

**MZU JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND CULTURAL
STUDIES**
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Volume 1 Issue 1

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Foreword

The MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies published by the DRS/SAP supported Department of English, Mizoram University is the outcome of the guidance given by the first Advisory Board of the DRS/SAP which sat on 25th February 2012. Though the initial prompting had been to start with a volume/book, the Department eventually opted for an annual journal that would be a continuous reflection of its research findings in the thrust areas of the programme entitled “Emerging Literatures of Northeast India.” The thrust areas include the development of literary genre forms as well as the cross-cultural comparative study of literature of the region as per findings of the project.

The Department is hopeful that it will eventually achieve its aspiration of attaining the status of Centre of Advanced Study under the UGC Special Assistance Programme (SAP) after completing its current level of Departmental Research Support (DRS) April 2011-March 2016, and the next level called Department of Special Assistance (DSA).

Prof. Margaret Ch. Zama
Coordinator, DRS/SAP

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EDITORIAL

Margaret L. Pachuau

The Department of English, Mizoram University is proud to publish its first annual refereed journal, entitled, *MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies*. The focus of this journal has especially been centred in terms of well researched articles that dwell upon the various tribes that inhabit India's northeast. In doing so, the very significant notion of emergent literatures in terms of tracing identity, cultural ethos and sensibility has been aptly portrayed by Margaret Ch. Zama, S.D. Baral, K.C. Lalthlamuani, Bibhash Choudhury, Margaret L. Pachuau, Cherrie L. Chhange, Kristina Zama and Lalthansangi Ralte within this issue.

Apart from the research articles, there has been a rich input in terms of creative writing, once again from India's northeast. Poets and writers such as Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mitra Phukan, T. Bijoy Singh, Mamang Dai and Lalrinmawii Khiangte, have attempted to denote the significance of life in all its myriad connotations, even as their creative zeal has been enthusiastic and deeply in recognition of a sense of identity in literatures that are well and truly novel.

It is our hope, as a department, that this journal will seek to establish the fundamental uniqueness of a literature that may perhaps be, at the time of writing, seemingly emergent and in the process, attempt to situate a literary sensibility that has been predominantly deemed as peripheral, to a more coherent centre.

Feasting Culture : the Morphing of Feasts of Merit

Margaret Ch. Zama

(Feasting culture does not appear to be a unique feature of a particular tribe, but a common practice of several early societies, or whom anthropologists would refer to as primitive cultures. The reasons for such a phenomenon are many thus giving rise to a fascinating field of study sometimes referred to as the anthropology of food. This paper hypothesizes on a theoretical premise that feasts of merit as practiced by several so called primitive cultures may now be obsolete but that, with the imbibing of new ideologies and the influence of new world-views, has morphed into a new strain in keeping with new belief systems. As a case in point, a study is also made here to examine the early Mizo practice of feasts of merit to attain thangchhuah status that assured one an entry into pialral (paradise), morphing into a Christianized chawimawina (glorification of God) that is fast gaining currency today. It is hoped that this angle of study will open up future debates and the examination of several other early traditional practices that now find legitimization as it were, by catering to the demands of a new belief system while maintaining a nostalgic link with an old way of life now beyond recall).

Prior to looking into the merits of the hypothesis mooted above, an overview is attempted here to examine the feasting culture as practiced in the past, and present, by some cultures other than those of the Mizo, to help establish the context of the subject. (Mizo is used here as a generic / inclusive term to refer to all kindred tribes claiming common Zo descent).

Feasting culture and feasts of merit per se, when studied in its various forms as practiced by different cultures, proves to be a fascinating concept that appears to have evolved from ancient times and now undergone adaptations in some cases, to current contexts in order to justify its continuity and relevance. The Naga tribes have long practiced it as one of their most conspicuous and important features of fertility rites, relating both symbolically and practically to life and prosperity. By giving feasts of merit, a feast giver's status rises, ensuring he will be remembered after death. Feasts of merit are normally performed in seven stages, a practice similar to that of the Mizo. Each successive stage is more exacting than the previous stage in the number of mithuns (a type of buffalo/ also spelt as mithan) sacrificed and the quantity of food and drink to be served. Each completed stage entitles the feast giver to show his status through certain ornaments, a headgear with hornbill feathers, clothes or house carvings.

It is the highest honour for one to be able to host a feast of merit for the whole village. The person has to give away his wealth, keeping only the bare minimum like a small house, farming equipment and a pair of mithuns for his farm work. When a person completes all seven such feasts of merit, he is eligible to build a

pheku or village meeting place and have it named after him. It is said that a person who succeeds in building five *phekus* can have his own fishing tank and no one can fish there without his permission. In other words, he influences the village economy directly (The Hindu 3). The feasts of merit of the Nagas are thus not an assertion against social competitors as is seen with some practitioners elsewhere, but a means of gaining certain recognized ranks in the society.

Feasts of merit though frowned upon and disapproved of by early Christian missionaries who entered the hilly tribal regions, in fact had important societal and economic functions. Giving feasts of merit had, and still has, an important social function, and is seen as far from being unchristian for it performs social reciprocation that manifests generosity, compassion, social concern and responsibility. Such practices are also seen to enhance social cohesiveness and communitarian feeling.

Lars Krutak in his study on tattoos of Indochina, makes mention of the Chin of Myanmar who, like their Theravada Buddhist counterparts across Indochina, also held great feasts and performed animistic sacrifices to “make merit.” Instead of offering earthly goods to Buddha to ensure positive karma, the Chin attempted to gain status in the present world and in the afterlife by appeasing their household (ancestral) and village spirits with ritualistic offerings. These feasts of merit were held to not only benefit the hosts of the party, but also their family and ancestors. At the same time these gatherings enhanced the status of the household through the display and redistribution of goods (eg household goods and food,

especially mithan meat) and were believed to contribute to fertility. The mithun, a kind of buffalo, is considered to be the most valuable possession of the Chin, and a person's wealth is determined by the number owned. Any feast of merit or other celebratory feast, like those held for large harvests or the killing of a large animal (eg tiger or elephant) required the sacrifice of at least one mithan because the spirits accorded them with the highest sacrificial value (1-2).

In his study on food chains and the whole accompanying concept of feasting commensality amongst the Minahasa people of Indonesia, Gabriele Weichart points out that the preparation, distribution and consumption of food play prominent roles in their feasting culture. It encompasses notions of sharing, community and equality, and is used as an invitation and encouragement for guests to participate in the communal meal. The Christian ideal of an all-inclusive commensality (sharing a table, a fellowship at table) which involves eating the same food at the same time and place, cooked in the same hearth, is a sign of being and becoming similar, of being connected, being kin. Offering and accepting food establishes or reaffirms relationships between two or more persons and what becomes effective is the popular wisdom that "sameness creates sameness" (15). In other words, doing the same and being treated in the same way leads to the conclusion that all persons actually are the same, in time and space. Eating the same kind of food at the same time and place adds to this image.

This whole notion of commensality is repeatedly emphasized at feasts of the Minahasa, and most fully realized at informal picnic-style gatherings where food givers and receivers are largely identical

and social differences and hierarchies become blurred or are even denied. By extension it can also be said that according to the Christian tradition, the classical example of commensality and the sharing of food and drink is the Last Supper of Jesus, which is re-celebrated in the Eucharistic ritual – this being one amongst a vast number of theological descriptions and interpretations of the Eucharist. Ironically though, commensality is not offered indiscriminately and is not all-encompassing at large banquets like wedding feasts. These practices reflect temporary or permanent differences in social positions, status and relationships. At such feasts, the hosts' ambition to enhance their prestige by ostentatiously demonstrating wealth and generosity is in competition with the community's egalitarian values of uniformity and integration (Weichart 1-2).

Similar to the Mizo Christian practice, what unifies most events of the Minahasa people is the presence of the church. The many church groups and their leaders are themselves the organizers of many public feasts. The church also plays a role in other social (including private) events, in the community and sometimes even beyond. The church keeps a watchful eye on them. In short, there is hardly any feast or other social event without at least one representative of a church being present in an official capacity. His/her duties may range from a simple prayer before the meal to a religious service (*ibadah*) of 20-30 minutes (ibid 4).

The fact that Minahasa society is traditionally based on egalitarian structures and values becomes a factor which facilitated the discourse and implementation of such Christian ideals as

commensality explained earlier. However, the absence of hereditary hierarchies does not necessarily imply the absence of other social and economic differences, and it has been well documented that competition and individual ambition were as much part of traditional Minahasa society as they are today after conversion. The institution of big feasts sponsored by wealthy individuals or families can be seen as a continuation of the traditional practices of *foso*, the feasts of merit where the hosts would accumulate prestige and achieve a higher status, even after death, through the redistribution and destruction of consumables (Schouten 1995 as referred to by Weichart 15). Feasts, particularly wedding feasts, have been described as important venues of alliance and solidarity but also of distinction and competition among participants as well as between hosts and guests. The building or reinforcement of social relations and the prospect to enhance one's social status are strong motivations for organizing and attending lavish feasts, especially in small-scale "egalitarian" societies (Weichart 2).

So despite the egalitarian and communitarian ethos that is emphasized in contexts of commensality of feasts of merit, it can be seen that social hierarchies and differences are often intentionally made visible. Wedding feasts are particular venues where the collective desire for uniformity and equality conflicts with the individual desire for distinction. Thus it can be seen that an ambiguous position arises wherein wedding feasts become venues of both competition and equality.

A paper prepared for the Costen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA Meeting on : Pathways to Complexity, 7-8 November

2003, entitled “Who Benefits? The View from Futuna” by Brian Hayden and Suzanne Villeneuve claims that material benefits from “feasts of merit” in which the wealthy gave away their surpluses to achieve village respect or honor from the gods, in reality only served to reveal inequalities within these “egalitarian” and chiefdom societies. They pointed out that it was in fact a sham, and used only to keep people from becoming too excessive in their quest for power and material. Thus, (the paper continues) the term, “transegalitarian societies” was used by Hayden to refer to societies where private property dominated and where there were significant socioeconomic inequalities between families. These were societies between truly egalitarian foragers on the one hand and chiefdoms with stratified classes on the other hand, wherein feasts and other strategies were used to create and sustain their factional support.

Both Hayden and Villeneuve in their Preliminary Report on Feasting in Futuna, describe feasts as a visual representation of a social group, and a demonstration that the social group is based on rules and on agents necessary for order. Feasts also display to everyone the social position and power of individuals. They are thus main arenas for the playing out of rivalries between both social groups and individuals. Food gifts establish, maintain, and restore the social order when it is disrupted by changes in status (births, maturity, marriage, death, disputes, political or military contests) (25).

A brief study of the *potlatch* or ceremonial feast practiced among some Native Americans (Nootka and Kwakwaka'wakw tribes) of the NW Pacific region reveals even more fascinating aspects to the study on feasts of merit. The traditional potlatch is considered

the ultimate manifestation of the principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive, for one is eventually repaid most generously by guests who are expected to return the favour. This is often carried out in a competitive spirit to outdo the other. It entailed conspicuous consumption of food and public distribution of property to invited guests. The *potlatch* ceremony also involved dancing and ritual oratorical boasting often lasting for several days. In return, the host was accorded prestige and status and the assertion of position established particularly in cases of *potlatch* given by an heir or successor, or an aspirant to chieftainship. It also usually marked a rite of passage such as a birth, wedding, funeral, or a naming or elevation to a noble title.

This tradition has been of particular interest to anthropologists for the light it shed on the nature of property, wealth, prestige and social status. Various theories have been proposed to account for this seemingly irrational ritual. While the nature of emphasis varies from group to group and transformed through course of time, the potlatch was clearly the fundamental means of circulating food and other goods amongst groups, validating positions, and establishing and maintaining warfare and defense alliances. It was in effect a system for redistribution and reciprocity of wealth for large accumulated surpluses of foodstuffs in which a few wealthy and powerful individuals controlled the redistribution as a means of gaining power and prestige. Under such conditions, the potlatch came to serve as a means by which aspiring individuals validated often tenuous claims of high rank, increasingly, through the ostentatious destruction of property.

Eventually both the US and Canadian governments outlawed the *potlatch* practice in 1884 largely at the urging of missionaries and government officials who considered it “a worse than useless custom” that was seen as wasteful and unproductive, and not part of “civilized” values (G.M.Sproat, quoted in Douglas Cole and Ira Chalkin, 15). The ban on *potlatch* was unsuccessful for it continued covertly, and finally lifted in 1951, by which time the ceremonies no longer involved property destruction. Sustaining the customs and culture of their ancestors, indigenous people now openly and increasingly hold *potlatch* to commit to the restoring of the ways of their ancestors.

From the above random study of feasts of merit and culture related to food as practiced by diverse peoples, we can see that despite surface differences in carrying out such feasts, there is the presence of two constant motives, though not necessarily paired together in all of the cases – the deep-seated desire firstly of ensuring continuity among the power elite, and secondly, to gain prestige in the now and hereafter.

Feasts of merit as practiced by the Mizo is best explicated as a series of prolonged communal feasts and rituals to be fulfilled in several stages over a period of time, resulting in the final attainment for an individual, of the most coveted and honourable of titles among the Mizo – the title of *thangchhuah*. In the old days a wealthy man was one blessed with abundant harvests and rich in cattle and domestic animals which he shared with the entire community, through these feasts. It was a feat aspired to by many but attained only by a few.

There were two ways of attaining the title. One was called *ramlama thangchhuah* or *thangchhuah* title obtained from the wild, which could be aspired to only by great hunters who had to kill a certain number of wild animals such as wild boar, deer, bear, sambar deer and mithun. If one could add the elephant, a venomous viper snake, a hawk and a flying lemur (Lorrain 539) to the list, all the better. But each of these kills had to compulsorily be followed by the ritual of *ai*. This is an old tradition of sacrificing a domestic animal and performing a ceremony over or for a wild animal killed in hunting or a foe killed in fighting. This is done with a view to getting the spirit of the slain into the power of the slayer after death, and also to protecting him from evil consequences during this lifetime (ibid 4). All of this each time ensured a community feast.

The other was called *inlama thangchhuah*, a title aspired to by the wealthy (wealthy in terms of grain and domestic animals as mentioned earlier) which could be attained only on completion of a series of public feasts of merit given over a period of time. Out of the seven stages or series of feasts of merit, the 6th called *khuangchawi* was the grandest and most elaborate which finally entitled a person to be bestowed with the *thangchhuah* title. For the *khuangchawi* alone, one had to at the least slaughter not less than two full grown male mithan bulls, a full-grown female mithan cow and two male pigs. Apart from this, the preparations for the brewing of sufficient rice beer, collection of firewood, accompanying rituals and dances, the involvement of the young men and women of the village – all of this required a minimum period of three months. On the day of the main public feast, the *khuangchawi* family would

be carried and twirled around in the village square on a strong bamboo platform built for the purpose, and the family would distribute precious items and goods by tossing them at the crowd who would jostle to catch them. This can be seen as a distribution and sharing of excess wealth similar to some of the other practices of feasts of merit mentioned earlier. Gifts such as mithans and guns were represented by a short twisted rope and wooden gun respectively, with which the real gifts were later claimed from the *thangchhuahpa*.

The 7th stage called *zau dawh* was when one completed the entire cycle of the 6 stages thrice. It was a rare achievement that gave one the privilege of erecting a wide *leihkapui* or platform enclosed by a few feet height-wise in the village square which provided space, among other things, for young girls to do their weaving while young men came to court them. It was never considered an encumbrance or encroachment of public space by the village community but rather seen as a marker of special status for the village as a whole.

The main reasons to aspiring for the *thangchhuah* title were :

1. To go to *Pialral* in the afterlife where they will live a life of peace and leisure, fed on ready husked rice forever.
2. To be persons of renown and great prestige during their lifetime, favoured by their chiefs and respected by all.
3. So that Pawla would not harass them on their way to *Pialral* in the afterlife. Pawla was believed to be the guardian of the road and entry square that all dead souls had to pass through on their way to the afterlife. His weapon was a catapult and

oversized pellets targeted at all who passed by, and resulting in huge painful boils that covered the body which often required as long as three years to recover. Only the *thangchhuhpa* was spared and duly acknowledged with respect and awe by Pawla. It was believed that all the animals slaughtered by the *thangchhuhpa* during his lifetime escorted him on his journey to *pialral* which proved to be a grand and awesome sight to the beholder.

As mentioned at the start, this paper hypothesizes on a theoretical premise that feasts of merit practiced by some earlier cultures may now be obsolete, but how with the imbibing of new ideologies and the influence of new world-views, is capable of morphing into a new strain in keeping with new belief systems. In this context, what makes interesting study is the morphing of the feasts of merit as earlier practiced by the Mizo prior to conversion, into a Christianized *chawimawina* (glorification of God) that is fast gaining ground. One of the key basis for this hypothesis is my recent study of feasts given by a church member of the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) claiming divine promptings (see Reference 11). The practice of giving such feasts was already reflected from the early days of the UPC history in Mizoram, the actual date of its establishment in the then district being February 18th, 1950.

Pathian chawimawina (Glorification of God), now more often referred to as *Lawmthu sawina* (Thanksgiving), is a religious community feast that can continue for several days depending as claimed, on the continued workings of the Holy Spirit. The

participants of the feast are members of the denomination who are invited from far and near. Though there is no hard and fast rule about the kind of animal(s) to be slaughtered, it is usually a pig, cow or buffalo which are either owned by the giver of the feast or purchased. The reasons for giving such feasts is not very complex – the most common being that a church member claims to receive urging and promptings from the Holy Spirit followed by a public declaration at a church gathering or at another such gathering for a feast. Often the unspoken compulsion to obey the voice was out of fear of God in the belief that if not responded to, it may not bode well for the family concerned. Sometimes the reasons can also be to celebrate or give thanks for blessings received.

The established practice of procedure for the conduct of such feasts is to first report to the sectional pastor of their church, which is then put up to the Church Board for finalization of dates and other preparations as the church becomes an active participant. But there is no hard and fast rule here as a family can inform their local church and take up the rest of the responsibility. Often other considerations enter in some cases wherein an outsider declares having received divine promptings on behalf of a particular family to give a feast, and if not fulfilled, will call down God's wrath. Whatever the motives, such deviations are not looked upon favourably by the church authorities (though not in an obvious way), and who consistently caution their followers to only heed the true voice received from within and not be swayed by external emotions or compulsiveness.

There are some peculiar features seen in this practice of religious community feast when compared to the secular feasts of merit already made mention of. It is not necessary for a person or family to be outstanding or well-to-do to give such a feast, for it is reasoned that even the poor and unknown can receive the voice of the spirit. There is, no distribution of gifts involved and the focus of the gathering is singing praises to God to the accompaniment of drums and dancing, often in a trance by some members, for a period of time depending on factors such as the continued spiritual promptings mentioned before that therefore demands a public declaration. This often leads to a chain of declarations by others and thus such feasts can even run into days or in rare cases even weeks given by different families.

Viewed objectively, theorizing and interpreting the reasons for the transformation or morphing of such feasts from the secular to the religious or spiritual, can be many. One view is the acceptance that it is indeed the unquestioned spiritual promptings received as claimed by the receiver. It can also be interpreted in terms of the deep seated desire to satisfy and continue the innate Mizo characteristic or *mizoneess* for communitarian living inherited from the forefathers, the compulsion of tradition from the remote past and the nostalgic clinging on to what one perceives as a unique feature of Mizo tribal identity. This obviously takes us into the realms of politics of identity. We have already seen the political nature of the re-nurturing of the *potlatch* tradition by some of the Native American tribes – it is one of the processes of restoration of the traditions of their ancestors and continues to be secular in nature.

These are just some instances of cases wherein very old cultural practices can be conveniently morphed to current contexts in order to justify and legitimize its continuity and relevance.

In any case, giving feasts of merit had in the past, and still has in the present, an important social function which is, a bringing together of people for purposes of solidarity and networking whether social, economic or religious, and more importantly, as a means of gaining certain recognized ranks in the respective group or community. Indeed the hosts of such feasts accumulate prestige and achieve a higher status. So it can be seen that though the names of deities and ceremonies may have changed yet their roles and functions as rituals and feasts have basically remained the same.

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Profile of the Hmar People

S.D.Baral & K.C.Lalthlamuani

The northern parts of Mizoram and the adjoining parts of Manipur state are the dwelling place of a big clan called the ‘Hmars’. The word ‘*Hmar*’ is a word to denote direction. *Hmar* means ‘north’ in Mizo language, the use of ‘*Hmar*’ as a name of a clan was started by the Lusei people. The Luseis used to call the earlier migrants into Mizoram who moved northwards due to the pressure from the Luseis as ‘*Hmar*’, it consists of 24 clans and 211 sub clans (Sen, 78). The 24 clans are Lawitlang (Hrangchal), Zote, Ngurte, Khawbung, Pakhuang, Darngawn, Banzang, Hmar Lusei, Sakiem, Rawite, Vaiphei, Ngente, Lungtau, Punte, Faihriem, Leiri, Khawlhiring, Vangchhia, Thiak, Hrangkhawl, Biate, Changsan, Zawngte and Darlawng(Lalrinawma., 28). The Hmars are a cognate clan of the Mizo tribe and they migrated together to the present Mizoram from the eastern side. Like the Mizos, they also belong to the Tibeto Burman stock (Chatterjee, 387). The list of Hmar sub-groups suggest that Hmar and Lusei are closely knitted together and that some groups belong to both clans, they inhabited mainly the northern part of Aizawl district of Mizoram. Many of them are residing in Churachandpur District of Manipur. Some of them are living in Assam and Tripura. When looking at the writings of the historians, the Hmars are not a separate clan from the Luseis or Mizos. H. Lalrinawma states that “Before 1500 A.D the Lusei and

the Hmars as a whole are collectively known as the Hmar or Mar.” (Lalrinawma, 101). They are known as a different clan from the Luseis because of their earlier migration. Many villages of Mizoram especially of the northern parts are coined after the name of their sub-clans the names of the villages like *Khawbung*, *Khawzawl*, *Biате*, *Ngurte*, *Chhungte*, *Zote*, *Neihdawn*, *Tualte*, *Chawnchhim*, *Vankal*, *Darngawn*, *Thiak*, *Kangbur* are the name of the Hmar clans or sub-clans (Lalthangliana, 180).

However, some account for identifying a people as the Hmars based on their origin stories. According to the Hmar tradition, there were once two brothers, namely, Hrum sawm and Tukbemsawm, the elder one, used to tie in a knot on his forehead, because of a sore on the nape of his neck. After his death, all his descendents followed the same hairstyle, and the Pawis, who live in South Mizoram, are believed to be the progeny of Hrum sawm. The young brother Tukbesawm however tied his hair in a knot on the back of his head. The Hmars who continued Tukbemsawm’s hairstyle, are believed to be the descendants of Tukbemsawm (Sonate 1976). Further, some identify the Hmar (meaning “north”) by ascribing to their settlement north of the Lusai Hills.

To study and understand the literature of any people, it is necessary to possess a proper knowledge of the religious, social, economic and political background of that community. The fragmented pieces of literary expressions collected from memory sources which were transmitted from parents to children during those long spans of barbaric life of the Hmars clearly testify to the richness

of the oral Hmar literature. The most unfortunate thing with the Hmars is that they did not have letters (signs or symbols) to put their creative literary activities into written forms. The Hmars up-till date have not yet had many written literature worth the name.

The Hmars are the earlier migrants into the present state of Mizoram, migrated prior to the mainstream of the Mizos known as Luseis. Most of the historians of the Mizos are agreed on the earlier migration of the Hmars to the west. In the book entitled "*A history of the Mizos*" the authors traced the causes of mass migration of the people, pointing out that all the migrations of tribes took place for one or more reasons (Vergheese & Thanzawna, 82).

For the Hmars, the reason for their migration could be traced to the attack by stronger tribes or armies who were more powerful or better equipped. While in 1200 AD the Mizos were in the Kabaw valley and there was no difference between the Hmars or the Luseis, they were superseded by the powerful Shan clans and were forced to migrate to the Chin Hills. They migrated gradually westward and according to B. Lalthangliana the Hmar clans crossed the Tiau River to reach the hilly areas of Mizoram by the year 1600 A.D (Lalthangliana, 180). After a short period of the Hmars migration, the Luseis also migrated westward and their migration was a beginning for the Hmars to move in the northern parts of their habitat. The migration of the Luseis into the present Mizoram had begun in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The last batch of people who claimed themselves to be Lusei, came to Mizoram in the beginning of the seventeenth century A.D. In comparison with the other group of earlier immigrants, the Lushai groups were stronger

and superior with their powerful chiefs. They were the subject of fear of the contemporaneous tribal groups such as old and new Kuki who fled to the west and north of Mizoram (The term Kuki is a Bengali language meaning wild man. In Tripura they are later known and called as Halam under which there are as many as nineteen clans. These people are known as old Kuki to the British, while the new kuki are Thado, Changsen etc. The new Kuki moved out from Burma to Manipur, Mizoram and Cachar Hills of Assam.). The Hmars are included under the umbrella of old Kuki. It is clear that the dwelling place of the Hmars in the north and the adjacent states was the result of the Luseis late migration to the present habitat. Rev. Liangkhaia also remarked that “They (The Hmars) are the early dwellers (of Mizoram) They were scared of the migrated Luseis and then moved northward receiving their name Hmar.”(Liangkhaia, 21&22). The migrated Hmars to the north went deeper and some had reached Meghalaya state. However, some of them have been settled in Cachar and North Cachar Hills of Assam and also in Tripura. But, the biggest stream of the Hmars settled in Manipur and it is the state where majority of the Hmars could be found.

In Mizoram, the Hmars constituted a sizeable population. By the year 1880, it was estimated that 2,000 Hmars lived in Mizoram. Their population had crossed 10,411 in 1901 census and in 1981 census of India the Hmars in Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram numbers 34,852. The Hmars in Mizoram alone constituted a population of 13,102 in the same census. The Bible Society of India (BSI) estimated that 45,000 Bibles need to be printed for the whole population of the Hmars (Lathangliana, 180).

From their genealogical study, historians mostly conclude that the Hmars are not a completely different clan from the Mizos. They were somehow linked with the Mizos. Meanwhile, the Hmars themselves claim that they were historically and culturally different from other tribes of Mizoram. Having a distinct language, they are highly literate people and have their own literary society which has been started in 1921. Their first text book came out in 1944 which was published in Hmar language but written in Roman Script.

The Hmars have 24 clans and 211 sub-clans. Generally each of these clans resides in a particular area, and many of the villages are known by the names of the clans of its inhabitants. Traditionally, each clan had a dialect of its own but a common dialect for all (Hmar) has developed among them. The missionary influence is responsible for the development of the common dialect. Before the acceptance of Christianity, the clans were exogamous. Now this is not strictly adhered to. A Hmar can marry any woman except a consanguineous kin. Traditionally marriage with the mother's brother's daughter was preferred. The age of marriage is eighteen years for a girl and twenty one years for a boy. At present the Hmar are monogamous. In olden days, a chief desired to marry another chief's daughters. Generally four types of marriages are there. These are marriage by service, elopement, intrusion and arrangement or negotiation. The amount of bride price ranges from Rs. 300 to Rs 500. The amount is divided among the kin of the bride's family. The major share goes to the bride's father and smaller amounts are given to the paternal and maternal relatives. The rule of residence after marriage is patrilocal. In case the girl seeks a

divorce, she has to persuade her parents to agree to refund the bride price which they have received, in case the boy seeks a divorce, and he simply gives a sum of Rs. 40 to the girl. The bride price paid by the boy is forfeited if the divorce is initiated by the boy. A widower and divorcee can remarry. Nowadays, they are expected to take remarriage license from the Church.

The Hmars are a patrilineal society, the father is the head of the family and his authority is obeyed. He represents the family in all public meetings, directs the family affairs and provides food for every member. The mother's chief duty is to look after the home. Though the Hmar traditionally follow an extended family pattern, the number of nuclear families appears to be increasing at present.

The general rule of inheritance is *ultimo-geniture* i.e. the youngest son inherits all property as he is supposed to look after his parents even after his marriage and he does not build his separate house after his marriage. The other sons can expect at least a portion of the property. Women are not allowed to inherit any property. Succession of family office is *patri-potestal* i.e. the eldest son becomes the head of the family after the death of the father. The status of women is subordinate to that of men. Nowadays, the educated and employed women have equal status as that of men in the economic spheres. The women do not inherit paternal property. Women participate in all the economic activities including collection of fuel from the jungle. They also join in all social and religious activities.

It seems, the Hmars' pre-Christian life and belief are roughly identical with the Mizos' -oral in form and characteristics. They

had a number of songs and verses to be sung, chanted and recited at certain places and on specific occasions. The Hmars believed like the Mizos in mithikhuo (village of the dead), Pielral (beyond the river of death), and Vanram (heaven or sky kingdom). It is well known that the Hmars, Kukis, and Mizos had close affinities in socio-cultural terms, though they often resorted to inter-tribal wars before Christianity calmed their spirits. There is an interesting legend, which says that the Hmar has his script, and God (Pathien) had given him a parchment of letters. However, the Hmar was drunk with rice beer, and a neighbor stole away the parchment from him. But in 1910, with conversion into Christianity, the Hmar realized his original ownership of the skin letter.

The Hmars still treasure their traditional arts, including folk dance, folk songs, handicrafts, representing scenes of adventure, battle, love, victory, and other experiences throughout history. Christianity was successfully introduced to the Hmars in South Manipur in the year 1910 by Watkin Roberts, a Welsh missionary.

Hmar Literature, was born only after the advent of Christianity in the Hmar dominated area of Manipur, i.e., at Senvawn in 1910. The Hmars of Manipur are exposed to the world of modern education only after their conversion to Christianity, and they began to learn how to read and write only in the early part of the 20th Century, i.e., only after 1910. The Hmars started their writings by adopting the Lushai Alphabet, which was developed from simple Roman Script to reduce the Lushai language into written form in 1894 by Rev. James Herbert Lorrain and Rev. F.W. Savidge, the

pioneer Christian missionaries of Lushai Hills. There is a close affinity in the Hmar and Lushai languages. The Lushai Alphabet was used for reducing the Hmar language into written form.

After their exposure to modern education, the Hmars began to put into record some of their folklores, folktales and folksongs which their forefathers used to pass down from generation to generation through words of mouth. The Hmars did not possess any form of letters to represent their spoken language before the advent of Christianity in their area is absolutely undeniable. It was only in the early part of the 20th Century that letters to represent their spoken language was introduced. Before that they could not reduce or convert their thoughts and emotions to writings. This, however, does not mean that they did not put to record any of the valuable events and memorable experiences of their life. Though devoid of letters of their own to translate their feelings and impressions of life into written records, Nature equipped them with powerful feelings and sharp memories through which their likes and dislikes, their joys and sorrows and some of their memorable adventures and experiences of life, narrated in lucid verse forms were safely stored in the unique boxes of their memory. These terse and epigrammatic verses, stored-up in their memory-boxes were orally transmitted by parents to their children from generation to generation. This oral transmission of the so-called literary activities accomplished by the Hmars was possible only because of their skill to tell many things with little expressions making effective use of verses. Using this genre, the sweet and bitter experiences, the marvelous adventures and impressions of life, and the reactions of

the Hmars to the messages of nature, etc., were beautifully, lucidly and but tersely related. Thus, verse is the most important vehicle to convey the minds of the Hmars at work from time to time.

The fact that the Hmars have a poetic bent of mind is clearly proved by the survival of a good number of verses treasured in the store-rooms of their memory. They employed verses to narrate their daily experiences, to express their emotional feelings, to communicate their thoughts and passions and to describe what they see and do in their day to day life. They pray to and worship their gods and goddesses in the language of poetry. It is this same language which is used to tell what they value and hold in high esteem in their social, economic, cultural and political life. As verse is used as an important vehicle to convey the minds of the Hmars, it plays a very important source from which the social, cultural, religious and economic life of the Hmars can be thoroughly reconstructed. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that poetry forms the nucleus of the emotional and sentimental life of the Hmars and the same is substantiated by the most oft-quoted four-lined narrative verse which describes the manner and the condition in which the Hmars fled from Sinlung, their earliest known settlement.

Important happenings, epoch-making events, remarkable feelings, notable impressions and unforgettable experiences of their lives are recorded with beautiful, short but meaningful verses which are easy to remember and easily passed down from generation to generation. As noted before, the pre-Christian Hmars had a poetic bent of mind. They used verses as tools to relate their activities in all spheres of life – social, religious, economic and cultural. Their

poetic bent of mind helped them to be self-reliant with lays, songs and verses to be sung, recited and chanted as and when any occasion(s) demanded. It was at Shan, their first well-settled life that clearing of forests to grow food crops and other vegetables began. According to Hranglien Songate, “The Hmars at Shan became very much civilized and developed than at their earlier Sinlung settlement. They now had learnt growing of food crops ahead of other communities and it was here at Shan that the practice of celebrating booming harvests started. They became much better in the art of war and the practice to celebrate victory over enemies began here.” The social life of the Hmars at Shan was marked by peace, security and prosperity. This atmosphere of peace and all-round development laid an ideal ground for the emergence of certain rites, ceremonies, celebrations and festivals like Sikpui Ruoi (Winter Festival), Sesun Inchawng (a solemn family-based socio-religious rite), Hranglam (celebration of heads of enemies and wild beasts), and others which had connections with agricultural activities and religious affairs, etc., etc. It was under this condition of life and ideal social atmosphere that the imaginative and inventive spirit of the Hmars was stimulated. Thus, lays, songs and poems to be sung and recited on these different occasions were composed in pretty large numbers. Besides the songs mentioned above, the Pre-Christian Hmars composed many and varied poems on the themes of Nature and Love.

The effort of putting the Pre-Christian culture and traditions into records was strongly opposed to by the Church people who held the strong belief that anything outside the Bible parameter

was taboo. In the face of such stiff opposition from the Church body, the development of the secular Hmar literature could not make much headway. Majority of books published in Hmar language in the early and later part of the 20th Century mainly comprises Christian literature. Very few books, indeed, are published on secular themes. The earliest Hmar literature, therefore, cannot but be a mixture of Christian and secular themes with the Christian themes getting the upper hand. Composing and writing songs on Christian and secular themes go side by side and transcription of folksongs and folktales dimly lingering in the memory of the few old folks is also dragging along.

As pointed out before, the social, economic and cultural life of the Hmar people of the third quarter of the 20th Century was fully dominated by the church and other Christian organizations. Under this atmosphere, secular literature, except that of school subject, had no scope to thrive and the trend of Hmar literature had now been directed towards Christian themes alone. No book or literary work outside their new faith was welcomed. This greatly slowed down the growth and development of the written Hmar Literature. But with the ushering in of modern education and the new vistas of life brought in by it, the outlook of the Hmars became transformed and their attitudes to and approaches of life also visibly underwent changes by and by. They now realized the importance of their cultural and traditional songs which they once ignored and discarded as an anathema. This realization made them to start taking interest in the study, development and preservation of their secular literature. This period thus witnessed the outflow of numerous secular

poems of diverse themes and also marked the birth of written Hmar Literature.

The first book ever published in the Hmar language was the Gospel according to St. Mark, translated from English Bible by Rev. F.J. Sandy, a Welsh missionary, stationed at Aizawl, with the help of Mr. Thangkhup and Mr. Thanga, in 1917. This was followed by the publication of many religious books – Hmar song books, New Testament Bible in Hmar and Old and New Testament Bible (Holy Bible) in Hmar and many other Bible commentary books in Hmar language. With the growth of the Church, some mission schools were opened and school subjects, novels, short stories, dramas, etc., came to be published year by year and now there are more than 600 books published in Hmar language.

The first religious song book in Hmar was published in 1923 and another collection of Old and New Poems, ‘Hla Hlui Le Hla Thar Lawrkhawm’ followed the publication in 1950 by the Hmar Literature Society. After 15 years from the publication of *Hmar Hla Hlui Le Hla Thar Lawrkhawm*, H.V.Vara published his collection of Hmar old poems in 1965. In 1980 appeared *Hmar Hla Suina* by L.Keivom, which is the most compendious book ever written on Hmar literature till today.

The Hmars have different festivals which are celebrated every year. Their festivals of *Khounglawm*, *Lunglak* and *Sesun* festivals have much similarity with the *shan* people of Burma. They have *Rong* (Kingship), *Lal* (Chiefship), *Siehmong* (Village council) and *Sier* (Dormitory). Their chiefship is hereditary and occupied only by the male descendant of the chief. The Hmar people are generally

short to medium in stature, strong and muscular in appearance, with broad and round faces, high cheek-bones, small eyes, a flat and short nose, with skin colour varying from dark brown to light yellow.

The major economic resources of the Hmar are land, water and forest. Agriculture, hunting and gathering are the main economic pursuits. The mainstay of their livelihood is agriculture. They practice Jhum (Shifting) cultivation. The season usually begins in January. They grow paddy and vegetables on their jhum land. The whole village irrespective of communities would join together in co-operative labour. They also undertake wet-rice cultivation in the valley. The main crop is paddy. They also grow all kinds of vegetables and fruits including cucumber, water melon, melon, beans, yams, potatoes, red chilli and maize in the jhum land. They go to the forest for hunting animals and birds for their consumption. They also collect roots, tubers, fruits and leafy vegetables from the jungles. They also go for fishing in the nearby stream. The excess yield of grains, roots, tubers and fruits are sold in the market. They are involved in market economy. They do not follow the system of barter. The educated persons go for jobs in the urban areas. Their houses are built on stilts. The floor of a house is raised from the ground at about 1 foot to 3 feet high. Their houses are about 24 ft x 20 ft in size and made with wood, bamboo and thatches. Most of them are now Christian. The traditional dress for men is *Hrenpereng* and *Tharlaizawm* for women.

Being well educated and their living conditions being developed, they hold important posts in the government and private enterprise.

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Thread Through: The Adventurer's Undertaking and the Northeast in Keki Daruwalla's *Riding the Himalayas*

Bibhash Choudhury

The traveller's plan may be well laid out before the journey, often that is the case, but when the actual movement begins, the narrative comes to have its own set of material conditions to refer to, and in this blending of the word and the world we find registers that emerge with new, unprecedented connotations. Keki Daruwalla went through the Northeast during his tour of the Himalayas in 2003, an adventure where he touched spaces that reflected the mountain range's physical variety, but even as the breath-taking images that accompany the narrative showcase the richness of worlds not regularly encountered, the Northeast that we get is one that draws on motifs of cultural history we are accustomed to, some of which we know, and others that aren't that familiar. Is that the case with tales of this kind? The tale where history is the offering of manuals programmed to feed and sustain a particular image? Difficult to say. For, in this tale too, we have the personal as the condition for what is selected for the text, and in the careful leaving out of threads that do not fit in with the overarching scheme, lies the logic of the fabric that emerges whole in the end.

Combining anecdote with material culled from the archive, *Riding the Himalayas* is an expedition-text focussed on a particular journey, but, almost as a textualization of the Wordsworthian dictum,

the narrative is a reorganization of felt experience, the words of a poet jostling the inserts from history to present memory in context of the place the adventurer finds himself in. For, the imprint of the personal is strikingly evident in the way the archival resources are tapped, or in the way verses address realities that extend beyond the immediate imperative of the journey at hand—the first bringing an experienced policeman’s acumen, and the other a poet’s sensibility, home to the reader. Daruwalla had visited the Northeast on other occasions, but they were professional assignments. This is an expedition of a different kind, imbued with a footloose, unbridled temperament, the rigour and discipline of a well-chalked plan guiding each stay, with duration and extent panned out well in advance. Worlds do not stay the way they are imagined to be, narratives that hold them may linger, but the dynamic of cross-fertilized natural and material movements do not follow such envisaged designs. It is this unpredictability that can heartstop the adventurer at the most unexpected of moments which invites the traveller so much. And it is not necessary that the moments that stay on for the narrative to transform them into texts of a special kind should be epiphanic; rather, as the many recounted episodes in *Riding the Himalayas* demonstrate, in the everyday interactions and the executed routines lie the source of that which emerge as both subject and text. Daruwalla offers a synoptic view of what an expedition like the one he undertook entails: “A trip like this is not remembered merely by the places seen and the mountain, monastery or valley that one explores. It is also remembered for the jokes shared, the camp fires (always organized by Sumanta Barooah,

who was also our barbeque expert), the occasions when people let off steam; the dhaba lunches (mostly noodles, sometimes even momos) and the people met on the way.” (240) Food, impromptu arrangements, revelry, situational anxieties—these familiar tropes, however, do not dilute the sense of immediacy that Daruwalla’s fluid prose captures so well. As a wielder of words, it is his experience as a poet that enables him to condense and close in on vistas that reflect the man-nature encounter without padding the narrative space with unnecessary description. One of the striking features of the book is its sparse but controlled engagement of the narrative medium, and unlike staid and commonplace travel accounts where the self is so much at the centre, *Riding the Himalayas* is remarkable for the clear eschewal of the speaking subject’s overtly personal predilections, and rather it is his spectatorial dimension that comes through. The movement of the personal to accommodate the collective is seamlessly done. I feel that this is achieved by a carefully crafted combination where the authenticity of the personal, the graphic encapsulation of the space under view, and the historical information that serves as a commentary on the land serve as annotations to the represented experience.

Like all travellers coming in to a land not his own, the narrative imprint does not always suffice to articulate the location’s cultural or material circumstances, but this is not meant to be the text one would turn to for authentic knowledge about the places covered, no travelogue serves such a purpose. The narrative logic of *Riding the Himalayas* follows a different objective, and addresses that

reader who is co-opted to share Daruwalla's experience where the raw cut, to borrow a film term, is trimmed of inconsequential run-ons, and what we have is a commentary that guides us into the Himalayan world by the roads which the great mountains touch. That the narrative is trimmed of externals is evident in the swift changes that Daruwalla records, covering spaces spread out without referring to minute expedition details. What is a departure, however, is the informed traveller in him, one who draws on his felicity for words and marks out the historical storyline to enhance or qualify the different anecdotes that occupy the book's pages. The critical counterpoints that intersperse the commentary are nuanced but effective. Here, for instance, is a pointer that brings the question of human intervention to the fore, but the possibilities are only hinted at, enough to critique the issue at hand, but the argument hits home: "About sixteen kilometers beyond Tawang lies a beautiful little lake called Senge Tso. In winter it turns into blue ice. But as we moved to the lake we met the startling sight of miles of jungles that had been logged. You could only see stumps of thousands of trees that had been cut. Some people blame the Chinese for it, while others say that it is possible that this havoc was wreaked by our army." (237) The choice of words is telling in what they suggest, for, without really arresting the matter within the narrative—the adventurer is constantly moving on and cannot afford to contemplate problems peculiar to the regions he ventures through—he provides enough for the reader to wonder about. The word "startling," connoting *shock* as much as it does *discovery*, carries with it the scope of *the unexpected*, a familiar motif in

travel literature, but here transformed to indicate human intervention that leaves one speechless. The damage is so extensive that Daruwalla is at a loss for words. As a man involved with the intelligence services for the major part of his professional life, Daruwalla's pointers carry considerable weight, for here is an adventurer who is not merely informed about the taxing circumstances in which India's Northeastern borders are fraught with the overbearing presence of the Chinese, but he also writes as one who has been privy to the country's defence strategy, and surprising though it may sound, that the Indian army may have had a hand in the felling of trees, is a possibility he accommodates here with responsibility. The point I am trying to make here is that Daruwalla is not a lay traveller picking up anecdotes and apocryphal versions that are confined to the local situations where they occur—he does refer to such experiences and does so by qualifying them sufficiently—and it is this undertaking as an informed adventurer that makes the narrative of *Riding the Himalayas* so fascinating. A traveller's narrative, yes, but also one that gains from his pedigree and experience, and all throughout the poet in the man makes the sensible and the fantastic merge in ways that reflect his consummate control over the resources that he has to make use of. There is a demon story, which Daruwalla retells from a version he gets from Mamang Dai. The point is not that such a story forms part of an adventurer's experience, rather, that it is spaced out within the source tales relating to different locations which makes its incorporation significant. What such an eclectic sourcing of place-texts does is to distribute the focus from a mere witness-related

narrative to an engaged commentary where the personal as well as the received subsist within the same plane. Such a design calls for an innovative scheme whereby the arrangement does not appear jarring, more importantly, the flow of the journey must not be impeded by details that come from outside the world of experience actually forming the crux of the narrative. It is this careful interspersing of archival and historical material, with inputs from folk accounts and other locally derived marginal texts that make the book such an interesting read.

At one level, this is an adventurer's account; at another, the storyline serves as an information manual, providing us with details that are bound to the place from where it emanates. What enables Daruwalla to retain the traveller's sincerity is that he does not discount any version, even when it may seem incredible to the modern mind. The demon story just referred to is a case in point. The reference comes from a one-hour stop at Dirang in Arunachal Pradesh where Daruwalla and his team had the occasion to visit the gompa there: "An old nondescript gompa is tucked away in the town. The last time I was here I had to search hard for it, because I had read about the petrified heart of a demon being kept here. With great difficulty I had got the gompa opened, but the *pujari* keeps that petrified heart in a small tin trunk under lock and key. Who would bother to steal the heart of a demon? But then one never knows. I am glad that I had read the poet Mamang Dai's book *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* where I had got hold of the story. The demon lived on a huge rock in the village. An envoy of the Panchen Lama, Droang Rimpoche, by name,

vanquished him, cutting out his heart. The rock sank under the earth and a monastery was built here. The heart actually bears the sword marks, if you are a believer. Otherwise, it is a piece of polished black rock, with a nice story around it.” (231) For us, accustomed to the outsider looking at us from a perspective that suggests a lack of inwardness, this passage can be seen as one which confirms many of our assertions about how typecast we are, and how folk beliefs and myths that matter to us suffer at the hands of the rational onlooker. That such a stance can be pursued while we read *Riding the Himalayas* is undeniable. Both the notes of scepticism and surprise that accompany the narrative of the demon’s presence in the gompa suggest such a possibility. This, however, is not to make an argument about the narrator’s lack of inwardness with the land that he refers to; that is a non-starter. Daruwalla’s experience of the Northeast—he mentions how his previous journeys here have held him in good stead in terms of navigation and acclimatization—enhances the narrative impetus, and transforms the account from being a mere diary-like travel tale to a book where we get to glimpse worlds which have either been unattended or, at best, considered too marginal to merit description. At the same time, there are also inserts that appear to cater to the populist notions of the Northeast, the best example of which comes from his focus on Kaziranga. Primarily a stop-by, Kaziranga adds another hue to the already colourful book, but it seems that this is what it is there for, to enhance the motley look of the world that the rest of India wants to know so much about. One cannot take away the sincerity of the traveller’s vision by referring to such an example,

but the line of movement can be tailored to meet the scheme already laid out before the journey, and if Kaziranga figures in a Himalayan tour by road, the prerogative is of the team that charts such a map, the point isn't actually about the places Daruwalla has picked to include in his narrative, rather it is about how the Northeast figures in the here. There are no stipulations in writings that rely so heavily on the adventurer's situation and emphasis, and if the Northeast occupies space in ways that suggest a more than surface engagement, then it is because Daruwalla here has chosen to annotate his experience of the expedition with his knowledge of the place, not just from this particular journey as such, but from an understanding that is sourced to his interest in the land.

Aligned to the adventurer in him, we have the professional and the reader of history, all coming together to illuminate the narrative through a carefully wrought juxtaposition of specific cultural values and critical understanding. His critique of the British exploitative mind is brought in, not purely to villainize the colonial perpetrator, but also to take potshots at our own failure to attend to issues that call for very sensitive responses. The following passage on the Apa-Tanis open up many fronts for our appraisal: "The Apa-Tanis are variously mentioned in old chronicles as Apa-Tanang, Auk, Anka and even Meri or Miri. And old travellers here—R.B. McCabe of ICS (who later became an inspector general of police, and came to the area in 1897) or H.M. Crowe who came here in 1890, seem to praise the Daflas more than the Apa-Tanis. Tribal frictions were routine. In a Dafla village Crowe found 'an Apa-Tanang woman with a log fastened to her leg, evidently a prisoner.'

It is interesting to note that Crowe took with him as gifts, three maunds of salt, fourteen rupees worth of blue beads and some 'silken cloths,' and had embarked initially on elephant back through the jungles." (221) Of the different threads here, from the ethnically volatile environment captured in the colonizer's archive to the politically motivated mind of the peoples so engaged, we can see the anthropologist's critical temperament also surfacing, cultivating a distanced bystander's outlook, as if the past that the narrative mirrors for the contemporary audience is one whose traces merge with the world now visited by this travelling team. This is a crucial motif in the book, the position from which Daruwalla examines the micro-histories of the different locations of the Northeast. It is difficult to say when the experienced professional of the country's defence establishment overlaps the curious anthropologist in him, but what we get in effect is a mix of voices that reflect sympathy for the space under review as well as a considered unambiguous point of view. And this more evident when the particular exchanges are drawn on to articulate a generic condition: "Some of the seven sisters, as the seven North-Eastern states are called, leapfrogged from a tribal society and a primitive economy straight into the twentieth century. This had obviously resulted in instability of sorts and people here are not slow to take the gun." (201)

The danger in situations such as these, either in the narrativized form or in terms of the 'truth' of the subject presented for examination, is of another kind: that of the patronizing valuer assessing and bracketing worlds which are otherwise closed to cultures that situate themselves differently. Daruwalla's personal

and professional situation cannot be separated from the narrative logic that undergirds *Riding the Himalayas*. While there can be no claim to an 'authentic' Northeast in narratives of this genre, either for purists who would look for faultlines to challenge the traveller's side of the story, or for one like Daruwalla whose situation as an adventurer is assured, the case can be argued with equal force. The Northeast that emerges in the book is one that is selectively rendered; without any claim to a comprehensive picturing of the land, such a selective engagement is inevitable. It is neither the traveller's prerogative nor objective to hold the narrative as a mirror to verifiable truths, truths that cannot be free from the subjective matrix all such projects are endowed with. What comes through, as effect and in its represented form, is the affirmation of the now recognized condition of narrative itself: that stories that aspire to convey the texture and feel of place can only be provisional. The triumph of a book like *Riding the Himalayas* emerges from this very provisionality: in these running accounts of spaces, peoples, histories, emotions, anecdotes and processed articulations lie traces of multiple realities, the questioning of which cannot be carried out unless one occupies a vantage position of the overarching narrative that overrides all. Daruwalla's book adds to the recognized values associated with the Northeast, and contributes to a spectrum which is in a constant state of emergence; for, like him, the experience of our own space is a continuing adventure of surprise and discovery. Whether we augment the knowledge of our culture and people by drawing on the 'modern' models of intellectual comprehension or through

means we take pride in for the values they have offered us, is a question for which we can have recourse to our own justifiable ways.

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The Lai

Margaret L. Pachuau

The Lai are a people who belong to the Lai Autonomous District Council of Mizoram. They are predominantly scattered in different parts of the world and are mainly concentrated in Mizoram, the Chin hills of Burma and Manipur and are also identified as Bawm, in the South of Bangladesh. The Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) is one of the three Autonomous District Councils in Mizoram state in North-east India. It is an Autonomous District Council for ethnic Lai people earlier known as Pawi, living in South-eastern Mizoram bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh. The L.A.D.C. has its headquarters at Lawngtlai town, which is the District Capital of Lawngtlai District. Lawngtlai District has a population of 75,477 persons [according to the Mizoram Statistical Handbook 2003]

Lai is an ethnic identity to determine all the tribes of Chin, the Pawi, the Bawm. Amongst the various clans of the Lai tribe, are : Anu, Bawm, Chuntei, Thangnge, Sialling, Hranglung, Mualcin, Khuangsai, Lautu, Pang, Miram, Senthang, Sim, Tlanglau, Zahau, Zangiat, Zathang, Zophei, Lithing, Chinzah, Fanai, Sathing.

Lai (Pawi) who reside in the Lai Autonomous District of Mizoram are but a segment community of the much larger Lai (Chin) population of Burma. They share common ancestry with those of

any mongoloid race in the North Eastern part of India even as far as their origins in China are concerned. They migrated through the Tibetan mountains while moving further towards the East to become a major tribal group in the Chin Hills of Burma from where some few came to their present habitat (Mizoram) in the beginning of the 18th century or perhaps a little earlier. Historians and anthropologists are of the opinion that the Lai Community belong to the Tibeto-Burman tribe who are of the Mongoloid stock. Their language is related to Tibeto-Chinese. However, the Lai people have been given various names in different places, and are known variously as Chin or Halkha in Burma, Zo or Laizo in different places in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere, Pawi or Mizo in Mizoram. The term Chin or Zo or Laizo or Mizo are genetic names that are used to denote a particular group or community. According to the oral tradition of the Lai, the term Pawi was 'given' to the Lai, since the Lai regarded themselves to be 'Pawite' during the conflict between the North and the South Mizoram (most probably in 1800–1900). It is said that the Lushai believed that the Lai claimed themselves to be Pawi significantly, because of their hair which was usually knotted on their forehead. Therefore, the people who sported such a hairstyle were referred to as Pawi, though ironically the term Pawite literally meant leopard in the Lai language. The Lai are also believed to be the main tribe that belong to the Chin Dynasty. It may also be noted that the term Shendoo or Shendu which was frequently used to denote the Lakher (Mara) in the Britisher's record were said to be the offspring of the Lai. F. Chhawnmanga (A retired District Adult Education Officer,

under the State Government of Mizoram. He has conducted extensive personal interviews with some chiefs of the Lakher community) has denoted that the Lakher chief Kilkhara of Saiha and Tawngliana of Serkawr villages were the descendants of Lianchi and Alkheng respectively of Hlawngching family of Haha. They spoke the Lai language. However, after coming down to Mizoram, their names were translated into the Lakher dialect and they themselves were Kilkhaw and Thylai.

Vumson [Vumson served as the President of the Foundation for Democracy in Burma for five years. He was also a member of the Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma. He later founded the Chin National Council and the Chin Freedom Coalition. He further formed the Chin Forum whose primary occupation was the drafting of a Constitution for the future Chin State. Further, he served as an advisor to the Zomi Innkuan, Washington DC and was a member of the Board of Consultants of the Political Affairs Committee of Chinland. He also focused on Human Rights and became an activist in 1987 addresses the UN and the UNHCR in several countries boarding Burma. Given his interest in Zo History, he became a member of (ZORO) the Zo Re-unification Organization and founding member of ZOLITE (Zomi Literature Institute)], in his work has also stated that;

The Lakher (Mara) are the branch of Lai tribe and speak a language closely related to Lai. They are the same people as Shendoo to whom Col. Lewin made constant reference in his various works and are still called Shendoo by the Arakanis.

There are many common clan names like Hlawnehhing, Chinzah, Khenglawt, Thianhlun, which are found in common amongst the Lai and Maras. This could perhaps be an indication of the fact that the Lai and Mara are one and the same people. Despite this however, there are other linguistic groups who were found to share the same culture and customs, and even spoke in a similar language with the Lai. These groups are the Bom and Tlanglau who reside in the Western part of Mizoram and Bangladesh. Lai historical researchers have also proposed that the Chhinlung theory is considered to be the most reliable in terms of tracing the origin of the Lai. However, the Chhinlung theory is also supposedly a theory that most mongoloid tribes would adhere to, and as such it may not actually be particular to the Lai community only. Despite this, there is the belief that according to the traditional belief, the Lai tribe originally came out of 'Chhinlung', and not merely a mythical rock as stated by some, but through a hole in the ground which was covered with a stone, in the east of the Shan State, which was located in the Falam Sub-Division of the Chin Hills District in Burma. It was believed that Lai tribes originated in China, the Chindwin Valley and the Chin Hills and then were finally located in Lairam where they now dwell. The areas inhabited by the Lai are contiguous to one another although they are at the present time of writing, located in different administrative units. Historians of interdisciplinary streams are of the opinion that the Chhinlung from where the Lai people were believed to have emerged from, could in actuality be the Great Wall of China, which was built during the reign of the Prince Chung called Chin Shih

Hwangti. His reign began from B.C. 221, and the construction of the Great Wall of China was started in B.C. 214. Therefore, the Lai and all other inhabitants of the Mizo language family were believed to have come out of the Great Wall of China and were believed to have made their way, towards Burma and North East India where they settled down.

Referring to the text, ‘The History of China’, written by Wan Shu Tang in 1955, Hniarkio, a research scholar from the Chin Hills, has stated, “*The Lai, with other groups of peoples like Miao, Yoa, Tung, Chouli, Kualo, Leng, etc. lived in China.*”

Hniarkio further elucidates that the archeological evidence which had been unearthed in 1974 proved that the Lai people served the King Shis Hwangti as his guards and also as a part of the defence service. The statues of the guards that were found in the King’s compound are those of men who have knotted their hair over their forehead. Some of the Lai people still continue to believe that the Lai are still in existence in China and its neighbouring places. Sangkunga, [a Medical Officer of the Lai community, who had been to Singapore in 1981] has denoted that,

“I have visited the Lai pharmacy in people’s Park in Singapore. The owner of the pharmacy and his wife, both physicians are Lai and came from China.” [Quoted from Lalthangliana, 101-2]

He further tells that there are some Lai among the Chinese. This eyewitness account is by itself convincing and could lead to believe that the Lai came from China. It however requires a more in depth study that would be based on cultural and

linguistic dimensions to further provide academic depth to the same. Chhuanawm Lahnim, [a Lai and an academician, has written a convincing article that has been based upon G.A. Grierson, [Sir George Abraham Grierson (7 January 1851 – 9 March 1941) was an Irish linguistic scholar and civil servant who conducted the Linguistic Survey of India (1898–1928), obtaining information on 364 languages and dialects] and F.K. Lehman [F.R. Lehman studied anthropology and linguistics at Columbia University from 1950 to 1952, and took up a post doctoral appointment to study South Asian languages and cultures and linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania during 1954-55, after which he was with the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University, working on the development of the Southeast Asian files, until 1956. At that time, having defended his doctoral thesis, he got a grant to conduct anthropological field research amongst the Chin people of the highlands of Western Burma for about two years in 1957 and 1958, having meanwhile returned to employment at the University of Illinois, where he has held academic appointments ever since. He has conducted major field research in Burma, Thailand and India over many years since then]. Grierson, who had conducted a linguistic survey in India and Burma resolved that ‘Lai’ meant ‘middle’ thereby, signifying that the Lai lived in the middle of Chin Hills. A study from the University of Illinois has also proposed that ‘Lai’ implies “Centre” or more appropriately ‘intermediate’. From these explanations Lahnim infers that ‘Lai’ in its conceptual meaning, is “civilized” or “superior” or “unprecedented”. He further associates this meaning

with the middle kingdom complex that had already been in existence among the Chinese thousands of years ago.

Contrary to this opinion, B. Lalthangliana, [a Mizo cultural historian], has argued upon the impossibility of the linkage in terms of Lai history and the Great Wall of China, because he feels that the geographical locale between the two areas is too great a distance for it becoming a practical reality, for a migratory shift to have actually occurred. However, as there is no academically viable study on the same, the benefit of doubt could still perhaps be given to the advocates of such a theory. Relying on the work of M.G. Tetpyo, [Customary Law of the Chin Tribes 1884] Hengmanga, the then Historical Research Officer, under Lai Autonomous District Council, Lawngtlai, has asserted that:

“The Lai people made their way from Northern China via Tibet to Burma through the Hukawng Valley. The approximate date when they crossed the Hukawng valley could be around 400 AD.”

In any case, the Lai could perhaps have spent some time at Kabaw and Khampat regions, where most of the Zo group were said to have once lived together for several years as Mangkhasat Kipgen, [a research scholar from Manipur State] has mentioned in his work, Christianity and Zo Culture:

“The time spent in Khampat is regarded as one of the most glorious periods in Zo History. Most of the major clans, who now inhabit the Chin State of Burma, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura are believed to have lived together there”(Vanlalzaaua)

According to the legend handed down from generation to generation among the Lai, they traced back their origin to Lailum. This is situated in Chin Hills near Falam. Around this people, there were some Lai historical places like Chin Mual, Lai VA, and Lai Kulh. Chumawi argues that:

“These historical places proved that the Lai people have been living for some generations.” [Quoted from Lalthangliana, 101-2]

The lingua franca in the Chin Hills is also the Lai language . Nishipada Deva Choudhury, an archeologist has denoted that:

“Lai bids fair to become the general means of communication in the Chin Hills.”[ibid]

In tracing out the origin of Lai, various Indian and British researchers have established the fact that the Lai people moved towards the North West along the Chindwin River, then settled down in the Chin Hills. The possible date of their settlement in this place, as suggested by F.K. Lehman is 750 A.D. Haka, the present capital of the Chin Hills (Laitlang) State, was said to have founded by the young prince of Lai, Hluansang by name. Subsequently many important places such as Thlantlang, Lungzarh, Khuafu, Sunthla and Thlanrawn were founded in which the clans, Chinzah, Zathang, Hlawhching, Khenglawt, Hlawhcheu, Zahau and Fanai lived. After some generations, in an effort to spread out , they moved towards the North and West of the land while crossing the River Boinu (Kaladan), and settled in Manipur, Bangladesh and Mizoram, where they live till today. The first group who left the Chin Hills in 1770 under the leadership of Vanhnuaitlira, the prince of Sunthla who

moved towards the south west and settled down at Rengtlang, Chittagong Hill Tract and Bangladesh.

The manner in which the tribes migrated has been denoted in the Book of Pawi Chanchin, that has been published by the Tribal Research Institution, Mizoram :

They crossed the River Tiau near Champhai and made their way in the Forest towards Bungzung. Then moved to North Vanlaiphai, Sangau, Lungtian from where they had spread in all different places in south Mizoram. After coming down to the present Mizoram, they occupied the whole eastern belt of Mizoram. Mr. L. Chinzah, a veteran political leader of Lai, has mentioned in his memorandum submitted to the Government of Assam, in 1970. The Memorandum reads.

The entire eastern belt of the Mizo district, as far as the Tuichang River on the West and Champhai on the North, and the entire areas South of Lunglei are Pawi (Lai) territories.

[Tribal Research Institution]

By examining available sources, oral or written, there is no opinion to rival that the Lai came down from China through Burma as many people still live in Chin Hills. A huge majority settled down in the South and Eastern belt of Mizoram, where they reside as the Lai Autonomous District Council, with Lawngtlai, as their headquarters. In terms of this aspect, the Lai possess a rich culture, with customs and traditions that are inherently distinct from that of their neighbouring tribes. The cultural heritage include language, folk songs or folklore, moral and social ethics, legends, myth, festivals, dances.

Rev. Th. Vanlalzauva [A Pastor of LIKBK (Lairam Isua Krista Baptist Kohhran) and currently Administrative Secretary of the

same in New Delhi] has denoted that the Lai popular dances epitomise the fact that the ancient glory of the Lai has never been decaying as some might presume; it is alive and is flourishing in the form of dances ,amongst other aspects. This reality is expressed by the fact that some cultural dances of Lai origin have gained wide popularity and some them like Sarlamkai and Rawkhatlak are often performed in various cultural celebrations. However, most Lai dances have been adapted and have been increasingly modified with the passage of time.

1) One of the most spectacular dances being adopted by many non-Lai is what is originally termed as Ruakhatlak. This dance has proved to be of cultural acclaim and it is widely performed. Ruakhatlak is of growing popularity in many educational institutions. Ruakhatlak is also known as Cherawkan, a name perhaps given by those who adopted it. Literally, Ruakha in the Lai means hop or dance and the literal meaning is bamboo dance. However, there is a greater profundity to the same. Originally , this dance was not meant for celebrations and merrymaking. It was first performed at the event of the death of a mother in childbirth. In pre-Christianity, the Lai believed that the soul of the unfortunate woman who died in giving birth to a child, had to traverse a rough road where she would be poked and pricked by thorns on either side. On her journey to the home (eternal abode) of the spirits, she may also have to encounter with enemies as the death at childbirth is considered to be most disgraceful and risky one. In this situation, the dancers by performing Ruakhatlak assure her soul of consolation and security against any difficulties which could stand her way.

This dance is to bid farewell to the departed soul. However, in Christian era, this dance of melancholy has become a dance of extravaganza. The most admired dance almost analogous to the western rock or disco is this dance performed normally by a group of youngsters with proportionate male and female ratio. It has a great variety of rhythmic bits, among the Lai dance this dance particularly exhibits the glory and supremacy of Lai culture. In the olden days, Chawnglaizawn was performed on the day when a chief or a person of prominence died. It commemorates the achievement of the person either for his/her greatness or prowess. The ball is not to mourn, but to honour the deceased. It is a dance of homage.

(II) The most fiery-looking dance symbolizing the habitation of the Lai warriors, the known cruel headhunters is Sarlamkai, which is also known as Solakia to the Maras, a sub-tribe of the Lai. Hunting for head or wild animal was a favourite game as well as a way of building the social career. On killing their enemies the heads were carried home as trophy so that celebrations could take place. Traditions have something to say about the origination of this dance. This dance celebrates the victory of the hunters. Sarlamkai not only demonstrates the bravery of the warrior, it assures the villagers of their security. Among all others, this is perhaps the only dance which the Britishers who settled in the land used to enjoy. It is the main dance of the Lai and is rendered as a dance of delight and gaiety.

(III) Pawhlohtlawh is performed on any day of celebrations and social gatherings viz victorious ceremony, public feast, festival,

marriage day, jubilee, carnival etc. this emotional dance conveys the spirit of freedom, peace and love. Its manner excites all, the performers and the onlookers. Pawhlo dance is luxurious and inviting and is a taste to everyone.

The Lai people have increasingly sought a regional or District Council in which they could protect their own customs and culture, and to develop their own language and ways of living. The Pawi-Lakher Company was developed into the Chin Association and was able to contact the Advisory Council known as the Mizo Hills District Advisory Council in 1947. As time passed by the political Development was in progress among the Lai. They were determined to secure a separate Regional Council along with the Mizo District Council, which was constituted for north Mizoram. In order to bring out their political will, The Pawi-Lakher Tribal Union was founded on 25 October 1949. The Principal aim and objective of the Union included the integration of the Lai and the Mara (Pawi-Lakher) into a single Administrative Unit, obtaining of a regional Council and safeguarding of their ethnic identities.

The hard labour of the Pawi-Lakher Tribal Union and the Lai-Mara members of the Mizo District Council eventually paid off when the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was constituted by the Government of Assam, under the Sixth Schedule, The Pawi-Lakher Autonomous Region Rules, 1952 was enacted. The Council had 12 members, 9 elected by the people and 3 nominated by the Governor of Assam on the recommendation of the Chief Executive Member of the Council. The first Election of the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was held in 1953. After some years of Administrative

experience in the Regional Council, the leaders of Lai, Mara and Chakma felt the need to have separate District Council for each community in order to safeguard their respective Customs, Culture and language. Upon their constant demand, the Government granted to them separate three District Councils, for the Lai (Pawi), Mara (Lakher) and the Chakma, with Headquarters at Lawngtlai, Saiha and Chawngte respectively, in April 2, 1972. Meanwhile an Union Territory was also constituted in Mizoram. The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was then automatically dissolved. The newly created Pawi Autonomous District Council started functioning with effect from 29 April 1972, with 14 members strength of which 12 were elected by the people and 2 were nominated.

In terms of the nomenclature, although the Lai have never called themselves Pawi, but the Government recognized them as Pawi even before India's Independence. The Lai were reluctant to embrace the term Pawi and thus, they sought for a change in terminology, namely as Lai. Upon their request the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India Amendment Act 1988 (No 67 of 1988) transferred the term Pawi to Lai. Subsequently the name of the District Council was changed to Lai Autonomous District Council on May, 1989. The Lai Autonomous District Council has a strength of 27 members of which 23 are elected and 4 are nominated. Under the Lai Autonomous District Council there are six (6) towns and eighty one (81) villages.

On the eve of India's Independence, in 1947 the British seemed to have been conscious of their past mistake of the 'divide

and rule' policy and seemingly in a bid to rectify their past motives, they laid out a plan to reintegrate the break-up.

“Under the constitution for the union of Burma drawn up in 1947 provision was made for the recognition of the special interest of the Chin people living in the tangle of forested hills between India and Burma”

One of the more significant proposals of the British in India, was to establish a ‘Crown Colony’ to cover the Lais and the area that they inhabited in the Arakan hills state, where one of the objectives was to build the Akyab as the harbour capital city. However, this suggestion was vehemently opposed by a veteran politician by name Ch. Saprang [First Commissioner amongst the Mizos] because it would render the loss of an ethnic gravity of the Mizo community, and thereby weaken its supremacy over the other tribes. Since then, the politics of the then Lushai hills remained predominantly under the control of the Lushai community. To a great extent the Lais, along with other tribes such as Hmar, Paite, Ralte have been gradually absorbed within the umbrella of the Mizo tribal community. As a political step forward for uniting all the tribes within Mizo district a political party called ‘Mizo Union’ was formed in 1946 under the leadership of R. Vanlawma [First General Secretary of the Mizo National Front (MNF), a politician and author of four (4) books]. The rationale behind the Mizo politics was to submerge all the tribes into the ‘mainstream of the Mizo’. In the midst of opposition and stiff resistance from the Mizo community, the Lais have struggled emphatically in order to maintain their ethnic identity by initiating a series of political-ethographical

movements. Certain political organizations based on the Lai ethnicity include Pawi-Lakher company, Chin Association, Tribal Union in the late 40's and Chin National Front in 1965 amidst others. The Chin National Front, in particular was increasingly aimed at "reuniting the Pawis". To cite an example, Lais were given strong opposition in terms of their membership to the Mizo Advisory Council. The Chin National Front, was jeopardised by the MNF which was formed on 22 October 1962. Ultimately though, the Lais were granted a Regional Council in the name of 'Pawi Lakher' on 23 April 1953, a year after the Mizo district council was accorded (on 22 April 1952). When Mizoram was granted Union Territory status in 1972, the Lai, Mara and Chakma were also granted separate Autonomous District Councils.

The struggle of the Lai people for identity seems to be largely determined by the oppressive structure of the Mizo Nationalism. Political critics especially continue to focus upon the 'Lai and their suffering' and of the 'pain of separation from a majority of their own community'. It is as if to say that their political dreams have always cherished a spirit of integration, and Lais have been identified as a community who have now, at the present time of writing, drifted apart from their motherland. Even after 1972, when Mizoram attained the status of Union Territory, the Lai people were increasingly aware of the political repercussions. In the light of this development was created the first political movement, which was termed, Pawi-Lakher Company. The name itself bore more commercial savvy, rather than being reminiscent of a political venture. However, the main reason behind the formation of this

institution was to build political awareness between the Lai (Pawi) and Mara (Lakher) communities and to attain a semblance of unity between themselves. This was done especially as they were since ethnically of the same family. This company brought back the ‘scattered Lai people’ and it enabled them to formulate a concrete political party for the Lai community. This was the Chin Association which was founded on January 21, 1947. The formation of the Pawi-Lakher Company was increasingly significant because it was with the establishment of this company that the Lai as a tribe and their existence was brought to the knowledge of the Government of Assam. After careful examination of the situation of the Hill areas of Assam, as well as its political demand, the Cabinet Mission of the British Government in India discussed various ways and means by which to protect the interest of the tribal people and the backward classes of India, in post independent India. As propounded by the Cabinet Mission an Advisory Committee was set up, and the Advisory Committee then formulated a sub-committee that was known as the North Eastern Frontier Tribal and Excluded Committee, to be headed by Gopinath Bardoloi, [Chief Minister of Assam in 1938. His strength lies in his political prowess, superb personality, truthfulness which attracted not only his colleagues but also people of various communities. Congress got recognition as a powerful political party in Assam by virtue of his ability and intelligence. His contributions as Chief Ministers were mainly to stop Land Tax, stop giving lands to migrant Muslims to secure the right of indigenous people etc]. The recommendation of this Sub-Committee (also known as Bardoloi Committee) thus

resulted in the constitution of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, in 1950. Under the articles 224 (2) and 275 (1) of Sixth of the Constitution of India, a special provision for the administration of Hills District of the present North East India was envisaged. The Constitution has denoted: 1. Autonomous Districts and Autonomous Regions. Subject to the provisions of this paragraph, the tribal area in each item of (Parts I, II and II A) in part III of the Table appended to Para 20 of this schedule shall be an Autonomous District. 2. Constitution of District Council and Regional Council. There shall be a District Council for each Autonomous District consisting of not more than thirty members. 3. There shall be a separate Regional Council of each area constituted an Autonomous Region under the Sub-paragraph (2) of Para I of this schedule.

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The Pawi/ Lai Community: A Brief Introduction

Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte

The Pawi or the Lai are mostly concentrated in the Lai Autonomous District of southern Mizoram. The Lai Autonomous Council was established by the Government of India (Article 371 – 9 of the Constitution of India) to safeguard the traditions and customs of the Lai people and to develop their own language and ways of living. Lawngtlai is the District Headquarters as well as the socio-political center of the Lai. It is connected by the NH- 54 and is about 296 kms away from the State capital, Aizawl. According to 2001 census, the total number of families in LADC is 13,902 with a total population of 73,620. About 6470 of the Lai population are literate. The population went up to 117,444 in the 2011 census. The majority of Lai in Mizoram are Christians. Under the Indian Constitution, Lai (Pawi) belonged to the Scheduled Tribes. The main occupation of Lais is agriculture of both swidden cultivation and modern agriculture. Linguistically, the Lai language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. No one can say when the Lai language separated from the large language group of Tibeto-Burman.

The Pawi –Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) was created under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, as a result of the demand for political autonomy by the Pawi

and the Lakher, who inhabit the Southern part of Lushai Hills. It is worth noting that PLRC was the only Regional Council of its kind in India, established under the provision of Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. With the upgradation of the Lushai Hills as Union Territory of Mizoram, the Mizo District Council was abolished. However, as the Pawi, the Lakher (Mara) and the Chakma were not in favour of the abolition of the Regional Council, the PLRC was trifurcated into three Regional Councils, namely, the Pawi Regional Council (PRC), the Lakher Regional Council (LRC) and the Chakma Regional Council (CRC) on 2 April 1972 and the three Regional Councils were upgraded to the status of full fledged Autonomous District Councils on 29 April 1972. Subsequently, the Pawi Autonomous District Council (PADC) was changed into the Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) and the Lakher Autonomous District Council was changed into Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) in 1988. As a matter of fact, PLRC was the root, from which, the present three Autonomous District Councils of Mizoram, viz. the LADC, MADC and the CADC, sprang up.

The then Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) comprised all of the present Lai Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC), and Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC). The PLRC also had international boundaries with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Beside the Pawi (Lai) and the Lakher (Mara), other tribes, namely Bawm, Tlanglau, Pang, Riang (Bru), and the Chakma, also inhabited the PLRC area. The PLRC covered all the Lakher inhabited areas within Mizoram due

to its compactness as well as the ethnic identity consciousness of the Lakher. However, it could not include all the Pawi inhabited areas within Mizoram because of the scattered locations and the overwhelming influence of the Mizo Union over some Pawi villages. Mr. Z. Hengmang, the then Advisory Committee Member of the Lushai Hills and the first President of the Pawi-Lakher Tribal Union (PLTU), has said he tried hard at least to include all the Pawi villages of the region but he was not successful in the face of strong resistance from the Mizo Union Leaders. Thus, Pawi-villages — Lungleng, Muallianpui, South Tawipui, Darzo, Thingfal, Mamte, Thlengang, South Vanlaiphai, North Tawipui, and Sairep — were included in the Lushai Hills District. After settling the boundary dispute and demarcating it, the PLRC Advisory Committee could not take any immediate decision for locating a headquarters but ultimately Saiha was selected to be the headquarters. But Lunglei was proposed to be used as the interim headquarters.

The PLRC was entrusted with law making powers as provided in paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India — including Legislative, Executive, Financial and Judicial functions. Accordingly, it was expected to uplift the tribal communities of the region in the domain of culture, custom, agriculture, health, village communications, and sanitation, economic and rural development. In this connection the PLRC had made various Acts, Rules and Regulations on the subjects assigned to it by the Sixth Schedule. The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) was the root from which the present 3 Autonomous District Councils of Mizoram evolved.

The LADC is the largest geographical area among the three Autonomous District Councils of Mizoram. It is bounded by Lunglei District in the North, CADC in the West, MADC in the East and Myanmar in the South and North-East. The area of the present LADC is 1870.75 km. In spite of being identified as Pawi in Mizoram, the Lai regarded the appellation “Pawi” as a derogatory term, as such; they never identified themselves as Pawi but Lai. So, the leaders of Lai began to demand the abolition of the name ‘pawi’ and wanted to change it into ‘Lai’. Thus, under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1988 of Indian Parliament (No.67 of 1988) and by Notification No.DCA/E/154/81/40.the name Pawi Autonomous District Council was changed into Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) in 1988. However, the name of the tribe is still listed as Pawi in serial number 13 of the list of Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes of Mizoram. There are numerous theories regarding the etymology of the names “Lai” and “Pawi”. It is generally believed that originally, the people referred to themselves as “Lai”; over time, the name “Pawi” evolved and was in common usage. Oral sources attribute the origin of the term “Pawi” in different ways, thus:

(1) Members of this community, in olden days, used a weapon called “Tek Lung” (flint stone) in times of altercations, which they would carry on their bodies, inserted into the folds of their puan at the waist. This act of inserting an object into the folds of the puan was called “Pangpawi” in their language. The Lusei tribes, not knowing the meaning of this word, separated the two syllables to

refer to certain groups, and hence the tribes of “Pang” and “Pawi” came to be referred to as such.

(2) The ancestor of Chinzah, Zathang, Hlawnehhing, and Khenglawt, whose name was Saikhama, had a feast (khuangchawi); during this feast, he began to suspect his wife of infidelity with one of the guests, Kepchara. He consequently banished her from his home with not a stitch on her back. She left her home and went to Kepchara’s village, where Kepchara married her. She gave birth to three sons, Hnialuma, Famchuna, Mualchina. When she died, all her children from both were reunited at her funeral, where they lamented over circumstances which had contrived to keep them apart although they all shared the same mother. They repeated “A pawi, a va pawi tak em!” again and again. “Pawi” in the Mizo language can mean “sad/sorry/ regrettable, pitiful/ tragic”, and they lamented “We are children of Pawi” and that is how they and their descendants came to be known as “Pawi”.

(3) Another version states that once, when a group of Lai warriors attacked a Lusei group in the jungle, a Lai warrior yelled out “Here I come, I, the pawte” as he swooped down upon his enemies. “Pawte” in Lai language means “leopard”, but since this was unknown to the Lusei, they believed that these people called themselves “Pawite”. From this day onwards, all men who knotted their hair on their forehead (as distinguished from the Lusei, who knotted their hair at the nape of the neck, and the Hmar, who braided their hair) were referred to as “Pawite” or “Pawi”.

There are also various versions with regard to the origin of the name “Lai” which may be summarised as under:

- (1) Khawzing Pathian, the diety they worshipped, threw a trivet from the heavens upon the earth; since this was thrown from the centre of the heavens and landed on a conveniently central location to the place inhabited by the people, they called themselves “Lai” which can be translated as “centre” or “central”.
- (2) The Burmese inhabited the East, where the sun rises, and the non-tribal people inhabited the West, where the sun sets. People who lived in the area between these two extremes were referred to as “Lai” since their territory was centrally located.
- (3) During the mass exodus from the Chin Hills into what is now Mizoram, a group of people later known as Lusei went towards the North, another group, the Lakher (Mara) went South, and those that went to the central region were called Lai.
- (4) Others insist that they were always named Lai, not because of any particular choice of geographical location, but that this was simply their name from time immemorial, and that the area they inhabited while still in Phairawn in the East, was also known as “Lai Tlang” (Lai Hills).
- (5) Another version states that the area known as Chin Hills in Burma was always known as Lai Ram (Lai land), and those who subsequently immigrated from those Hills retained the name “Lai”.
- (6) In olden times, there existed a huge cave known as Lailun Puk, wherein lived two brothers, Suihluan and Hluansang. Together they built the village of Panlan. Suihlian was the Chief of this village, and it was decreed that his brother Hluansang would give a pig annually as payment to the Chief. When it was time to kill the pig, the Chief was required to hold the animal’s tail while his brother

stabbed it. When this ceremony was to be performed, Hluansang suddenly stabbed his brother instead. Suihluan died, and Hluansang became the Chief. He had three sons, Thanghulh, Zathang, and Bawmlung, who later built a new village, which they named Halkha. Those who inhabited the region comprising Halkha, Thlantlang, and Sakta were all considered to have their origins in Lailun Puk, and therefore their descendants came to be known as “Lai”.

As with most communities whose history and culture are rooted in the oral tradition, it is impossible to verify the veracity of any of these versions. As is to be expected, these oral narratives have also been modified, reshaped, and remoulded with each telling over many generations. In the same vein, it is also an equally difficult task to trace the origin of the people themselves in the absence of any written records. The people belong to “Zo” group of the Tibeto-Burman family, and are generally believed to have been from the region East of what was referred to as Lushai Hills by the British. This area might refer to Burma, or even China. According to most scholars, it is believed that they were referred to as Chin people by other tribes, while they themselves used different terms. The people who later immigrated and settled in the Northern part of Lushai Hills used the term “Zo” (or “Yo”/ “Asho”/ “Jo”) to describe themselves, while those who went South referred to themselves as “Lai”.

In his book *Pawi Hnam Tobul*, Z. Hengmanga traces the immigration route of the people as originating in China, then Tibet, and from there, following the source of the Brahmaputra and Sallwen rivers into the mouth of the Chindwin river at Kochin, and from

there to the Hukawng valley and into Burma. It is believed that they were in the Hukawng valley around 400 AD, and then moved to the banks of the river Chindwin near Monywa around 750 AD. From Monywa, they expanded towards Kalemyo, Mawilaik, and Kalewa, and subsequently, from these areas into Lai Tlang (Lai Hills). During the colonial period when the British started occupying India and Burma, many of the Lai people were scattered in different directions, into Burma, Bangladesh, and India.

Oral narratives tell of the story of two brothers who set out as coolies and sat down by the river Chindwin to quench their thirst. They had carried with them some vegetable seeds, but the younger brother accidentally dropped his seeds into the water. He asked the older brother for some of his seeds, and the older brother responded by demanding that he first make some salted chicken broth, after which he would give him the seeds, and he promised would grow abundantly. The younger one did as he asked, and together they planted the seeds, which yielded a good harvest as promised. The elder brother is believed to be the progenitor of the Lusei and the younger brother, the Pawi. Traditionally, the Pawi have been known to carry on the ritualistic practice of preparing salted Chicken broth before planting seeds in their fields.

Another rendition of the origin story says that the Lusei, Pawi, and Lakher (Mara) all emerged from Chhinlung. Migrating from China, they went to Burma. There, they became afraid of the Burmese king Siampahranga, and did not venture further into KawlzaPawwl, or the Burmese plains. As they fled the king, the different groups parted ways and settled in different areas.

Narratives surrounding the migration are also sketchy at best. They resided in the Haka region of the Chin Hills in Burma together with the Lakher for a long time and then migrated to the Mizo Hills in the seventeenth century. Like all the other tribes of Mizo these people never occupied the same land for more than 4-6 years for various reasons. Since their main occupation was agriculture and the system practised was shifting cultivation, they were constantly in search of more fertile land. Another reason for their perpetual moves from one land to another was that when they felt the land was unhealthy and when a large number of people fell sick or died, they felt the need to move. Prevalent diseases were rheumatism, eye diseases, fever, and diarrhoea. The climate of the Hill tracts is distinguished by its coolness. There are no hot winds, and the hottest part of the year is tempered by cool breezes. In those times, it was the custom of the people to remain in their villages until the cultivation season commenced in May, and then the whole countryside moved up, every man to his patch of cultivation, on some lofty hill. Another justification for these moves was that the climate was also almost deadly for men of the plains, who were not used to the cooler mountain air. Also, because they were warriors and were often involved in inter-tribe as well as inter-village conflicts, they moved when they felt their territories being threatened.

Village sites were chosen with an eye on both defensive position and availability of water. A preferable site was high on a ridge so that it was easily defensible. The Chief and his ministers, called “upa”s, would venture out in search of new land and to survey the area. This was done after having consulted the priest who

performed the augury by calling for an egg and trying to make it stand on its tip in the palm of his hand. If he succeeded, it was considered a good omen. They would also perform many other forms of divination and soothsaying. If the community moved to a new land that was very far from the one that they were previously occupying, that was called not a 'move' but a 'jump' (khaw zuan). As soon as the move had been decided on, arrangements were made for cultivation near the new site. Once the land was decided upon, the Chief was always given the liberty to choose which part of the land he wanted for his residence. Usually the Chief's residence or 'Lal In' had to be built in the centre of the province. And there were certain common architectural designs and styles to be adopted in all palaces. The entire community took part in the construction of the 'Lal In' which had a defensive wall, and in time of war, it served as the village refuge and fort. After the chief had chosen his area, the leader among the Village Elders who had taken part in the survey would pick the area he liked, then all the other Elders would do likewise. It was only after this that the other members of the community, the laymen, could decide on which area they wanted. Finally, they marked their boundaries and worked on security measures for their new territory.

After the 'Lal In' had been completed, the men set to work building his house, each in his own jhum or plot of cultivable land, for the crop must be watched carefully to preserve it from the wild pig and deer, which would otherwise play havoc among the young shoots of the rice. Houses were raised from the ground, and built entirely of planks and logs of wood. Bamboo is said not to grow in

the Lai region. And as soon as the construction was over, before moving in, they would hang a big chunk of tree outside the entrance of the house in order to scare away evil spirits.

Lai society is essentially a patriarchal society and the father is the head of the family but the women also were given importance and recognition. We find that the concept of 'Zawlbuk' was absent in Lai. 'Zawlbuk' was a dormitory in a Lusei village where all the unmarried young men of the community came to sleep at night. It was one of the most essential part of the Mizo society and it was the place where young boys learned their manners and skills. Since the Lai people did not have Zawlbuk, most of their lessons were taught at home by parents. Meal time was the only time when all the members of the family were present at home, so parents took the opportunity to admonish, instruct, chide, or rebuke the children if necessary.

They made salt from brine springs existing in the region. They also manufactured their own gunpowder. Sulphur was obtained from Burma and lore has it that an inferior sort of saltpetre was collected from strongly sulphurated heaps of earth which they had repeatedly doused with urine over a period of time. Their guns were also locally made; the stocks were painted red, black, and yellow, and were highly varnished. Their powder flasks were made of gayal horns, polished and beautifully inlaid with silver and ivory. The men smoked a pipe made from a joint of bamboo, lined with copper, while the women used a tiny hookah, also of copper, with a clay bowl. The pungent tobacco water which collects in the bottom of the women's hookah is called 'Tuibur' and was held in high

esteem among them as a preservative of the teeth and gums. Every man carried a small gourdful of it, and it was an act of common courtesy among them to offer it to an acquaintance or visitor to take a sip. They also drank as a beverage, fermented rice called 'zu'.

Characteristic Traits and Appearance:

The Pawi were traditionally very hospitable and generous towards their visitors and guests, even upon strangers from another village. They made sure they offered them the best they had in terms of food and it was a tradition to kill a chicken in their honour. They were very generous in offering them 'Zu' as well. The Pawi integrated all people and treated all peoples equally and without prejudice. Thus they enjoyed the trust of most of the Zo people from the Lushai Hills and the Burmese border. They had their own distinct language and songs which were broadly categorised into two groups- funeral songs and songs for other occasions. They bound their hair in a very high and lofty knot on top of their forehead as opposed to the Lushais who wore theirs in a knot at the back of their head. All women wore the same costume of a short chemise of white home-spun cotton covering the bosom, and a long petticoat of dark blue cotton cloth, reaching just below the knee. When out of doors, they wore fine cotton robes or cloths woven by themselves over the shoulder and head. The cloth is black, with brilliant red and yellow stripes. All these garments were made from locally grown cotton manufactured by the women of the household. The women bound their hair in smooth bands on each side of the face, fastening it in a knot at the back of the head. The men wore a

cloth round their waist the length of which ends in mid-thigh, and a mantle of cotton cloth over their shoulders. Both the sexes in stature were above the ordinary height of the hill men, and of a fairer complexion. Both men and women had their ears pierced and wore studs and earrings made from ivory or silver. They were also very fond of necklaces. A tiger's tooth was often hung around the neck as an ornament and was also believed to have magical properties. There are more than a hundred sub-tribes or groups among the Lai but all these groups speak the same language usually referred to as 'Thlantlang' or 'Lai Hawlh' with slight dialectical variations dependant on usage in different villages. Some of the bigger of these subtribes are Fanai, Chinzah, Zathang, Hrawmchhing, Khenglawt, Bawitlung, Hlawmchhing, Pang, Bawm, etc.

Dances:

The Pawi also have their own distinct cultural dances while some of them are quite similar to Mizo dances.

1. Tuakhatlak- this is one of the most spectacular of their dances and has been adopted by many non-Lai/ Pawi tribes, i.e, other tribes of Mizo. It was originally called 'Ruakhatlak'. 'Ruakha' in Lai means dance. Originally, it was not meant for merrymaking but performed at the event of death of a mother in childbirth. In pre-Christianity, Lai believed that the soul of the unfortunate woman who died in childbirth had to traverse a rough road where she could have been poked and pricked by thorns on either side. On her journey to the home of the spirits, she might also have to encounter enemies, as death in childbirth was considered disgraceful. By performing Ruakhatlak, the dancers assured her

soul of consolation and security. Its function was also to bid farewell to the departed soul.

2. Pawhlohtlawh- this is the most popular among their dances. It is performed on big occasions such as public feasts given by chiefs and other well-to-do called Khuangchawi, and in ceremonies performed in order to get the spirit of an animal killed in hunting into one's power after death, and also to protect oneself from evil consequences during this life, callae Sa ai. The steps are almost similar to one of the Mizo dances called Chai. Men and women make a big circle with their arms joined on the shoulders and sway together in rhythm.

3. Lamtleng- this dance is not a ritual dance and is not meant for special occasions so it is usually performed in places where public drinking was going on. While drinking they sat together forming a circle inside which the drummer sat and led the singing. One man or woman would stand up and dance while others remained seated. Every one took turns dancing for the duration of one song each. The dance step is not very different from the Lusei Chheihlam.

4. Ban thui lam- this is another dance that does not need any special occasion and can be danced freely to any song or music. Men and women join hands and dance in circle. Together they throw their arms to the front and then backwards while throwing one leg to the front.

5. Phiphuthai- this is a very important ritual dance performed on sacrificial ceremonies and communal feasts given by the chief. Two men play on the Pandean pipes and while another man beat the drum and another beat the gong to produce a sound to match the

dance moves. The player of the Pandean pipes lead the dance while the spectators stood around and the dancers dance within the circle formed by the spectators. When a tiger was killed in hunting and a ceremony was going to be performed on that account three dancers would be especially requested in advance to perform this dance.

6. Chawnglaizawn- it is a dance of homage performed in funerals by a group of youngsters with proportionate male and female ratio. In olden days, it was performed on the day when a chief or a person of prominence died. The function of this dance was not to mourn but to honour the deceased, to commemorate the achievement of the person for his/her greatness or prowess.

7. Sarlamkai- when enemies were killed their heads were carried home as a trophy so that celebration could take place. This dance was especially for this occasion only. It celebrates the victory of the hunters. It is also known as ‘Solakia’ to the Maras.

8. Rawkhatlak- the most illustrious of all the Mizo dances called ‘Cheraw’ actually originated from this dance, and the Pawi performed this dance to bid farewell to women who died in childbirth or during the last six months of pregnancy. They believed the spirits would go in peace after this dance had been performed.

Lai Women:

Since they did not have *Zawlbuk*, all the young unmarried men would sleep over at a young lady’s house. The women, both married and unmarried women lived a considerably carefree life because they had the upper hand within the family and there was a saying that went something like this- ‘The married woman who

does not have mastery over her own husband is not a real/complete woman.’ They did not have to work much and had plenty of leisure time unlike Lusei girls and women. They were not expected to work in the fields with the men, so their main tasks were collecting woods, fetching water from the river, and weaving. At night the young ladies freely entertained the young men who came to their house for courtship. They would play guitar and sing with the boys without a care in the world. They also indulged in drinking freely with the men. Young unmarried women, mothers and grandmothers all indulged in drinking the fermented rice beer, ‘zu’. The married ones even went out in groups to join the men at a public place called ‘zu-hmun’ where drinking ‘zu’ was carried on as a form of socializing, which was while their husbands watched over the children at home. Even if their wives danced and made merriment with other men at ‘zu-hmun’ the husbands were proud of them and were not excessively jealous. But when it came to communal feasts, the girls and women were very shy and reluctant to join in. They did not take part in public meetings which were called and presided over by the Chief and his Elders. But women definitely ruled in household matters. In courting young maidens there was no discrimination between rich or poor. Any young man could woo any girl he liked.

Occupation:

Zo people shifted their fields frequently due to rapid erosion of the soil. The most important crop cultivated was paddy, followed by millet and cereal crops. Since their main food was rice, every family tried to produce enough rice to last them at least a year until

the next reaping season. For them 'food' virtually meant rice. This was of course a very tough mission. They were also said to be acquainted with the method of terrace cultivation common among the Himalayan tribes; they used a large heavy hoe in breaking up the land for seed. Agricultural land was evenly distributed and a plot was given to each family after the Chief had chosen his plot. Millet was also grown extensively for brewing alcoholic beverages. Crop was grown for the manufacture of their clothes and beddings. They did not reap the grain with a sickle but plucked the ears by hand. Field labour, as a general rule, was performed by the men: only the wives of very poor men laboured in the fields. During the rainy season mutual help and assistance in weeding the crop was given; each one took his turn to help in his neighbour's jhum/field; no hoeing was done; the crop had merely to be kept clear from weeds by hand labour, and an ample return was obtained. If there was excessive rain, however, the cotton crop was liable to be spoilt, as the young plants die from too much water. Sometimes the whole region suffered severely from the visitations of rats. They arrived in swarms, and swept everything before them, devouring the corn and emptying the granaries of the hill people.

Rearing cattle and poultry was another occupation but they were not for commercial purposes. Keeping domestic animals was also very common. They reared such domesticated animals as the gayal, the cow, buffalo, goat, dog, cat, pig, and the common fowl. Long-haired varieties of the cat, dog and goat are found among the independent tribes of the hill people. These animals were kept beneath the house where the earth was flattened. Full grown

domesticated bull-gayals or mithans were very valuable and were expensive. But again, they were hardly sold for commercial purposes. They played an important role in sacrificial ceremonies and marriages. In marriages, they were also offered as the price for the bride by the groom's family. Mithun was the most important domestic animal, and the wealth of a man was judged by the number of mithuns he owned.

One custom of interest that was prevalent throughout the hills was the hierarchical relation of servant and master, or slavery. However, the servants in the hills are not the same as what we generally understand by term 'servant' today, which means a person doing menial service for a certain wage. On the contrary, they were mostly debtor-slaves. Certain villagers borrowed money from their Chief or some other well-to-do individual, and gave one of their children or a female to serve as a servant until the debt should be paid or cancelled. This service took the place of interest on the money lent, with no interest being payable; but the creditor was bound to release the slave on the repayment of the original sum borrowed. The condition of these so-called slaves was not vastly different from that of the free people. They were treated as members of the creditor's family, and were never exposed to harsh treatment. They could not be sold or transferred to another owner. This kind of slavery was of the mildest type and was the deliberately adopted custom of the people, not a bondage imposed by force.

Customary Laws Regarding Marriage and Divorce:

Inter-marriages between the Pawi and the Lakher were common both in the Chin Hills and in the Mizo hills, and even more

so in some particular villages like Chapui, Chakhang, Chhualung, Ainak, Siata of the Lakhers and Bualpui, Lungtian, Fangkuh, Rutkual of the Pawis. Marriages were a communal affair, and all the villagers were automatically invited when there was a wedding.

When a young man wished to marry a girl from the same village, two emissaries, usually middle-aged or older married men from other families, would be sent to the girl's house to ask for her hand. The first emissary was paid Rs.3, and the second one Rs.2. If the girl was from another village, the emissaries were paid Rs.5 and Rs. 3 respectively. They also had to take along some *zu* and present a bottle to each of the leaders or Chiefs of every village they crossed on their way or they would not be permitted to enter that village. Weddings were held in high esteem among the Lai/Pawi and matrimony was considered almost sacred. The ceremonies were performed and observed very solemnly. There were two types of weddings called 'Puanparkai' and 'Ah'. In 'Puanparkai', there were elaborate celebrations, and many animals were killed to feed the entire community. After the feast, the bride was escorted by her parents and her friends to her new husband's home where she will reside with all the in-laws. The path to her husband's house would be completely carpeted with various *puans* for the bride to step upon, hence the term, 'Puanparkai'. Divorce was also not unheard of. When the girl wished to leave her husband's house and terminate the marriage, she took with her all the property she had brought as dowry and she returned the money that was paid as the bride price. This kind of divorce is called 'sumchhuah'. On the other hand, when the wish for divorce is from the man's side he

can simply order her to leave his house empty handed or otherwise depending on their terms of settlement. ‘Ah’ was more or less a similar practice of marriage, but the celebrations were even more lavish and was most often performed for daughters of the Chiefs or eminent persons of the village. In this type of marriage, the festivities often continued well into the next day at the bridegroom’s house.

Language:

One of the most important factors that sets the Lai apart from other Mizo groups is their distinctive dialect which also goes by the name ‘Lai’ or ‘Lai Hawlh’ or less commonly, ‘Thlantlang’. Lai-speaking groups are scattered in Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh. The Lai script which is in Roman alphabet was introduced in Chin hills of Myanmar by colonial administrators and gradually modified by the Christian missionaries in the early part of the twentieth century and was adopted in Lai Autonomous District Council of Mizoram. In India, speakers of the Lai language are mostly concentrated in the southern part of Mizoram, followed by Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Outside Mizoram, Bangladesh and Myanmar have a huge number of Lai-speaking population. Due to the militarization of Myanmar government, a large number of Lai speaking populations from Myanmar have migrated to European countries, America, and other parts of South East Asia.

Lai is considered the richest dialect among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups in Mizoram. It is rich not only in vocabulary, idioms and phrases, but also in grammatical features. Besides the use of adjectives and adverbs, Lai is particularly rich in vowel and

consonant sounds. Many of the phrases and idioms in mainstream Lushai language, also known as ‘Duhlian Tawng’, have their origins in Lai. The nature and characteristics of many Lai folktales are similar to Mizo folktales, although there are many specific folktales attached to the Lai culture. One of the most popular folktales of Lai, “Uichuur”, about two distinct characters of Uichuur and Nahaia is also equally popular in Mizo oral tradition where the name “Uichuur” has been changed to “Chhurbura”. Like most folktales, the story is full of humour and moral lessons.

Recently, the Lai people have realized the need to promote their language, but unfortunately it has already become an endangered language of Mizoram. Although the Government of India granted the right to protect (Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India) as well as to promote the Lai language and culture, more and more of the population have adopted Duhlian/Mizo Tawng as their lingua franca. Those who use Lai as primary language today are generally confined to people living in isolated villages and among the older generations. It is believed that at least 85% of Lai population in Mizoram now speak Duhlian as their daily communication. But there is no statistic account to show the reality. However, the above observation may not be an exaggeration since all important public functions in Churches, festivals, political campaigns, and even District Council Assembly sessions are conducted mostly in Duhlian rather than Lai. There have been public debates among the Church leaders, scholars, and politicians regarding revitalization of the language, and attempts are being made to popularize its use in the domain of the Church. For instance, the

Church insists on reciting the Lord's prayer in Lai. Delivering sermons in Lai is still a challenge in many parts of Lai Autonomous District Council.

Health

There is not much information that can be accounted for regarding the health care of the older generations of the Pawi/Lai. In general, their health care condition can be referred to as generally low, especially before the colonization by the British. In spite of such low health care condition, their health status was found to be surprisingly good.

Before and even after some time after the British colonization, the main remedies for sicknesses and diseases were the local medicines improvised and sacrifices/ceremonies conducted by local priests and quakes. They did not seem to have too much medical knowledge, and it would be very easy to assume that mortality was quite high, and life expectancy short. However, on the contrary, the people of the olden days seemed healthier than those of today. Maternal mortality and death of youngsters was quite rare. Gynaecological diseases were not very common. Migration to newer places however took its toll among the elderly, and is believed to have led to a higher mortality among the elders. Young people however seemed to thrive from migration, and there was improvement in their physical growth. Infant mortality was high; this is because circumstances often did not allow special care for infants, and there was a high incidence of babies suffering and dying from diarrhoea, fever and chest infections as weaning and

complementary feeding were done early. The surviving babies however were strongly built, healthy, and well-developed.

One of the reasons why the the Pawi/Lai of the olden days are considered to have had better health status is that they consumed clean liquor. The liquor they consumed was locally brewed from rice, and is said to be very clean and healthy. One type of such rice beer called ‘zufang’ is said to be beneficial for the body; a nursing mother who drinks zufang recovers quicker and does not suffer from any complications. Diet also played an important part. In olden times, it was not that they excessive food, but whatever they consumed was their own harvest, fresh, organic, and wholesome. The third factor is migration. Even though there was higher mortality among the elderly when they migrated to new areas, the youth and children benefited much from it. There was fresh air and cleaner water supplies, and the waste and pollution from the older settlement area/village was left behind which presumably contributed to improvement of their health conditions. They also selected places which they thought healthy for migration. They always went to places where there was good and wholesome water supply, and they maintained springs/wells in pristine conditions. Another reason for their better health condition is that, they led relatively stress-free lives away from material worries. Their habit of drinking wine and cheering themselves up is an important factor that relieved them. There may be several other reasons, and there is no proof that the ones mentioned are the true reasons, but they important considerations.

Since their main occupation was jhum cultivation, they were all manual labourers. The men, apart from their main work at the jhum, had hunting and spending nights out in the wilderness as their main occupation. They, however, did not suffer because of such strenuous activity. The women were mostly exempted from jhum work, but they worked at home cooking, cleaning rice, fetching water from springs/wells, weaving, collecting firewood, and so on which kept their body fit and healthy.

It is seen that the women had better health and higher longevity than the men. The reason why women are thought to have higher longevity than the men is because of records obtained from recent grave stones. Besides, in different villages, it is found that elderly women live longer than elderly men. Women had less strenuous physical activities, and perhaps this was a factor. However, heavy consumption of liquor led to health problems in some cases. In general, the life expectancy of women was 70-90 years, whereas in men it was 60-80 years. Apart from this, special cases have been found among them with people living to 90-100 years, some even exceeding 100 years of life.

It has been mentioned that infant mortality is high. Those who died before reaching a year are called 'hlamzuih', also called 'hlamzuk'. The highest mortality is found among those in the age group of 0-5 years, while mortality was rather low among the 6-12 years age group. Among those in between 13-50 years, there was a very low incidence of death, diseased or healthy. Deaths other than due to accidents or childbirth were considered surprising. They had a superstition that if they happen to find a fallen tree on

the start of the route to their jhum, a youth from among the members of their community/village is likely to die. Death among those above 50 years of age was quite common, the reason for which was mainly due to extreme exhaustion from their days work, and some from diseases.

What has been mentioned about does not in any sense try to say that they were disease-free, the Pawi/Lai of the olden days did suffer from diseases like dysentery, measles, malaria, influenza, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, and other common diseases. They also suffered from diarrhoea and gastrointestinal problems. Epidemics were rather rare. It was noticed that epidemics were common only after the return of men who were sent to fight wars in France during the Second World War. Respiratory infections were also quite common. Among the diseases known then, the commonly fatal ones were severe fever, severe diarrhoea, and tuberculosis. After the epidemics, fatalities were seen in years when the epidemics reached its peak.

As mentioned earlier, the main remedies were sacrifices/ceremonies, and local improvisations were practiced after the 'Vailen'. 'Vailen' refers to a period when non-Mizo soldiers from neighbouring states, specifically Assam and Bengal, following orders from the Central Government of India, placed Mizoram under military siege. These improvisations are still practised in the modern day in places where qualified medical doctors are not available. Sacrifices and improvised medicines were quite popular, and folklore has it that they were quite useful too.

Here are a few such improvisations: for stomach ache, lichens and mosses that grow on the sides of larger boulders and river

stones; for diarrhoea, the leaf of a small shrub that resembles a miniature gooseberry (known in Mizo language as *mitthi sunhlu* or *mitthi silhlu* or *mitthi khuhhluh*) which has to be grounded and the juice obtained thereof; for worm infestations, the seed of a fruit called ‘hnaahu’ in Mizo, grounded and soaked in water to get its essence; for those seized by the evil spirit known as *khawhring*, to cut their big toe and smear the blood obtained thereof on the navel accompanied by a verbal threat to the spirit.

For major injuries, the ground juice of leaf a certain kind of creeping hogplum; for burn, they had two remedies: one for burn with hot water, to smear a yellowish substance that is found in the Sih river which is called ‘chhamek’ (also called ‘hniar ek’); for direct burn with fire, ground dry goat dung pellets and red soil. For fractures, apart from warm water bath, grated wild-goat horn is applied. In infected sores due to poisonous hairs of a poisonous caterpillar, there is quick recovery by rubbing with a traditional hair clip made of copper called ‘darsamkillh’ in fresh injuries; however, if the sore has taken time and pus is already formed, the wound is bandaged along with the remnants of fermented rice brewed for beer.

Apart from these, roasted egg wrapped in clerodendron leaf is consumed in fever, the bark of a particular tree, grounded and the juice obtained thereof is also used. For dysentery, the sap of a thorny cotton tree that grows in bigger size, and locally brewed liquor is a good remedy. Liquor/rice is also used in snake bites.

These medicines mentioned are greatly improvised and made-up for the need of the hour, but the people of the olden days benefit

much from them. They even claim to benefit from the sacrifices/ ceremonies, and if not, they blamed themselves for such failures. They believed that the one they pray to is not pleased well enough, and they simply repeated the procedures.

From this brief overview of the Pawi/ Lai community, we may understand the values and ethos that come together to weave the intricate fabric of their social and communal life. Many aspects have not been thoroughly covered in the present study, but from whatever has been highlighted, we may conclude that in many ways they are similar to other groups under the umbrella of 'Mizo' in many ways, and yet at the same time, display some unique features. Of these many aspects, the position and status of women in the traditionally patriarchal society is especially remarkable and may merit special focus and study in the future.

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The Construction of Mizo Childhood: Past and Present

Kristina Z.Zama

It is often stated and agreed upon that children are the ‘future’. Songs emphasise upon ‘teach your children well’ and it can be claimed without much opposition that ‘childhood’ is universally acknowledged as the most important phase in a person’s life. It determines not only the individual’s adulthood but also the much larger and more important social and cultural impact on the society to which the child belongs to. All over the world scholars from different disciplines debate on various aspects of nature versus nurture, on the role of play and education upon the child and on what a society can do to raise well adjusted children. Whether it is sociology, anthropology, history or psychology, its scholars have an opinion on children and their childhood resulting in the existence of an enormous body of work.

In the context of Mizo culture and literature, it is important to note that the tradition springs from an oral one. And so play songs, games, folk tales and jokes, are meant to be performative rather than read, practised rather than preached. The books available on mizo children and childhood are more of collections of these stories and games by historians and interested writers. One such person is Pi. Nuchhungi. Her book titled *Mizo Naupang: Infiamna leh A hla te'* was first brought out in 1965 and reprinted in 1994. It is an

extensive archival collection of play songs, games and how they are performed/ played. This particular book has often been used as a source for inclusion in school curriculum and syllabus, and also as a how-to guide book for the curious as to how certain games were played in the past. A Welsh missionary, Frederick J. Sandy in 1919, reprinted in 1926, translated various folk tales called *Legends of Old Lushai*², intending them to be read by children themselves or read to children as children stories, rather than a text commenting on the culture. H.Zoramthanga's book published in 2010 titled *Kan Naupan Lai*³, or literally 'Our Childhood' is interesting in what it has to offer. The author gives an extensive illustration of his days as a young boy in the rural villages in the 1960s. Although he romanticizes the pre-insurgency Mizoram, drawing an idyllic image of the past, his intention is to draw a comparison of childhood existence and experience with the present 21st century urban Mizo child. Historians like P.S Dahrawka and B.Lalthangliana have also written books about traditional Mizo communities in the pre-Christian context, while Sangkima has written a book on the modern 20th-21st century Mizo society where he adds a small paragraph on urban Mizo children. What is missing though, are critical writings on the treatment of Mizo 'childhood' per se, especially in relation with the larger Mizo culture. As stated earlier, writings that exist on the subject of childhood is in the realm of archiving, recording and information-giving rather than as an in-depth analysis and study of the idea of childhood in the Mizo psyche, or as an interesting text on the issue of identity construction and 'Mizoness'. They do not necessarily attempt to tackle any question

regarding what is meant when one mentions the word *Mizona* or *Mizoness* and how the notion of childhood and treatment of children can shed light about a culture and its people, nor is there any creation of (new) theory or a hypothesis about Mizo childhood and their cultural construction especially when one compares the complete difference of the pre-Christian Mizo child in the traditional set-up, to that of the post-Christian child.

It is therefore the objective of this article to critically analyse this aspect of Mizo concept of 'childhood', to question 'how', 'why' and 'where' this construction and creation of a Mizo child takes place. To achieve this objective, functionalism and post-colonialism will be employed but not exclusively, to approach our analysis of Mizo concept of childhood, and also deconstruct how and in what ways the cultural child is created within the ambit of the Mizo psyche in general. Functionalism in itself is a theory that helps understand why 'the way things are', that customs and rituals are functional in so far as they are useful and encourage survival of a culture. But the reason that functionalism is employed is the fact that it innately allows involvement of a historical revisionism. It allows itself as a theory to be used to revise how the way 'things were' and simultaneously look at how 'things are'. It is with the obvious understanding that collective life stems from a larger human nature whether psychological, sociological, anthropological or historical that I approach this topic which can be read very much as a universal issue. It is from this point that this article takes off; to revise Mizo history in an objective manner where everything may not be as self-revelatory but open to new ways of 'seeing' rather than blindly accepting and attributing history to 'tradition'.

India under the British from 16th century upto the 19th century has a completely separate and different history as compared to races in the North East region of the country. Of course, Mizos' in general, including the large populations currently spread out in Manipur, Tripura and Burma share very similar migration histories and folktales, although the telling of them may vary. Like other races, Mizo culture and folk-life too, drastically changed when it came into contact with the man from the plains and the white administrators in the 19th century. The current tendency of history books is to romanticize both the pre Christian and post Christian Mizo society. The former because it is mainly constructed on cultural memory, oral history through folk songs, tales, myths and legends of yore, on questions of cultural identity and the basic human desire to cast histories into stone; and the latter because it stands on the self conscious, self aware, colonial and Christian identity of being biblically enlightened and therefore the 'chosen' people of God. This second interpretation is always fraught with a sense of thankfulness and gratitude on the one hand and a sense of identification with the past cultural identity on the other, of being a unique people even before the coming of the missionaries. In many cases, people are of the consensus that this dual identity of Mizo and Christian is not in conflict; that the two identities have coalesced into each other without hegemony of one over the other. But the hypothesis here is that one identity has taken over that of the other and thus, 'childhood' is therefore held up as the screen, the mirror that will reflect how the concept and construction of 'Mizoneess' too has changed.

Traditionally, Mizo culture did not refer to any one particular age as the invisible line that divided a child from an adult nor did it have any specific age designated to indicate when a child could be called an adult. This metamorphosis from child to adult depended on a series of tasks at hand, the child's physiology, capability, and peer age which were mostly decided by elders of a village. Certain tasks were given to children who were taught according to their approximate age group. Traditional Mizo society was characterized as strictly patriarchal and therefore gender roles were rigid and fixed. In this matter then, the experience of childhood was functionally different in boys and girls, although *pawnto*⁴ involved both boys and girls on an equal platform⁵ without much gender discrimination. And because of its patriarchy, adult life too strictly tailored all rules and regulations, customs and rituals around it. The practice of patriarchy was seen as performing a functional role especially in the context of early centuries of geographical isolation, of tribes that hunted and lived in thick danger both from wild animals and neighbouring raiding parties which was characterized by frequent wars. Such cultural practices, rituals, customs and beliefs were therefore taught to children through play, songs, tales and community participation to ensure survival of the clan, village, cultural practices and the chief's legacy.

The protection of the village and household, the hunting for meat and the raiding of villages had always been within the ambit of men, strictly guarded by codes of conduct. Women on the other hand existed as an appendix to their fathers and husbands, to see to the smooth functioning of the household and healthy care of the

child/children in the family. Gender roles were strictly adhered to in both public and private space. Private concerns came second to social responsibilities and obligations either towards the community or towards the chief in particular. The chief whose agency was arbiter and sovereign head *owned* the village and therefore the village and members within it were his subjects and family and were all tied to his selfhood and identity as chief. In this sense, all members of a clan/village functioned as a group and not as separate entities. There was no concept of individuality⁶ especially in relation to communality. So when the stronger more able bodied men and women left to work the fields, the older children, grandparents and other adults took on their role as caretakers of children of the village. Because the village functioned in this manner, care-taking and teaching of children became a communal responsibility although children were also taught gender roles and communality in their homes. An unsaid contract between people of the village was forged that was based on its functionality and filiations. Everybody, from the chiefs elders to men of the community, from women to young adults contributed to the taking care of the children and their childhood. The role of a teacher did not belong to any particular type or class of people but all generations and ages had an agency as teacher of custom, tradition and cultural practices. Hence, a Mizo child and his/her experience made him/her a communal responsibility. Children grew up in the close scrutiny and watchful eye of the adult/communal gaze. Respect for elders became a natural rule in the child's world view because he/she could potentially learn something from any elder, whether it is a joke, how to make a

catapult, how to sharpen a dao or decapitate a chicken or how to make a pattern on a shawl or how to spin cotton.

When children played, the games they played were not solely for the sake of play itself. Games took on the role of a performance especially when elders were watching from a distance. An example can be given here of a game played only by boys called ‘*sakei lem chan*’ or ‘pretending to play a tiger’.

The boy who plays the *sakei*/tiger ties a long piece of cloth to his waist, indicating a tail, starts crawling on all fours. He pretends to stalk a group of boys. He suddenly pounces upon one of his ‘victims’, pretends to impale him and drags him to the edge of the village. The other boys run after the *sakei* hoping to save their friend. The *sakei* runs away, while the other boys rally each other to ‘hunt’ the predator. The *sakei* crouches in his nest and upon hearing the approaching ‘hunting party’ runs away. The boys pretend to feel the warm ground where the *sakei* must have sat upon and then, they proceed to chant a challenge to the *sakei* :

Sakei bu ka luah ka luah!

A bu laizawl wawi sawmthum ka luah ka luah!

Tiger’s nest I take I take!

Thirty times its nest I take!⁷

The ‘hunted’ animal would also sometimes be a gayal where the game was then called *in-selem chaih* where a young boy would hold two logs of wood over his head to represent the gayal and the other boys would *chaih* or spar with it trying to tame the animal in simulation of what young adult men of the village would do with a

live gayal. Such games were played exclusively by boys because of its rough character. When such play took place there would inevitably be a *valupa*⁸ with the group of playing boys who would supervise their play. In the distance, the watching elders of the community would witness the physical sporting. The dual function of the games would ensure that the young boys who were aware that they were being watched, performed their roles to the hilt, not just for comic effect but also to show their physical strength and dexterity in tackling, wrestling, running and ‘hunting’. The elders’ gaze enabled these boys to find their selfhood, their masculine identities and purpose in the community while, in the watching, patriarchy is further concretised and released as the only authority and truth. Furthermore, elders would mark out boys likely enough to take a title in future and therefore bring accolades to his chief, clan and village. A child was trained from a very early age to be sociable, participative and giving of one’s time. In the ‘giving of one’s time’ the individual gave his effort and energy so as to be *tlawmngai*.⁹ The Mizo child, short, podgy and stout hearted was thus raised as a child of the community. An attachment and bond was built between child and culture/community, where the tradition and community took on the role of parent. As long as a boy continued to sleep under his father’s roof, the boy’s identity as a member of the clan was in its nascent stage and incomplete. Probably because this split was seen as an inevitability whereby his identity as a clan member would override his filial one and his identity could achieve fruition only once he was given entrance into the *zawlbuk*. But once he was given entrance into the boys’ dormitory or *zawlbuk*,

his identity and loyalties underwent a creation of an identity that was dyad in nature. This dyad/dual identity came with patriotic affiliation and loyalty to his chief and clan over that of his family, although his family is not necessarily seen as separate from that of his clan and village. This was most evident in the *zawlbuk*¹⁰ culture, its functioning, hierarchy and structure under the totemic and emblematic nature of the *zawlbuk*, which further contributed to the child-clan/village attachment.

Childhood was transient as a child had to make himself useful in the household as well as in the community. H. Zoramthanga in his book *Kan Naupan Lai*¹¹ recollects:

“When we were little, as children we were quite helpful in the house doing chores. When it was evening and my parents had not returned from the jhoom, I would cook the rice, although it was many times either half-cooked or burnt. I was always in a rush to rejoin my friends at play but I would remember to do my duties.”

A Mizo child was a contributing member in every sense of the word when it came to the smooth running of a household and were acknowledged as so. Children were made to perform certain functions in the home and in the community at large, always keeping in mind that they were children that needed guidance but also needed their time for play. A child was taught to be *tangkai* or helpful, *fel* or obedient, *nula* or big/grown-up girl and *tlangval* or big/grown-up boy. The need, use and function of a child also shifted according to the occasion whether at a funeral, wedding or communal feast. Therefore, a fluid non-fixed entity defined the child's existence. A child performed various roles such as a messenger, a delivery person,

baby-sitter, home stay, running errands and to generally help around the house. As children are expected to do, many of these chores would have been performed in a great hurry so as to join friends at play. A common song sung to indicate this was:

Ni aw sa as!

Vaihlo pho nan,

Buh pho nan!

Ni aw sa sa!

Sun do shine do shine and glow!

Dry our rice and tobacco!¹²

The child was also the go-between for their parents who referred to each other not by name but by the name of the oldest child. For example, if the child's name was *Mawii*, then the father would call his wife as "*Mawii nu!*" or "Mawii's mother!" and "*Mawii pa!*" or "Mawii's father!" when a wife had to call on her husband. This can be read as a way of showing love and affection towards a first born, but more importantly, this did not necessarily have any indication or reference to the child per se. It merely indicated the neutral ground that children occupied in the home, between parents themselves, and also between parent and child. The non- threatening, symbol of union between parents was obviously the child, and so, calling each other in this way indicated the affectionate relationship and equation between husband and wife, while also freeing them from having to show affection. Overt show of affection was and still is not common in mizo culture. Whether it is the trait of being reserved, or inhibition of showing emotions or the traditional concepts surrounding the idea of

masculinity and tough hearted seems to have had a direct root and origin in experiencing detachment with a parent at such a young age. The strong attachment with the community and identification of community as a collective parent seems to have resulted in affection being projected onto the culture and community as a whole with specific concentration on communality and clan/ethnic/racial solidarity above all else. Although in the modern context individualism and personal space have equal importance in one's life, the emphasis is still on social participation, whether through the Young Mizo Association where youth of 14 to 15 years and above are expected to participate actively and involve themselves in YMA activities of staying up through the night for the wake in a funeral home, distribute tea, giving time and physical effort in cleaning the neighbourhood when called upon, go for grave digging or even attend rescue missions which traditionally lasts for 7 days; or the YMA *chhang* which is the younger adolescent group who basically give their time in service of the community. The intention is to somehow carry forward the traditional ideologies of *tlawmngaihna*, communality and continuation of imbibing solidarity and loyalty to ones culture and people. These associations are all inclusive and apart from being a torch bearer for good social conduct, it also is a platform for the young Mizos to learn cultural dance and traditional songs. Since the *zawlbuk* or boys dormitory no longer exists, the YMA is the only surviving association that includes children and young adults in promoting and propagating cultural practices and customs in practice today.

The patriarchal set up of Mizo traditional existence can also be said to have influenced quality of childhood especially in the

case of boys. Because the date of a child's birth was not recorded, the biological and physiological indicators were applied in teaching a child certain cultural ways¹³. In the case of boys, pubic hair of a young boy was twirled around a twig to measure his readiness for physical work and emotional readiness in learning various things¹⁴. Whether this was done in jest or as a practical indicator to the simple mind must have revealed an approximation on a child's biological stage.

Before the boys could actually sleep in the boys' dormitory, it took many years to prepare them for the honoured role as members of the *zawlbuk*. They were placed under the mentorship and care of a *valupa* as mentioned earlier. The boys would start with simple tasks like collecting small logs of wood in the nearby forest to be used as firewood in the *zawlbuk*, collecting long banana leaves for a community feast to be used as communal plates, run errands, carry messages or were sent to collect *khaukhurh*¹⁵ wood. These experiences are again recollected in H. Zoramthanga's book where he says:

“There would be a lot of noise coming from the grave site where young men were busy digging the grave. A young man would dig once and before he could continue, the next boy would jump into the pit and dig. There would be at least two to three boys digging at the same time and the rest all vying to take the spade away so as to relieve them! Likewise, they would all compete to clear the dug up earth. When this was going on, some of the young men took us younger boys into the nearby forest to collect the *khaukhurh* wood that would be used in the grave.”

(*Kan Naupan Lai*, pg-94.)

The boys would have been rewarded with a comment “*in van tlangval em!*”, or “What helpful young men you all are!” Such comments would have been reinforcing of what would be termed as behaviour that was *tlawmngai*. What were the other activities that young boys experienced before entering a *zawlbuk* and into a much more disciplined and regimented life? Playing of folk games and a general passing of time in the forests looking for birds to capture, catapulting competitions, going to the river to swim, exploring the village boundaries, etc., and running of errands and completing chores would have been how young boys spent their time before *zawlbuk*. These folk games played were generally of competitive nature to decide the fastest, strongest or most cunning. The games did not involve using of any complex material but children used what was available around them. *Inbaisiak* was a hopping contest, *inbansiak* was to test who could last the longest or who could reach the farthest along a horizontal bough, *kalchhet* involved walking on bamboo stilts which often led to balancing abilities and even running in them. *Kaih-bu* was spinning of a top while *vuk-vuk pawh vir* involved a thin wooden disc pierced in two places near its centre threaded with a thin cotton band, and then revolving it rapidly to cut things.

The chief, the village elders and the *Valupa* decided when it was time for the boys to enter the *zawlbuk*. The Mizos’ do not have a ritual that can be termed as a particular rite of passage ceremony nor a celebratory event to be observed like the Balinese teeth filing or the Samoan tattoo ceremonies or *Pe ’a*, to indicate

masculinity. What the Mizos' did have were a series of rites that initiated them to another identity, whether from boyhood to manhood or from an ordinary member of a clan to an honoured person with a title. To make my point, I will highlight an essay by Arnold Van Gennep called "The Rites of Passage".¹⁶ In the essay, Van Gennep offers us the discovery that virtually all rituals share the same tripartite sequential structure: separation, transition and incorporation. He also follows this with an attempt to prove the validity of his claim by referencing various rituals and ceremonies from around the world seen as milestones in a person's life. In the Mizo context there does not exist one particular 'rite' performed as one event. A boy goes through series of events and milestones that can be termed as 'rites' but the tripartite separation, transition, incorporation structure isn't incorrect in this case. When the boy leaves his home and his mother's side, a 'separation' takes place. Although the 'transition' period is a long process that begins much before the actual 'separation', the 'incorporation' into the *zawlbuk*, the physical, spatial, emotional and experiential changes occur universally in the case of Mizo boys in the traditional past. The sleeping in the dormitory, although a 'separation' from his father's house, is 'transition' in itself in context to the larger community. This 'transition' is an important indicator of the larger role he is expected to play as a child of the community and as a future cultural symbol of Mizo manhood and patriarchy. This 'transition' is further functional in his pursuance of title taking and seeking of a selfhood and establishing future hierarchy within the village and more importantly amongst his clansmen. The distance of time that it takes a young boy between

a 'separation' and 'incorporation', or the period of 'transition' out from the other end of his training in the *zawlbuk* is another fluid region that depends from one individual to the other which is lifelong, unless and until an individual takes a title. No particular ceremony is played out or performed after an 'incorporation' marking the end of 'transition'. Even when a young man is said to be given the task of teaching younger boys, he himself has much to learn from his elders, while even an elder finds his purpose in the dormitory. Therefore, for a young boy, entry into the *zawlbuk* pronounced his existence and identity within his clan, and it was no wonder this exclusive club functioned on its bond as brotherhood.

As for girls, a great part of her day was certainly spent helping around the house with chores, babysitting younger siblings or carrying the young baby on her back, or at play with her friends. One cannot say for certain that an initiation rite existed except in the time of marriage. But girls underwent a series of training geared towards making someone a good wife someday. A young girl's life in the past was a busy one. She helped her mother cook, clean, collect firewood, look after the domestic animals, and fetch water from the village stream for the entire family. According to historian B. Lalthangliana, menstruation would have marked her as eligible for a married life and therefore capable of bearing children¹⁷. I imagine her menstruation would have also marked her as separate from the asexual world and therefore expected to incorporate herself into the adult world of conducting herself with awareness of her own sexuality. Thus, she would become a member of one sexual group as opposed to the other. As far as historians are aware of,

girls were married relatively early because their social activity would have been much limited as compared to their male counterparts; once a young girl of around fourteen or fifteen years knows how to run a household, she would simply carry these skills over the threshold into her husband's household, not entirely requiring her to learn any new skill, apart from bearing him children. Also the stage of puberty and menstruation for a girl is much more private as compared to that of a boy who exhibits more visible signs of puberty. In the Mizo household, such an attainment of a stage would have been handled more with subtlety rather than as a ritual announcing or celebration of the passage into womanhood. There have been no references to the sacred or profane in relation to menstruation of a Mizo girl.

Of course, although a child's sex was predominantly used as an indicator and means to create the gendered version of the adult world upon children, the practice of *pawnto*¹⁸ in this respect was inclusive of both boys and girls. The singing, wrestling, playing and storytelling sessions took place under the light of the moon where neighbourhood children met without much adult interference or supervision, except when they were called to end their play. Performing of gender roles by children in their play, gender naturalizing and social conformity on the basis of gender boundaries was very much played out in the public and private space. Apart from issues of gender and its roles, the issue of sex and sexuality of a child was an ambiguous yet interesting matter in the Mizo context. Folktales and their renderings have revealed that references to the act of sex are almost always glossed over whereas words referring

to the male and female genitals have been used quite liberally without any anxiety. In the case of the folktale *Chemtatrawta*¹⁹, the storyteller does not gloss over the word testicles/ *til* but is used to add to the comic effect within the tale. The element of surprise and pleasures of laughter rises when a prawn stings *Chemtatrawta* in his testicles while busy sharpening his knife. As for the act of sex itself, words and meanings referring to the act of sex, especially ones involving participation of children in early adolescence are heavily glossed over. When such censorship began to occur in the oral telling of Mizo tales, one is unable to uncover owing to the oral nature of Mizo history. The tale *Chawngchili*²⁰ tells us a tale of a father and his two daughters who were both well loved. When the younger of the two sisters, Chemtei rapidly loses weight and looks increasingly gaunt, their father becomes suspicious. After all, he has been packing their lunch so they could share it together in the *jhum*. When he questions his younger daughter the reason, he learns that instead of sharing the lunch together, *Chawngchili* would invite her lover, a *rulpui* to eat with her while expecting her younger sister to wait outside. In anger the father employs a plot to end the relationship that ends with him killing the *rulpui*.²¹ He cuts off the testicles of the *rulpui* and buries it in the hearth while burying the rest of the body parts of the *rulpui* under the *jhum* hut. When she realises that her lover is missing, after much searching she discovers the cut up pieces under the hut, including his testicles in the hearth. Because she loved him dearly, she stuffs the severed testicles into her vagina and is soon made pregnant. On returning home, when crossing the threshold of her house, *Chawngchili* has no choice but

to cross over her father who is lying on the floor. When stepping over her father, she drops the testicles on his chest. Horrified at discovering what his daughter has done, he kills her by cutting her into pieces including all the baby snakes that crawl out of her. One escapes into a hole in the ground.

Chawngchili's lover is represented as a 'snake'. When the adult teller replaces the sexual liaison not with a human but with an animal, he/she frees himself/herself from having to explain the nature of the relationship. Also children understand the character of the snake, as a snake. How the symbol of the snake attaches itself to the adult mind is interesting because the 'snake' represents a phallic symbol. The association with the imagination of the snake as slimy, slithering creature and wily natured is significant²². Also the *rulpui* here, I imagine is a python. In the Mizo cultural context, *rulpui* means a really 'large snake', a python, greatly feared and respected in the dense forests of the Mizo country. It is given the distinction of being among the five mighty animals that a man has to kill in his lifetime to take the title of a *pasaltha* or a warrior and gain passage into paradise or *pialral*. In the telling of the tale, the actual act of sex itself is circumvented by the teller. We only know that the snake and Chawngchili 'share' a meal together while making the younger sister wait outside the jhum hut. The 'eating' indicates the sexual act wherein the younger sister is not only excluded from, but made to vacate the hut. Perhaps Chawngchili herself would have been morally judged as deserving her death because of the forbidden nature of her relationship with a snake in the mind of both the child and the adult teller. The loss of chastity, reference to bleeding,

dropping of the testicles out from the vagina is meant to cause anxiety on the child while registering it as the pitfalls of a relationship of the forbidden kind. Furthermore, the impregnation is solely seen as her act and decision alone as the snake is dead. No copulation is ever described to the child. The culturally accepted social construct of the ‘virtuous virgin’ or *hmeichhe thianghlim*, the expectation of an innocent childhood, the evils of disobedience to words of the patriarch may therefore, all end with an inevitable death, like the one that meets both the *rulpui* and Chawngchili. Thus the tale is a means for the adult story teller to deal with the anxieties of childhood sexuality while glossing over of words, while further substitution with symbols and use of images retains a child’s innocence. The causation of the wrongful act is thus projected on the girl, the feminine while the owner of the testicles is a ‘snake’ and not a boy. How the child listener interprets the story hinges on the child’s age and imagination, but what remains, we can assume is the recollection of the ‘morals’ of the tale and what is culturally frowned upon by the culture becomes a part of collective cultural memory in later adult years.

In post Christian Mizoram, the glossing over of certain symbols, words and names has taken place, albeit in a more conscious and deliberate manner. In the tale *Mauruangi*, the name *Chhubungtaituki* has been changed to simply *Bingtaii*. *Chhu* the female genitalia and the word *tai* connotes an inflamed, reddish ripeness to the female genitals. The word *tuki* would then refer to the exaggerated condition of the state to being sexually excited or a lustful character. The simple *Bingtaii* is then freed of its sexual

reference which would be deemed unfit for children's consumption by the post Christian readership/story telling adult. What I would like to add here is that the anxiety comes from the name/words itself, the discomfort a morally conscious Christian adult would find highly disturbing. But what is actually meant by the name is not that the name is literally meant to characterize a young girl as sexually active. It is necessarily a literal representation of who she is as a person. I imagine that the name is only meant to express the youthfulness and vigour as opposed to an older woman who is past her menopausal stage and no more *taituk*. Another name would be *Chhuzangkaki* which was glossed over into *Zangkaki*.²³ Again *chhu* is the woman's genitalia, *zang* is a man's testicles, and *kak* is to 'spread', which in this instance would mean a woman's spread out legs. The censored *Zangkaki*, glosses the sexual *zang* and *kak*, to simply mean one who has a spread out/large back or wide *hnung zang*. Children in the traditional past were told these very stories with the original names with no reflection of anxieties attached to the name. In the past, whether through song, play, storytelling or learning under adult supervision, learning was consciously or unconsciously geared towards the better understanding and conformity into the culture. Children were treated as a collective group who, it was hoped, would also grow up to retain strong ties to each other and continue the close communal attachment they were brought up in. Adults treated childhood as a period to be closely observed and supervised, to focus on conformity rather than dissension, a collective purpose and interest rather than an open assertion of self-interest. Although this functional

aspect of childhood and their traditional teaching is obvious, one can say that the conditions surrounding the Mizo past indicated the necessity of survival of the fittest, protection from other rival chief's and villages, and survival from wild animals that lurked in thick forests. The concern was protecting hegemony enjoyed by men while maintaining peace and harmony. This dual purpose in the traditional past had its functionality that began from early childhood and treatment of children as property of the community. There was no conflict like the concept of the Christian 'heaven' or 'hell' or vexing questions about sin although the spirit and supernatural existed under one realm. Although history tells us that the Mizo forefathers were a nuisance to the British administration in the 19th century²⁴ as they repeatedly raided neighbouring states of Assam, taking slaves and killing in general, it was the coming of and following establishment of the white administrators in the region, and the missionaries who impacted change in the Mizo society as a whole, and in this case, impacted a change on how children and childhood were viewed in the Mizo psyche.

What happens when the Mizo's as a culture and society have to evolve according to demands of situations and circumstances that come their way? What happens when a new culture, religion and people that are much more powerful, introduce changes to your society? It became inevitable that Christianity and the white missionary influence and the white administration had far reaching consequences in the culture as a whole.

Keeping all things aside, there was an effort to archive and record oral narratives into the written form. There was F.J Sandy's

Legends of Old Lushai, works by Nuchhungi, which I have mentioned earlier, and also the Presbyterian and Baptist publications specifically for the consumption of children in early 20th century. Most of the first generation of educated and literate Mizo's received education under the supervision of missionaries. These Mizo's later became teachers themselves or entered the service of the church as clerks, translators and much later on, preachers. With the inevitable moving away from more traditional forms of learning like the *zawlbuk* and learning through play and *pawnto*, the new school establishment also played a significant role in the teaching and learning of Mizo children.

Nuchhungi who, under the guidance and encouragement of Ms. E.M Chapman, also called Pi. Zirtiri undertook an admirable effort that began from 1938, to bring out books that would be read in schools and instruct mizo children. Nuchhungi collected stories, games and their method of play with careful instruction as to how the games were played in the past and in the rural space in early 20th century. Her book *Mizo Naupang: Infiamnate leh a Hlate* included children songs sung by both children at play, and by adults as lullabies. She also wrote poems of her own composition which was meant to instruct children to lead a good obedient and moral life. Her effort is invaluable to the Mizo's because collections and archiving had never been published at such a scale and with such focus on children's pedagogy. Of course, there is also no doubt that there was a heavy influence and leaning toward a more Christian instruction of morals, values and the role of a child in the household and church. The preoccupation with the colonial white

missionaries thus resulted in a shift in the concept of childhood and the treatment of children in the collective Mizo mind. Was there a conflict between the traditional collective memory of the issue of children and childhood and the more Christian concept of childhood? Yes there certainly was. The 'concern' with things past including use of language and words led to rewriting of names, images and symbolic references that featured in the oral narratives, as mentioned before. There was also a general moving away from the traditional idea of the child as the 'child of the community' into the new identity of the child as a 'child of God'. The achievement of 'selfhood' and its acknowledgement in the past came from the community²⁵ whereas for the modern child, it comes from the Church and the congregation. Although the Church too is a community in essence, the child is no longer a cultural construction created through a communal joint responsibility. The Church has taken on the central role of the parent in the modern community with the focus shifting from cultural to religious construction. Parents also have increasingly left much of the moralizing and value teaching to the Church and its organized activities. The period of childhood seems to have a longer duration than the traditional times. Children in the past were contributing members both in the home and society where they physically contributed to cohesion and smooth functioning of both house and community. Although in the village hierarchy, children would not have been placed amongst authority; their status was acknowledged as useful, adding to the growth of society while having the ability to move up and down the ladder of hierarchy based on their abilities and future promise. In the modern

context, whether under laws of the state or wishes of the Church, the focus is to allow childhood to remain free of adult anxieties as much as possible thus keeping their ‘childhood innocence’ intact, stretching the period of childhood to the maximum whereas their equals in traditional past would have been expected to ‘grow-up’ into adults as quickly as possible. Traditional folk games and play, singing of certain folksongs sung at *pawnto* have now fallen into disuse and are no longer relevant as compared to the past context. But we do see them as ‘survivals’²⁶ when in the current 21st century scenario, these folk games, folkplay and songs are ‘performed’ at festivals like the Chapchar Kut. Eg: *Zawng a leihlawn* which is a game where children make a human chain using their arms and the children climb onto this ‘chain’ one by one, precariously crawling on this ‘ladder’ like a monkey would, thus, ‘monkey bridge’ game. Some lullabies and play songs like the ‘swing songs’ or *pipu uai hla* are taught in the school curriculum under Mizo subject in the primary and middle school section that is published under the Mizoram Board of School Education. But in general, children whether in the urban cities or rural places rarely sing folksongs anymore and have become a shadow in their cultural memories. Folk games and folk play have become a spectacle to be amused about. Unless a parent or teacher specifically teaches them or tells them these tales and sing these songs with them, only those few songs included in school syllabi will survive. The context of play and games in modern context have become much more sophisticated like the rest of the world with complex rules, mechanised and manufactured toys fed by consumerism although

such sport have their functionalism in their own context. Children are now, more so than ever before, more independent in their own pursuits and are encouraged thus by parents, all the while balancing on the beam of tradition, Christian faith and the phenomenon of globalization. Childhood, therefore in the mizo context has shifted from a once cultural and social construction to that of a more Christian and Church based socialization mixed with a precarious paring with tradition. The daily realities of children's daily lives have also meant that the functionality of games, play, learning and education has shifted with the evolution of time which has had a direct impact on the child's signification within the culture while altering to a large degree the child's world-view of his/her identity as a creation of the past and the present.

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- ¹ Nuchhungi. *Mizo Naupang: Infiamna leh a hlate*. Baptist Assembly Press: Lunglei. 1994. 2nd print/ed.
- ² Sandy, F.J. *Legends of Old Lushai*. 2nd edn. Loch Printing Press: Aijal. 1926.
- ³ Zoramthanga, H. *Kan Naupan Lai*. Zo-Awm Off-set Press: Aizawl. 2010.
- ⁴ *pawnto*- boys and girls call each other to play traditional games outside under the moonlight. The games are usually group games that involve singing and can be considered as night time entertainment for children to occupy themselves before bedtime.
- ⁵ Books written on the traditional folk life usually generalize childhood play and experience, without realizing that the focus given is usually fixated on young boys and their cultural grooming. This is the case probably because Mizo society is a patriarchal one and so young boys are given more importance, and thus the concentration of material.
- ⁶ Individuality could be aspired to only by men. The requirement was the obvious taking of titles by achieving certain tasks and fulfilling certain

rites. This idea of Mizo cultural concept of individuality is dealt with in the chapter on “Belief System”.

⁷ Translation- scholars own.

⁸ *Val upa*- a young elder who plays the role of teacher, mentor and supervisor. He is usually a young man in his early twenties and is said to have good leadership qualities which the boys aspire to.

⁹ *Tlawmngai*- A heavy loaded term which indicates selflessness, helpfulness and sense of duty without any expectation of return of favour or good name.

¹⁰ *Zawlbuk*- boys dormitory where young boys under the care and watch of older men would learn various cultural ways. Wrestling, learning songs and dance, making of weapons and using them, and teaching and learning of values of hardwork, team spirit, helpfulness, respect for elders, etc. were imbibed in the boys through this institution.

¹¹ Zoramthanga, H. *Kan Naupang Lai*. Zo Awm Offset Press: Aizawl. 2010,pg.52-53

¹² Translation-scholars own.

¹³ In this matter, there is complete lack of material to suggest any ritual or rites of passage in the mizo tradition when it came to indicate age of a child. All the resource persons who were interviewed, whether historian or otherwise could not provide much information for the same.

¹⁴ In an interview with historian B.Lalthangliana, he revealed to me this very strange but unique indicator of a boys readiness to learn and absorb certain aspects of the cultural practices which would otherwise have seemed age-inappropriate.

¹⁵ *Khaukhurh*- A method of burial. A deep pit was dug in the earth where the body was laid in this pit and before covering the body with the dug up earth, the body was usually covered by slabs of stone or with wood placed as planks over the body.

¹⁶ van Gannep, Arnold. [1909] *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

¹⁷ An interview with Mizo historian B. Lalthangliana which took place on 21st December, 2013, revealed this bit to me although he could not elaborate

beyond this. He did mention that since not much material is available incontext Mizo women of the pre- Christian times, it is necessary to rely on what ‘must have been’, thereby indicating cultural memory.

¹⁸ *Pawnto*- Children of a village would gather at night after their dinner was over. The meeting spot was usually an open area within the village boundaries and they would sing and play games, and sometimes an elder person would tell them stories under the moonlight.

¹⁹ *Chemtatrawta* would literally mean ‘Knife (*chem*) Sharpener’ referring to the character’s name in the tale and his station as a knife sharpener, or the direct reference to the action in the tale, which in this case is knife sharpening. In the tale, *Chemtatrawta* is busy sharpening his knife, when his penis is bitten/stung by an insect. There is a direct reference to his penis or *til* without the teller having to gloss over the word. The reference is also devoid of any sexual intent when a child hears this tale while for an adult the indication is different. The hilarity and comic effect lies in the body part that is stung.

²⁰ Vanlallawma, C. *Hmanlai hian mawm...* Lengchhawn Press:Aizawl. 1992, p-79.

²¹ *Saphai* or python in the Mizo animal kingdom is considered amongst the great, majestic, dangerous and difficult- to-kill animals. When a man wants to take the title of *thangchhuah pa* or have the great distinction of *pasaltha*, the ultimate aspirations of men in the traditional past, a man has to kill various particular kinds of animals to be given passage to enter paradise in the after-life. The python is amongst such animal that a person has to kil, or should kill in order to take the title and receive the honor of a safe passage into paradise.

²² This aspect of the snake as representation of evil can also have a Biblical reference to that of Satan himself. The Christian condemnation of sex before marriage, the slaying of both snake and Chanwngchili by the ‘father’ can also excite a deep reading into the tale as a whole in a post-Christian context.

²³ This censorship seems to have been undertaken by Pastor Chautera according to B.Lalthangliana who interviewed the pastor at his Lunglei residence in 1988.

²⁴ Kipgen, Mangkhosat. *Christianity and Mizo Culture*. Assam Printing Works: Assam. 1997.

²⁵ Georger, A. Robert. And Michael Own Jones. *Folkloristics: An Introduction*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1995.p-64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Portrayal of the ‘Mizo Identity’ Through an Analysis of Femininity / Masculinity in the Mizo Society

Lalthansangi Ralte

This article is an attempt to bring forth the position Mizo women occupy in Mizo society through literary sources backed by oral history, colonial writings and newspaper articles. Focus will be given on the question of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as defined by the Mizos down the ages. It will take an empirical study to show the position of women and likewise men in Mizoram before the entry of Christianity in 1894 and then gradually move to the present day scenario. The Mizos are a close-knit people. Among the Mizos, the ‘Braves’ (always men) of the village were called *Pasaltha*. The term *Pasaltha* is closely linked with the word *Tlawmngaihna*, which when roughly translated means being humble in all respects and at the same time, to always be ready to help. A *Pasaltha* is considered to be a man who is self-less and brave and wise and is always ready to sacrifice his life for others. *Tlawmngaihna* is a quality which is always found in a *Pasaltha*. A *Pasaltha* was the epitome of masculinity in earlier Mizo society. It was custom for the women to bid farewell to the warriors of their village with song and food and rice beer prepared specially for the ‘Braves’. ‘Masculinity’ was defined by the amount of wild animals and enemies’ heads the men took and the number of women he bedded. On the other hand, femininity was defined by the ‘purity’ of the

woman. It was considered normal for the young men to boast jestingly about the number of women they have bedded. It was not just the society but also the early indigenous belief which considered this act as a great achievement. There were songs where the young men boasted of their ‘achievements’ –

*Di riallo val¹ a thlawnin ka uang ngai lo,
Ka zawl a tam, ka zawl loh thing leh mau zat;
Zahlei zawl khua lian ka thang leh thin.
Di riallo val, (Dokhuma 185)*

I never boast without cause,
I have loved many, the ones I haven’t loved are still as many
as the trees and bamboos;
In this village of more than hundred my escapades become
celebrated yet again. (my translation)

On the other hand, it was considered shameful for a woman to fall in lust over a man, the scars of which never go away. The pre-British period was called *Pasalthate hun*, time of the Braves. It was not a time for the women to act bold and challenge the men (Dokhuma 315). The women lived under the protection of the men and there was rarely an occasion which required women. This was one of the main reasons why women were being subjugated in the society. Amongst the Mizos, the young men and women can freely mingle with each other as a result of many social activities. In the Mizo society, the young men go to the young women’s homes to court them. In earlier times, the women would usually be spinning yarn at night when their visitors/suitors arrive. But the young men would never sit in the interior rooms of the house. The women

would welcome the men with utmost polite greetings and it was considered punishable if a young woman was impolite to her guests and she was also not to show any partiality to even that particular man whom she likes. A smart woman would never show any kind of partiality among her male suitors even if there is a particular young man she is more interested in. She will try her best to hide her feelings. The idea of a 'feminine' woman was also judged by the amount of young men guests/suitors she had. It was considered very disgraceful for a young woman not to have any bachelor guests/suitors and so even her family will try their best to maintain their daughter's 'feminine' status. If an incident arises where the young woman or her parents have uttered something offensive for the young male suitor/visitor, the village elder would hold a meeting at the Zawlbuk and depending on the intensity of the words uttered the young woman might even be prohibited from having any male visitors. And it was thoroughly embarrassing for any young woman to not have any male visitor/suitor. Moreover, traditional law does not allow young women to have male visitors or suitors during the day; it was very unusual for any person to have a visitor during the day as everyone, including the young women, would be out working in the fields during the day.

The 'Braves' had songs called '*Hla Do*' (war songs and songs chanted when wild-life is killed) and '*Bawh hla*' (songs chanted in celebration after taking the heads of enemies) which was a way to accentuate their bravery and masculinity. During the *Kut* (festival) the 'Braves' would adorn themselves in their 'masculine' attire and waving their *chem-pui* in the air they would proudly chant a '*Bawh hla*' like –

*Kei chu e, milu ka pian pui e,
Milu a tlar bung e,*

I was born to take the heads of my enemies
Severed heads are hanging in line and –

*Kei chu e, mi that ing khaw,
Mualuah thle hlang ka duhin e,
Lu chung e, thlang vapual e,
Her law luai sawm ka luah e.*

Just as I have killed the enemy,
I celebrate the head in the local yard,

And on my head is the hornbill's feather (Khangte 2006:6)

Men also fought over 'possession' of women (*Chhak leh Thlang Indo* – War between the East and the West) where women were brought home as slaves. Woman's body was used as a procreating device. Woman was made to work in the fields and was reduced to the perpetually giving, all-forgiving 'nature' that never demands anything. 'Possession' of women is a very macho trait to highlight the masculinity of a man among the Mizos. In earlier times, when a young man visits a neighbouring village and is able to bed a young woman of that village, while leaving that village, he would take a leaf and place it at the entrance of the village, in the shape of a human body. Placing a leaf in such a manner is called 'sul tum' and it means: I could bed a young woman of your village (Dokhuma 184). The ability to bed the young women by the young men was anyway considered as something worthy of jestful boasting. Moreover, if a young man is able to bed sisters, it is said that even when he dies he is made to wear *archang thiang*² to show that he

has bedded sisters (Dokhuma 184). In the early Mizo indigenous belief, when a person dies, s/he has to cross a path where *Pawla* would lie in wait with a big sling. Whoever the deceased may be, *Pawla* would know what they had done and achieved during their lifetime. Legend has it that when a young man who has never bedded a woman dies, *Pawla* would lie in wait and shoot him with his sling and he would be in pain for six years. This was greatly dreaded by the young men and in order to avoid such a predicament, they were told to bed as many women as possible.

Folksongs, Tales and Old Sayings

The definition of masculinity and femininity in Mizo society (early and present) with the help of folksongs, folktales and old sayings will be presented here. The Mizo society is a patriarchal society where the woman has no say in anything and has no share in the family property. The Mizos are very cautious when it comes to choosing one's partner in marriage. Since earlier times, both concerned parties would be very careful. For a person, usually a woman, who is known to be sexually promiscuous, it is very difficult to find an 'eligible' husband. Besides this, in earlier times, the price of a divorced woman and a woman who has an illegitimate / bastard child falls exceedingly low. It was near to impossible for such women to find a *tlangval hnakhkat*³ as a husband. As marriage was dealt with such great caution, the young women would always be very faithful. A point which needs to be mentioned is that it is always the position and behaviour of the women which is being scrutinized with utmost caution in the Mizo society. Even though the women are more liberated than women from other cultures, there are still

many derogatory sayings about women such as: “*Hmeichhe thu thu ni suh, Chakai sa sa ni suh*” which means “A woman’s word is no word (to be taken seriously) in the same way that the flesh of crab is not really considered meat.” Whenever a woman spoke up on days when *Thupui*, serious discussions, were being held she would be silenced and told ‘Do not speak, you are a woman’ as she was not regarded to be worthy of participating in the serious discussions (Dokhuma 2008: 316). Among the Mizos there is such a term called ‘*hmeichhe thudawn*’ which can be roughly translated as ‘woman’s wishful thinking’ which is considered to be quite illogical. The ‘what-ifs’ are considered a part of ‘woman’s wishful thinking’. Woman is seen as someone who is unable to draw clear-cut conclusions unlike man who is seen as the decision-maker in the family and society. Woman is seen as indecisive as a result of which she is considered weak-kneed. There is also another saying which says: “*Hmeichhe finin tuikhur ral a kai lo*” which means “A woman’s wisdom does not reach beyond the village well.” In the Mizo society, a woman is expected to work hard at home, get up early in the morning and cook for her husband and children. Her work is concentrated within the household and never goes beyond the village well. The ‘work’ which happens beyond the village well is done only by the ‘men’ as it is considered as something which can be done only by the men. Moreover, a man helping a woman in her chores is often seen as unmanly and is given the name ‘*Thaibawih*’ in mockery. There are even more earlier Mizo sayings concerning women such as –

Hmeichhia leh uipui chu lo rum lungawi ve mai mai rawh se.

Let a woman and a bitch whine till they are satisfied.

Hmeichhe vau loh leh vau vai/sam loh chu an pawng tual tual.

A woman who is not warned tends to become more and more out of control.

Hmeichhia leh pal chhia chu thlak theih alawm.

You can replace your woman just as easily as you can replace your fence.

Hmeichhia leh khuang chu vuak ngai a ni.

Women and drums need to be beaten.

Hmeichhia leh uite chuan a khal peih apiang an lawm.

Woman, like puppies, prefer whoever gives them more attention.

Hmeichhe tawng menah thlak la, hmeichhia leh uipui chu lo rum lungawi mai mai rawh se.

Regard women's voice as venial and let women and female dogs bark to satisfy themselves.

Hmeichhia leh thlawhhma chu pawm mawi an ni.

Women and jhum have value on their being accepted by men.
(my translation)

All these sayings concerning women have been taken from James Dokhuma's *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*. Even though most of the previously highlighted sayings seem to be said in a humorous tone, they clearly portray the position Mizo women hold in their society. It shows that the men give the women a pre-destined position which is below their own. There are very few Mizo sayings which concern men; most of them are about the centrality of a male figure in the society. One saying goes like this – *Pa an tlo leh*

in a tlo which when roughly translated means ‘If the father of a household is steadfast, the household will also be steadfast’. There are some which emphasize the confidence and determination of a man in time of need and emergency. There is a saying which goes like this – *Thing phur khat leh pasal pakhat chu hmuh zawh loh thu awm suh* which can be roughly translated as – There is no problem in finding a basket full of firewood and one husband. A man might boast of the easy availability of women to bed and marry but the women are not too silent in regards to the availability of husbands. There is a saying which shows society’s concern for a woman and the saying goes thus – *Hmeichhe ruak lo chu thalfang pai ang a ni* which means – A pregnant woman is like one who carries an arrow-dart. This saying emphasizes the frail condition of a pregnant woman and shows how she needs to be handled with utmost care. The ability to conceive seems to be a saving factor for the women as it is only then that they are shown some care and respect.

The Mizo folktales mirror the position of the men and women in early Mizo society. Like folktales from other regions of the world, woman has to be beautiful in spite of all her other qualities. Man, on the other hand, can still win the beautiful damsel with his wit and charm no matter how ugly he is. *Kawrdumbela* and *Chepahakhata* are tales of ugly young men. In the tale of *Kawrdumbela*, it was only after he became handsome that his wife’s love for him grew. The society’s regard of women as superficial is seen in this tale. On the other hand it can be seen as woman getting back at man for always ‘loving’ the pretty girls more. The Mizo tales are mainly

about beautiful damsels with legendary beauty who get taken away from their homes and some even from their own husbands. It is the 'foreigner' who takes away the women and the young girls from their homes. In the tale of *Thailungi*, a young girl named Thailungi was sold to a merchant by her step mother for scrap iron (Pachauu 2008: 15) and in the tale of *Rimenhawii*, a beautiful young woman is taken away by the servants of a powerful foreigner while her husband was away. In *Rimenhawii*, the damsel Rimenhawii is locked up inside a house of iron by her husband as he was afraid that she would be captured by miscreants while he was away (Pachauu 41). When the servants of the powerful man lured her out and grabbed her by the hair Rimenhawii was too vain to lose even a strand of her beautiful hair and so she allowed herself to be captured. The 'effeminate / feminine' woman is portrayed as beautiful but dumb and vain. The foreigner is seen as someone really powerful with minions to do his bidding. Man is always portrayed as the one who rescues, who kills the enemies and emerges victorious. The looks of the 'brave' man is never mentioned but he is always taken to be good-looking and as someone who can fend for himself. It is the looks of the 'ugly' man which keeps on getting mentioned but he is endowed with wit and charm and he still ends up with the beautiful damsel and sometimes even the chief's daughter.

Songs composed by Mizo women like Pi Hmuaki, Laltheri and Darpawngi showed the ways in which the Mizo women had earlier challenged the administration, the patriarchy. Legend has it that Pi Hmuaki was buried alive by the people of her village because

since she was such a prolific composer they were afraid that there would be nothing left for the younger generation to compose. Mona Zote has given an allusion to Pi Hmuaki in her poem ‘Girl with Black guitar and Blue Hibiscus’ (Sen 2006: 67). There is even a song that narrates the way she was buried alive:

Nauva te u nau haiate u,

Tha te te khan mi chhilh ru (Mizo Academy of Letters 1997: 23)

Young ones, young ones who have forgotten your young ones,
Bury me with some care (my translation)

In ‘Girl with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus’, the woman (Pi Hmuaki) stands forth and accuses the world for the wrong it has done to her. Since poetry written by women and concerning women often become personalized, Pi Hmuaki becomes the accusing “subterranean gong” who will go on accusing for all the wronged women –

The sad subterranean gong will go on accusing ...

Until the gong is quiet and the woman in the earth goes to sleep. (Sen 2006: 68)

The learned and talented woman of the age, no matter what age it is, ends up being silenced against her will by the world. Laltheri was the daughter of a Sailo chief Lalsavunga who fell in love with a *hnamchawm*, a commoner, named Chalthanga. Her brother killed Chalthanga as soon as he heard about their affair. Laltheri on hearing the death of her lover took off her garments and necklaces and mourned. And when she was asked to put on her garments she replied –

Mother! I will not put on my clothes

While my beloved lies cold in the grave ...

It shall not be for want of food I die,

To pine and die, is as easy for noble Sailo (Thanmawia 1998: 43)

A chief's daughter mourning shamelessly for her departed *hnamchawm* lover is something which the chief and his family could not tolerate as it showed their family's weakness to the villagers. The chief's regret was that he had granted too much freedom and given too high a status to the women in his village. Darpawngi's songs are songs of lamentation and rebellion against the village chief. The 'Darpawngi Thinrim Zai' (the infuriated songs of Darpawngi) reflects a quarrel between the village chief and Darpawngi when the chief took a goat from Darpawngi. She condemned the ruling of the chief through her verses but circumstances forced her to move to another village soon after.

The Contemporary scenario

The readiness of the people to accept change depends upon their values and attitudes which are the products of the culture (Beteille 1995)

This paper will also portray how social conditions and cultural traditions still perceive woman as an adjunct to man in contemporary Mizo society. In the June 1st 2011 paper of *Vanglaini*, a Mizo daily newspaper, we find that a certain locality in Aizawl has made Wednesday to be a *Puan bih ni* (day to wear *puan*). It was in December 2, 2010 that the Art & Culture Minister PC Zoram Sangliana had requested the colleges in Mizoram through letter to make a day for the women to wear *puan*. Throughout the month of June and mid-July seven articles, all written by men, have

appeared on *Vanglaini* newspaper debating on the positive points and negative points on ‘enforcing’ the women to wear the *puan* to their workplaces. The main opinion of the men was that the most beautiful and decent attire for a Mizo woman is when she wears the *puan*, covering her lower body till her ankle. The other opinion shared by most of the contributors is that the dress-code of the women need to be supervised but that there is nothing too ‘shocking’ which needed to be supervised in the dress-code of the men (June 21 *Vanglaini*). The shared opinion is that the *puan* will make the ‘Mizo identity’ more valued. The use of the phrase ‘our women’ makes them feel that they have the right to ‘force’ the women in everything they do including their dress-code, not thinking of the ‘suitable’ situation to wear it. In ‘The mentality of Mizo men and women’s dress-code’ (June 25), Lalchhuanmawia Tochwang writes how a Mizo woman’s marriage outside the community is regarded as a betrayal to the community while on the other hand, when a Mizo man marries an ‘English’ woman he is considered ‘lucky’. And likewise when women dress themselves in ‘non-Mizo’ attire they regard it as offensive to the Mizo culture. At the end of the day, the big question is yet again ‘Is it on a par with the words of God?’ a very crafty way to judge the dress-code of the women which is expected to be always feminine and ‘enforce’ the *puan* on them. *Puan* is considered to be an attire which a Mizo woman should wear to keep her femininity intact. In the College for Teacher Education (CTE), now called Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Aizawl, wearing *puan* on Wednesdays has been followed by the faculty, both teaching and non-teaching, and the student-

teachers since January, 2011. Since January 2013, beside Thursdays, Monday has been announced as a day to wear formal attire to the institute. The men wear their formal shirts and pants while the women wear their *puan* which is considered to be the ‘proper’ formal attire for them. On Thursdays, the men wear their traditional shirts, made of the traditional *puan*, and formal pants and the women wear their *puan* with their formal tops. *Puan* is considered to be the attire which is at the centre of the Mizo culture. In the Middle-eastern countries, a region where women are the most subjugated, it is surprising to see that both men and women, alike, wear their traditional attire in their everyday life. Malsawmi Jacob, a Mizo poet, has written a poem ‘*Puan sin*’, which means ‘Wearing Puan’. In this poem, she writes –

You are cruel, O Mizo man,
 Why would you bind down poor woman
 With rough textured Mizo puan?

‘Tis a garb you have discarded
 Like dry grass, and ‘primitive’ branded,
 But you wish to keep her stranded.

Pretty is the Mizo puan
 Mizo women love to own,
 For years to come carry on.

But then, like a net of gold
 If it will entrap and hold
 We will fly out of the fold!

Each Mizo, each Nature’s child

Is born free, though woman be mild,
 Low placed, word-less, left behind.

Think again, O Mizo men,
 Ethnic worth does not depend
 On mere costume or garment.

Were it so, all Mizo men
 Would be clad day out, day in
 With *hnawkhal* or stay 'puan sin'. (Jacob 2003: 37)

In earlier times, both men and women used to wear the 'puan'. Though the men have discarded this native cloth in favour of Western dressing, the women still cling to it because they love the pretty patterns. But sadly, when they choose to adopt other forms of dressing like pants or *salwar kameez*, they are often criticized by the men and even accused of being disloyal to their ethnic identity. This poem protests against the gender discrimination regarding freedom of dress⁴. The position of Mizo women has been uplifted, to some extent, as a result of education. But male egocentrism arising from a strong patriarchal society is the very wall which blocks the women from achieving a higher status. Women hold a central position in the society as they are the ones through which a sense of loyalty to one's culture and tradition is being preached. These judgements are always being made through the factor of them being 'feminine' and 'proper' and worthy of praise in the eyes of the society. The idea of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' thus will always be the compelling categories that straitjacket men and women. An 'effeminate' woman who knows her position, one below that of

man's, will always be considered as the one thing which defines and upholds the 'Mizo identity'. Although this opinion may never be acknowledged it will always be practiced in the Mizosociety.

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¹ A bachelor who is never without a lover.

² The longest tail feather of a cock, which was entwined in the head-gear of the deceased man.

³ Unmarried man / bachelor.

⁴ From an online interview with Malsawmi Jacob 18/08/11 @19:07.

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Bonsai-God*Temsula Ao*

once i wanted to grow a god
in the middle of my garden

which would grow majestic
and command the reverence of all

whom women would dress
with crimson drapes

and worshippers would offer
gifts of flowers and fruits

the cash would flow
and I would build a fitting temple

where I would lord and
bask in the reflected glory,

but it was not to be

because the god-designate
languished in his assigned plot

and thwarted my grand ambition
of owning a god in my domain

so I ended up by re-planting
the scion of giants in a puny pot

forever constricting
his genetic propensity

and reducing his divine destiny
to become a stunted absurdity.

there he squats now dislocated,
awkward, and grotesque

a pathetic travesty
of his natural majesty.

now from his prison in the pot
the banyan hurls me taunts

hisses at me with utter contempt
and shakes the earth off his roots

he even ridicules me, shouting loudly,
'hey you wanted me to be a god?

and that too in the turf
where another reigned underground?

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he resented my intrusion
and called me an upstart,

he drank up my sap
and gnawed at my roots

so that I would not become
the new god of your dreams.

and on the day you dislodged me,
oh, how he capered and shouted in glee

‘hey, hey behold, the new god
of the constipated earth!’

time has moved on and the agitations
are milder, for he is now resigned

to his lot in the almost crumbling pot
and I too am past caring

as I sit on my rickety rocking-chair
in the dilapidated verandah

a far cry from my dream-temple.

and on certain days i seriously begin to wonder
if it was indeed a god that I was truly after.

Forest Song

Easterine Kire

The elders call it forest song, that inexplicable phenomenon of people going missing from the village, only to be found three or four days later or sometimes, as in the case of Nito, ten days later. But by then, it was too late. He has never been the same since. Those who are found cannot remember details. They talk about hearing incredibly sweet music from the forest. They say the melodies were sweeter than the songs of courtship their age-mates sing at the harvest festival, when marriages are contracted. They say they followed the songs into the forest, deeper and deeper into the heart of the dark woods until the music grew so loud that the singing was inside their heads, sung up close into their ears, its harmonies swaying back and forth and sending them into a deep slumber.

Bilie's sister was seven when she heard the elders use this phrase. A young man had gone missing for two days. In the early morning, the crier was heard sounding the call to the menfolk. *Forest song*, said her mother to her father under her breath.

“What did you say, Mother?” asked the little girl.

“Hush, Zeno, nothing that concerns you”.

Zeno knew what that meant. Older folk used that phrase when they thought you might be scared by whatever was happening in the village or outside it. But she vaguely knew what it was. She

and her sister had eavesdropped on women talking about it when they were out in the woods, not too far from the village and then, they had run home, fearful and unable to tell their mother.

“Do you know what really happened to Bise’s mother?” asked her friend Bano, in a whisper when they were on their own.

“No, tell.”

“Sure you won’t run off and tell your mother?”

“I am biting my finger, see?”

“Alright then, but come closer, I can’t shout it.”

Zeno drew close to her so she could speak in her ear.

“She listened to a forest song,” said the older girl conspiratorially. “You mean she simply sat in the forest and listened to a song for five days?”

“Oh, you’re hopeless,” said Bano in an exasperated tone, “It doesn’t happen like that.”

“Oh please, please, I will give you my wrist band if you tell me,” begged Zeno, because she wanted to keep Bano in good humor so she could tell her about it. The two girls went inside the house. It was very dark in the inner room because they had sat outside in the sun for so long.

“Sure no one’s in the house?” asked Bano.

“No one,” responded Zeno, “they are all in the fields and I stayed back to sun the paddy.”

“Well, okay then,” said Bano in a low tone. She was older than Zeno by a year and a head taller. Her mother had died when she was three so she had grown up in her grandmother’s house, listening to the stories her grandmother was full of, till she too died

a year ago. Her father was always out hunting so the little girl was pretty much on her own. At eight years, she was considered old enough to stay in the village when the others were at work in the fields. But she was still not big enough or strong enough to be of much help in the fields. She sometimes babysat her cousin who was three and was too big for his mother to carry to the fields.

Zeno took out her wrist band from a niche in the wall and passed it to Bano without a word. The older girl took it and slowly tied the red threads onto her wrist. The little woven band looked pretty on her brown wrist.

“Now tell me,” demanded Zeno, because she had bought her right to the story.

“Let’s sit down,” said Bano and the pair sat by the hearth. Poking at the ash with a twig, Bano began her account. “When you hear a forest song, you should close your ears and begin to run from the spot. It’s the song of the spirits of the forest and if you stop to listen, they draw you into the woods and they keep you there for days and days feeding you roots and worms.”

“Is that why Bise’s mother was gone so long?”

“Well, I’m not so sure about that woman. Some people say she had a lover.”

“What?!”

“Hush, not so loud. You forget that Vide sometimes eavesdrops on people’s houses?” Vide was the village clown.

“But what are you saying, Bano? That Bise’s mother had gone to be with a lover? Wasn’t everybody saying that she had been taken by forest spirits?”

“Oh, that was what her husband said when he got her back. But didn’t you notice her face was black and blue and she couldn’t get out of bed for three weeks because two of her rib-bones were broken? Have you ever heard of spirits beating people?”

Zeno was very quiet. She wasn’t sure she wanted to listen to this about Bise’s mother who was a kind woman and had always given her a treat when Zeno went to them on an errand. Her husband, on the other hand, often gave her a queer look that scared her. He would look at her with a kind of leer and though she was young, she sensed that was not the way grown men were supposed to look at little girls and her stomach knotted in fear when he did that. She tried to avoid going to their house. But her mother would chide her if she refused to run errands to Bise’s house.

“But her father scares me,” she tried to explain. Zeno’s mother wouldn’t listen.

“That’s ridiculous, Pulie is harmless, he just isn’t a friendly sort of man.” So Zeno gave up and when she had to go to Bise’s house, she made her way there very quietly so she wouldn’t attract his attention. Once he had crept up from behind her when she was stealthily walking to their house. Gripping her hard, he laughed and put his face very close to hers while she struggled to get out of his grasp. He had the sickly sweet smell of rice-brew and tobacco on him. Zeno ran home gagging all the way. She was ashen when she reached home but she couldn’t bring herself to tell her mother what had happened.

It was very disturbing to listen to what Bano was saying about Bise’s mother. It made Zeno uncomfortable to talk about the things

that grown-ups did. It made her feel dirty. But Bano seemed to be dying to tell her more. So she changed the subject.

“You said you would tell me more about forest song.”

“So I did,” replied Bano with a bored look on her face. “Really, Zeno, you are such a simpleton at times,” she said, “Don’t you know that forest song is what we heard when we were at your grandmother’s field last year?”

“Yes? That sweet melody that some girl sang all day from across the river?”

“That was no girl.”

“What was it then?”

“A spirit of the forest. They sometimes sing in groups and sound like an age-group¹ returning home from the fields and courting on the way. That is how people who lag behind are trapped by them. They think they are their age-mates² and go to join them and are spirited away by them. Then the whole village has to look for them or else they can never come back on their own.”

“Why can’t they come back on their own?”

“Oh why are you such a baby? Everyone knows it’s because the spirits want to make new spirits out of them. So, humans have to struggle to get them back and the men go out in pairs so one can stop the other if he should begin to go off after a spirit song. Don’t you ever see the men sticking bitter wormwood behind their ears when they set off? Spirits can’t abide bitter wormwood. I’ve often

¹age-group: Children born within three or four years of each other form one age-group. They work together and celebrate festivals together.

²age-mates: youngsters belonging to the same age-group

seen your mother throw bits of it into your basket when we are going off to the woods.”

“She always does do that. I can’t remember ever going out without a bit of bitter wormwood.”

“Well, if you didn’t have that, you’d have been taken off by a forest song long ago, you’re so silly sometimes, Zeno.”

Zeno put up with the remonstrations because she wanted to listen to more of what the older girl had to say. But Bano soon got bored and was opening the door to leave.

“I have to fetch water before my father comes home,” said Bano as she half-ran from Zeno’s house. Oh well, they would always have some other opportunity, Zeno consoled herself, watching her friend sprint across the village square.

“Zeno, get up!” Her mother stood at her head and shook her awake. It was dark outside and Zeno struggled against sleepiness. “Hurry!” urged her mother again, “You have to take your father’s food to him.” Zeno slid to the floor and ran to the water-pots and took out cold water to splash on her face. Her head cleared when she did that.

“But what about you, Mother?” she asked. “Didn’t you say last night that we would both go?”

“I can’t, Zeno, the baby’s due today.” Zeno was quite frightened when she heard this. When her younger sister was born, she had mercifully been too young to have had any thoughts about it. Now her mother, who had been pregnant for what had seemed like the whole year to her, was ready to give birth again.

“Shouldn’t I stay with you then?” asked Zeno in concern. Inwardly, Zeno hoped that she would say no. Childbirth frightened her. Bano had told her terrible things about childbirth. She wanted no part of it. But if her mother asked her to stay she would stay and do the best she could.

After what seemed like a long pause, her mother said, “No, I don’t need you as the baby’s got another hour or so and I have time enough to call your aunt. Your father needs you more. Now, get dressed and get started. It will be early afternoon by the time you reach the forest. Mind you don’t take that silly Bano with you. That girl gads about all day, she’s more of a nuisance than a help.” Zeno kept quiet. This was not the first time her mother had voiced her disapproval of her friendship with Bano. In any case, she had no intention of taking Bano with her. It was too far to walk to the clan forest where her father was cutting wood. In any case, Bano would be needed at home to babysit her cousin and they couldn’t possibly take the little boy along with them. He was a hefty boy, and impossible to carry for long distances.

Her basket packed with freshly cooked food and a gourdful of rice brew, Zeno set out for the forest. It was quite dark and she had to peer at the path to make sure she did not step on bits of wood or sharp stones because that hurt. She was not used to the new shoes her father had bought for her on his last trip to Kohima. So she continued to walk to the fields and forest in her bare feet, calloused by habit. Her father didn’t like it at all. She hoped he wouldn’t notice.

Her father had been gone two days now. He preferred to sleep in the little hut they had built in the forest because it helped him use the time spent in walking back and forth from forest to village on cutting more wood. Most of the men worked in this manner, sleeping overnight in the forest and working singly or in pairs. By this afternoon, her father's rations would have dwindled considerably. But he planned to finish cutting and stacking wood in this time. So he had asked his wife to send cooked food on the third day.

Surprisingly, Zeno walked as well as a grown woman, because she had made this trip so often with her mother. Ahead lay the bamboo grove. In the half-dark, the bamboos made her heart jump a little, swaying as they did in the wind and making funny noises, for they creaked when the wind pushed them downward. She ran past the grove because she remembered that a man had been found dead there in her grandfather's day with tiny spirit-spear marks all over his body.

Heart pounding, she looked back but there was nothing there. So she composed herself and walked on at a slower pace. Later she would run again if she needed to. It was strange that no one was about. The village people were hard-working and liked to set out for their fields early. Maybe they had taken the other path, she thought. That would explain why it was so still this morning. But after a few moments, she heard the loud clang of a machete against a tree followed by a man's swearing. Instinctively, she stepped out of the path. There was a large hollowed-out tree stump ahead. Noiselessly she made her way to the tree and climbed inside. No

one could tell there was anyone there. She clutched her basket to her and waited for the man to pass. If he were from her village, she would make herself known to him. He was still standing on the foot-path, rolling tobacco in cigarette paper. When he lit the match, Zeno gasped and quickly held her hand to her mouth because the man was Bise's father. He, among all other people, should not find her alone on this dark forest path. She dared not even think of what he would do to her if he discovered her. So she crouched lower into the tree and prayed he would go past her soon.

He sat beneath the tree for a long time, smoking his tobacco and cursing when it went out. "Damn damp tobacco!" he swore before lighting it again and dragging on it deeply. Would he not leave? Zeno was getting impatient to get to her father and give him news of her mother. It was not until another fifteen minutes had passed that he finally got up and resumed walking. Zeno got out of her uncomfortable position and shook the soil out of her clothing, slipped her basket back on and began to sprint alongside the path. But Bise's father was a hunter. His ears cocked at the faint sound and he shouted, "Who's there?" Zeno flew into the forest, pricking her feet on the thorns of fallen bushes but not caring. He began to give chase. Zeno zig-zagged past the trees. Somewhere up ahead was a little brook and a short path to the nearest field. She would head there and seek the company of other people. Only then would she be safe from him. But her anxiety had disoriented her sense of direction. She realised too late she had run too far past the little path. But she couldn't stop running. Even if she was late delivering her father's food, she had to run as far as possible from this man. If

he caught her, she knew he would do something evil to her. So she kept on running. She ran further into the forest thinking rapidly, perhaps there would be another field path, so many people cut across the forest to get to their fields, let me reach another path soon. Zeno's thoughts raced through her mind as she kept running. Gasping, her every breath hurting her throat, she ran northward now, making for the places where the forest cover was thicker. She dared not look behind her to see if he was still chasing her. She couldn't let him close the distance between them.

Suddenly, she saw a flicker of movement in the woods ahead. It was an old woman leaning over to line her carrying basket with firewood. "*Atsa, Atsa!*" she called in the customary greeting used by youngsters for much older women. The woman looked startled by Zeno's bursting upon her.

"What is it my child? Why are you running as though from the devil?"

"Oh, *Atsa*, he mustn't catch me."

"Who, my child? There's no one here but you and me."

"It's Bise's father, he'll soon be here. *Atsa*, he's an evil man, don't let him take me."

"There, there, my child, no one dare come near you when I am here. You are safe with me." Zeno calmed down and collapsed near the woman's stack of wood. She was overwhelmed by the fact that she was now safe. If he saw her with the old woman, he would slink away, not because he could not overpower both of them but because he would not dare risk the village people coming

to know about his behavior toward the women he was traditionally bound to protect.

Twelve days later the clansmen of Zeno's father were about to abandon their search for the lost girl. Her mother was inconsolable. The baby's cries momentarily reminded people that there was new life in that desolate house. Otherwise, it was as though a death had taken place. The women who went to see Zeno's mother had no words to console her with. They sat together in the dark inner room, their tears running together in unspoken loss. "My child, my child," wailed her mother as she came upon her daughter's clothing, or her little dolls made out of the coverings of maize with their long blond and brown hair falling in neat plaits. "Have you named the child yet?" asked her neighbour, trying to divert her distraught mind.

"Yes, his grandmother has named him Viebilie. We call him Bilie."

"What an odd name," said the neighbour. "Whatever does she mean?"

"Well, it was on the fifth day of Zeno's disappearance that she named him, and she says the name has two meanings: It could be taken as *the-one-who-will-be-ours* or *the-one-we claim-as-ours*."

"Hmm," mused the neighbour, "Have you ever thought that Zeno's name could have been misinterpreted? If you use her full name Zevino, it means *the-one-who-is-good-to-be-with* but Zeno simply means *take-her* or *the-one-who-can-be-taken*. Isn't it strange how the old ones say that names always have power over our destinies?"

Zeno's mother sat silently on, nursing her son. Surreptitiously she spit saliva onto her finger and touched it to his forehead mumbling,

“He is mine, hear me Spirits, I have staked my claim.”

The Gift

Mitra Phukan

Sunday. Flat on his bed, Aditya squinted up, and looked at the light coming in through the curtained window. It was quite sunny outside. He could tell by the golden glow that came in through the green material that it was going to be a fine day. Just right, in this late wintertime, for a last picnic on a sandbar, or maybe a long drive through the outskirts of town to one of the forest bungalows outside. It was the beginning of Spring, really. The greyish mist that had blanketed mornings for the past few weeks had now retreated. The fog and morning haze would appear again in autumn, when they would bring with them the fragrant, creamy white orange-stemmed sewali blossoms.

It was a day to be up and about, a day to bound out of bed and make preparations for fun events. Upstairs, he heard the footsteps of people moving around. Probably Rishi and Priyanka were getting ready for just such an event. They were not, otherwise, given to rising much before nine on a Sunday, no matter how wonderful the weather outside. It was he, Aditya, who was the early riser now. He would wait, sleepless, in his bed, closing his eyes but resigned to sleep eluding him, till he could make out the dawn breaking through the curtains. It was only then that he allowed himself to leave his bed, and give up all pretence of trying to sleep.

Today was different though. In spite of the sunshine outside, he pulled up the blanket closer to his chin, and closed his eyes determinedly again. There was really no need to get up just now. It wasn't as though he was going to a picnic or an early morning boat ride or even a temple.

The faint fragrance of Ishita's perfume came to him. Strange how these blankets and quilts held the scent even now. It came up to him at unexpected moments from these materials that had once touched her body. The quilt that he had set aside just a couple of weeks ago, when it had started to get warmer, had been strong with the fragrance in December, when he had taken it out from the box under the bed where it had been stored in summer. Her clothes held her scent, that mixture of the perfume she usually wore and the scent of her body, a fragrance that was as unique as a fingerprint.

He pulled up the blanket further, up to and then over his eyes, trying to shut out the brightness that was trying to nudge him out of his bed. He breathed in deeply, surrounding himself with the fragrance. Maybe, he thought, since it was a Sunday and such a nice day outside, he would allow himself the luxury of opening her cupboard. He would inhale the scent of her clothes again, just for a couple of minutes, and then close the steel doors shut, firmly, blocking even the keyhole so that the lingering fragrance would not disappear. Vanish, like the morning mist on a warm spring day.

His breath inside the blanket was warm. The scent, though, was already becoming fainter. That was the thing about fragrances, he had realized. They came and went at their own whim, almost. Maybe the olfactory apparatus became used to the smell, maybe they could

just take in that much and no more. In any case, he could no longer smell her perfume inside the cave of the blanket. Like so much else, that whiff from the past too had been impermanent.

His mind went to the recurring leitmotif of his thoughts these days. Everything on this earth was temporary. The intensity of that realization, an intensity that had hit him when he was sitting among the fading flowers of last year's spring, still had the power, even today, to make him pause in whatever he was doing, to think about it. Everything. The little anonymous flower that bloomed, blue and fresh in the grass had a life of a few hours. And those hills beyond his bungalow, they had a span of some thousands of years. Millions, probably. But hours or millennia, it was all the same. It was just a case of different time spans. In the end, everybody, everything had to go.

Strange that he had not realized this before Ishita left them. And now, at this point more than a year later, he found it even stranger that he had not realized this from the moment he had been born, from the time he had begun to understand about life. Oh, he had read about it all right. Poets penned verses about the transience of life, singers sang about the passing of love, of life, novelists kept writing of loss. But it had all been a kind of theoretical thing, something that people talked about. He had recognized the truth of all that was written, about all that the various sages and holy men had spoken about, but in a kind of distant way, something that did not affect his life, and the way he thought and felt at all.

And then, one day, he did. It had been a month or so after the cremation, a few weeks after he had come back home with the

other mourners, with Rishi in a dhuti and white kurta, bearing the urn that contained Ishita's ashes. By then the stream of people coming in to offer their condolences, their heartfelt sympathies to them had dwindled to a trickle. He was sitting in his usual place on the porch, looking at the garden, trying not to remember, and yet wanting to remember the way Ishita had always punctuated her morning half hour with him on the porch with little dashes to the garden to prop up a drooping stem here, or tweaking a dead leaf there. The sharpness of the pain just seemed to be getting worse. He had looked at the garden, seeing not the green of the grass and leaves and the brightness of the flowers, but a slim figure, moving swiftly, happily about as she set about putting the garden to order.

It had hit him then. The little patch before him was showing signs of neglect already, even though Hari the gardener came in twice a week as he had always done. But he had seen, at that moment of epiphany that now, it was very much in need of attention. The soul of it was gone. There were dead leaves on the branches, flowers were drooping. True, Hari would twist them off when he came, but he was due only day after tomorrow. The flowerbeds bordering the little lawn were bare, the brown earth turned up by Hari's spade. Ishita would have had saplings planted in them. He didn't remember seeing a bare bed like this in the garden ever before. By the time one row of flowers drooped and became too old for flowers and fragrance, another row was already ready behind or in front of it. Young, vibrant, full of colour and perfume. It used to be a continuous process. But now with Ishita gone, the continuity was missing as well.

That was when it had struck him, suddenly. Everything around him was impermanent. The flowers were here momentarily, just as Ishita had been, just as he himself was. Time was arrowing ahead, and it was just a matter of a few years, a few decades, before he too left this place.

He had felt comforted by the fact. He still did. Now, as he pushed aside the blanket and got up from the bed, the same thought that came to him every morning appeared in his mind again. One day, one night was over. A new day was before him. Soon, this too would be in the past. He would be one day closer to his own death at the end of this span of a few hours. Once more, the thought comforted him.

The day outside was indeed beautiful. Sometime in the past fifteen months, he had resumed his old habit of sipping his morning coffee while reading his newspaper. In the beginning, with Ishita gone, he had thought he would never be able to do it again. They had always sat down there, exchanging interesting tidbits of news from their respective papers, with Ishita occasionally darting to the garden if something that needed doing caught her eye. This was how they had eased themselves into their days then, before they left for their different jobs. He had thought he would never be able to do it again. For weeks, he had gulped down his coffee in the dining room, reading the papers there. But now here he was again, continuing that habit. Alone.

He gathered the papers that the newspaper boy had flung into the driveway, and sat down on the cane chair. He had got used to the emptiness of the other chair now. Strange, how people

got used to everything. Anything that reminded him of Ishita's absence had brought on the agony then. And now...he was used to it.

Such a mundane phrase. And yet, so comforting. There was comfort indeed in the ordinariness of the way life moved on, in predictable patterns. No grand climax, only the routine of the everyday. And yet as he well knew, it was the ordinary, the mundane that held up the drowning person, providing a gentle buoyancy, unobtrusive because it was habitual.

Sometimes, hours passed before thoughts of Ishita came to his mind, though she was always there, behind his conscious thoughts. That sense of loss would probably be part of his life for ever now, he knew. Sometimes days, even a week passed during which he would not need to rub away the moisture in his eyes. Footsteps. Rishi and Priyanka, dressed in their nightclothes still.

"Up so early?" he asked, affectionately. This bantering about their love for late Saturday nights and even later Sunday morning-afters was part of their easy relationship. "And no late night yesterday, I notice, either!"

Both the young people smiled. Rishi pulled up the other chair for Priyanka to sit on. "I'll get the tea," he said.

Aditya looked at the young girl who was his daughter in law. She had come into the house, her head ablaze with sendur just a few months before Ishita's illness had been diagnosed. What happy months they had been. Now, in this bright Spring sunshine, the girl seemed to be a whiff of fresh air. He was suddenly grateful, again, for the fact that Ishita had been there to welcome this gentle, quiet

girl into their lives. A girl who had shown unsuspected reserves of compassion and strength through all the months of illness and suffering that had followed. He was always quietly thankful for her presence in their family now, even though he was not dependent on his son and his wife for the running of his own household downstairs. It was their presence that comforted.

Priyanka was looking ahead, to the patch of garden before them. He followed her gaze. A little bird was hopping busily on the grass, pushing its beak into the earth in an exploratory manner. But the earth had not yet yielded any worms to it.

“The early bird does not seem to be getting the worm,” he observed.

Priyanka laughed. It was a cascade of silvery notes, a simple laugh on a cheerful and sunny Spring morning. A young person’s laugh. The morning brightened up a little more.

“Earlier birds got them,” she said. “Early worms got caught!”

He smiled. They did not usually get to meet up like this, on Sunday or indeed any morning. It was . . . nice. On weekdays they all left for their workplaces by nine. No time then for them to dawdle like this. They were not like he and Ishita had been, easing themselves into their routine in cane chairs overlooking a garden. They would get up at eight, rush to their baths, fling on their clothes, not have any breakfast, and then move off in different directions to their jobs.

He looked beyond the bird at the garden. It could hardly be called that now, he thought, trying to ignore the pang that came with the reflection. Hari still came in, and he certainly did his quota of work for two hours on those two days of the week. But there

was no life in the garden. The grass looked brown in patches. It could hardly be called a lawn any more. The edges, near the flower beds were bare, with the naked earth showing through. A garden had a life of its own. It was like a child, needing constant nurturing, round-the-clock care and unconditional love. Hari tried, but he had not been able to get through the fog that had engulfed his employer. Looking guiltily at the barren flower beds now, Aditya remembered the many times Hari had told him that seedlings needed to be bought, fertilizers and pesticides had to be sprinkled. Aditya had always said, "Later, tell me that later..." For these fifteen months. And now Hari had stopped asking. He came in, cleaned and cleared, but there were no new flowers to greet the season now. The gerbera plants looked droopy and sick. And the pots that at this time had been a blaze of colour, were now empty. Aditya closed his eyes, recollecting, in a sudden bright flash, the golden marigolds, multihued white-bordered frilly-petalled petunias, white chrysanthemums, bright blue larkspur, pink and yellow phlox, crimson salvias that had spilled out in such joyous profusion from all the planters and window boxes and tubs around the garden. Almost all of them were empty now.

Aditya opened his eyes, taking in, for the first time, the barrenness of the front of the house. Strange, he was only noticing it now.

Priyanka was saying something. "Hear that, Deuta? The kuli bird!"

It was indeed the first cuckoo of the season, calling out from a neighbour's tree. Soon the brain fever bird, the keteki, would begin to cry out, also.

He looked at this girl by his side. She was leaning forward, trying to see the kuli bird from whose throat the calls were coming.

“You won’t be able to see it, you know,” he told her. “They are very good at hiding in the foliage of trees.”

She was a girl from a different part of the country. Even after these four years of marriage, she still found excitement in all the new things around her. The kuli, herald of Spring, always excited her with its clear, sweet, plaintive voice. Ishita, too, had loved the bird’s voice. When its song had kept them awake on warm summer nights, Ishita had felt a sense of calmness, even during those terrible days when the disease was eating into her vital organs. It would bring her some relief from the agony in a way that even those syringes of pain-killing injections failed to do.

Rishi came in with the tea.

“It’s becoming warm, isn’t it?” asked his son. Inconsequential words, but that was what companionship was about. Not the words or what they signified, but the fact that they were sitting here, together, looking at the changing weather, and thinking, all three of them, of the fourth person, whose absence Aditya felt in every aching breath.

He remembered how this girl had come to their house. Rishi had been working in a different city then. But the name, Priyanka’s, had figured increasingly in his conversations with them over the phone. He had always had many friends, but one day Ishita had observed, “Have you noticed? This girl, Priyanka. She seems to be with Rishi all the time.”

He remembered looking at her, surprised. She had read his thoughts, and said, “No, I’m not being all protective about Rishi, you know I wouldn’t be. Maybe I should have put it another way. Rishi seems to be with Priyanka all the time. To the exclusion, it seems to me sometimes, of his other friends, girls and boys.”

“You think there’s something going on there?” he had asked. Ishita had always been more perceptive than him when it came to divining things about other peoples’ relationships.

“Time will tell, won’t it?” she had said. But there had been a smile on her lips, as though she knew more than what her words implied.

In a few weeks, Rishi had called, saying that he was coming home for ten days. No, it wasn’t his annual leave, he had just felt like taking a bit of a break, and he had managed to swing it. And yes, he had said, almost as an afterthought, he would be bringing a friend. Priyanka.

Bringing home a girl with him during the holidays was nothing unusual. They had welcomed all his friends, boys as well as girls, over the years, and found them to be friendly and quite like Rishi himself. Mostly, they were effervescent and talkative. Unlike Priyanka. She was a quiet person, they had discovered with some surprise. The tranquillity of demeanour was reflected in the quietude of her manner, and the calmness of her eyes. She had spent quite as much time with them, Rishi’s parents, as she did with Rishi during that visit.

He had Skyped them after his return to Bangalore. “Did you ... do you like her? Priyanka?” he had asked.

They had made the enthusiastic comments expected of them. Indeed, what was there not to like about her? they had told their son. Different from his usual friends. Having, they thought, hidden depths that revealed a fine character.

“Hm.” There had been an uncharacteristic pause in the conversation then. The picture of their son on the computer screen had been as clear as though he was in the room with them, his voice as near as when he had been here that very morning. Every little nuance in his expression, his voice was magnified by technology.

Aditya and Ishita had leaned into each other, touching, waiting for the words that were hidden. Words that they knew would change all their lives.

But what came had been totally unexpected. “She...Priyanka I mean...she can’t have children, you know,” he had said, his voice careful. “She was – she doesn’t have a uterus. She was born without one.”

It was Ishita who had spoken first. “Ah. I won’t say “poor girl” or anything like that, but she does have my good wishes. My best wishes. Her life ahead of her is likely to be difficult because of that.” But of course they had both known what was coming next. They had reached out to touch each others’ hands, waiting for their son’s next words.

“I...am going to marry her,” he had said then, in a rush to get the sentence out.

“That’s wonderful...it’s a wonderful choice...” they had both spoken the words immediately, spontaneously. Indeed, the fact

that they would never have grandchildren had never, in any manner, come in the way of their affection for this girl.

“Thank you Ma, Deuta... I knew it would be all right with you,” Rishi had said, quietly. “Priyanka insisted that I should tell you this...”

They had never spoken about it again. In fact, he hardly thought of it. Indeed, he wondered why suddenly that memory had come back to him now... He shook his head to clear it away. It was almost as though he was being disloyal, in some way, to this girl sitting beside him by remembering that conversation.

But Rishi at this moment had that same expression that he remembered from that conversation on Skype from the past. Perhaps that was why he had been reminded of it. Aditya watched as his son set down his cup. There was an expression that Aditya could not read in his eyes.

“There’s something we...” Rishi’s glance took in his wife ...”need to tell you,” he said.

It was something important of course. Otherwise why this buildup? Thoughts and worst case scenarios raced through Aditya’s mind. Were they being transferred? Would they leave this city, and go back to Bangalore, leaving him here, alone? Well that would be all right, why the clearing of the throat and the strange looks. He could look after himself, he had made that perfectly clear to them. He would visit them, they could come here for their holidays...

“It’s like this...” began Rishi.

But he had to stop. The click of the gate leading out to the road made them swivel their heads towards the sound.

A woman stood hesitating at the gate. Middle aged, probably the same age as Aditya himself. She was a stranger. He was quite sure he had never seen her before. He would have remembered the distinctive head of white hair above her bright eyes and aquiline nose. He looked questioningly at Rishi, then at Priya. They shook their heads.

The woman saw them, and walked up to the veranda. Aditya stood up and waited for her to come. A large cloth bag bulged down from her right shoulder. Aditya noticed that she was supporting the bag with her right hand as she strode down the garden path towards them, so that it would not swing against her hips.

She walked till she was standing before them. She looked straight at Aditya, then at Rishi. Confidently, with no hesitation, she smiled. It was an open smile, a friendly one.

There was something about her bearing, her demeanour that invited automatic respect.

“Ah...come in, please...” said Aditya. He still had no idea who she could be.

The woman made no attempt to introduce herself. Instead, she was unslinging the cloth bag from her shoulder. She bent down and placed it on the topmost step of the veranda.

There was a deliberateness to her movements. What was she going to take out? The papers and news channels on TV were always full of bombs that were planted all around town, lethal bombs that killed and maimed. But in those seconds that she stooped to take out that something from the bag, Aditya felt no fear. He waited to see what it was.

It was a flower pot. A clay pot, with a single plant, about a foot tall. Its green stem and darker leaves were topped by a single flower. Arose, yellow, like the sunshine outside.

The woman held up the pot carefully in both her hands. Looking straight at Aditya, she said, “This is for your wife.”

In automatic response, he held out his hands to receive it. Only when he heard Rishi’s quick intake of breath beside him did realization come to him. His hands fell to his sides. He felt their heaviness. In his head, thoughts whirled. Feelings, bottled down firmly for months, popped open a cork and flew out in a confusion of foam and fume into his mind.

But the woman was still holding out the flowerpot to him.

“My wife....she’s ...I mean, she passed away.” He heard himself stammering.

The woman answered, her voice steady, “I know...”

The three of them looked at her, speechless. Her voice was quiet, but had authority. She was still holding out the flowerpot to Aditya, though she was looking also at Rishi and Priyanka now, including them in her gift.

Aditya held out his hands again and took the pot. The flower glowed in his hands. It seemed to have a life of its own. The goldenness of it was concentrated sunshine, which the flower had taken into itself, and then scattered, carelessly, all around.

Roses. Of course Ishita had loved roses. The bed at the end of the garden, raised a few inches above the rest of the plot still had some of her shrubs. A few were flowering now, brave in spite of the neglect. But the blooms were small, nothing like what Ishita

had coaxed out of them. Even the colours seemed washed out. As though they were already dead, as though they were anticipating the time when their very existence would seep out of them. And yet it wasn't as though they had aphids feeding on them or anything like that. Hari saw to it that they were not diseased. And yet they were almost dead. Lifeless.

“Fifteen months ago, wasn't it?” asked the woman.

They nodded, all three of them on the veranda, still speechless.

“Four seasons,” said the woman. She picked up the empty bag, and slung it on her shoulder again.

Priyanka found her voice first. “Please... come in... you must have a cup of tea.”

“Did you know her? My mother?” Rishi too seemed able to speak. Only Aditya remained as he was, holding the pot with the bright flower in steady hands. He felt he would never be able to tear his gaze away from the woman. Or indeed, find his voice ever again.

The woman continued, as though she had not heard either of them. “Four seasons. It takes that much time. At least.”

Unexpectedly, she smiled, her teeth white and strong against her darkish face. She turned to Priyanka and said “No, that's fine.” Her voice, Aditya noticed, was kind. Compassionate, even. Not a voice full of pity though, no, not that at all.

Ignoring Rishi's question, she turned to Aditya. “I hope you will do the garden again. It's time. Spring, summer, the rains, winter. Four seasons, they've gone. And now it's spring again. Basant. You've noticed that, haven't you?”

Slowly, Aditya nodded.

“A garden needs tending. Nurturing. It’s like life. Like a child.” She looked at them, smiling, not noticing, perhaps, their confusion and wonderment. Or perhaps prepared for it, but unwilling, nevertheless to say anything else.

And with that, with no further words, she turned around and walked down the driveway towards the gate.

They watched her, unable to speak or cry, “Stop”! They looked, unable to move their feet to run towards her and block her exit and make her tell them who she was, how she knew so much about them. And about Ishita. Their voices too were frozen again, as in a dream, the kind of dream where it was impossible to get a sound out of the throat, a word or a laugh, even though the dreamer tried and tried.

The woman walked purposefully on, away from them, never turning back to look at them. Only once did she glance up at the Krishnosura tree as she neared it at the gate. It was on the brink of blossoming now, the bright red flowers that would unfurl from the tight buds showing through in a hint of colour that was a promise. She reached out a hand and patted the curving trunk of the many-branched tree, heavy with foliage. Without breaking her stride, she walked through the small grilled revolving gate at the side of the main gate. And then she was gone.

On the veranda, they found their voices at last.

“Did you...” “Do you...” “Ever seen...”

They all shook their heads.

Aditya looked at the pot. “I should get this planted...”

Rishi reached out a hand and took it from him. Priyanka cupped her hands around the flower, caressing it. Her fingers seemed to be speaking to the bright bloom.

“It’s...it’s a sign,” said Rishi, slowly. There was a faraway look in his eyes. Aditya saw that they were glistening.

They put down the pot carefully, in a place on the veranda that was sheltered from the wind and the noon sun, but was bright just now with the morning light. “We’ll water it...not too much, I seem to remember Ma saying. You have to be careful about the amount of water a rose plant needs. Not too much, not too little...” Rishi’s voice was still soft.

“Yes. I’ll get Hari on his mobile. He’s not due for a couple of days yet, but maybe he can come in today or tomorrow. That rose patch needs to be cleaned, probably hoed and weeded before this can be planted there. Manured also. I’ll have to buy some...maybe I’ll take him with me to the nursery tomorrow on the way to work. He can pick out what he needs and I’ll have them sent here...” Aditya paused. He realized that for the first time in his life, he was talking about getting things done in the garden. And for the first time in more than fifteen months, he was planning something.

They sat down again, and looked at the rose in its corner. The brightness of it was at one with the brightness of the sunshine around them.

“Breakfast?” asked Aditya finally. “I was going to make my famous omelette, the Dak Bungalow one.”

“Totally flat, with lots of chillies,” explained Rishi to Priyanka, smiling. “Of course, why not, Deuta. We’ll help you with it. But

just a moment before we go in... I was about to tell you something when the lady came in..."

Aditya remembered. Yes, perhaps Rishi would now tell his father about the transfer. He wanted to break in, tell them it didn't matter, they shouldn't worry, he would be quite all right here, and if he wasn't, he would go and stay with them, he knew he would be welcome in their home. He had a few more years to retire, he was still able bodied, he could manage. But Rishi was already continuing.

"We've been visiting some doctors, Deuta, Priya and I."

He waited, bracing himself against the storm that rushed into his mind. Doctors. Disease. Not again, oh no, please God... not again... please please... take my life, please, not that again, not for these children... please God please...

"About getting a child. Ever since we knew about this procedure, Priyanka felt that we should go ahead... in fact she's the one who feels that we should give it a try..."

"Procedure? What procedure?" Relief, then puzzlement, replaced worry. The long ago Skype conversation came into his mind. But his son was speaking again.

"Surrogacy. It's all done quite efficiently these days. The doctors had identified a person who will carry our baby full term." Aditya stared at them.

"The baby will be ours, Deuta, Rishi's and mine," said Priyanka in her usual soft voice. "That... really means a lot to me. I never thought I could have a baby, and now I can."

"We had thought of adopting, but for Priya, to have one's very own child, like this, our own... with our genes, her parents', yours, Ma's... This is a miracle, Deuta. A miracle."

“And this morning we got the news that the fertilised ovum is safe in the surrogate womb. God willing...in another nine months...” Priyanka’s voice broke. She shook her head, unable to continue. Bending down, she touched her father-in-law’s feet. As Aditya stooped to lift Priyanka up, he got that familiar scent again. A mixture of Ishita’s fragrance and the aroma of her body, the same scent that he had got a whiff of that morning. It seemed to be all around them now. The veranda, the garden, the house, their minds...everything was full of it.

Ramu Prasad's Angel

Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh

A hot summer afternoon not many people were out on the road; the fierce summer heat at its peak had confined everyone indoors. Only those who had to go on compulsion were out, clumsily walking on the road, with umbrellas to protect themselves from the glaring sun. 'Fire walking', walking swiftly over a layer of embers spread thinly along the bottom of a shallow trench, would in no case be less comfortable than walking on the heated asphalt.

In a dilapidated shack built next to the road, a washer-man's shop, dead tired after ironing all the cloths left in the morning, Ramu Prasad, a frail old man, was taking a nap to rest his weary bones. He was seeing a dream, flashback of the bygone days, of the days when he was younger ...

... On the bank of the Imphal river, he was sitting under the shade of a peepul tree, to cool off the summer heat, while waiting for the cloths he had spread out after washing to dry. His two children were prancing around merrily, unmindful of the scorching sun. The gaiety of their laughter filled the air. They saw a butterfly sitting on a wild rose and tried to catch it. The moment they held out their tiny hands it fluttered its colourful wings and flew off. They chased but it flew up and down, floating high up in air. It suddenly turned away and went almost out of sight. One of them ran to their father and pulled him hard holding his massive hairy right hand,

crisscrossed with thick veins, with his tender hands and pleaded, "Please, catch the butterfly." ...

All of a sudden, Ramu heard someone speaking to him very close to his ears, "Get up." A very sweet voice, though it gave him a sudden jolt.

"An angel speaking to me, I'm blessed!" he thought and winked his eyes to rub off sleep.

The voice continued, "Get up. Otherwise, I will turn you into a frog."

He sat up with a start and rubbed his eyes to clear. A small girl, not more than four, holding a stick in her hand, was standing near him, watching him intently with her sparkling dark brown eyes. The moment she saw him awake, her innocent face turned serious and said, "Are you a stranger?"

Perplexed, Ramu exhaled a long breath and said with a toothless smile, "No, my sweet child, I'm not a stranger. I'm Ramu Prasad, your neighbourhood dhobi."

She giggled and said, "Good! My parents told me not to talk to strangers. But, what's a dhobi?"

"A washer-man."

"Then you're not a bad man. I'll turn all the bad men into frogs with my magic wand. They kidnap children."

"Meri Pyari Pari! What are you doing here? Where do you live?"

"Meri Pyari Pari," she repeated after him and said pointing to the big house with a well laid-out garden in front that could be seen through the small window of the shack, "I live there."

Gently stroking her plump cheeks with his dry shrunken hands, Ramu said, “Meri Pyari Pari, so you live next-door. Won’t your parents be worried when they find you missing?”

She chuckled and placed her forefinger before her pursed lips to hush him. She then whispered, “My parents are out. I have sneaked out while Nene is taking her siesta.”

Ramu guessed, “Nene must be the maid who had brought cloths for ironing in the morning.” He too lowered his voice and said, “Still, your Nene will be worried to find you missing when she wakes up. Meri Pyari Pari, go home, now.”

“But, I want to play with you.”

“Meri Pyari Pari, I have nothing to play with.”

She looked around and thought for a while before pointing to the big heavy charcoal heated iron lying on the table that served as ironing board, “I want to play with it.”

“Hai, Ram ... Ram! It’s not a plaything. It’s hot and quite heavy.”

She looked at him inquisitively and said, “What’s it?”

With all the earnest to make her understand in the simplest way possible, he said, “It’s my implement for ironing cloths.”

“Will you iron my doll’s cloths?”

“O yes, Meri Pyari Pari.”

“A promise?”

“A promise, Meri Pyari Pari.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll bring my doll’s cloths.”

Ramu was jubilant to learn that she would be coming again the next day but he was worried – she might go to school and be

prevented from coming. He said, “Tomorrow? But, don’t you go to school?”

“I go to school in the morning. I will come after school.”

He said triumphantly, “Fine. See you tomorrow, then.”

The small girl ran away happily, giggling all the while. She, an angel, had come and gone like the unpredictable spring clouds, one moment it was here, next moment it was gone and he was left alone brooding over his loneliness.

His forefathers belonged to the groups of people from Bihar who migrated to Assam in the wake of tea garden boom. Born and brought up at Dhubri, he had come to Imphal to seek his fortune after his marriage.

After the death of his wife, Ramu became very lonely, he worked harder and tried to keep himself busy to forget her. His work as a dhobi was all he knew and cherished. When his wife was alive he worked only to earn his livelihood and feed his family but after her departure it had become his friend, his companion, his love, his solace, his rest, his soul, his life, all in one. But, his sons would not allow him to do any work saying he was quite advanced in age and he needed rest. Without his work he was like a fish out of water.

One of his friends told him about the place at Airport road. The man who used to run a washer-man’s shop in a shack had left and it was lying vacant. Without paying heed to his sons’ request not to go there, he went there and opened his shop. He, who had never played with his grandchildren and avoided their company, unable to withstand the noise they made, had been overwhelmed by the small girl’s openness. She, whose name even he did not

know, except calling her lovingly ‘Meri Pyari Pari’, seemed to have brought a bit of sunshine to his turbulent life; her innocence had charmed and comforted him.

He pondered over the life of the small girl, “Poor little thing! She, such a sweet child, is the only child in the big house with no one to play with. Of course, her Nene is there but she would not want to play with her. She must be feeling very lonely ...”

The following day, she came running, dragging along a bag. The moment she saw him, she giggled and said, “Meri Pyari Pari, here I am.”

“Welcome, Meri Pyari Pari.”

“See what I have brought for you,” she said opening her bag and then brought out a bar of chocolate.

“Oh, chocolate for me! No, you keep it.”

She sulked at his refusal to accept what she had brought for him. She said, “Aren’t you my friend?”

With a beaming smile on his face, he said, “You’re mistaken. I’m your friend but I don’t eat chocolate. It sticks to my teeth. What more you’ve got in your bag?”

She blushed and closed her bag, and hid it behind her back.

He tickled her and said, “No secret between friends. Right?”

She cackled with laughter and said, “Right. Stop tickling me.”

She then opened her bag again and brought out a doll without any cloth on. “Shameless girl. She always gets her cloths dirty. I had to wash her cloths and hang it out to dry.”

“Yesterday, you told me to iron your doll’s cloths. Why didn’t you bring it?”

With a twinkle in her eyes, she said, “But her cloths are not dry yet.”

He said, “I can wash your doll’s cloths and iron it too. Whenever, your doll’s cloths are dirty bring it to me.”

“But, I have never seen you washing cloths.”

“Meri Pyari Pari, I told you I’m a dhobi. Washing cloths is my duty. I’m now old so I do not wash others’ cloths. But, I will wash your doll’s cloths.”

She opened her eyes wide in wonder and said, “Good! So you also wash cloths.”

Ramu, an old man, and the small girl had become inseparable friends. She would bring her dolls and toys. Everyday, she would think up new ways to play with her dolls and toys – ‘Going to market’, ‘Celebrating birthday’, ‘Going for picnic’, ‘Selling vegetables in the market’, ‘Going to school’, ... While playing, she would go on talking and ordering him to do this and that, “Keep the doll here ... lay it down ... put on new cloths ... do the dishes ...”. He would never grouch and do whatever she said without a murmur. With her around, he did not notice how time flew. She had brought spring in the autumn of his life.

Summer had gone, so too rainy season, followed by autumn. Winter had set in and the bond of friendship between the old man and his ‘Meri Pyari Pari’ grew tighter.

Government machineries were busy with a plan for widening the roads in Imphal. Surveys were conducted. Many buildings and structures near the roads had to be pulled down to make room. Notices were served to the occupants to vacate and ultimatums

were issued. Ramu Prasad's shack would have to go; there was no means of saving it. On the eve of new-year, his 'Meri Pyari Pari' came as usual, her bag loaded with her dolls and toys. She was surprised to see her friend, old and frail Ramu, sitting dejectedly, all his belongings neatly packed and tied into a big bundle with a coarse white cloth.

She said, "Meri Pyari Pari, why are you looking so gloomy?"

Exhaling a long breath, he said with a pensive heart, "I am leaving tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Don't know."

"Won't you play with me now?"

A faint smile imprinted on Ramu's wrinkled face.

"O yes. How shall we play now?"

She brought out her doll and said, "Do you love my princess?"

Ramu could not help but laugh aloud, "Very much."

They then proceeded to play 'Princess and her magic wand'.

With the magic wand the princess turned all the bad men into frogs . . .

When the time came for her to leave, she said, "When will you leave tomorrow?"

"Early in the morning."

Without any further query, she ran away leaving behind Ramu watching her till she vanished into her house.

The following morning she sneaked out through the backdoor, went around their house, opened the gate without making any noise and came out. Once out of the gate she ran to the shack where Ramu was waiting for her.

Still panting, she gave him a small packet, a parting gift, wrapped with old newspaper.

“What’s this?”

“Open it later.”

Both of them faintly heard her mother calling her for breakfast, in the distance.

She turned around and said, “Mama is calling me.”

She did not stay even a moment longer to say good-bye, she rushed off like a flash of lightning in a dark stormy night that momentarily shone to show everything only to engulf all in darkness the next moment.

After she had left, Ramu opened the packet with shaky hands. A sense of mild exhilaration filled in his mind, his heart ached with the pang of separation. Inside was a doll, her princess of the previous day, the one he had said he loved.

Holding the doll in his right hand, with his left hand Ramu lifted the bundle packed with his belongings and started walking slowly with his frail legs – the start of a new year, a new beginning, a new destination, another new chapter of his life.

Be careful how you cut that tree*Mamang Dai*

Be careful how you cut that tree.
A dizzy blow can change the sunlight,
alter the snaking path of a breeze;
kill the ground with unexpected poison, heat.
These things are unpredictable.

In the frontier days of love and conquest
these trees grew wild.
They are priests, gods of a pre- human age
carrying a knotted stick;
every posture, angle,
arrangement of limb and eye
a pathway of time;
unfurling destruction, and returning life
in the inherited tattoo of a green leaf.

Two brothers fought a war.
The vanquished sleeps in these branches
dreaming the seasons like a wheel.
The good guy also died here;
His sword turned into an instrument,¹

designed to dazzle the squirrel and bat,
and other messengers who sprang to life
with the birth of a song.

Be careful how you cut that tree.
It is the same tree that watches the hunter
alone on the hard earth, laying his traps.
Ancient stairway to heaven,
send him a fierce bird with a wing span of the sky.

When the evening star is sinking
the tree on the hill watches over everything.

¹ This is a reference to the yoksa, a long sword fitted with metal discs at the hilt that is used as a musical instrument in a dance performance, and for the chanting songs of Adi oral history usually recounted by the miri-shaman.

Man and brother*Mamang Dai*

Before the day is over one kill, and the deed is done.
The alert faces are speckled, beads of sweat on the ground,
the sun is drooping over the hill when the last wild tiger is killed
and a heartbeat like thunder echoes from earth to sky.

Deep into the night the women tell stories.
In the incestuous hunger of birth and creation, they say,
we tumbled down the same stairway
of stars, fire and salt.
All the zodiac was given to us;
Signs, symbols, the marks of destiny,
choreography of blood
frame by frame – a life!
But now, the red mantle¹ is being folded away.

When the moon rises the hill will be empty.
Perhaps a long silhouette will lope across the sky line,
but it will only be a silhouette;
All the fire remaining in our hearts
will melt like ice and dead bone
until a brother cries out again,
seeking a brother's lost face.

Without his footprint we would not know how to be brave.
Alone with the wind, perhaps a sigh will save us now—
Burning, incandescent memory
of the swift stream and forest light;
when somewhere, in his sleep, a child whimpers,
dreaming a dream of an ancestor
calling him back, calling him back,
to the striped summer of the tiger.

¹ It is a widespread belief in Arunachal Pradesh that man and tiger were born brothers. The killing of a tiger is equivalent to that of killing a man and the rituals associated with a tiger hunt are rigorous. This is a reference to the *ga-lè*, the dress of Adi women. When a tiger is killed the hunter is received at the village gate by women carrying a red *ga-lè* to shield the hunter from the eyes of the slain tiger.

Zawlpala's Lament
(Of lovers united after death)

Lalrinmawii Khiangte
Department of English
Govt. Aizawl College

With fury directed at himself,
 Zawlpala felt his insides bleed in agony;
 This is self-annihilation!

He had made a bargain o'er a lie in jest,
 Surely no man be wealthy enough to pay;
 Such a reckless, exorbitant demand,
 For the price of a bride!

The lie: this priceless beauty Tualvungi,
 Is my sister; not my wife!

The royal suitor Phuntih-a
 Delivered the goods: the price intact!

Alas! Zawlpala – his word of honour given,
 His principle to uphold;
 Could not his accursed words take back!

It was living death: to watch his beloved led away,
 To become the wife of the ardent, wealthy suitor!

He saw: the hurt of betrayal in her eyes.
 He heard: the silent weeping of her soul.

Pride goes before a fall, it tore him to shreds;
It led him to his grave!

Such a hideous, ugly, gross mistake,
Such self-loathing; such remorse and guilt!

A bird was despatched to break the news,
Tualvungi went heart-broken to the grave;
Her beloved was indeed dead!

A passing old woman enquired the matter,
And Tualvungi informed plaintively;
“Oh, please be merciful, stab me to death!”

The old woman fathomed her pain and she obeyed....

And Zawlpala’s bones shifted gently to the side,
To make room for Tualvungi in the grave.

Epilogue:

A pair of butterflies aerily,
Lovers united after death;
And in their merry trail,
A solitaire follows forlornly;
The dejected spirit of the much maligned suitor.

And the legend lives on...

Note: At the Chapchar Kut (Spring Festival) 2008 celebration, I had watched a short play broadcasted on the local channel of television: ‘Tualvungi and Zawlpala’, based on a popular Mizo folk

tale of the same, enacted by the drama crew of Art & Culture Department, Govt of Mizoram. It was so touchingly enacted and directed with such depth and profundity that I rendered their story into this short poem. My empathy for Tualvungi, and empathy too, at Zawlpara for his conflict-ridden angst at his prideful bravado.

So, this is the English poetical rendition of – a tragic Mizo love story which –I don't think I would be exaggerating when I take the liberty to say that it is possibly a Mizo version of Shakespeare's 'Romeo & Juliet'! I also thank A.Hmangaihzuali Poonte, my colleague, for graciously contributing the title – I would not have come up with anything better, and for all her encouragement and support in my compositions.

Composition: 2008

An Empty Nest

Lalrinmawii Khiangte

How you have grown, you're an adult child,
Swiftly have the years flown by;
And we were swept along with it.

Ah! But, why is it my precious child?
A stranger you are to me at times?
Come back to me, my dearest-est.

Little bird, you'll fly away someday,
Building a nest to call your own;
Leaving me to face an empty hearth.

It is now long, long ago,
When I had held you in the circle of my arms;
Sang for you, rocked you to sleep.

How blessed I am, holding your tiny frame,
Holding you closer than closest, my dearest-est;
And hear the beating of your heart.

Watched you play gleefully in the mud,
Cleaned you up and scolded you lovingly;
'Cause I wanted everything best for my child.

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Prepared you as much I could,
Within the compass of my limited wisdom;
To face this big, bad world!

So, to my two little birdies:

The sweet pain of a mother's heart,
Will be relieved when you come over to visit sometimes;
The nest you'll have left behind.

This much I know – loving you means not binding you.

Loving you means setting you free to find yourself.

And that for you both, I will always be near.

Composition: 2011

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The next issue of MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies shall focus upon the concept of *Orality and Oral Tradition*. Articles may be sent by September 2014. Contributors are requested to kindly refer to the prescribed format that has been denoted in the inside back cover of the journal. The sub themes may be related to, but not confined to the following:

Literacy and Culture

Verbal Expression Within Cultures

Memory

Cultural Traditions

Communication

Writing

Intangible Culture

Oracy

Oral History

Oral Interpretation

Oral Law

Oratory

Performance Arts

Storytelling

Epics

Folklore

Folksong

Proverbs