

# Christianity and Cultural Shifts: An Exploration of the Lai Experience

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical examination of the comprehensive portrayal of Christianity, highlighting its dual function: both constructive and destructive, in relation to the preservation and alteration of Lai culture; it contends that the half-hearted attention of the pioneer Christian Missionaries have served as the primary catalysts for the assimilation of Lai culture. The changes and alterations that have been brought about in the various cultural aspects like norms, values, and social ties have been thoroughly covered in this chapter. After analysing both the constructive and destructive changes brought about by Christianity in the Lai culture, the study thus concludes that the 'Hegemonic Christianity' had led to the assimilation of the Lai culture.

**Keywords:** christianity, cultural assimilation, cultural norms, lai, lawngtlai, mizoram, social ties, values

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lawngtlai district, that is the place where the Lai tribes predominantly settle, is situated in the extreme corner of southern part of Mizoram, sharing international borders with Bangladesh to the west and Myanmar to the south. It is surrounded by Lunglei District to the north and Saiha District to the east. The Thega (Kawrpui River) largely demarcates the western boundary with Bangladesh, while the Kaladan River forms the eastern boundary with Saiha District. Covering an area of 2557.10 km<sup>2</sup> (Census of India, 2011), the district features mountainous and hilly terrain, with a narrow strip of low-lying riverine plain along the western side of the Chamdur Valley. According to the 2011 Census, Lawngtlai district has a population of 117,894, ranking it 611th out of a total of 640 districts in India.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Formal documentation of Christians activities in Lawngtlai dates back only to the year 1912 (Chinzah, 2019:15). However, with the arrival of Christianity, drastic change and issue of cultural assimilation had been imposed by Christianity. Therefore, this article attempts to study the impacts of Christianity on the Lai culture by selecting three very core aspects of culture, that is, cultural norms, values, and social ties. To conduct an in-depth analysis of Christianity's impact on Lai culture, this study pursues the following objectives:

1. To assess the influence of Christianity on Lai cultural norms and practices.
2. To evaluate the effects of Christian values on Lai societal values and belief systems.
3. To examine the changes in social ties and community dynamics resulting from Christianization.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural transformations experienced by the Lai people.

## III. METHODOLOGY

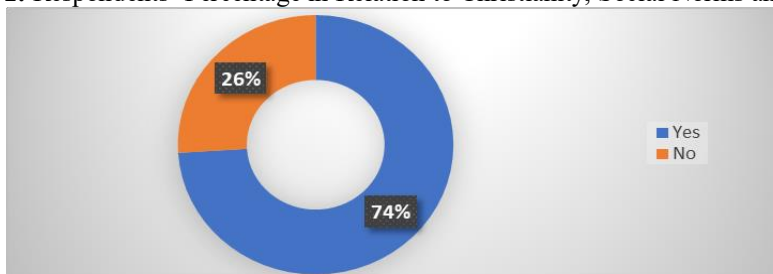
This study focuses on LIKKB church members as its universe of study, given their dominance in Lawngtlai District's Christian demographic. A mixed-methods approach is employed to explore Lai culture. A stratified sample of 379 participants were selected, proportionally distributed among various LIKKB church stakeholders, including: Church Pastors, Deacons, Women Theologians, Youth Wing, Men's Wing, and Women's Wing. Using Cuemath for sample size calculation, the distribution ensured representative participation from each group, providing a comprehensive understanding of Lai culture within the LIKKB church community.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 Lai Cultural Norms, Values and Christianity

Bierstedt (1938: 204-216) suggests that cultural norm can be understood as a guiding rule or standard shaping our behaviour within social contexts. He elaborates that norm serves as cultural specification directing our conduct within society. Similarly, Parsons (1951) contends that individual actions are influenced by norms, which can be internalised through diverse factors. Examining Christianity in this context, it is evaluated whether it serves as the benchmark for internalising standardised behaviour within Lai culture. It is observed that majority of the participants (74 percent, 295 respondents) agree that Christianity is the main factor that has brought decline in the norms and values of the Lai culture. (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1:** Respondents' Percentage in Relation to Christianity, Social Norms and Values



Source: Fieldwork

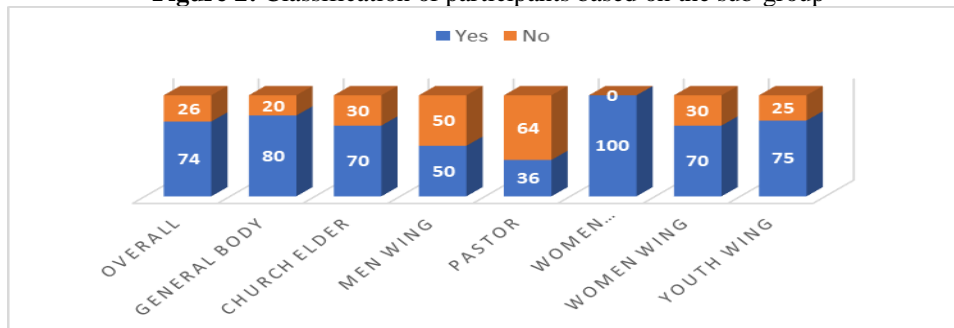
Most of the participants argue that Christianity is the main factor for bringing about changes through the internalisation of Christian cultural values and norms. However, these changes may not always be favourable for the society. Specific changes that have been mentioned by the participants may be summed up through one participant's quote as:

*In the Christian era, traditional norms such as respect for elders have dwindled, especially among educated youths, marking one of the most regrettable consequences of Christianity's influence.* (Mr.Lalthakima). Furthermore, echoing this sentiment, another respondent has argued that, *'Certain aspects of our cherished Lai way of life have undergone alterations due to Christianity. In the era predating Christianity, there was a deep-seated reverence for parents, and responding with harsh or disrespectful words was viewed as a curse. However, in modern times, this level of reverence for parents appears to have declined.* (Mr.Hmangaihzauva)

However, in the sub-categorisation of respondents, significant numbers of pastor (64%) and men wing (50%) do not agree as such. (Figure 2). Upon careful investigations for the reasons why considerable percentages from men wing and pastors, who are the sternest upholders of Christian values amongst all the sub groups, are having such an opinion, it may be answered through the following Pastor's statement, who however has agreed that traditional norms have been declining, nevertheless, Christian norms, that is, the better version of the traditional norms have positively replaced the Lai Cultural norms as:

*I don't think cultural norms and values had declined with the advent of Christianity. However, I do agree that the Christian norms have replaced our cultural norms, but, let me say that cultural norms like 'respect for elders', 'love for neighbours and family' are similarly taught by the Christian norms. Therefore, I don't find much difference.* (John)

**Figure 2:** Classification of participants based on the sub-group



Source: Fieldwork

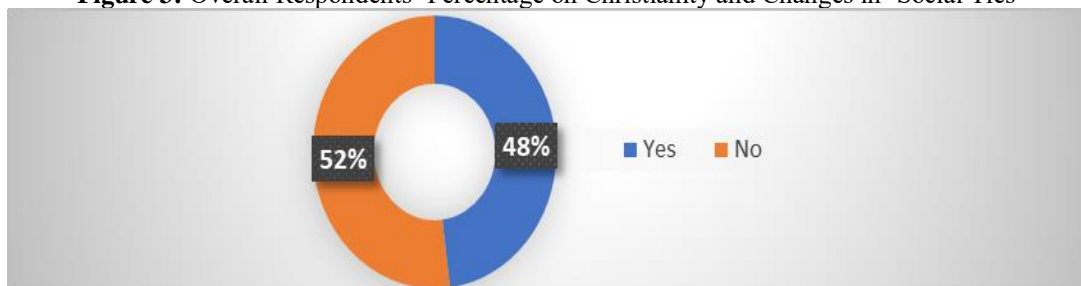
The question on whether Christian norms has positively changed the traditional norm have been reacted by one respondent asserting that: ‘We tend to lose honesty after becoming Christianity. In the olden days, instances of robbery were hardly heard of wherein nobody made it as a habit to lock their houses to prevent robbery. Therefore, the present Christian era witnesses a decline in social norms and values.’ (Muanzuali). Moreover, the most boasted and highly acclaimed culture of all the Zo-ethnic tribes, that is, ‘*tlawmngaihna*’ (a self- sacrificing nature for other’s good) has also been tainted as was mentioned by one respondent as: ‘Yes, I totally agree that cultural norms and values have been declining after embracing Christianity because norms and values like self-altruism (*tlawmngaihna*), honesty and the like have been slowly eroding with the coming of Christianity.’ (K. Lalfakmawii)

Drawing from Ingen., et al (2015) who made an observation of the Dutch society and asserted that social norms and values has been declining with the advent of Christianity wherein both positive and negative changes had been witnessed, the study may likewise, be resolved that all the traditional social norms and values have been declining with the advent of Christianity wherein the ‘Christian norms’ have been gradually replacing the cherished cultural norms either by replacing them or by altering the structure of social norms and values. It may however, be noted that the traditional norms are not completely wiped out of the structure, rather, changes and alteration are seen.

### 3.2 Weakening of Social Ties

Building on Maurice's (2022) research on African culture, which highlights religion's pivotal role in promoting social cohesion and development, this study investigates whether similar dynamics apply to the Lai people. Specifically, it explores whether religion fosters social ties among the Lai, cultivating shared norms, values, and beliefs that facilitate cooperation and drive societal progress. In line with Maurice’ (2022) statements, the Lai group cohesion has been studied and the finding similarly reveals that Christianity is the new key factor that strongly determines the group cohesion and strong social ties. The overall respondents amounting to 52% (See Figure 3) posited that Christianity strengthens social ties and we feelings. In support of this statement, the author has marked one quote as: ‘Thanks to Christianity, we have embraced a fresh set of principles emphasising love for our neighbors and even our enemies. Within the same denominations, the level of love and support we extend to one another is truly remarkable.’ (Mr.Lalnunthara, church-elder).

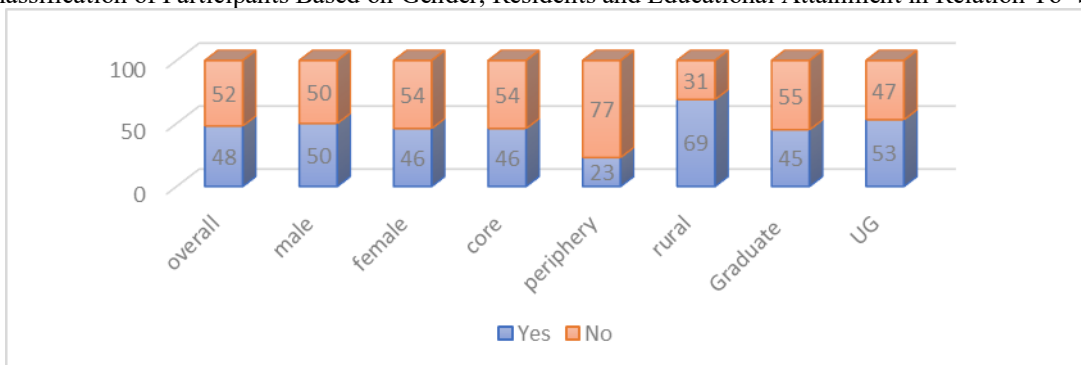
**Figure 3:** Overall Respondents’ Percentage on Christianity and Changes in ‘Social Ties’



Source: Fieldwork

However, the sub-groups study remarkably reveals that the rural population of (69%, see Figure) does not agree to this statement. Instead, they are of the opinion that Christianity has weakened the Lai group cohesion.

**Figure 4:** Classification of Participants Based on Gender, Residents and Educational Attainment in Relation To ‘Social Ties’



Source: Fieldwork

In support to the above finding, a sad story had been narrated by one Church-elder respondent from *Lungzarhtum* village, saying that the communal helping hand had gone with the advent of Christianity:

*I agree that Christianity has weakened social bonds and the sense of 'we-feeling' among the Lai people. In the past, it was customary for villagers to come together to assist a family in building a new house. This communal effort ensured that construction was completed swiftly, often within three days. However, such practices have declined in the post-Christian era. (Mr. Hmingchuana, a rural resident)*

## V. CONCLUSION

Despite some rural residents arguing that Christianity has weakened the Lai social cohesion, majority of the respondents (52%, 208 persons, See Figure 4) holds the opinion that Christianity promotes social cohesion, it may be safely concluded by using Emile Durkheim's (1893) description of social cohesion as a strong collective consciousness brought about by strong religious ideas of right and wrong. Therefore, the Lai social cohesion is grounded on religion and particularly on Christianity. However, when it comes to the issues of social norms and values, it is observed that the Lai people had been considerably deviated from the traditional norms and values, whereby Christian norms had replaced the Lai traditional norms. This research concludes that Christianity's impact on Lai culture is complex and bidirectional, yielding both constructive and destructive outcomes, ultimately leading to cultural assimilation, a phenomenon with profound implications for the long-term sustainability of Lai cultural heritage.

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