

# A Study of the Religion and Culture of Khami Ethnic Group in Northern Rakhine State

Myint Myint Than<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Khamis* ethnic groups who live in northern Rakhine State are the focus of this study and their religion, traditions, customs and cultures are explored with the descriptive method from many literature sources and personal interviews. Some points of participants' observations also support the major insight on this study. Khami people believe not only Buddhism but animism in their daily activities. Other social customs apart from religious theme are also included as the focus of this study. The aim of this research is to explore the rich traditions and cultural themes of Khami people and to promote union spirit for the nation building process of Myanmar through the general knowledge of one of ethnic group and mutual respect and understanding among various ethnic groups of Myanmar.

Keywords: Khamis, culture, Animism, Buddhism, social customs

## Aims and Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are:

- to explore the religion, traditional customs and culture of Khami Ethnic groups of Northern Rakhine State;
- to promote general knowledge on one of the ethnic groups of Myanmar;
- to promote the mutual understanding and mutual respects between various ethnic group and every citizen of Myanmar; and
- to promote Union Spirit for nation building process of Myanmar through the insights and finding of this study.

## Research Questions

- (1) What are the religious beliefs and social activities in everyday life of Khami people?
- (2) Why does the vanishment of culture lead to the disappearance of an ethnic group?

## Materials and Methods

Different secondary sources on the literatures of Khami people and Rakhine State are the main supportive documents in this paper. Primary sources from interviews with key informants and direct observation are main sources for analysis in this paper. Descriptive and exploratory approach is the method of this study. Literature analysis, interviews and direct observation are the main tools for collection of data in this paper.

## Introduction

As Myanmar has been a multiethnic country since years ago, there are diversified traditions, cultures, customs, social life and historical backgrounds among different ethnic groups in the country. These diversified ones can be assumed as their own traditions and cultures and the remaining ones can be called common cultures. The maintenance and

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<sup>1</sup> . Professor, Dr, Department of Oriental Studies, University of Mandalay

protection of these cultures are the good precedent and practices for different cultural heritages of different ethnic groups of Myanmar and should last on continue from generation to generation. To do this, traditions, the exploration on the faith, religious beliefs and other social traditions customs of Khamis will be conducted in this paper.

### Historical Background

When the Tibeto-Burmans entered into the plains of current Myanmar, the Chins had come earlier from the northeastern path and then were displaced by the late comers to the western hill region. In the western part of Chin State, the two regions are northern Rakhine hills and northern delta region of *Kaladana* River and Chins can be found in these regions.<sup>1</sup>

Khamis can be found not only in Chin State but also in Rakhine State. In Sittway District, many ethnic groups such as Rakhine, Myanmar, Khami, Chin, Dinenet, Chaungtha and Thet can be found.<sup>2</sup> The ethnic groups who live in Palatwa Township in the southern part of Chin state are Khami, Wakum, Anu, Khaungso, Panan, Laymyo, Mara and Kalinkaut. Palatwa Township was included in Rakhine State previously and in the era of BSPP (Burmese Socialist Program Party), it was inserted in the area of Chin State.

Regarding the historical background of Khamis, it was stated in “Ancient History of Myanmar”<sup>3</sup> that Tibeto-Burmans divided into three groups and entered Assam, Tibet and Myanmar. In the sub-group of Assam- Myanmar, there are six groups and among them, Khamis are included in the Kuki Chin group. In Rakhine history, first Dynasty of Dhanyawaddy (BC3325-1507) was established by King Marayu who had been nurtured since childhood by one of the Khami, Thingyi Aunglar. This history can also be found in the Egyin of Rakhine Princess by Adu Minnyo. Some local said that some names of Rakhine Kings are Khami ones such as King Ngatone (AD-794).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Khamis can be assumed as the ancient ones.

### The Meaning of Khami

The word “*khami*” is believed to derive from *khwtmu*, from *khwtmu* to *khwtmi* and then *khami*. The word “*khwtmu*” means, according to the Khami language, the dark cave or world before the emergence of primitive sun and moon. *Khwtmi* means the people in the dark cave or world and therefore, the word “*khami*” means the primitive man or cave man.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this word is similar in nature with the Northern Chin word “*mi*” and means man. The Khamis are one of the ethnicities of Chin groups.<sup>6</sup> Khamis are called in different names by other ethnic groups but the Khami themselves accept that the pronunciation of Khami is the only correct one for the entire group of them.

### The Location of Khamis

Khamis generally live in clan base or family group base. Sometimes, two or three clans gathered and lived in many family groups. Ancient Khamis mostly lived in Mechaung region,

<sup>1</sup>. မြန်မာ့စွယ်စုံကျမ်း၊ (၁၉၇၀)၊ အတွဲ(၂)၊ ၃၉၀။

<sup>2</sup>. မြန်မာ့စွယ်စုံကျမ်း၊ (၁၉၇၀)၊ အတွဲ(၂)၊ ၃၉၁။

<sup>3</sup>. Ancient History of Myanmar, (2002). 47.

<sup>4</sup>. Minnyo, (1965). 3.

<sup>5</sup>. Kyaw San Hla, interviewee.

<sup>6</sup>. Ethnic Cultures, (1968). 39.

Kyaukpadaung region, Nilarpadaung of Palatwa Township, Rakhine State. When time passed, they moved to the southern parts of the state.

The first place of Khamis was assigned as Mechaung in the traditional sayings of them. The Khamis in the mouth of Mechaung and lower part of Kalardan river can be recognized as AwaKahmi and those who live in the upper part of Mechaung and Kalardan rivers are ChaungphyarKhamis (upper Khamis). According to traditional saying, Khamis lived on Kuaukpadaung Hill long years ago and therefore, this hill is recognized as the most supreme one for them. Most Khamis still live around this hill and along the Mechaung today.

In current condition, Khamis live in the surrounding place of Sittway Township, Punnakyun Township, Kyauktaw Township, MyaukU Township, Pauktaw Township, Yathaedaung Township, Butheedaung Township, Maungdaw Township in Rakhine State and Palatwa Township in Chin State. According to local records, the number of Khamis is more than 80,000 in all of Rakhine State.

### **The traditions and customs of Khamis**

Khamis are those who have their own tradition, language and culture. The Burmese word *Yoeyar* (tradition in English) is a compound word composed of Yoe which means the lineage and Yar means the action and behaviour. In the pocket Dictionary of Myanmar, the Burmese word “*Yoeyar*” is described as the lineage, the customs by one’s lineage. According to this definition, the traditions of Khamis derived from their ancestors are practiced from generation to generation. Although they are included in the group list of Rakhine, their culture and traditions are far different from those of Rakhines.

### **Religious beliefs**

#### **Buddhism**

In the ancient time of Rakhine state, the co-existence with Rakhines has made Khamis Buddhists since the advent of Buddhism in Rakhine region in sixth century BC. Therefore, Buddhism can be recognized as the main religious theme of Khamis. According to Buddhist traditions, many religious ceremonies such as robe offering ceremony, novitiation ceremony, ordination ceremony and water festival are held by Khamis.

Teaching Buddhist literatures in various monasteries can be seen in current Khami regions. The number of Khami novices and monks who tried to propagate Buddha *Sāsana* in these monasteries is significant in Rakhine State. The local classes for basic Buddhist teachings, Dhamma Schools classes are conducted by Khami Buddhist monks. Some elderly monks perform missionary work for spread and propagation of Buddha *Sāsana* in Khami regions. Almost sixty- five monks are included in the list of missionary ones. These monks also perform the charity work for parentless children.

In most of Khami houses, there are no shrines for Nats except one for Buddha. Based on this point, Buddhism is assumed as major religious belief of Khami people.

#### **Animism**

Khamis believe that the sun and moon and the sacred hill (kaneekhwetma) which is the first place of settlement of the ethnic group are the most supreme ones for the entire group. This is based on the strong belief of primitive man at the time of dark cave world and change to lightened new world. In daily practices of Khamis, even murmuring for something such as

fear or excitement, they exclaimed these scared ones as their words. When one Khami person vows for something, they pledge these most supreme objects as they believe that if they do like this the enemies will diminish eventually. This belief reveals the strong animist practice of Khami people.

### **Other religious practices**

Khamis also show other traditional religious practices in their daily social and economic activities. The traditional spirits or gods are worshiped by most of Khamis. Some examples of these Nats are guardian spirit of farm, home, village and stream. The sacrifice to the guardian of farm by the blood of a fowl at the time of starting cultivation of paddy is conducted as routine task. In the time of harvest, the offering of food and other snacks is made to the guardian Nat of home. In other occasions such as holding ascending ceremony of new house, being sickness of one of family members and giving birth of a child, the worshipping of home guardian is performed by some experienced elderly.

### **Other Social customs**

#### **Costumes**

Khamis show their rich tradition with own colourful costumes. The traditional costumes of Khamis are called *Jutkhote*. Other accessories such as jewels, silver handicrafts, gold works and coral necklaces support the beauty of the traditional expression of Khami people.

#### **Lineage pattern**

Khamis accepted the three systems of lineage in the family group. They are the lineage of brother, father-in-law and son-in-law. The lineage system of brother can also be sub-divided into more three types of the same lineage from father's side, the same lineage from mother's side and the familiarity due to vowing. According to these systems, almost all of Khamis are relatives and therefore, they show strong relations with any Khami person whether he or she is a true relative or not or near or far.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Naming**

The naming practice to newborn child is conducted by the elderly persons based on the religious and social beliefs. The name of sun and moon, the place of birth, the time of birth such as day, month or season, the name of musical instruments and the names of familiar plants are the themes of naming for Khami people.

#### **Marriage**

All the practice and customs for marriage of Khamis are based on the lineage system of relatives and the concept of sun and moon. Based on the many beliefs related to sun and moon, strict rules are set for every marriage of Khami people and all follow these in order to maintain the purity of clan and to preserve the tradition from generation to generation.

#### **Resolving social disputes**

Like other ethnic groups, Khamis also have their traditional ways of solving social disputes and judicial themes. The respectable person is appointed for judicial affairs and can be called Taungmin. The main mode of solving social disputes for Khamis is negotiation. After

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<sup>1</sup> . Ratthaparla, (2011), 75.

negotiation, the dispute is resolved with the sacrifice of blood of a pig. The system of Taungmin is a jury one which consists of at least three juries from both sides and the relatives or family members of any side must not involve in the jury list.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This paper is the exploration of faith, worship, religious practices, other social traditions and general customs of Khami Ethnic Group.

In the themes of religious practices, it can be assumed that Khamis have animist beliefs because they had showed their faith in the sun, moon and the sacred hill (*kaneekhwetma*) as the gods or supreme ones. Moreover, they greatly showed the strong beliefs in traditional gods (spirits) such as guardian spirit of home, stream and farm. As they showed the holding of Buddhist ceremonies such as ordination, robe offering ceremonies, they can be called *Theravāda* Buddhists like majority of Rakhine people. Therefore, it can be concluded that Khamis have mixed religious beliefs: strong traditional animist practices and *Theravāda* Buddhist ones.

According to daily social practices, Khamis can also be recognized as strong believers on traditions and customs rather than genuine Buddhist teachings.

In most of the day to day sociopolitical practices of Khamis, the strong influence of traditional practices can be observed rather than the practices of modern administrative and social institutions.

In terms of social practices, Khamis show their tight bond with same clan or family group and mutual respect and understanding among them. Strong conservative practices on preserving their rich traditions and customs are the remarkable finding in this study. The naming scheme, practices and procedures in marriage, the resolving various social disputes, holding of various ceremonies and their costumes and dance all support the conservative nature of this ethnic group.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the religions, climate and life experiences, every ethnic group in this world possess their own cultures, traditions and customs. These emerged from the respective territories, geographical locations, social living systems and social surroundings such as religions of the respective countries.

All ethnic groups in Myanmar also have practices related to worship, traditions and customs that have been preserved from generation to generation according to the sociopolitical trends and historical experiences of the country.

The traditional customs of Khami ethnic groups are also included in the cultural themes of Myanmar. To maintain, preserve and protect the own cultures and traditions is the prime responsibility of every citizen of Myanmar. If we fail to perform this responsibility total loss and diminishment of valuable Myanmar cultures can inevitably occur.

In this paper, the exploration of cultures, traditions and customs of Khami ethnic groups, one of the ethnic ones in Myanmar, can enhance the comprehensive understanding of the cultures, perceptions, habits, lifestyle and social surrounding of them. In addition to this, mutual understanding, sympathy and mutual respect can also be promoted through the new knowledge and insight on them. Finally, this paper can also support the union spirit that is

crucial for the nation building process in the country through the exploration of traditions and customs of various ethnic groups of Myanmar.

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Appendix





Women Dress



Khami traditional Jutkhote



Bracelet and Fetters



Man Dress



Silver Accessories



Waist Accessories



Novitiation Ceremony



Khami Youths at the religious Ceremony



Kuauk Padaung Hill

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