

Christianization and its Impact on Mizo Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Mizo consists of different sub-tribes. The various sub-tribes are differentiated by their own specific rituals, ceremonies and dialectical differences that exists between them. The differences among the Mizo sub-tribes are slowly and gradually vanishing after the acceptance of Christianity as their Religion in the early 20th century. The social life of the Mizo was controlled by their religious and cultural life in the past. Before the arrival of the British (and subsequently the Missionaries), the Mizo were having ‘nomadic habit and volatile mentality’. The way of life of the Mizo was immensely transformed by the Christian Missionaries. In 1894, two English Baptist missionaries of the Arthington Aborigines Mission, J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge landed in Lushai Hills (the present Mizoram) and began their missionary works. The introduction of education and a new religion—Christianity changed their perspectives and the world view of the Mizo. In other words, a new culture, custom and tradition and identity of the Mizo developed. Though the Mizo still cherished their old cultures and traditions, much has undergone change beyond recognition. In recent times, there is a movement back to the roots. At the same time, they also agree that their culture has been blatantly influenced by Western culture in dress, food, mannerism, music and ideas. The main tradition festivals of the Mizo—Chapchar Kut, Mim Kut and Pawl Kut—of the old slowly and gradually faded away from the society after they adopted Christianity. Today, the main festival of the Mizo is Christmas even though effort has been put to revive Chapchar Kut again. In the above context, the paper analyses the influence of Christianity on the cultures, traditions and various areas of life of the Mizo by observation and analyses of materials available.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a very complex process. It is even more complex to define. It is formed around the meanings people construct and share regarding many things in their lives and the lives of the community at a particular period of time. Jeff Lewis (2002) in his Cultural Studies defines, “Culture, therefore, is both the context of existing meanings and the dynamic which stimulates the production and dissemination of new meanings. Culture, in fact, is best understood as the processes of meaning-making within a given social group. Culture may be formed and operate through a broad range of social groupings and social practices: for example, family, neighbourhood, age-group, ethnic group, religion, workplace, text style, clothing style, nation, globe, and so on.” (p.3) Roland Barthes (1975) has explained that any representation or symbolization necessarily constitutes a ‘text’, or system of meanings. For Barthes and other cultural theorists there can be no reality outside the text. In other words, an individual can only relate to, or know, the world around him or her through some form of mediation. In Barthes’s sense, everything constitutes a text or sign system: a stop sign, an article of clothing, conversation, a bottle of wine, a tree, a Hollywood movie, a newspaper. Of course, things exist outside the representations of text, but they can have no meaning until they are captured by culture. This means that a distinction between nature and culture is no longer valid, since even natural objects (water, stars, trees) are rendered meaningful by human sign systems. (Lewis, 2002: 7) These sign systems change in meaning with time due to many external as well as internal factors. The coming of Christianity brought about a revolutionary transformation in sign systems that existed before and affected all areas of life of the Mizo whose everyday life was closely linked to nature. The ultimate power was held by the Agents who brought the new religion to the Mizo. So the meaning-making lay with power. Michel Foucault, a French language theorist and

historian, believes that the operations of meaning-making (discourse) are always associated with relationships of power. For Foucault and others who follow this perspective, discourse and power are so thoroughly interrelated that they constitute a virtual compound: 'discourse/power'. (p. 25)

The word 'Mizo' means 'people' (mi) of the hills (zo)', Mizoram thus meaning 'land (ram) of the people of the hills'. The name Mizoram inhabited by the Mizo had been adopted in 1972. In order to understand the different aspects of Mizo culture, religion, economics, politics and society, it would be wise to throw some light on "ethos". (Lalrinawma, 2005: 46) The Dictionary meaning of ethos means, the characteristic spirit, moral values, ideas or beliefs of a group, community or culture. Culture of a people finds many forms of manifestation, be it their beliefs and practices, food, dance forms, occupation, festivals, rituals or simply way of life. It is the collective consciousness of a group or nation. The paper is based on qualitative analysis of secondary sources along with observation and experience. Under some of the categories termed as culture, the paper looks into what was the Mizo society like before colonization/ Christianization and the changing aspects it has brought about after Christianization in the state.

The Old Beliefs and Practices

To know the changes that have taken place in many areas of the Mizo life, one need to be acquainted to the old Mizo culture and ethos. We will study them through some of these areas of the Mizo life.

Festivals

The Mizo between the years 1450 to 1700 celebrated three main festivals. They were: *Chapchar Kut*, *Mim Kut* and *Pawl Kut*. *Chapchar Kut* was celebrated annually at the end of March or beginning of April after cutting their jhooms and before burning them. It was celebrated by drinking 'zu', drumming, dancing and feasting on pigs and mithuns. The festival was held for 3-7 days and was the happiest and merriest occasion or episode in the life of the Mizo of long ago.

The next festival is *Mim Kut*. 'Mim' is a nut known as "job's tears." It was celebrated at the end of August or beginning of September. It is also regarded as a festival in honour of the dead. The origin of this festival goes back to the story of *Ngama* and *Tlingi* of ancient lore. *Ngama* in a state of trance finds his dead wife pale, thin, undernourished and on another occasion, after he had offered fruits and vegetables to his wife, finds her strong, plump and chubby. Thus, this festival establishes a strong connection between the dead and the living. Life and death being parts of the cycle of Nature. From this time forth, he along with his neighbours started offering food on the same day every year and so 'Mitthi thali-chhiah' (offering vegetables to the dead) and 'Mim Kut' (Job's tear festival) came into being. It was celebrated by offering dumplings made of glutinous rice and the first fruits of their produce to the dead relatives. It is observed for a day only.

Pawl Kut: This is a harvest festival celebrated at the end of December after a rich harvest of paddy, cereals, root crops etc. During the years 1450-1700 when the ancestors of the Mizo settled in the Chin state, they suffered 'Thingpui tam' which means 'famine' for three consecutive years. The fourth year, they had their barns full. They thought it a fit reason to celebrate the occasion. Thus, this festival became a firm, rigid and established part of the customs and traditions of the Mizo. They celebrated it by drinking 'zu', eating meat, children dressed in all their finery. Like in *Chapchar Kut*, here too, they would go to the exit or entrance of the village where there was a platform of large stones erected in memory of the dead.

Religion

The pre-Christian Mizo worshipped what was commonly called *Sa*. It is the object of worship for a particular clan, who presided over the clan and its members. *Sa* was a clan deity, a supernatural being who gave each clan its unique identity. It is true that the Mizos conceived *Pathian* as *Sa*, who is Transcendent, unmixed, Immaterial, Creator-God. This *Pathian* dwells somewhere in the space away from human reach. Every clan offered a boar to avert the spirit's anger. This is accompanied by singing. This sacrificial boar was not to be shared with other clans. *Khua* was described as collective deity, having power to protect the members of a village community along with their domestic animals. Almost every experience of life from birth to death, failure or success was attributed to *Khua* that was almost identified as fate.

Early Mizo society was controlled by superstitious faith. Something unusual or occurrences are taken as indication of misfortune. Their superstitions were normally attached to cultivation, animals, birds and snakes. It was prohibited to do certain things and kill certain animals. There was belief in witchcraft. The life of the society depended on *Thiang* or *holy* and *Thianglo* or *unholy*. Certain dreams, acts and sights were believed to be *Thianglo* or *unholy*. In

this regard they consulted a priest in order to avoid misfortunes. Even if two members of the same family take journey in east and west directions on the same day, it is believed that one of them will meet with an accident. They built a thick fence of timber and bamboo around a village and sharp spears were embedded in it as to keep plague and contagious diseases at bay. On the high poles placed among them, dead monkeys were impaled and the people hoped that this was enough to frighten away the evil spirit responsible for their sickness. Likewise, the Mizo had their own particular beliefs and practices which concerned their day to day affairs.

The concept of God

The Mizo believed in the existence of Supreme Reality or Supreme soul who is the creator and sustainer of everything in this universe even before the coming of the good news or Christianity. This God was known as “*Pathian*” or God of whole humanity and creator of everything. *Pa* means father and *thian* means holy. They believed the *pathian* possessed creative power. There were many gods and goddesses, spirits whom the Mizo believed existed before the dawn of Christianity in the land.

The concept of Soul

The soul was believed to having personality like human being. The soul dwells in the person. The soul of the human is taken to be superior to that of animals. The soul is believed to live eternally. When a man died, the soul burst open the body from the forehead. Following the wall and the roof of the house, the soul roam about the village for three months, then a simple ceremony released the soul and the soul proceeded to *Mitthi Khua* (the eight layer of the earth) and to *Rih lake* and beyond etc. So, on the whole, Mizo were classed as animist, and a deeper study reveals that they worship a Supreme Being and sacrifices were made to appease their anger when they became ill or any natural calamity disturbed them.

Tlawmngaihna

An important practice which the Mizo have inculcated in their youth is the “*Tlawmngaihna*”. The term cannot be simply defined by a word. It literally means, ‘unwillingness to be defeated or be beaten.’ It has and also brings out an essence of beauty. Mr. C. Vanlallawma defined *Tlawmngaihna* as being pushed out into the streets by society, where it established itself in the daily life of the community and was hitched to and drawn forward by the big cup of honour. Though the term is hard to give just one definition, we will try to experience it through some acts or examples from daily life of those yonder days. For example, while foraging in the Jungle, sometimes the amount they procured was too little to divide among themselves, so they would give all to the youngest and weakest in the group. At meals, on the other hand, a child would wait for a sign from his elders before he took the first mouthful. For youth and youngsters, camping for cutting jhooms was a convenient time to learn the Mizo way of life: Mizo altruism, *Tlawmngaihna*, Mizo assiduousness, diligence and industry; Mizo behavior, courtesy, obedience and respect for elders. It was the most important time for them to be trained, to acquire those desirable traits which added up and amounted to *Tlawmngaihna*-the Mizo personality.

One writer, who referred to himself only as LKS, felt that, with the coming of Christianity, aspects of ‘Mizo’ society such as ‘*tlawmngaihna*, courage, helpfulness- all that we used to practice is now fast disappearing. ‘When I see with my own eyes how *tlawmngaihna* is disappearing, I feel sad’. For one chief, ‘becoming a Christian meant becoming shameless; it meant wearing/having [Western] clothes [which, to him was shameful]’ (Saitawka 1932:12-14). Similarly, many authors denounced the pretense of acting like a white man, as well as the cleavage that was being created in society as a result of education and the introduction of government jobs. (Pachau, 2014: 121) Though the colonial authorities made attempt to maintain the status quo in terms of village authority, the colonial and Christian presence was making the Mizo lose their previous mode of living. Thus, several authors wrote that *tlawmngaihna* or traditional morality was slowly eroding, it was not so much the spirit but the conditions in which its practice was relevant that was being eroded.

Zawlbuk

The word ‘*Zawlbuk*’ means *bachelor’s dormitory*. It is not exactly known when the *Zawlbuk* began. When the Mizo migrated West and crossed the river Tiau in the year 1700, young men used to sleep on the veranda of the chief’s house to be available at his beck and call at all times. The main purpose was to safeguard and defend the village against enemies, to maintain law and order in the village etc. It thrived for over two centuries till its usefulness came to an end in around the year 1938. All boys above nine are engaged in some way or the other in maintaining the *Zawlbuk*. They had to collect firewood, fetch water sweep, clean and maintain the *Zawlbuk*. It was a very useful institution in the society. They controlled the life of the people. They are given the right to right the wrong in ways they deem fit. They had innumerable responsibility in the society. They guarded the village against wild animals, helped carry sick and dead bodies, find people lost in the jungles and even acted as fire fighters. Staying together

helped a great deal in times of emergencies. It was also a place where wayward children are tamed and taught discipline, hard work, led by example, fearlessness and many life lessons. It is also a centre for sports and games, learning arts and crafts, community rules and administration, in keeping Mizo 'tlawmngaihna' alive and in handing down history and traditions.

Marriage and divorce

In a pre-Christian era, marriage was purely a civil contract although a pseudo-religious ceremony was performed. Monogamy prevailed although there were exceptional cases where polygamy was practiced. Polygamy was mainly confined to the chiefs, but this was stopped with Christianity. The most important characteristic about a Mizo marriage is that of bride price. No marriage takes place without paying at least a part of the bride price to the bride's family. It has two parts: *Manpui* and *Mantang*. *Manpui* is the principle bride price given to the father or brother of the bride. The bride price was given in the form of *sial* (mithun). The price of a *Sailo* girl was ten *sial* and the rest five mithuns. In keeping with the prevailing custom, the bridegroom's and the bride's families prepared *Zu* (rice beer) for the marriage feast, which is an invariable accompaniment of a marriage.

Divorce is originated from two different words such as *Ma* or *Mak*, which means unwanted. Since the traditional marriage among the Mizo society was essentially a civil contract, the marriage bond was not as strong as it should have been. Divorce was quite common. Women can divorce their husband at any time by refunding all the marriage price already paid as mentioned earlier as bride price. In this case, reconciliation is out of question. In a way, the Mizo married couples enjoy such a vast freedom to decide the future of their marriage. Though the society considered divorce to be disgraceful, the Mizo could not avoid divorce altogether for they considered women as replace entities as the famous adage comparing women to fences which are replaceable. Perhaps this thinking gave birth to a number of divorce cases in the primitive Mizo Society. Divorce was taken very lightly. A divorced man was not looked down upon, whereas a divorced woman was looked down upon. The same is true for widow re-marriage. There is no hindrance to it for a divorced man to remarry but in case of divorced woman, she is expected to consult her children before a final decision is taken. If not given their consent, she could not get married from her own relative's house. A widow who lost her husband had to remain unwashed and with her hair uncombed for three months after the death of her husband. All these practices just leads us to see the very condition and position of women in days yonder.

Death and its associated beliefs

The Mizo death practices, including perceptions in the past is to be studied in order to show the changes undergone, as well as to understand how the practices surrounding death have become the focus of Mizo identity. The Mizo had their own ideas and views regarding death, after death, the soul etc. before Christianity swept the state. Various kinds of death have been classified: *Awmlaia thi* (Natural death); *Hlamzuih* (death of an infant or a baby); *Rai-cheh* (death of a woman in childbirth); and *Sar-thi* (an unnatural death). Among all, *Rai-cheh* was regarded as the most horrible death. On the day of her death, no one should weave cloth, nor spin or wind cotton and the loom of the demise was regarded as a taboo. It was also believed that her spirit would roam about in the village, so every house would fix a leafy branch or a bracken fern to keep the spirit away. The corpse of a person who died an unnatural death was not taken through the back door and was not allowed to spend the night in the house. In the case of an infant, they would dampen a piece of cotton wool with its mother's milk and shove it into the baby's mouth to suck it on its way to the spirit world. They put some grain of raw rice on one palm and on the other, a fowl's egg so that the egg would roll before it to the spirit world, the village of the dead. They put the corpse in a big earthen pot and buried it. The ancestors did not know how to bear the sorrow and mourn the death of a loved one. They deliberately and willfully refuse to eat any food for two three days. There was no hard and fast rule that they should fast or not. Nine weeks or about three months after burial they would perform the '*Inthian* or *Inthen*' sacrifices and ceremonies to purify themselves and their family clean. They regarded it as end of stay of the spirit in the home. The ancient Mizo believed in the existence of the soul.

The new religion and its impact on the Mizo society

The history of democratic administration in the Mizo Hills began in the year 1890, when the territory was divided into two administrative wings, viz, North Lushai Hills a part of Assam and South Lushai Hills District, a part of Bengal. The south and north Lushai Hills were amalgamated and merged into one administrative district under Assam in 1898. The British missionary to first set foot in Mizoram was Rev. William Williams of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission who worked in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The first two missionaries of Arthington Mission Rev. J.H. Lorrain and Rev. F.W. Savidge who landed in Aizawl in 1894 opened schools in the state in 1897. The church took measures to suppress traditional customs and practices and developed negative

attitude towards the pre-Christian Mizo tradition and culture. So naturally, the so-called ardent followers began thinking that everything practiced and believed to be wrong while all things new taught by the new religion and the preachers began to be absorbed as right.

After the arrival of the new faith, women enjoyed more power and were regarded as equal to men. Men no longer think domestic chores are for women alone. The relationship between married couples are no longer that of superior and inferior, but of equal partners. But the church too reifies the traditional dominance of men in society by preventing women from being ordained as priests, or even elders in the case of the Presbyterians. Sometimes theological reasons are given for this; other reasons are less subtle. There are women evangelists and women preachers, to whom equal respect is given, but they are denied opportunities for leadership within the church hierarchy. (jp.147) In the case of inheritance, women still remain discriminated against. A woman can inherit property only when there are no other male relatives. Even with Christianity not much change is seen regarding inheritance rights of women in the family.

In very recent times, event like death in Mizoram is much publicized. The Church bell is rung fifteen times at a slow pace to indicate that there is a death in the locality. Use of the Church bell to announce death is a very recent phenomenon. Some decades back, a *dar khuang* ('gong'), slung on a pole with the help of a rope and carried on the shoulders of two men, was sounded to announce a death. A black flag is used to mark the house of the deceased as a sign of mourning. A notice board, set up by the YMA, mentioning the name of the deceased, age, date, and time of death, cause of death, the denominational affiliation, the name of the person conducting the funeral service and time of the service, was also set up outside the house of the deceased. In case the deceased happen to be a church elder or a pastor, the corpse is taken to the church for the funeral service. The idea of a grand death (*thih ropui*), which imply the presence of a large number of mourners, is very strong.

The chieftainship slowly came to an end with the British colonization of the Lushai Hills. There was abolition of several rights and prerogatives of the chiefs, which lowered their status to a considerable extent. The chief now became subordinate to the British ruler. Many old establishments and institutions lost their meaning and significance. One such case is the *Zawlbuk*. The *Zawlbuk* that emanated a great spiritual aura was gradually neglected and outmoded in time and especially with the coming of Christianity and opening of day schools by missionaries and the British government. By the year 1925, there was no more *Zawlbuk* which are functional any more. In the year 1938, the superintendent, A.G. Mc Call (1935-1945) called a social meeting in Aizawl, Thakthing Veng (ward) to discuss the re-establishment of *Zawlbuk*. The people found it inconsistent and incompatible with education and Christianity, so, the superintendent resolved to rescind the order to re-establish the *Zawlbuk* and ultimately the *Zawlbuks* came to an end.

On the other hand, the spirit of *Tlawmngaihna* became Christianized. As *Tlawmngaihna* talks about essential goodness in man which was not much different from the very essence of Christianity, the former easily dissolved with the new religion and has become quite indistinguishable. Whereas, the *Bawi* (slavery) system that existed from time immemorial was abolished with the introduction of the new religion. A settlement was reached on the basis of the recommendation made by J. Hazlett, Superintendent of Mizoram in March 1914. According to him, the *Bawis* could now leave their owner chiefs at will, and the chiefs no longer had the right to force them to remain in their service-but could sue for the freedom price, i.e., Rs.40. The use of the term *Bawi* was to be discontinued. The system of *Bawi* came to an end in Mizoram in 1927.

Zu in Mizo society was an indispensable part of Mizo society and culture in pre-Christian era. Due to the teachings of the missionaries *Zu* was rejected. Tea in place of *Zu* became a common drink. It did have a positive impact in removing mass drunkenness. Traditional Mizo festivals too came under the influence of Christianity. There arose a strong voice against the old practices whether they were religious or cultural. The gospel has taken its own shape within the Mizo culture. Christian festivals except the *Chapchar Kut*, have substituted all native festivals. Good Friday is celebrated in the same manner as the *Mim Kut*. Elements of *Mim Kut* are found in Mizo continuation of erecting memorial stones for their dead. During the *Chapchar Kut* young people perform different kinds of Mizo dance. The traditional dancing prohibited by the church earlier has now taken a new shape in the life of the Mizo Christians. The first public celebration of Christmas took place in 1903 at Mission Veng. After this the importance of the traditional Mizo festivals lessened. The celebration of New Year was also introduced instead of traditional harvest festivals. In case they celebrate the harvest festival, it has been infused with singing Mizo Christian hymns. Similarity is again drawn between New Year festival and *Pawl Kut*. But as one sees not every old practice could be discarded at one go. In the initial years, the drum was not allowed in the church since they were associated with traditional festivals. But without it, either singing or dancing became impossible and lifeless. The banned drum came

to be used again on 29 July 1919. Since then, the Mizo Church leaders accepted it as one of the most important instruments to be used for the praise of God. The period saw psychologically traumatic times under the impact of foreign rulers whose religion they had come to accept. They were also tempted to think of the western way of life as that was thought to be appropriate to the new religion.

The spread of western dress along with the changes in cultural practices was often ascribed to the intervention or missionaries. Apart from missionaries it was the government who brought young people into contact with the outside world at the time of the First World War. Dress and clothing undertook changes and progress. This is partly because indigenous clothes were not easily available while foreign clothes were better in quality and easier to procure and handle. Shirts, pants and trousers came to be commonly used. The Mizo women continue to wear their traditional dress in a modified form. Dressing is an area where fast changes are being introduced. Western dress has become the dress code of the day. It is unthinkable of what the Mizo would be wearing if not a western dress.

In case of old marriage system, the new religion disproved of it. The missionaries introduced the Mizo Christian Marriage system. But the old practice of 'bride money' continued to mark the Customary Laws. The bride price came to be paid in cash and not in the form of mithuns or any other animal. Marriage had to be solemnized by a pastor or an appointed Church elder. As soon as the marriage system was Christianized, the impact of it has been systemized by way of adopting a western way of conducting it. The old practice of throwing water, mud and rotten eggs at the bride's party when she was taken from her house to the groom's house and listening secretly to the conversation between wife and husband on their first night has been done away with the new religion. Instead of 'Zu', a cake cutting ceremony or reception is introduced. Thus, from the wedding gown to the food, much has been an adopted version which they have come to think as their own.

Divorce is not allowed in Christianity. Divorce due to any reason is an act of sin. Education through missionary work has made the Mizo marriage ties more stable and has reduced the cases of divorce. Whereas not much change is made in the laws of inheritance. The Mizo society is more inclined towards western culture that finds expression in the Mizo dress, food, music and dance. Christianity accompanied by British rule, dismissed everything that was held dear especially in their beliefs, discarding them as superstition and placed human being and nature on equal standing as creations of God. Sorcery, magic and sacrifices were done away with and absorbed the teachings and practices of the missionaries as the absolute truth.

CONCLUSION

According to Joy Pachuau (2014), colonialism and Christianity both contributed to providing a changed outlook among the Mizos. The reason behind the Christian identity that the Mizos came to adopt may be because in a society that traditionally acknowledges fluidity in group affiliation and recognizes a set of similar categories in the new form of belief, affiliation becomes easier because of the recognition of familiar categories. The ways in which Christianity has come to be an important part of contemporary Mizo identity and society. The new religion became acceptable as it did not contradict their traditional concepts, though it did oppose traditional beliefs. It was like adopting a new 'tribe-spirit' or *sakhua*. All this, of course, happened in the context of colonialism, and one cannot deny that the order and power that colonialism seemed to represent—including the missionaries, who also represented that civilization—were important attractions.

The church also exercises deep moral authority over the people, seen especially in the way it conditions ideas of good and evil. One example is the introduction of total prohibition in the state, made possible through the influence of the church. Mizo society emphasizes greatly the wrongness of alcohol, and very often a person's moral integrity is judged on the basis of his or her attitude of alcohol. Thus, it is from within the church framework that notions of respectability, honour, propriety, and morality are determined. Christianity is pervasive in Mizo society, defining not only the physical landscape but also providing for a definite way of living. (jp.147) A family that is seen to be closely associated with the Church and its activities is respected much more than those who do not show as much interest. Respectability is also attributed to the families of priests and *upas* (*elders in church*). Many take up pastoral training or theological studies for the respect that they and their families would gain. (jp.146) Pastors and elders are much respected within Mizo society. Any dissent or new views differing from the church elders and teachings are taken as works of the devil which is unacceptable. Those who choose to think differently also choose to keep their thoughts to themselves as it would be unwelcomed in the society and family. So, on the whole, every aspect of Mizo life is directly or indirectly linked and controlled by the church.

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