



FORMATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF 'MIZO' AS IDENTITY

R. Lalsangpuii

Department of History, Govt. Aizawl West College, Aizawl, India

✉ virgoralte@gmail.com

R. Lalsangpuii: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6046-6107>

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand the complex issues of identity formation of the Mizos who are presently living in the corner most region of India's North East. Here, it is interesting to study how identity is formed, constructed and even protected. This process involves centuries of historical journey that examines how the people perceived themselves and how the outsiders constructed their identity on the conception of "difference" that would include subjugation and internalisation. It aims to understand how space and territoriality that are imagined or constructed in the psyche of the people played a significant role in identity formation. These are the products of colonial intervention affirmed by Christianity and exposure to the world beyond their isolated hills. It would also focus on the formation and development of 'Mizo' in the pre-colonial and post-colonial era. Further, it would also highlight how the nomenclature of the ethnonym, 'Mizo' has been debated by the historians. On a methodological note rich archival materials and secondary sources on Mizo identity are employed.

Keywords: *Identity, Mizo, Community, Christianity, Colonialism.*

Introduction

On the 4th September 2019. East Mojo (one of the largest circulating print media in northeast India) reported that Students of 6 Mizoram schools have taken a pledge not to marry 'outsiders' (Fanai, 2019). This was the result of the on-going campaign led by the MZP (Mizo Zirlai Pawl), The Largest Mizo Student Body to safeguard the identity of Mizo in Mizoram. It is always interesting to study how identity is formed, constructed,

and even protected particularly in this context. This process involves centuries of a historical journey that examines how the people perceived themselves and how the outsiders constructed their identity on the conception of "difference" that would include subjugation and internalisation. The understanding of space and territoriality that are imagined or constructed in the psyche of the people played a significant role. Of course, these are the products of colonial

intervention affirmed by Christianity and exposure to the world beyond their isolated hills. It would focus on the formation and development of 'Mizo' in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. It would further highlight how nomenclature has been debated by historians.

Imagined Identity

Benedict Anderson is studying the progress of a nation state published a book in 1983, titled *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. In this book, he argued that the idea of a Nation is imagined by the people and is therefore, a cultural construct and not something innate to groups. He rejected the assumption that nations are natural and inevitable social units. When someone died for a country, he died for the imagined ideas that include deep horizontal comradeship. In a tribal society like Mizo, the idea of identity has been imagined by the people within their tribal worldview taking collectivism as a cultural marker that binds the societal order.

This may include a different cultural phenomenon that regulates the function of society. One of such traits is the spirit of 'Tlawmngaihna'. This is the by-product of their interaction with nature. To survive in rugged and forested terrain and live with wild animals such social regulations are needed to put society in order. Due to the depth and wideness of its scope, N. Chatterji finds it (Chatterji, 1975) difficult to put in a single word. Sometimes the word is equated with "altruism", "chivalry". JH Lorraine, a Christian Baptist missionary in his book on Dictionary of Lushai Language put it as:

1. To be self-sacrificing, unselfish, self-denying, persevering, stoical, stout-hearted, plucky, brave, firm, independent (refusing any help).
2. To put one's own inclinations on one side and do a thing which one would rather not do, with the object either of giving up one's prestige, etc; or of helping another, or of not disappointing another, etc.
3. To do whatever the occasion demands no matter how distasteful or inconvenient it may be to oneself or to one's own inclinations (Lorraine, 1940).

The character of being Tlawmngai has been passed down from generation to generation. What makes a 'Mizo' is that one must be respectful and obedient to elders. He should be generous to the poor and help those who are in need, give opportune in favour of others. Never abandon his sick friend even at a hunting party. Tlawmngaihna could be a combination of both personal and collective levels of activities. It further meant compelling moral-force which finds expression in self-sacrifice for the service of others according to Chatterji. It was this moral ethics that binds the social order and also that defines the identity as a Mizo.

Language, Territoriality, Space and the Colonial Intervention

G.A. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India mentioned that the people who inhabited Mizoram belonged to the Kuki-Chin group of the Assam-Burman sub-family, which along with other eastern families constitute a Mongoloid race (Grierson, 1927). The language of the Mizo

namely Duhlian spoken in Mizoram belongs to the Central Kuki-Chin sub group. The Mizo identity has emerged mainly from tribes who speak Tibeto-Burman languages who lived in different parts of Mizoram. Although different tribes have different dialects, however, it was always mutually understandable. It was Duhlian which was used as a common language and is spoken, and contributed to the formation of ‘Mizo’ as identity. The crystallised form has resulted from the boundaries created as a result of colonialism (Pachau, 2014). For various reasons the Duhlian dialect got popularity and is now the lingua franca of the state alongside English as the official language and it also gained acceptance from Zo ethnic tribes within and outside Mizoram. The formation of definite boundaries in the colonial era played a significant role in this project.

Due to tribal and family feuds that were prevalent during the pre-colonial period, outside observers viewed the different tribes as distinct people. However, with familiarity with the land and the people, the British military officers and civil administrators came to realise whom they called by different names belonged to the same tribe. In the 1890s there was a proposal to amalgamate the three administrative districts of South, North Lushai Hills and the Chin Hills which were controlled by Bengal, Assam, and Burma respectively. The Chin Lushai Conference that was held in 1892 was convened by the military department at Calcutta. This conference suggested that it “very desirable that the whole tracts of the country known as the Chin-Lushai Hills should be brought

under one administrative Head as soon as it can be done” (Foreign Department Report, 1892). Another resolution to amalgamate the South and North Lushai Hills was soon in effect. On the other hand, the resolution to bring together the districts of both India and Burma came to hold as two members from seven which includes Alexander Mackenzie, Chief Commissioner of Burma abate the final decision. He sees no reason why he should give up his territories to Assam. The Chin Hills were left undisturbed within Burma until the question of the homogeneity of the people inhabiting the whole tracts could be ascertained. The responsibilities were given to the local officers working on both sides. These officers soon engaged themselves in collecting data and compiling in their respective areas of operation.

It was the administrator like T.H. Lewin who acted as a paternalist for the Mizo society, offering loans in the hope that the local people would settle down to own and hold land as permanent cultivators. This could not be successful because farmers found it difficult to harvest in the rugged terrain forest. Except for the valleys of Champhai and North Vanlaiphai where plough cultivation was introduced by Major J. Shakespear in 1898 with the help of Santhal and Nepali farmers (Zou, 2015). The British started to employ techniques of rule such as cartography and boundaries that had consequences for Mizo political imagination of land and identity.

A watershed development regarding Land Settlement was met in 1901-02 when the Superintendent marked off the boundaries of the chief’s land called *Ramri*

Lehkha, (boundary demarcation letter) which was introduced. Hence, the Chief were made responsible for the payment of revenue and the observance of the government orders (Aitchison, 1983).

Besides the Sailo Chiefs, there were also 'Hnamchawm Lal' or Headmen, to whom land was allotted for their loyalty, and as recognition for the services rendered by them in the administration as well as other remarkable contributions. They did not acquire any permanent heritable or transferable land but were entitled Fathang or paddy tax from their villages (Das, 1990). The increase in the number of chiefs from about sixty to more than four hundred during the forty years of British rule was a sad reflection of the disruption of chieftainship under colonial rule (Zorema, 2007).

To improve the administration and smooth communication between the Chiefs and Headquarters, Shakespear accordingly introduced the system of Circle administration in 1901-02. Since the occupation of the Hills by the British authority, they became the real owner of the land and had appropriated it out to any person of their favour. Thus, though the chief's power over the land remained, the legal ownership was passed to the colonial government. The new system of land administration led to the imagination of a definite territory which was contrary to the earlier nomadic patterns. This gave a sense of land and identity to the people residing in these areas.

The Mizos had a strong relationship with settled agriculture in Manipur and

Cachar areas; these were the hunting grounds where annual raids were conducted. At that time they were in contact with the 'Kawl' of Burma (Burmese) and 'Vai' (plain people) mostly Bengalis whom they imagined to have settled in 'Vairam' (land of the plain people). The term 'Vairam' during the colonial era denotes 'foreign country, not necessarily the plains of India and Burma. The Mizos even called the British invasion of the hills 'Vailen' (plain people's raid). But after a long interaction, they began to realise how the whites were different from those of Vai in the plain. They began to call the Europeans 'Sap'. However, in the Post-Colonial era there was a sharp distinction between the Sap and the Vai as the Mizos experienced negative interaction - especially with the army and traders of the plains. This stereotyping of 'Vai' continued in the Post-Colonial era (Zou, 2015).

Christianity and Exposure to the outside world

The pre-colonial Lushai Hills was defined by the idea of a steady state, where the Mizos managed their affairs. However, after the occupation of the Hills by the British, the introduction of education and Christianity gradually altered the worldview of the Mizos which produced significant cultural stress. This resulted in a reconstruction of their history, which was also enhanced by the First World War experiences. This stress built and produced what Tippet calls "a reservoir of tension." This is "a built-up communal experience which only requires a spark to explode it". The society, though experiencing this build-

up of tension with its explosive potential for dramatic cultural change, preserved what Tippet labels “ethnic cohesion” – the fundamental cultural glue that makes and keeps a people a people (Tippet, 1987). Thus, there is a production of a kind of hybrid culture that converts into the western culture while still retaining the ethnic culture. In the process when it reaches some level something may happen to “ignite” the reservoir. Causing neither a dramatic change nor innovation, that resulted in conversion or submersion. This happened without disrupting the fundamental configuration patterns that hold people together, providing them security and identity. An intangible culture like composing the song “German Run Zai” is one of the fine examples we can get out of this production.

The other consequence was that the people who lived in isolation hardly disturbed by the outside world began taking interest in life beyond their hills after the First World War. The first Mizos who visited Calcutta in the 1870s, were not impressed by the magnificent city of Calcutta. However, during the war, a number of Mizos participated in the war along the side of allied forces. Their experiences and exposure to the outside brought many changes in the life of the people. One of the spectacular changes was in dress and hairstyle as the people developed an admiration for the European lifestyle. Before World War, the boys usually kept their hair long and wore it in a bun at the back and front. Only 4 or 5 of them got their hair cut. A satire was even composed for the ones who cut their hair. However, the returnees cut their hair in western style and only very

few of them came back with the same hairstyle.

The Mizos’ participation in the war changed the mental attitude of the Mizos in two ways. Firstly, they started to have a sense of belongingness to the wider British Empire. Secondly, their minds were opened to readily accept the gospel thereby helping the missionaries in their evangelizing mission (Rohmingmawii, 2013). These conditions that came up with the encounter with both Christianity also became the first large-scale encounter with modernity.

On the other hand, their experience and recognition for their good work during the war naturally gave the Mizos new confidence in themselves. Their service in the war, though confined to a menial job, gave them a chance to prove to themselves that they were better than the others. The building up of self-realisation and self-respect ignited the formation of consciousness in building their identity as a ‘Mizo’.

Debate on a common nomenclature

With familiarisation about the land and culture of the people, the colonial ethnographers and the local writers during the post-colonial era try to establish common nomenclature to cover the particular community who shared the same culture and practices. Their methodology was somewhat crude and confined to the vestige of political spheres. This was no surprise because they were bound by their officialdom and their main aim was efficiency in administration.

An attempt for political unification or re-unification of cognate tribes (real or imagined) under one administrative umbrella is the outcome of a search for an ethnic-tribal identity. Despite their differences in terms of dialects, rituals, cultural, social, and other practices, there are some obvious trends and practices which show that certain elements of similarities regarding traditional costumes, languages, legends, and folklore. Hence, these differences could be accrued to their long period of separation during their migrational period and their similarities show that they were of the same stock and the same ancestry. As S. Carey was of the opinion that the people were of the same stock; their form of government, method of cultivation, manners, and customs, beliefs, and tradition point to one origin (Carey & Tuck, 1986).

Various attempts have been put forward by scholars to build a common generic term for the tribes living across the National and International borders of India, Bangladesh, and Burma. The problem, however, lay in the fact that the people of this particular area did not agree with the name given by the outsider. They interacted with other tribes during their migrational period and the formation of their identity was acquired during this period. While they were staying in Burma, they were given the name 'Chins' or 'Khyan', which means 'a friend' in Burmese (Lalthangliana, 2001). They further moved towards the hills and subsequently made contact with the plain people of Assam. Here they acquired a new name 'Kuki', and in Manipuri, 'Khongjai' by the Meiteis. 'Lushai' was the name given by the colonial writers since they were the

first to make contact with them. Lushai seems to be a mispronunciation of Lusei, a section of one tribe among the Mizo. The colonial writers used this generic term to refer to the people of the Mizo Hills, but this was not supported by the whole population as shown by the 1901 census where the majority used the name of their particular clans.

Since then, the words 'Lushai', 'Chin', 'Kuki' etc has been debatable terms to locate a common identity for different tribes who were residing in and around the hills and plains of India and Burma. It was the colonial administrators who are indeed confused with their identity called by various hyphenated names like Kuki-Chin or Kuki-Chin-Lushai etc. However, the people have not agreed to the term given by others. On the other hand, there was agreement from all on the ethnic homogeneity of these cognate tribes. Many writers started suggesting a common generic name one of such is whether to locate 'Zo' as the tools for hegemonizing the identity. The debate on these ethnonyms and the continuing energy articulated by the diverse groups points out that this is still an unfinished project

The first British administrator, T.H Lewin, in his book, *The Lushai Expedition* (1871-72) wrote that "The generic name of the whole nation is 'Dzo'" (Lewin, 1885 H.B. Rowney, and Alexander Mackenzie rejected this there by saying that there is no common name for the particular region. In 1945, H.W. Carter, a BMS missionary working in South Lushai Hills made a comparison between the people in Mizoram

and Scottish who called themselves highlanders (Mizoram Baptist Kohhran Chanchin, 1945). This idea was subscribed by J.M. Lloyd, a Welsh missionary who had worked in the North Lushai Hills and who called the people as “people of the hills” (Lloyd, 1956). On the contrary, Vanlawma said that the term ‘Zo’ does not merely signify highlanders, the place where the people dwell in a place of pleasant climate which in Lusei word is ‘Zo’. He further said that the people derived their name from the high lands and especially the farm lands there called “Zo lo”, which derived their name from the Mizo people who cultivated the farms (Lehman, 1963). Their investigation to conceptualise the term makes us wonder that whether the construction was best based on political or geographies.

‘Mizo’ as contested name and the fallacy of its Construction

One of the most contested terms is whether to suffix ‘Mi’ (people) before or after the word ‘Zo’ which will become ‘Mizo’ or ‘Zomi’ which relates the same meaning. One needs to understand that the construction of using ‘Mizo’ as a common generic term in modern usage is political rather than cultural. The colonial masters played a significant role in this construction followed blindly by the local writers. On tracing the etymology of the word ‘Mizo’, K. Zawla could be the first writer who wrote, once a hunter after killing a wild boar with “Puiraw” (bamboo spike) prided himself by calling himself ‘Mizo’ (Doliana, 1988). This might have been where we can first find ‘Mizo’ in historical accounts. K.

Zawla further contended that the forebears left Khampat around 1170 AD and migrated to Than Tlang (Chin Hills) which was high and cold-for which reason they began calling themselves Zomi. Later, its poetic form ‘Mizo’ began to be accepted in common speech. B. Lalthangliana rejected K. Zawla suggestions, Mizo would mean highlanders, he said that when their forebears left Kabow for the Chin Hills to evade the onslaught of the Shans no one was left in the hot valley to call those up in the high and cold region Mizo. He came up with the alternative theory that in the late eighteenth century when the Mizo lived in the town of Zopui located near the eastern border of the present Mizoram. It was from their successes in raids on other tribes for which they prided themselves and sang praises of the bravery of the men of Zopui that the word Mizo had its beginning (Lalthangliana, 2001). The first published book was “Progress Colloquial Exercise in Lushai dialect ‘DZO’ or “Kuki” language by T.H. Lewin and the first newspaper was “Mizoleh Vai Chanchinbu” published by the same. In the process, the people also became conscious which resulted in changing the names of Associations like “Lushai Student Association” had been changed into “Mizo Student Association”, “Young Lushai Association” as “Young Mizo Association” (the most powerful voluntary organization in Mizoram). Even the first political party is called “Mizo Union” (Lalthangliana, 2001).

Even though the word ‘Mizo’ was favoured by the British administrators, the word ‘Mizo’ did not draw the other tribes on the main stream of Mizo history as their interpretation as the Mizo confined to the

Lusei clan. This is clear from V.L. Siam's book, *Mizo History*, where he mentioned that the Pawi (Lai) of the east used to attack the Mizo (Siama, 1953). In this book, Siama quoted Mizo under Lusei tribe alone. This is clear from his writing that the Lai were having a war with the Mizo (Lusei). Regarding dialects, it should also be noted that within the Mizo there are different tribes with different dialects. This has also been taken into account in building the common identity as the 'Mizo'. The British administrators had a propensity of habituating a single dialect and culture, which is blindly followed by the local writers, undermined the complex nature of the cognate tribes, this further implanted a false sense of "superiority" over the other in its exercise.

In the context of Mizo identity formation, patronising one single dialect and culture of Lusei and using them as a signifier of Mizo identity would lead to alienation and marginalisation of other tribes. Historians while dealing with this sensitive issue should not fall into the trap of colonial legacy. This project thus calls for a serious interdisciplinary pursuit in research for Mizo identity that is still relevant at all levels and just an academic pursuit as academics is also informed by popular opinion in this particular instance.

Conclusion

The Mizos experienced colonial intrusion; Christianity and exposure to the outside world in the First World War were immense as their history underwent a great change with the cultures that were adopted from in and outside. It is further interesting

to know how the Mizos positioned themselves to these new realities. Therefore, this was an 'open moment' in Mizo history that gave chances for the Mizos to take diverse historical paths and the idea of ethnic belongingness was built on societal consensus and therefore the Mizo identity became an overarching and accommodative one. The Mizo society, though experiencing this built-up tension with its explosive potential for dramatic cultural change, preserved what Tippet labels "ethnic cohesion" – the fundamental cultural glue that makes and keeps a people a people. This produced a kind of hybrid culture that converted into the western culture while still retaining the ethnic culture by not losing their cultural bearings. With this new reorientation, they successfully created a new identity under the banner of 'Mizo' which will be a guiding map for centuries to come.

References

- Aitchison, C.U. (1983). *Treaties, Engagement & Sanads Volume XII*, reprint, Delhi.
- Allan R. Tippet (1987), *Introduction to Missiology*, William Carrey Library, p.287.
- Carey, Bertram S. and Tuck, H.N. (1986), *The Chin Hills: A history of the people, our dealing with Them, Their Customs and Manners. And Gazetteer of the country*, Vol.1, 2 Vols, p.2.
- Chatterji, N (1975). *Zawlbuk as a Social Institution in the Mizo Society*, Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, p.15.

- Das, J. N (Ed.), (1990). *A Study of the Land System of Mizoram*: Guwahati. p.14.
- Doliana, R. (1988). *Mizo nun hluilehhlate*, Aizawl, Lengchhawn Press, p.91.
- Fanai, Ezrela Dalidia (2019). *Students of 6 Mizoram schools take a pledge not to marry 'outsiders'*. East Mojo. Retrieved from: <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2019/09/03/students-of-6-mizoram-schools-take-pledge-not-to-marry-outsiders/>
- Grierson, G.A. (1927) reprinted 1967. *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. I, Part I Introductory*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp. 392-6
- Kipgen, *Mizo Culture*, p.20 also cited in George Scott, J, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and Shan State, Part II, Vol III*, Rangoon, 1901, p.413.
- Lalthangliana, B. (2001). *India, Burma leh Bangladesh a, MizoChanchin*, Published by Remkungi,
- Lalthangliana, B. (2001). *India, Burma leh Bangladesh a, MizoChanchin*, Published by Remkungi, p.7.
- Lalthangliana, B. (2001). *India, Burma leh Bangladesh a, MizoChanchin*, Published by Remkungi, p.762.
- Lehman, F.K, *The Structure of Chin Society* (1963, revised ed.1980) pp.53-4.
- Lewin, T.H. (1885). *A fly on the Wheel, or How I help the Government of India*, p. 246.
- Llyod, J.M. (1956). *On Every High Hill* (c.1956), p.9.
- Lorraine, JH (1940). *Dictionary of Lushai Language*, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, p.513. Retrieved from: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/lorrain/>
- Malsawmdawngliana (2018). Exploring the New World: The First World War Experience, *Historical Journal Mizoram*, Vol. XIX, p.186.
- Mizoram Baptist Kohhran Chanchin (1945), p.1.
- No 32, Chin Lushai Conference, Foreign Department Report on Chin Lushai Hills, September 1892.
- Pachau, Joy (2014). *Being Mizo, Identity and belonging in Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.8.
- Rohmingmawii (2013). Mizos and the World Wars in Malsawmdawngliana&Rohmingmawii (Ed.), *Mizo Narratives, Accounts from Mizoram*, Guwahati, Scientific Book Centre, p.270.
- Siama, V.L. (1953). *Mizo Chanchin*: Published by Lengchhawn Press, 1953. p.30.
- Zorema, J. (2007). *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*: Mittal Publication, New Delhi.p.65.
- Zou, David Vumlallian (2015). Production of Place: Folk Geographies and Religious Desire in Colonial Mizoram in Malsawmdawngliana, Lalrameng

Gangte, Rohmingmawii (Ed.). *Orality and Folk Literature in the Age of Print Culture: India's Northeast Experience*, Guwahati, Scientific Book Centre, p.113