

# Colonialism in The Chin Hills: Where God prays with a Gun

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## Abstract

This paper explores the paradoxical impact of British colonialism on the Thadou and Chin communities in the Chin Hills, focusing on the simultaneous introduction and increasing prominence of firearms and Christian missionaries between the 1860s and 1910s. Drawing on primary texts like Carey and Tuck's *The Chin Hills* and Mackenzie's *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, the study argues that these two forces drastically altered the pre-colonial socio-cultural landscape of the Thadou and Chin people.

Prior to British intervention, firearms, primarily European flintlock rifles obtained through trade, already held significant value and status within Thadou and Chin society. However, the colonial period led to more advanced firearms entering the region and British policies aimed at disarmament, which were met with strong resistance due to the deep socio-economic, cultural, and symbolic value of guns. Concurrently, Christian missionaries, particularly American Baptists, established a significant presence, introducing Western education and healthcare, translating the Bible, and profoundly changing traditional animistic beliefs. This paper reveals a complex interplay between colonial administration, firearms, and missionary efforts, demonstrating how these seemingly disparate elements contributed to both

resistance and adaptation among the Thadou and Chin, leaving a lasting legacy on their identity and society today.

*Keywords:* Chin Hills, Colonialism, Firearms, Christian Missionaries, Thadou

## **Introduction**

It is a well-known historical fact that India was colonized by the British East India Company from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chin hills, however, were not directly under the control of the Company. While historical narratives have often overlooked the specific experiences of these groups, recent academic interest underscores the importance of understanding their past, particularly, during periods of significant external influence. The British colonial era, marked by its strategic interest in the Chin Hills situated between Bengal and Burma, brought about profound changes in the region.<sup>1</sup> This period witnessed not only the assertion of colonial power but also the introduction and increasing prominence of firearms alongside the arrival and activities of Christian missionaries. This paper aims to look into the paradoxical role of the Colonizers in the Chin hills, where they introduced Christianity to the people but also introduced firearms as the people of the hills adapted and encountered modern firearms between the 1860s and 1910s. This paper will primarily draw upon two key texts that offer valuable insights into this transformative period. Bertram Sausmarez Carey and Henry Newman Tuck's "*The Chin Hills: A History of the People, Our Dealings with Them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of Their Country,*" stands as a crucial source for understanding the colonial perspective on the Chin Hills, particularly concerning the acquisition and significance of guns within Chin society. This work, through the observations of the two British administrators, provides detailed accounts of Chin interactions with firearms

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<sup>1</sup> Pau, Pum Khan. 'Disarmament and Resistance in Colonial Burma: A Case Study of the Chin Hills'. *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2017, pp. 233–61. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2017.0016>.

and the colonial policies enacted in response. The other selected key text that complements this perspective is Alexander Mackenzie's *"History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal,"* a comprehensive record of British interactions with various hill tribes in the region, including potential references to the Chin and their engagement with both firearms and external influences. Mackenzie's work, stemming from his role as a British civil servant, offers an authoritative account of the political relations between the colonial government and these communities. The central argument of this paper is that the Thadou and Chin people's sociocultural landscape was drastically altered by the introduction and significance of firearms, which existed before but developed under colonial rule, and the revolutionary arrival of Christian missionaries, who were frequently assisted by the colonial government. This resulted in both resistance and adaptation that are still felt in the area today.

### **The Pre-Colonial Thadou and Chin Society**

Prior to the significant intrusion of British colonial power, the Thadou and Chin communities possessed distinct social structures and customs that were deeply rooted in their mountainous environment. Villages were headed by chiefs called 'Vaihomte' which means those who look over others, and the system of Kinship played a crucial role in the Thadou and Chin society. Practices such as shifting cultivation were fundamental to their subsistence, and communal labour sharing systems were also prevalent among groups like the Hakha Chin. The religious beliefs were traditionally animistic, with a reverence for spirits inhabiting the natural world and a belief in a supreme being known as 'Pathen'<sup>2</sup> by the Thadous and 'Pasian' by the others. Firearms were not entirely absent from Thadou and Chin society before the full force of colonial intervention. Guns held immense value and significance, often regarded as prized possessions representing a man's status and masculinity. In fact, acquiring a gun was

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<sup>2</sup> God

considered by the Chins to be more challenging than finding a wife or having children, highlighting its profound socio-economic and political worth.<sup>3</sup> These were not locally manufactured in their entirety but were primarily flintlock rifles of European origin, bearing names and dates suggesting they were acquired through trade networks that predated direct British administration. These firearms played a role in hunting, warfare, and defence against raids from neighbouring communities, and their possession often conferred respect and influence within the village. The tactics employed by the Chin in warfare, as noted by Carey and Tuck, often involved utilizing these firearms in ambushes, demonstrating an understanding of their strategic value.

### **The advent of Colonial influence and introduction of Modern Firearms**

The expansion of British colonial power into the Indo-Burma frontier, a process extensively documented by Alexander Mackenzie, had a significant impact on the Thadou and Chin regions. Initially, British policy towards the hill tribes was one of non-intervention, viewing these areas primarily as sources of trouble. However, following the annexation of Upper Burma, the strategic importance of the Chin Hills, lying between British territories, became increasingly apparent, leading to a shift in policy towards intervention and eventual annexation in the late 19th century. From the colonial perspective, the possession of arms by the hill tribes was viewed with suspicion and concern, perceived as a potential threat to their authority and the stability of the frontier. Consequently, policies aimed at disarmament and arms control were implemented as part of the "pacification" process. These policies, as noted in Carey and Tuck's account and other colonial records, aimed to curtail the existing gun culture and prevent future resistance. However, these efforts often faced strong resistance from the

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<sup>3</sup> Carey, Bertram Sausmarez, and Henry Newman Tuck. *The Chin Hills: A History Of The People, Our Dealings With Them, Their Customs And Manners, And A Gazetteer Of Their Country, Volume 1*. superintendent, government printing, Burma, 1896.

Thadou and Chin people, for whom guns held significant socio-economic, cultural, and symbolic value. While the pre-colonial era saw the presence of European flintlock guns acquired through trade, the colonial period likely facilitated the introduction of more advanced firearms into Thadou and Chin society. Although Carey and Tuck noted that all the guns owned by the Chin people were flintlocks, the ability of local blacksmiths to convert percussion-cap guns into flintlocks suggests that these newer weapons were becoming available, possibly through evolving trade networks influenced by the colonial presence. The introduction of these more modern firearms could have potentially impacted warfare tactics, hunting efficiency, and the balance of power dynamics both within and between different Thadou and Chin communities. On December 25, 1862, an extensive seizure of arms, powder & c was made near the Arracan<sup>4</sup> River Myoo entry. 45 muskets, 800 flasks of powder, 8,000 flints, 40 extra locks for flint muskets, five swords, and a quantity of lead, saltpetre, and buck shot were among the items confiscated from Godoo, a native craft. Captain F. C. Hamilton, the Deputy Superintendent of Arracan, oversaw this significant arms confiscation. Hamilton had been on the lookout for certain individuals bringing powder, arms & c., into this district for a while. Inquiries were conducted to ascertain the scope of the arms trade after weapons were seized at the River Myoo. Captain Hamilton discovered that the weapons and ammunition were being transported by boat from Calcutta and intended for sale to the "hill tribes." However, other traders had already been alerted and had escaped, so Hamilton's following attempt to make more seizures was unsuccessful. The colonial authorities in Bengal was concerned when it was discovered that an arms trade was using Arracan to supply weapons to "the Kookies"<sup>5</sup> in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This kind of incident led the colonial authorities to go to great lengths

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<sup>4</sup> Arracan division was a part of British India and later fell under British rule in Burma.

<sup>5</sup> Kuki.

to stop the movement of firearms and their use by "the Kookies" and other hill tribes on the frontier.

### The arrival of Christian Missionaries

The year 1899 was a pivotal point for the people of the Chin hills as a mission headquarters was established in Haka by Rev. Arthur E. Carson and his wife Laura.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, in 1894, Christianity had been introduced to Northern Manipur, the homeland of many Thadou people, by William Pettigrew, an American Baptist missionary.<sup>7</sup> While the American Baptist denomination was the most prominent, other groups such as the Welsh Presbyterian Mission also became involved, particularly in South Manipur.<sup>8</sup> An initial attempt by the Roman Catholic Mission in the Chin Hills in 1891 was reportedly prevented by colonial officers, highlighting the complex interplay between religious missions and colonial administration. A key strategy in missionary works involved establishing schools to provide Western education, which missionaries believed was essential for understanding the Bible. Healthcare facilities, including hospitals and dispensaries, were also established to address the medical needs of the communities.<sup>9</sup> The translation of the Bible into local dialects was a central undertaking, facilitating the spread of Christian teachings in a comprehensible form. Rev. Arthur E. Carson even developed a Roman alphabet for the Chin language, significantly contributing to the development of a written literary tradition.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pau, Pum Khan. *'Rethinking Religious Conversion'*. Journal of Religion, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> TBA-I History | Thadou Baptist Association India. 10 Nov. 2017, <https://thadoubaptistassociation.org/en/about-tba-i/history>.

<sup>8</sup> Haokip, Thongkolal. Kuki Churches Unification Movements.

<sup>9</sup> Maung, Dennis S. 'Christianity in Chin State'. Melbourne Chin Church, <https://melbournechinchurch.com.au/christianity-in-chin-state/>.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. Dr. Chum Awi. *'CHRISTIANITY IN EASTERN CHINLAND'*. Chin Human Rights Organization, <https://www.chinhumanrights.org/christianity-in-eastern-chinland/>.

These missionary activities had a significant and diverse initial impact on Thadou and Chin society. Many gave up animistic customs and spirit worship as a result of the widespread adoption of Christianity, which caused profound changes in ancient religious beliefs and practices.<sup>11</sup> The missionaries' introduction of Western education contributed to social and cultural transformations by bringing literacy and fresh viewpoints. This resulted in the abandonment of customs like traditional feasts and sacrifice ceremonies that were thought to be at odds with Christian beliefs.<sup>12</sup> However, Christianity also served as a unifying factor, creating a new sense of political consciousness and shared identity across many Chin communities.

### **Was their God intertwined with the Guns?**

The introduction of firearms and the missionary works in the Thadou and Chin communities were not isolated phenomena but were often intertwined with the overarching presence and policies of the British colonial administration. The establishment and expansion of missionary work in the hills was often facilitated by the prior or concurrent establishment of British colonial control. As it was seen in the Chin hills, the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in 1899 followed closely on the heels of the British in the 1890s.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, colonial officers actively invited missionaries in the hills, viewing them as agents who could promote Western culture and potentially extend British influence. The partnership between the colonial administration and missionary societies was not always seamless, as evidenced by the initial prevention of Roman Catholic missionary efforts by British authorities, possibly due to concerns about local reactions or strategic preferences for certain denominations. However, in

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<sup>11</sup> Chongloi, Lamkhotinthang. *Confluence of Religion from Traditional to Modern: A Case Study of Indigenous Thadou-Kuki Tribe of Nagaland*. 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Salai Za Uk Ling 'THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHIN SOCIETY'. Chin Human Rights Organization, <https://www.chinhumanrights.org/the-role-of-christianity-in-chin-society/>.

<sup>13</sup> Pau, Pum Khan. 'Rethinking Religious Conversion'. *Journal of Religion*, 2012.

many instances, a symbiotic relationship developed, with missionaries benefiting from the relative security and access provided by colonial rule, and the colonial administration potentially viewing the civilizing influence of Christianity as complementary to their own objectives of governance and control.<sup>14</sup>

It is plausible that the presence and increasing prevalence of firearms in the region had a complex relationship with missionary activities. While the pacifist teachings of Christianity might seem inherently at odds with the use of guns, the colonial context complicates this picture. The colonial administration's efforts to disarm the local population, while facing resistance, also created a power dynamic where the ultimate authority rested with the colonizers, who often possessed superior weaponry. This environment, paradoxically, might have provided a degree of stability that allowed missionaries to operate, even if they disapproved of the widespread possession of arms. Missionaries, focused on spiritual and social transformation, might have viewed the preoccupation with firearms as a symptom of a more 'primitive' state, something to be overcome through conversion and the adoption of Christian values. However, direct evidence of missionaries explicitly addressing the issue of gun ownership in their early interactions with the Thadou and Chin people requires further investigation with a focus on the primary sources.

### **The resistance and adaptation by the Thadou and Chin community**

The Thadou and Chin people did not passively accept the changes brought about by colonial rule and the introduction of new influences. Resistance to colonial policies, particularly those related to the confiscation of their valued firearms, was a recurring theme. The British encountered significant challenges in their attempts to disarm the Chin Hills, highlighting the strong attachment of the local population to their guns. Events like

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

Chandrakirti Singh's failed campaign against the Chins in 1857 suggest early instances of armed resistance.<sup>15</sup> The Kuki rebellion of 1917-1919, which involved Thadou chiefs, was partly fuelled by resentment towards British arm-licensing controls, demonstrating the continued importance of firearms to their sense of autonomy.<sup>16</sup> Even in later periods, as seen with the emergence of the Chin National Front, resistance to central authority has persisted.

Alongside resistance, the Thadou and Chin communities also demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation in the face of these transformative forces. The widespread adoption of Christianity can be seen as a form of adaptation, allowing these communities to navigate the changing socio-political landscape while often preserving elements of their cultural identity. Following the suppression of armed resistance and the enforcement of disarmament, the Thadou, for example, had to adjust to increased administrative oversight and the growing influence of missionary teachings, leading to social adjustments.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of indigenous religious movements, such as the Pau Cin Hau movement<sup>18</sup> in the Chin Hills, represents another form of adaptation and assertion of local agency in response to the influx of new religious ideas. This movement, contemporaneous with the arrival of Christian missionaries, offered an alternative path for religious and social reform, indicating a dynamic response to external influences rather than mere passive acceptance.

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India* ([1884] New Delhi: Mittal publications 2001), 164

<sup>16</sup> Thadou-Culture. [http://lisindia.ciiil.org/Thadou/thadou\\_cult.html](http://lisindia.ciiil.org/Thadou/thadou_cult.html).

<sup>17</sup> William Shaw, *Notes on The Thadou Kukis*, 1929

<sup>18</sup> The Pau Cin Hau movement, also known as Laipianism, was a religious and cultural movement founded by Pau Cin Hau in the early 20th century in the Chin Hills region of Myanmar (Burma). It emerged as an indigenous reform movement that challenged both traditional Chin religion and the growing influence of Christianity. Pau Cin Hau, a Chin healer and dream worker, claimed to have had a series of dreams in which he was taught a new alphabet and a monotheistic belief system.

## Conclusion

The history of the Thadou and Chin community during the British colonial era is a complex tapestry woven with threads of tradition, transformation, resistance and adaptation. Although firearms existed before the arrival of colonial authority, the advent and importance of weapons in their society were fundamental to their social structures, methods of combat, and sense of self. Christianity was widely accepted and Western healthcare and education were introduced as a result of the significant religious and cultural shifts brought about by the entrance of Christian missionaries in the late 19th century. These two strong forces, guns and missionaries, were not apart from one another or the overall impact of British colonial rule. The environment in which guns were used and missionary work took place was frequently influenced by colonial policy, which occasionally helped and occasionally hindered their respective effects.

The long-term impact of these historical processes is evident in contemporary Thadou and Chin society. The Chin people, in particular, are overwhelmingly Christian today, a testament to the enduring legacy of missionary work. This Christian identity has become deeply intertwined with their ethnic identity and has played a significant role in their political consciousness and the formation of diaspora communities around the world. Organizations like the Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), tracing its origins to a mission agency called Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission (TKPM), have also been instrumental in planting churches and spreading the gospel among the Thadou and other tribal populations.<sup>19</sup> While the social and cultural significance of guns may have evolved with the widespread adoption of Christianity, the historical importance of firearms in Thadou and Chin society, particularly in the context of resistance to colonial rule, remains a crucial aspect of their past. The interplay of firearms and

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<sup>19</sup> Mission & Evangelism | Thadou Baptist Association India. 10 Nov. 2017, <https://thadoubaptistassociation.org/en/departments/mission-evangelism>.

faith, set against the backdrop of colonial power, profoundly shaped the trajectory of the Thadou and Chin people, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence their lives and identities in the present day. According to Carey and Tuck, what strikes the Englishman most in a gun is the smallness and narrowness of the butt and heel-plate, because the recoil from the heavy charge is enormous. Hence their weapons are heavy in stock but light in the muzzle. The guns of the Chins, on the other hand, is the reverse for the stocks weighs next to nothing and the barrel takes up all the weight. This enables one to withstand the recoil and protect one's own shoulder. In contrast, when the current conflict in Manipur is viewed, most of the older generation of men have the traditional riffles which have heavier barrel whereas, the Meiteis and the newer generation of the Thadous and Chins have modern weaponry, which further shows the colonial influence on the kinds of guns the people of the hills were exposed to. The Hun Festival of the Thadou and Chin communities always consists of a performance that showcases the rituals that used to be followed by their ancestors, however, this is often followed by a group of pastors praying to God to forgive them for performing the old ways. The necessity of prayers after a mere performing of the ancestral rituals further shows the impact of the missionary works done by the British missionaries.

While the introduction of firearms and the arrival of Christian missionaries were presented as forces of progress, a critical examination reveals a potential hypocrisy in the British approach to the Thadou and Chin communities. On one hand, the introduction of guns, further facilitated by British trade and policies, altered traditional power dynamics and could be seen as destabilizing, despite claims of establishing order. Simultaneously, while missionaries brought education and new religious beliefs, their efforts often coincided with the erosion of indigenous cultures and traditional ways of life, potentially contradicting any stated respect for local customs. This dual impact suggests a complex and potentially self-serving agenda where the purported benefits of modernization and religious enlightenment were

intertwined with the advancement of British colonial influence and control. Further investigation into the specific motivations and consequences of these interventions is crucial to fully understand the nuanced and potentially contradictory nature of British involvement in the hills.

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