gawsem, Pengkul, Theile, Tingtang, Pheiphit, Dingdung, and Dakpi are becoming less common and difficult to locate. In ancient times, men and women used to have long hair and wear ornaments, but nowadays men do not wear ornaments and prefer short hair (Prim, 1975)<sup>[10]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Vaiphei community in Manipur has undergone numerous social transformations because of the impact of Christianity and Western customs. The wedding ceremony transitioned from customary to Christian, featuring a pastor reciting scriptures from the Bible instead of a traditional priest. The newlyweds are now dressed in Western attire, and the wedding takes place in a church. The conventional way of showing respect to elders has declined, as children are now using their names when addressing them. Kids nowadays

enjoy greater autonomy compared to before when they were required to follow their parents' rules. Women continue to experience discrimination based on their gender, such as limitations on receiving inheritance and seeking divorce. When their husband passes away, women without children go back to live with their parents. The Vaiphei people stopped celebrating traditional festivals like Thazinglam, Sa-ai, Oa ai, Bu-ai, Somzu, and lom zu after becoming Christians. The Vaiphei community follows a patriarchal social structure with a focus on patrilocality. Each chief guides a different village in the Vaiphei society, making the village the fundamental entity.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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