



CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE MIZOS: A BRIEF SURVEY OF PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT:

The Mizos, a Tibeto-Burman language speaking people belong to Mongoloid race. From time immemorial, they have their own cultural practices. They have their own social structure, village system, social institutions, festivals, economic life and religious beliefs which are different from many of the tribal groups of the period. This paper is a brief attempt made on the Cultural History of the Mizos prior to the occupation of the Lushai Hills by the British.

Key words: Mizo, Family, festival, Zawlbuk.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The Mizos are Tibeto-Burman people, speaking Tibeto-Burman language. They belonged to the Mongoloid race. They once settled down in the mountainous areas of Szechuan, Yunnan and Kweichow provinces. As a result of population movement, they arrived in Burma with other ethnic tribes. They lived there for centuries and developed their culture into different dimensions which attained a certain degree of maturity in one form or the other. Whatever system they developed in Burma were brought down by them when they came to the present habitat for their continuous uses.

In this study, the period covers from earliest time till the British occupation of the Lushai Hills as it is too difficult to divide the Mizo History into Ancient, Medieval and Modern as was done in the case of others like Indian History or of European History. Therefore, the purpose of this writing is to throw some light on the Cultural history of the Mizos prior to the occupation of the Lushai Hills by the British.

II. THE MIZO SOCIAL STRUCTURE:

(1) Family:

In the early Mizo Society, the father was the head of the family and exercised arbitrary powers. He was responsible for the procurement of food for the family through the system of jhum cultivation. On the death of the father, the power devolved not to the mother but usually to appropriate person, who like the father exercised the power in the same manner. Everything in the family belongs to the father, the mother has no share. Even the right to inheritance was reserved for paternal descendant.

Family was constituted through the institution of marriage. Marriage among them was a civil contract but the system of marriage was ‘marriage by purchase’, the price being originally varied from clans to clans; the highest being the price for girls of Sailo Chiefs. However, it also depends on the mutual agreement of both the parties whether the price is required to be paid or not. Usually marriage price was calculated in terms of mithuns. The marriage price which the Sailo’s had determined in terms of Sial (mithun), was of three kinds; (1) SepuiNghalkal (grown up mithun), (2) TlaiSial (young mithun) and Puisawmsial(a newly borhmithun). Anything could also be accepted as equivalent to sial by the father of the girl.

Polygamy is said to have existed among the Mizos but in the long run, such a practice was confined to the chiefs only. It gradually ceased to exist among the common class people and thus monogamy came to be practiced among them.

A man can divorce his wife for some reasons. The common ones being adultery, impotence, madness, etc. To divorce his wife, a man simply says, “*ka ma ache*”, which means ‘*I divorce you*’ and the woman in then divorced.

(2) Position of man:

The Mizo society was a patrilineal society. As such, the rule of descent is strictly based on the male line. All property belonged to males and they alone could inherit it. But in the absence of a male inheritor, females of the same family might be allowed to inherit property under special circumstances. The males were solely responsible for the family affairs and collected all the necessary material for construction of house from the jungle. They were also solely responsible for clearing the jungles for the jhum and to acquire the require jhumming tools. Other hard works like hunting, fishing and the alike were also done by men. In their spare time, married and old men used to visit and stay at the Zawlbuk and bachelors were engaged in courting girls and sometimes, the bachelors also

accompanied them to the jungle to collect firewood. The bachelors slept together in the Zawlbuk and were ever ready to meet any emergency.

(3) Position of women:

In the early Mizo society, the position of the women was very low. She had to look after all the household affairs but her status was insignificant. She had no right either in the family or in the society. There was a dominating role of the men folk over the women folk in the family and the society. As such, her place in the family and society was full of miseries.

From her childhood, the position of a girl is quite different from that of a boy. What is considered to be the job of a girl would not be touch even in a jest by a boy. As soon as she was capable of helping her mother, she would help her mother in all domestic works.

In the early time, a Mizo woman along with men went to the field and spent their time in the field with men during day time. At night, she had to entertain inleng (suitor), if she was a young unmarried girl of marriageable age. She also had to spin the cotton for cloth for the whole family and such women who are good in spanning the cotton were like by men for their wife. She might not go to bed till the menfolk retired. She would cook the pig's food for the next day and also could not go out without the permission of her menfolk. She hardly found leisure time.

There are many Mizo phrases and idioms indicating the low status of women in the traditional Mizo society.

1. *Hmeichcheginintuikhurral a kai lo*, meaning
Women's wit does not go beyond the water point.
2. *Hmeichhialehpalchhiachuthlaktheihanni*, meaning
Wife and old fence can be changed.
3. *Hmeichhialehchakai in sakhua an nei lo*, meaning
Women and Crabs have no religion.
4. *Chakaisa, sanisuh, Hmeichhethu, thunisuh*, meaning
Just as crab's meat is not counted as meat, so also women's word is not regarded as word.

From the above phrases, we can learn that in the traditional Mizo society, menfolk looked down upon the women and had a low opinion of them. She could be divorced or driven out of the house by her husband empty handed at any time. The prevailing custom and usages also did not allow the women to make any claim on property.

Thus, the position of the early Mizo women was very unsatisfactory. We can agree with **E.Chapman** and **M.Clark** comments on the treatment of the Mizo women in the early Mizo society which run as follows: “*A women had no right at all. Body, mind and spirit she belonged from her birth to her death, to her father and her husband. Her menfolk could treat her as they liked and a man who did not beat his wife was scorned by his friends as a coward. A woman possessed nothing not even the few clothes she wore... a women began her day’s work before dawn and continued it unceasingly until into the night*”.

Though the status of women in the traditional Mizo society was very low, they played a vital role in the family circle. She along with men folk work in the field and did all the domestic works. In the community life of the society, they also participated in the various festivals like MimKut, Pawl Kut and ChapcharKut. They also collected firewood and draw water for the family. Her presence in the family was in no way inferior to that of a man. Chatterji claims that the status of women in the Mizo society was in no way inferior to that of a man and she suffered none of those derogatory and discriminatory treatment meted out to women in some more advance society.

(4) **Inheritance:**

The Mizo word for inheritance is *Rokhawm*. In the Mizo society, son alone had a right to inherit his father’s property. A daughter has no share in it. If there is more than one son, the youngest son or *fatlum* is the formal heir of the father’s property. The youngest son is treated as the legitimate heir because he will look after his parents in their old age and lives permanently with them. In the event of the death of the youngest son, the right of inheritance would come to the next youngest son and so on. Very often, a father divided his property among his sons before he died and that was accepted by his sons. The youngest son as the formal heir gets the first choice of the articles he wants out of the estate of his father. If there is cash, the youngest son would get two shares to one share of each of his brothers. But if the youngest son failed in his duty, he cannot claim the privileges of the youngest son when the father’s property is divided up.

The law of inheritance among the Lusei chiefs and the Paite clans was quite different. Among the Paite clans, the eldest son inherits the father’s property including the ancestral home. If a man has no legitimate son to inherit his property, *hmeifaor* son by a concubine can inherit. If he have no *hmeifa*, *sawn* or illegitimate son can claim to

inherit his father's property. Again if he has none of the above, a nearest male relative among the male line only would inherit the property. Thus, in the traditional Mizo society, inheritance was only through the male line and the chances of inheritance for daughter or widow was bleak and rarely happened it.

III. VILLAGE SYSTEM:

In the early period, all the Mizo villages are built on the top of the hills most probably for health and security. They took utmost care in selecting the site for their village. For selecting the village site, a team went and slept over the proposed site for one night with a cock. If the cock crow before dawn, the site is considered to be suitable and if not, it is considered as unsuitable. After selecting the new site, the Chief's house and the Zawlbuk would be built first and then followed by others.

Every village of the Mizo in the early period was an independent unit, ruled by its chief, assisted by a number of officials who helped the chief in the discharge of his daily duties. The officials consists of the *Upas*, the *Thirdeng* (village blacksmith), the *Puithiam* (priest), and his assistant the *Tlahpawi*, *Tlangau* (village crier), the *Ramhual* and the *Khawchhiar*(village writer), the last being the British creation.

Every household in the village except the *Upas* and some of the village officials have to pay a paddy tax to the chief called *Fathang*. It was the due payable to a chief by every household of his own village or by any one from another village who cultivated his land. Besides *Fathang*, the other taxes received by the chief are *Sachhiah* (hunting due), *Chichhiah* (salt tax), *Khuaichhiah* (tax on honey), *Sechhiah*(tax on selling a mithun) and *Thachhiah* (labour tax). *Thachhiah* was a service rendered to the chief in building and repairing his house voluntarily by every household in the village. Besides the above taxes and labour services rendered by the villagers, they also paid the *Thirdengchhiah*, a due payable to a village blacksmith who made and repaired the tools of the village people.

The social and cultural life of the early Mizos is also marked by dances. The three most popular are *Cheraw*, *Khuallam* and *Chheihlam*. The last one is also known as *Zuhmun lam* as it was generally performed whenever zu drinking was held. Besides the above dances, there were other forms of dances like *Puma Zai*, *Sakei Lu Lam*, *Sarlam Kai*, *Chai*, etc.

The early Mizos had different kinds of musical instruments some of which are still used among them. Of these musical instruments, *Darkhuang*, which were mostly imported from Burma but adopted as indigenous resource had occupied an important and significant place in the Mizo society. There were two sizes, the larger one being

called Darkhuang and the smaller, Darmang. These are commonly used on the occasion of Khuangchawi feasts. Other important musical instruments includes Khuang (drum), MizoTingtang, Phenglawng, bengbung, Rawchhem, Lemlawi, Tuiumdar. Tumphit, Talhkhuang, Seki Khawn and Mau Tawtawrawt.

The Mizos in the primitive time also played games and sports. The common games played are Inbuan (wrestling), and Ritchawi (weight lifting) which are usually held at Zawlbuk. Inbuan was held regularly every evening whereas Ritchawi was done only on certain occasions. The stone used as Chawilung (stone used for weight lifting) was about 75-100 Kgs. Besides, the Mizo boys and girls also played different games like in-ulen, inkawlvawr, in buhvawr, inveilungthlak, etc. The favourite game among the boys was in Kawihnawk or Inhnawk whereas inkawi bah or inbah was played by the girls. Both boys and girls played a Khaihbu, a spinning top and Kalchhet. For both the Mizo boys and girls, inbihruksiak, hide and seek was a common game.

In the early period, the Mizo women wore a kind of skirt called Siapsuap, a small piece of broad cloth woven from the reeds or bark of tree. A man wore Hnawkhal, a cloth made of the same material as the women Siapsuap but woven in larger pieces. After they invented cotton, the men cloth was replaced by a Puanhlap, an ordinary cloth made of cotton. Later, DawlremKawl, another piece of dress was added to the women's attire. The women also used HmaramPawfen, a peticoat which was colour with various designs. The two most beautiful designs used by the Mizo women which are still popular among them are Kawppuizikzial and Lenbuangthuam. Both Mizo men and women wore ornaments in the early time. The most valuable one are SainghoBengbeh (earring made of ivory), and Thihna (amber necklace). They also kept long hair alike and used thimkual (hairpins) and Dawhkih (hair stick) made of bamboo. A headdress known as Vakiria was worn only on important occasion like Khuangchawi by Thangchhuah celebrant which was made and composed of parrot's feathers and porcupine quills inserted into a bamboo ring.

IV. SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS:

Roland De Vaux said "*Institutions are the various forms in which the social life of the people finds expression...*". Most of the social customs practices among the Mizos in the present time are survivals of the social institution in the early Mizo society. Some of the major social institutions in the early Mizo society are:

(1) Zawlbuk:

Zawlbuk, the bachelor's house or dormitory had been the most important institution in shaping and moulding the early Mizo society. It occupies a centre position in the organisation and administration of the early Mizo village

and functioned as the potent institutionalized mechanism of social control. It shaped the Mizo youths into responsible adult members of the society and also fostered and nurtured a pure and uncorrupted life among the early Mizos and contributed for the good of their society.

Zawlbuk was placed under the charge of a leader called Val-Upa who was respected in the society and was assisted by a number of lieutenants who were assigned with the charge of day to day vigilance and service of the village. The Zawlbuk inhabitants were divided into two- Tlangvals or young men and the Thingnawifawm also known as ThingfawmNaupang. To control Thingnawifawm, monitors were appointed from among the younger Tlangvals. The Thingnawifawm supplied the Zawlbuk with firewood every day and night.

As a social institution, the Zawlbuk served as sleeping place and recreational centre for unmarried as well as young married men, imparting training and taught discipline to young boys and also served as an inn for a visitor from another village. Zawlbuk was, therefore, a very powerful institution which exercised the greatest sway in establishing social norms and customs among the Mizo people.

(2) Bawi Custom:

Another important institution of the early Mizo society was the institution of Bawiship. A Bawi was an individual who was dependent upon a Lushai Chief for any reasons. According to Lewin, "*Boi (Bawi) is the term in their (Mizo) dialect, which betoken a person who has lost the right of individual freedom of action, but in all other respects the word 'slave' would be inapplicable*". Traditionally, there are three categories of Bawi in the Mizo Society, namely- InpuichhungBawi, ChemsanBawi and TukluhBawi.

The InpuichhungBawis were those who took refuge in the chief's house due to poverty or hunger, sickness and distress. Widows, orphans and others who are unable to support themselves and had none to support them formed the bulk of this category of Bawis. They were treated as part of the Chief's household and do all the Chief's work in return for their food and shelter. They were allowed to acquire private property and can purchase their freedom by paying one mithun or its equivalent in cash or goods.

The Chemsan Bawis were those criminals who, to escape from the consequences of their ill deeds took refuge in the Chiefs' house by touching the Chiefs' Sutupui (centre pillar of a house) at the expense of their own and their children's freedom. After this, no one can harm them. Only the chief can protect such criminals and if the avenger continues to make attempts of vengeance, he would be counted as enemy of the chief. Murders, debtors and thieves usually formed the bulk of this class of Bawis. Such Bawis lived in a separate house and can purchase

their freedom by the payment a she mithun, calculated as equivalent to Rs.40/-. However, such Bawis should give the marriage price of their daughter to the Chief.

The Tukluh Bawis were those who were defeated in war or raid and to save their skins, deserted their party and joined the victors. They promised that they and their descendants would obey the victorious chief and will become the chief's Bawis. Such Bawis lived in a separate house with his family and can purchase freedom by payment of a mithun or its equivalent in value to the chief. Besides the above discussed Bawis, there was another type of Bawi known as FatlumBawi. Such Bawis could not purchase his freedom and would remain as Bawi throughout his life.

The Bawi custom which evolved through the ages became a recognized institution in the early Mizo society. No one was forced to become a Bawi, instead they became a Bawi from their own free will. The children of Bawi became Bawi by birth but they can buy back his freedom. However, the British administrators did not fully understand the system which had prevailed among the Mizos before they advanced into the Lushai Hills and merely referred the system as slavery. The Bawis were not slaves in the real sense of the term. Their condition was quite different from that of a slave. They were miscall slaves only by those ignorant of their real condition.

(3) Sal:

Sal is a Mizo word for slavery. Sals are people's captures in raids and are the personal property of their captors who could be sold from one to another. As there were inter tribal feuds and inter clan feuds among the early Mizos, many people were made captive and those captives became the sal of their captors. As such, every household was entitled to keep as many Sal as it could collect. But they could be redeemed by paying a big ransom. Unlike the neighbouring state of Tripura, the number of Sal among the Mizos was very few. As a rule, the Sals were well treated by its captors.

(4) Tlawmngaihna:

Tlawmngaihna, an unwritten moral code is one of the most valued traits of the early Mizos. The word has no exact equivalent in English. It means to be unselfish, courteous, consideration, courageous, industrious, kind, generous, persevering and in short; it means all good qualities of life. A person who possesses Tlawmnhaihna must always be ready to help others even at considerable inconvenience to himself, and must try to surpass others in doing his ordinary daily tasks efficiently. In theory, Tlawmngaihna should enter into every compartment of Mizo life. Those who possess Tlawmnhaihna did not go unrewarded. He was honoured at a special function in

which he was offered rice beer in a cup called Tlawmngai No, usually made of the biggest Horn. As a mark of honour and felicitation, he was offered the first drink, followed by the Chief and then by the rest. That No (cup) was the highest Award ever presented to a meritorious person among the early Mizos.

V. ECONOMIC LIFE:

In the early period, the Mizos were agriculturist. They cultivated their land by jhumming method. Millet, maize, arum-bulk, gums, sweet-potatoes, etc are their staple food before rice was cultivated. Traditions say that rice was first cultivated by the Mizos only when they came to a settlement at Lentlang or the present Chin Hills of Burma. In course of time, they also grew cotton and developed the art of spinning and weaving. They also dyed their clothes by using indigo grown in the locality. With other crops, they also cultivated tobacco for local consumption.

In their economic life, domestic animals like mithuns, pig, dog, chicken and goat played a very important part. Apart from being important source of food, they were used for sacrifices and ceremonies. Among the domestic animals, mithun played a very important part in the economic life of the early Mizos. Apart from being important source of food and used in rituals, it was used as the marriage price of a girl. It was also used for exchanging the captives and other valuable properties. Its skin was also used for shields. A man's wealth was also judged by the number of mithuns he possessed.

The early Mizos also practiced hunting. Their favourite game was the wild elephant which were hunted for their tusks and meat for food. They also killed other animals and birds for food. To supplement these animals and birds, they also catch fish.

The Mizos in the primitive period carried out raids to loot and to get slaves which in turn brought wealth to the family. These slaves were employed for economic works to work in the jhums or domestic work. In return, the slaves brought wealth in the form of increased labour power to their owner.

Another aspect of the economic life of the early Mizos was Hnatlang or community work. In the village, the weaker sections of the people were uplifted by this system. The chief's house and the Zawlbuk are built by hnatlang. Cleaning of the village spring, making of inter village path and jhum path are done by the local people through this system.

The Mizos also practiced trade through barter system in the early time. However, their economic life was disrupted by the coming of the British in the Hills when they introduced currency and the subsequent establishment of trade centres at different places in Mizoram.

VI. KUT (FESTIVALS):

The exact origin of Kut, a Mizo word for 'Festival' was lost in oblivion. Some believed that it had its origin from Thlanrawkpa, a famous Mizo legendary originator of feast when he performed the Khuangchawi feast before the Mizos entered Burma. There are three kinds of Kuts:-MimKut, Pawl Kut and ChapcharKut.

(1) *MimKut:*

This Kut was held in honour of the dead when the first crops other paddy in the field was ready for reaping. It was also known as 'Tahna' Kut which means 'feast of weeping'. In this Kut, offerings were made to the dead ones. It was sometimes called 'MithiKut', meaning 'festival of dead'. It is said that this Kut had originated from the legendary lovers, Tlingi and Ngama. It lasted for 3 days.

(2) *Pawl Kut:*

The word 'Pawl' means straw. This Kut was observed soon after the harvest was over. Everyone was presumed to have completed his harvest and gathered his crops when this festival is celebrated. After this festival, none can claim to any crop left over in his field. This Kut was meant for children only although the adults freely took part in it. The main event of this Kut was *Chhawngnawt*. This Kut lasted for a day.

(3) *ChapcharKut:*

It is a festival celebrated with great pomp for 4 days. It is a spring festival, celebrated just after cutting of the jhum land. To celebrate this festival, the villagers prepared rice beer and the men folk went for hunting. The main important events of the feast were Chhawngnawt, which was performed in the evening of the third day and the Chai, a traditional Mizo dance, performed by both men and women in the evening of the 4th day. As this festival was their happiest occasion in their social life, all the Mizos looked forward to the advent of this festival with great eagerness. No squabble was permitted in the family nor did the couples shall quarrels during the festival. It was also a common belief among the Mizos that anyone going into the jungles on these days would be devoured by a tiger. Therefore, all should observe public holiday.

VII. RELIGIOUS BELIEF:

‘Sakhua’ is the Mizo word for Religion. Most writers described the Mizo religion as animism. A.G.McCall said, “*Before the occupation of their land by the British, the Lushais were wholly animists*”. The Mizos believed that the world in which they lived was full of spirits which were responsible for the illness and misfortunes and can be appeased by sacrifices. They were always afraid to angry the evil spirit, they offered sacrifices very frequently to the evil spirit to appeased them. However, it must be understood that the Mizos did not worship these evil spirits or demons. They only wanted to propitiate them as they were believed to be the causes of their illness and injuries.

The primitive Mizos believed in the existence of one ‘Supreme Being’ whom they called Pathian, who created the universe. It is believed that he lived somewhere above and as such called ‘Chung Pathian’. They also believed in the existence of numerous subordinate good spirits like PuVana, Vanchung Nula, Khuanu, Khuavang, Lasi and Vanhrika. The term ‘Khuanu’ (mother of nature) was still used as a synonym with Pathian particularly in song and poetry.

The primitive Mizos also worships their ancestors. This was done in the Mithirawplam. It was a feast performed with dance in honour of the spirit of the ancestors.

The primitive Mizos also believed in the existence of life after death. They believed in the presence of Mithikhua (dead men’s village) and pialral (paradise) which were the two places of abodes after death. One had to go either of the two. Pialral was meant only for those who earned the Thangchhuah title during their life time with their wives. Life there was full of luxury, plenty to eat and no work to do. On the other hand, all the dead excepting those who can go to pialral go to mithikhua, where life is dull and colourless, a shadowy existence.

There are two ways of earning the Thangchhuah title - the first one is by giving a series of feast to the public, numbering seven or eight which involved considerable expenses. After giving all these feasts, one can attain the Thangchhuah title which is known as an Inlama Thangchhuah. The second way of earning the Thangchhuah title was to kill a number of prescribed wild animals such as elephant, bear, wild bison, stag, barking deer and wild boar. Besides these, a viper, an eager and a flying lemur are to be killed. If a man killed all these animals, he qualified himself for another type of Thangchhuah title known as Ram Lama Thangchhuah.

Thus, Thangchhuah was the most coveted goals which every Mizo longed to perform and it was the highest possible achievements and honour in the old Mizo society. It was this title which was a passport to enter Pialral which was the main aim of the Mizos. This title also suggests the Mizo's concern about life beyond the grave.

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