

Original Research Article

## Has Christianity Lessened the Gap between the Rich and the Poor in Funeral Practices? A Study of the Lai Culture

Zarzozuali Tlau<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Government Lawngtlai College, Mizoram, India

\*Corresponding Author: Zarzozuali Tlau

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Government Lawngtlai College, Mizoram, India

### Article History

Received: 09.09.2024

Accepted: 15.10.2024

Published: 16.10.2024

**Abstract:** This paper explores the unique funeral practices of the Lai tribes residing in the southernmost region of Mizoram, northeastern India. The study focuses on the distinct funeral traditions of the Lai people and examines the transformative impact of Christianity on these customs and Lai culture as a whole. The findings suggest that Christianity has, to some extent, reduced the socio-economic divide, as the Church now oversees funeral practices that are uniform for all community members. However, the study highlights that, despite this shift, wealthier families tend to have a larger number of mourners attending the funeral services compared to those from poorer backgrounds. Therefore, the study concludes that Christianity has not totally done away with social stratification pertaining to funeral rites and practices.

**Keywords:** Lai, Lawngtlai, LIKBK, Funeral Practices, Mizoram, Socio-economic gap.

## INTRODUCTION

Funerals are a universal human experience, serving as a pivotal ritual to honour the deceased and provide solace to the grieving (Prothero, 2001:12). Defined as "a ceremony or rite to honour and show respect for the dead" (Laderman, 2003: 5), funerals hold profound social significance across cultures. They provide a platform for communal mourning, social support, and reaffirmation of cultural values (Laqueur, 2015: 23). Every society attributes immense importance to funeral practices, reflecting its unique cultural, religious, and historical context. Funeral practices not only facilitate emotional closure but also reinforce social bonds, establish continuity with the past, and navigate the transition from life to death. As such, funerals serve as a critical aspect of human sociality, warranting exploration and understanding.

Funeral practices among tribal communities worldwide are diverse and deeply rooted in their cultural, spiritual, and environmental contexts. These practices often involve ancestral reverence, nature-based rituals, community involvement, and spiritual elements, such as shamans or supernatural forces. Examples include Native American tribes' traditional burial grounds and sacred objects, African tribes' varied burial practices and mask rituals, Indigenous Australian communities' smoking ceremonies and Dreamtime stories, and Indian tribal communities' varied burial practices and use of sacred plants. Specific practices include the Dayak tribe's secondary burial, Tibetan Sky Burial, Maori tribe's Tangi funeral ceremonies, and Yolngu tribe's elaborate funeral ceremonies with traditional music and dance. Despite cultural erosion, conflict, and colonization, these practices reflect the community's heritage and require understanding and respect for preservation (Berreman, 1964; Grim, 2001; Kolig, 2007; Raj, 2013).

### Review of Literature: A Debate on Whether Christianity Has Lessened the Gap Between the Rich and the Poor

Long (2013) explores Christian funeral practices, emphasizing community support and spiritual significance. Long argues that Christian funerals should focus on comforting the grieving, rather than displaying wealth or status. He provides guidance for clergy, funeral directors, and families. Likewise, Lynch (1997), a poet and undertaker, reflects on his experiences with death and funerals. He explores how Christian traditions influence funeral practices, promoting simplicity and dignity. This memoir sheds light on the human side of the funeral industry. In line with aforementioned

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

**CITATION:** Zarzozuali Tlau (2024). Has Christianity Lessened the Gap between the Rich and the Poor in Funeral Practices? A Study of the Lai Culture. *South Asian Res J Human Soc Sci*, 6(5): 241-246. 241

statements, Smith's (2015) history of American funeral directing highlights Christian influences on funeral practices. He discusses how Christian values have shaped funeral traditions, emphasizing equality and simplicity. This book provides context for understanding contemporary funeral practices. Echoing in the same sentiments, Christian (2018) examines Christian funeral practices, emphasizing community, simplicity, and spiritual significance. It explores how Christian traditions can help bridge the gap between rich and poor, promoting inclusive and meaningful funeral experiences. Similarly, Christian Today (2019) provides a biblical perspective on Christian funerals, focusing on hope, comfort, and equality. It argues that Christian funerals should prioritize spiritual significance over material display, reflecting God's love for all people. This article explores the Christian approach to death and funerals, emphasizing simplicity, dignity, and community support. It discusses how Christian values can transform funeral practices, promoting equality and compassion.

On the other hand, various literatures highlight that Christianity has not lessened the gap between the rich and the poor in regard to funeral practices. For instance, Prothero (2001) explores cremation's history in America, revealing tensions between Christian traditions and social class. He argues that cremation's rise reflects changing attitudes toward death, but also perpetuates economic disparities in funeral practices. Laderman (2003) examines American funeral practices, highlighting commercialization and social inequality. He contends that Christian funeral traditions prioritize ritual over economic equality, exacerbating disparities between rich and poor. Additionally, Laqueur's (2015) cultural history explores the significance of mortal remains across societies. He argues that Christian funeral practices reflect social class and economic status, rather than promoting equality or compassion. In summary, the main arguments put forth by the researchers indicate that Christian funeral practices do not reduce economic disparities. Instead, social class and cultural norms shape funeral choices. They further argued that funerals have become unaffordable for many, with Christian funeral traditions contributing to commercialization and inequality. Authors advocate for reform and increased accessibility.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed-method approach, with the Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Church (LIKBK) serving as the focus, given its prominence as the leading Christian denomination in the district. A total sample size of 400 participants was selected, and a stratified sampling method was employed to ensure representation across different subgroups within the LIKBK. These subgroups include the Pastor (20), church elders (50), deacons (50), the women's wing (80), the youth wing (80), the men's wing (100), and women theologians (20). The Cuemath formula was applied to proportionally allocate the sample across these subgroups. Additionally, participants were further categorized based on their place of residence—core, periphery, and rural areas—to assess potential variations in attitudes towards Christianity's influence on funeral practices. For qualitative analysis, content analysis of church records, as well as both local and English-language literature, was conducted to enrich the findings.

### Research Question and Objectives of the Study

Looking from both the positive and the negative aspects of the role of Christianity towards the affordability of funeral practices, the study attempts to answer questions like:

1. Who are the Lais?
2. What are the typical funeral practices of the Lai?
3. Has Christianity lessened the gap between the rich and the poor in funeral practices?

### The Lai People

The Lai people, residing in the Lai Autonomous District Council in the southern part of Mizoram, the north-eastern region of India was traditionally referred to as '*Pawi*' by other Mizo tribes. However, they identified themselves as '*Lai*' and considered the term '*Pawi*' derogatory (Bawitlung, 2012:4). The Lai people are indeed one of the ethnic groups in Mizoram. They are part of the larger Mizo ethnic group, which also include tribes like the *Lusei*, *Hmar*, *Ralte*, and others. The origin of the Lai people, like many other *Mizo* tribes, is believed to be in southern China, and they migrated to their current homeland in Mizoram (Mizoram District Gazettes, 1989: 80). According to Lai genealogy and oral traditions, various communities within present-day Mizoram, such as the *Lai (Pawi)*, *Lusei*, *Paihte*, *Hmar*, *Ralte*, *Fanai*, and *Lakher*, among others, consider themselves descendants of common ancestors. These communities often trace their lineage through myth, legends, and oral histories that emphasise shared origins and kinship ties (Bawitlung, 1997:57). The assertion made by Luce (1960) provides a specific timeline and migration route for the early movements of the Lai people out of China. According to this perspective, the Lai people were the first among the *Mizo* tribes in terms of migration, moving out of China around 400 A.D (Laitanga, 1998:8-9) and settling initially in the *Hukong* valley in present-day Myanmar. Subsequently, they continued their southward migration, eventually reaching the Chindwin valley. Lehman (1980:18) noted that Lai settlements in this valley began around 750 AD. During their stay in this valley, they settled at two places now known as *Monywa* and *Shwebo* in Burma, as indicated by recent excavations that unearthed Lai materials like jars and plates from these locations. After residing in the Chin Hills of Myanmar for a considerable period, some Lai people began moving toward their present habitat in the last part of the 18th century (Bawitlung, 2012:8).

A more nuanced picture of their complex and multifaceted past and their detailed course of migration was provided by a prolific writer, *S.R. Chinzah* outlining a series of movements in four distinct batches, each led by different chiefs and accompanied by various clans and families: The first batch consisted of *Hlawncheu* chiefs departing from *Falam*, accompanied by *Tlanglau*, *Bawm*, *Pang*, and *Miria tribes*. The second batch, originating from *Chawngthi*, included tribes like *Phunhnawma*, *Tlangchhan*, *Bawilawma*, *Thinte*, and *Zabiaka Fanchun*. The third batch comprised *Chinzah* chiefs and others from two villages called *Lungzarh* and *Khuafo*, accompanied by *Fanchun*, *Bawihlung*, *Hnialum*, *Mualchin*, *Zinhlawng tribes*, and more. The fourth and final batch involved *Hlawnhhing* chiefs from *Thlantlang*. These migrations occurred over a period spanning roughly from 1750 to 1850 (Chinzah, 2003:26-27). The majority of chiefs and their followers moved into the southern part of the present-day land, while the group under *Chinzah* chiefs settled in the middle part of Lawngtlai. This account provides specific details regarding the leadership, group composition, and settlement patterns of the Lai people as they migrated into their present habitat.

### **The Typical Lai Funeral Practices**

Funeral practices among tribals in India, including the Lai people, have undergone significant changes with the advent of Christianity. Traditional tribal funeral practices typically involved burial grounds, belief in the continued existence of ancestors in the spiritual realm, mourning periods and the like. (Poyil, n.d; Vitebsky, 2016). With the arrival of Christianity, many of these practices have undergone significant changes, including burial in cemeteries, changes in rituals, modified mourning practices, and discontinuation of ancestor offerings. (Thanzawna, 2018). As such, this research aims to investigate the transformations in funeral practices among the Lai community resulting from the introduction of Christianity, seeking to understand the shifts in their traditional burial customs, rituals, and beliefs.

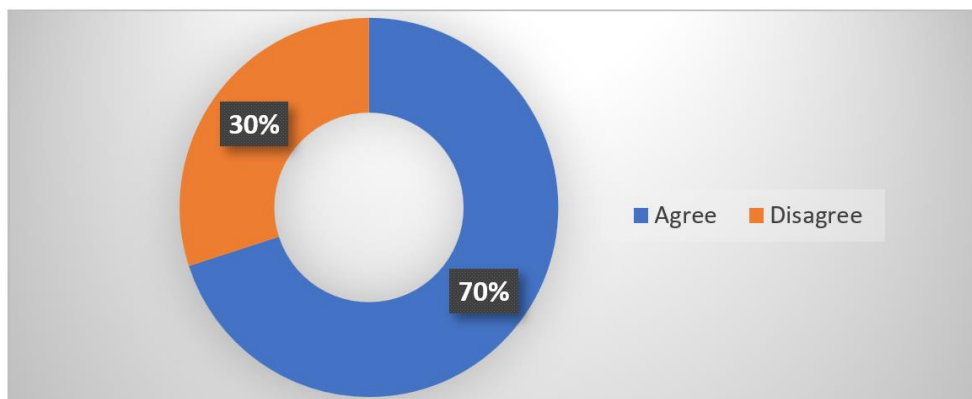
The ancient Lai people distinguished between two types of death: '*pulthi*' for natural death and '*sarhi*' for sudden unexpected death. They held a belief in '*zinghmuh*' a paradise for the deceased. Those who died a natural death were thought to be escorted by a guide called '*Tuarthlua*' on their journey to '*zinghmuh*' where they would be received by gatekeepers known as '*sanu*.' Warriors, hunters, and men with multiple spouses were accorded higher status even in the afterlife. Conversely, those who met an unnatural death were barred from entering '*mithi khua*' directly and instead remained outside for a month, enduring hunger, as it was taboo to offer them food and water (Kompa, 2018:444-471).

Similar to marriage, death was a costly event in Lai society. The deceased person's family typically provided abundant food, including pigs, mithun, chickens, and alcohol, to feed all mourners, including relatives from neighbouring villages. The length of the mourning period varied from village to village and depended largely on the deceased person's wealth. Typically, ordinary family mourned for three to seven days. During their settlement in the *Hakha* region, the first day was often marked by a grand feast called '*ruaknghah sa*,' where all mourners were treated to large pigs and alcohol. Additionally, a ritual known as '*chhuat tihfai*' was conducted. This practice signified that families who could afford such ceremonies did not place the deceased body on the ground but elevated it on a specially crafted mat called '*theng*'. The wealthy family had the liberty to retain the deceased body for as long as they desire, a period known as '*ruangnghah*.' During these days of mourning, they slaughtered pigs, bulls, buffaloes, cows, and mithun. Additionally, they conducted rituals such as '*mithi thlaichhiah*' and '*sa-serh*.' These rituals included a special feast reserved for selected well-wishers of the family, accompanied by grand musical performances featuring gongs, gun salutes, and dances around the deceased body, known as '*cawnglaizawn*' and '*sarlankai*'. (Kompa, 2018:458-459).

### **Opinions on Whether Christianity Has Lessened the Gap Between the Rich and the Poor? A Controversial Debate**

In the present Christian era, such expensive traditional death practice is done away with. All the death ceremonies are now commonly performed by the Church wherein the death ceremonies are performed by the Pastors, the church members and the community as a whole. The Young Lai Association (YLA) has now taken up the lead role of digging the graves common to all. The dead body is never mourned for more than an overnight. In light with this statement, the study thus attempts to find out on whether there is still kind of stratification in funeral practices or had Christianity completely wiped away such differentiation.

The finding discloses that 70% of the respondents (See Figure 1) agree that Christianity has lessened the gap between the rich and the poor in funeral practices. However, overall, 30% belonging especially from the periphery (see Figure 1) still don't agree as such.



**Figure 1: Overall Participants' Response on Christianity in Reducing the Gap Between Rich and Poor in Funeral Practices**

Source: Field Data

The following comments put forward by the respondents have also portrayed the true stratified pictures of the traditional funeral practices wherein differentiation on the nature of death was highly considered which is quoted as:

*In the past, the Lai people categorised deaths into various types, including 'Pul Thi' for natural deaths, 'Sar Thi' for sudden and accidental deaths, 'Nausen Thla Tlinglo' for neonatal deaths, 'Misilo' for deaths due to leprosy, and 'Nulai Kungkhieh' for deaths deemed predestined by nature. The community attached significance to the causes and circumstances of death, with unnatural deaths often leading to social ostracism and a lack of condolences. However, with the spread of Christianity, these distinctions in perceptions of death have faded, and all deaths are now treated with equal respect and consideration. (Mr. Hmunga, South Lungpher village).*

In line with the above statement that depicts a highly stratified funeral practice in nature of the causes of death, another respondent has asserted that:

*In the olden days, 'sarathi' meaning sudden and unexpected death due to drowning in water, accidental falls from trees and cliffs, wild animal's attack, death due to severe fighting etc. were regarded somewhat as a curse and people felt hesitant to be near the dead body. Proper burial place was not assigned for such death; a separate burial place was designated for such people known as 'Sar thlan' and were at times forbidden to carry the dead body inside the village and even a memorial stone was never erected for such death. All these notions have changed with the coming of Christianity. (Mr. Hminga, Chamhari Locality)*

A wide disparity in term of economic condition has also been detected through the respondent's quote saying that:

*Christianity had significantly lessened the gap between the rich and the poor in funeral practices. In the ancient times, the Lais had different types of tombs such as 'thlanpui, (for the well-off persons), 'Thlan ker' (for the common people with a natural death), 'Thlan Chhia' (for sudden and unnatural deaths like stillbirths, suicide by hanging) and all these unnatural dead body were buried before the first flush of morning. (Mr. Bawiha, Sangau village).*

Differentiation in manner of death rituals has also been narrated which is quoted as:

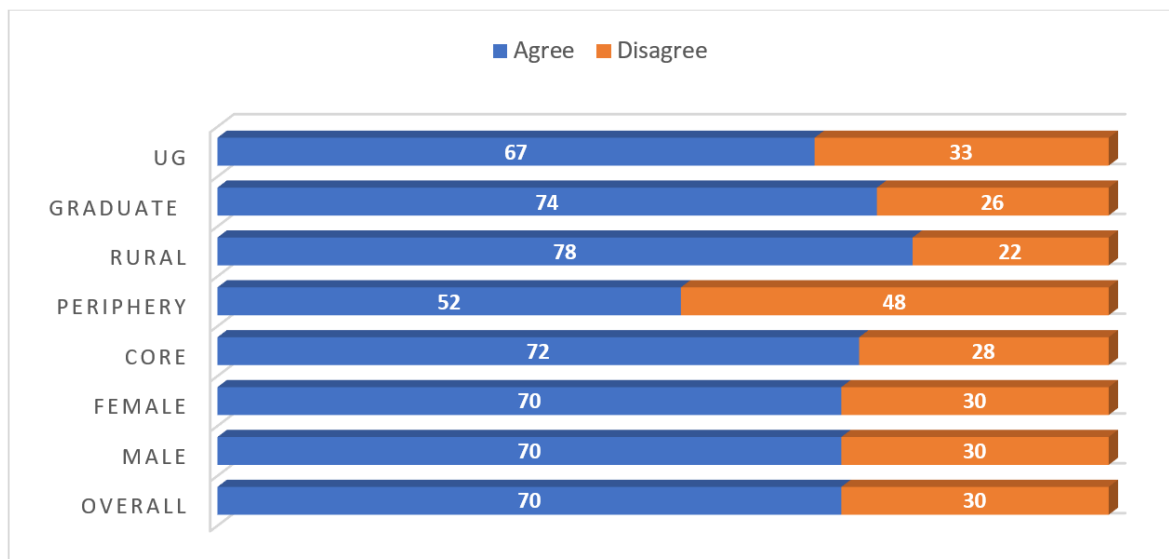
*'A dead body of the affluent family were kept elevated from the ground known as 'Vazunn bu' and a traditional dance dedicated for the dead 'Conglai zawnh' was performed circling around the dead body. On the contrary, the dead body of the poor family were simply laid on the ground. (Mr. Chhuana, Bazar locality). Additionally, the duration of the rituals had also been largely dictated by the economic standing of the family as another respondent stated that: 'In the pre-Christian era, the death of an affluent individual was accompanied by an extended mourning period, while the poor had few mourners, if any.' (Mr. Sanga, Vengpui locality)*

Respondents have given comments on the positive changes in the funeral practices mainly by expressing that the dead funeral is no longer expensive and has become free of alcohol saying that:

*'In former times, it was customary to consume alcohol as part of the mourning process, which could sometimes lead to mockery, especially for families facing financial hardship. However, Christianity has brought about a positive change in this regard.' (Mr. Hranga, Cheural Village). One respondent has also expressed a noticeable shift towards a more compassionate approach to dealing with death after embracing Christianity saying that: 'Be it a natural or unnatural death, the Church and the community handle the dead body and their family with deep condolences and compassions so much so that the whole community usually pools contributions in cash and kind ('ralna') in order to ease the burden of the bereaved family.' (Mr. C. Laltlanmawia, Rulkual Village)*

Contrary to the above statements, the main complaint put forward by the periphery respondents (see Figure 2), who still don't believe that Christianity has lessened the gap between the rich and the poor is that:

*'Despite efforts by the Church and the Young Lai Association (YLA) to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor through standardised funeral practices, there remains a disparity in attendance between the funerals of affluent individuals and those of less financially privileged families. Typically, the number of attendees at the funeral ceremonies of wealthier individuals tends to be higher compared to the gatherings for less affluent families.'* (Mr. Reginald, Aizawl)



**Figure 2: Classification of participants based on gender, residents and educational attainment**  
 Source: Field Data

Looking at the above Figure 2 that highlights that a significant response of 48% periphery residents still don't agree that Christianity has lessened the gap between the rich and the poor, one periphery respondent has avowed that:

*'The number of funeral attendees in the 'Khawhmawr' (outskirt of the town) is still lower as compared to the main town, maybe due to transportation constraint; provided that the dead family are not affluent'* (Mr.Sanga, Thinkah locality)

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be affirmed that Christianity has played a significant role in narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, particularly in the context of funeral ceremonies. Through the establishment of a common code for conducting funeral rites by the Church and the Young Lai Association (YLA), the financial burden associated with these ceremonies has been significantly reduced. The common procedure followed by YLA in death event which are more or less similar to all locality is articulated as:

*'In the event of a death, the Young Lai Association (YLA) ensures that every deceased individual and their family receive fair treatment. In our locality, such as College Veng, the YLA commonly allocates an amount ranging from ₹ 8000 to 10000 for each funeral. This allocation covers various expenses including the cost of the coffin, tomb excavation, tea distribution, and preparation of chicken porridge. However, it is noteworthy that if the deceased individual hailed from a wealthier family with a larger social circle, the associated costs of the funeral may be higher compared to those for a less affluent family.'* (Mr. Lalrina, College Veng locality).

However, as was argued by some respondents mainly from periphery, there may be rare instances where attendees at the funeral may be lesser in number due to location and distance issues, like periphery location where people cannot afford to attend such funeral as in the main town.

## REFERENCES

- Bawitlung, V. (1997). *Chieftainship and the process of state formation in Mizo society*. PhD Thesis, Department of History and Ethnography.
- Bawitlung, V. (2012). *Lai customary law and the administration of justice in the Lai Autonomous District, Mizoram*. Minor Research Project, UGC, New Delhi.
- Berreman, G. D. (1964). Brahmins and shamans in Indian tribal society. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 23(3), 373-383.

- Chinzah, S.R. (2003). *Khuafo hnam chhuina*. Mizoram Publication Board. Millenium Computer Centre, Aizawl.
- Christian, C. (2018). Funeral practices in the Christian tradition. *Christian Century*, 135(21), 22-25.
- Christianity Today. (2019). The Christian way of death. *Christianity Today*, 63(4), 40-44.
- Grim, J. A. (2001). *The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kolig, E. (2007). *Aboriginal Culture and Spirituality: A Divided Heritage*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Kompa, R. (2018). *Lai*. Self-published. Hnamte Press. Aizawl.
- Laderman, G. (2003). *Rest in peace: A cultural history of death and the funeral home in twentieth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Laderman, G. (2003). *Rest in peace: A cultural history of death and the funeral home in twentieth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Laitanga, C. (1998). *Pawi chanchin*. Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl.
- Laqueur, T. W. (2015). *The work of the dead: A cultural history of mortal remains*. Princeton University Press.
- Laqueur, T. W. (2015). *The work of the dead: A cultural history of mortal remains*. Princeton University Press.
- Lehman, F.K. (1980). *The structure of Chin society*. Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, Mizoram.
- Long, T. G. (2013). *Accompanying those who grieve*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Lynch, T. (1997). *The undertaking: Life studies from the dismal trade*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Mizoram District Gazetteers. (1989). *The Lai origin*. Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Mizoram, Aizawl.
- Poyil, M. (n.d). *Death customs in the tribal context: Concluding observations*. [https://www.academia.edu/download/75976599/11\\_chapter\\_205.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/download/75976599/11_chapter_205.pdf)
- Prothero, S. (2001). *Purified by fire: A history of cremation in America*. University of California Press.
- Raj, S. J. (2013). Tribal funeral rites in India. *Journal of Anthropological Sciences*, 91, 147-162.
- Smith, H. I. (2015). *A decent obscurity: A history of American funeral directing*. Kregel Publications.
- Thanzawna, V. (2018). The impact of Christianity on the funeral practices of the Mizo people. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 9(1), 53-64. Doi: 10.5958/2277-343X.2018.00006.X.