

The Lost Identity: A Study of the Zo People

C. Lalhmingliana*

Abstract

It is believed that China is the home of different ethnic groups that scattered in different parts of the worlds. Among these ethnic groups, some stocks of Mongoloids were also believed to be originated from China. The Zo/Dzo/Jo people who were believed to be one stock of Mongoloid race were also believed to be originated from China and migrated to different parts of the world. Because of their migration to different parts, nomenclature tussle occurred among them that hindered in the attempt of solid identity.

Keywords: Ethnic, Tribe, Identity, Migration, Nomenclature.

Introduction

The end of World War II led to decolonization in different parts of the world and this decolonization somehow led to an Identity crisis. The merger of different states/countries gave rise to the question of “Who are we?” within the state and separation of one territory led to the question of “Where are they?” The question of “Who am I?” became very important and its importance cannot be overlooked in today’s society. Colonization of India by the British led to many changes not only in the administrative system but also in the geographical boundary of India, both in the colonial period and post-colonial period. The change in the administrative system and the geographical boundary of India led to many questions today. The inclusion of different ethnic tribes in the tribe recognition list of India and the separation

of the particular geographical area into different states led to the question of who we are and who they are?

The question of Identity arose in this context because, as mentioned earlier, the change in geographical boundary led to the question of insider and outsider in the context of Indian Identity today. One such Identity problem that arose in India is the identity of Zo people. Therefore, the word Zo, Mizo, Chin, Lushai, Kuki etc will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to this particular Mongoloid stock of race. The history and Identity crisis of the Zo ethnic tribe should be analytically studied in this paper.

Different perspectives on the origin of Zo

Vumson in his *Zo History* states that the term Zo or Jo was used to refer the

* Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University. Email: hmingtea656@gmail.com.

Indo-Burman people. In 862 AD, Fan ch'o, a diplomat of the Tang Dynasty of China mentioned that there exists a Kingdom in the Chindwin Valley whose Princes and Chief's were called Zo. However, their lack of written record and their frequent contact with people at their surroundings made it more confusion about the ethnic stock who are termed under the umbrella of Zo and this is also a factor that makes it more difficult to trace their historical origin. (Vumson, 1986:1)

TH.Lewin who was the Political Officer during the Lushai Expedition 1871-1872, after encountering with different hill tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts like the Sylo (Sailo), Lushai (Lusei), Shendus, Khumi, Kuki etc. came to the conclusion that the generic name of the whole nation is Dzo which he mentioned in his *A Fly on the wheel*. (T.H. Lewin,1912:246)

The legends of the ethnic tribe who were known as Zo believe that their origin started from a cave called Chhinlung, Shinlung, Khur, Khurpui, Khutu-bi-jur, Khor and Puk which is given different location by different clans. But the legends could not be accepted as a fact because it is contradictory with the known facts of human origination. The physical outlooks of this ethnic tribes - yellowish or brown skin, brown eye, black hair, slanted eye, prominent cheekbone, wide nose and flat face suggested that there may be a deep relation between this tribes and the Indonesian –Malay sub-race of the Mongoloid race and anthropologist came

to the conclusion that the language of this ethnic tribe is related to the Tibeto-Chinese language (Vumson, 1986: 26,27). The subdivision of the Tibeto-Chinese people clubbed the Zo people together with the Burman, Meitei (Manipuri), Naga, Kachin, Lolo, Tibetans etc under Tibeto-Burmans, and this led to the belief that the Zo people originated in China. Anthropologists believed that the Zo people had a close relationship with the bones of "Peking Man" who possessed certain characteristics peculiar to the Mongoloid race found at the cave of Chou k'outien, South of Peking, and the Peking Man is the earliest known man in China and surrounding areas (Vumson, 1986: 27).

There are contesting theories regarding the origin of this ethnic tribes. There are also theories that these ethnic tribes are one of the lost tribe of Israel, but these theories lack a valid proof and lost its momentum.

According to Eberhard, by about 4000 BC, there were eight principle historical cultures in China amongst which the Ch'iang tribes, believed to be the ancestor of the Tibeto-Burman were found in Western China in the province of present-day Szechuan and in the mountain regions of Kansu and Shensi (Vumson, 1986: 27).

B. Lalthangliana in his *India, Burma leh Bangladesh-a MizoChanchin*, states that the Ch'iang tribes migrated to a different place in search of a better place for practising rearing of Goat and Sheep whereas the Chinese practised rearing of

Buffalo, Cow and Pig. The difference in the type of animals, they reared, became one of the reasons for conflicts between the two tribes and there were several fights between them. It became a danger for the Ch'iang tribes who were fewer and weaker to be dominated by the Chinese. Therefore, they abandoned their place and made Southward movement and reached Szechuan. This period is believed to be between 1334-1281 BC (B. Lalthangliana, 2014: 50,51).

According to Hall, the Ch'iang tribes served as the Tanguts- the Tibetan Tribal Federation, during the Han dynasty. This federation fought with the Chinese who tried to conquer Turkistan, but the Chinese got the upper hand and conquered Turkistan that drove the Ch'iang to the South. Hall believes that this southward movement by the Ch'iang took place during the first millennium BC and he states that they were further driven by the Chinese rulers to Tsin (Chin) through the Mountain towards the South (Vumson, 1986: 28).

There is a belief that there must be some other reasons why the Zo ethnic tribes left China and this is mentioned by different Historians and Scholars, but because of the absence of written records as mentioned earlier, one cannot point out exactly why and how they left China and migrated to Burma (Myanmar). Historians like Vumson and B. Lalthangliana believe that the migration to Myanmar did not take place as a group but in a different phase. B. Lalthangliana believes that the migration

from China to Myanmar took place from the very early centuries of the present era, and he believes that 600 AD may be the year for which the last wave reach Myanmar (B. Lalthangliana, 2014: 64).

B. Lalthangliana believes that the Zo people live for several centuries at Myanmar and built their own Kingdom which was one of the most powerful Kingdom at that time. He also believes that there was a good relationship between the Zo and the Burmese King as there has been no record of any fights mentioned in history between them.

The Zo people after settling for several centuries at the Kale-Kabaw valley of Myanmar were conquered by the Shan who pushed them out from the plain and hence migrated to different parts of the Hills. F. Rongenga in his *Zofate Lo Khawsak Chhoh Dan* believes that the reason why the Zo people left the plain was that of the cruel King of Shan, Soa Saw Ko who employed the Zo (Seifa) forcefully; because of this cruel King, the Zo people left the plain and migrated to different parts. Like other historians, F. Rongenga also believes that the migration from Kale-Kabaw valley of Myanmar happened in a different wave. Some tribes remain at present-day Chin Hills and some crossed Run River and settled at present-day Mizoram. Some moved further down and settled at different states of India like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura. Some of them reached Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The last group that enter the

present Mizoram was the Lusei group and F. Rongenga believes that 1600-1700 AD maybe the year which the Lusei people enter their present settlement (F. Rongenga, 2000: 22,26,27).

From the above, we see that the Zo ethnic tribes migrated to different places that led to emergence of different nomenclatures among the ethnic group. The people who live in Chin Hills of Myanmar today called themselves as Chin. Carey and Tuck in *The Chin Hills Vol-1*. mention that in the Burma Census report of 1891, Chin ethnology is dismissed with the remarks that the Chins or Kyins are a group of hill tribes, all talking various dialect of the same Tibeto-Burman speech and calling themselves by various names (Carrey Tuck, 1932: 2).

This signifies that the Identity of Chin came lately to hold all the Zo ethnic tribes living in Myanmar. Carrey and Tuck reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam and the Chins once lived in what we now know as Thibet (Tibet) and are one and the same stock.

Carrey and Tuck further state that, those of the Kuki tribes whom we designated as Chins do not recognize that name, which is said to be a Burmese corruption of the Chinese Jin or Yen, meaning, Man. The Northern Chin calls themselves Yo, the Tashons, Haka and more southern tribes call themselves Lai, while the Chins of lower Burma gives their name as Shu. Some of the Assam

tribes have also been referred to by names unknown to them (Carrey Tuck, 1932: 3).

After the British access of Bengal and had contact with the Zo people, the Bengali's told them that the Zo was Kuki, a Bengali word which means something like savage or wild hill people. But after getting information from the Lusei people themselves, the British came to realized that they did not call themselves Kuki. The British used the term Loosye initially. However, the British later adopted *LUSHAI* as the official designation of the Zo people living in the western part of the Zo country (Vumson, 1986: 1).

In the 1860s, T.H. Lewin states that he encountered with independent tribes known to them as *Kuki*, but he also states that the kukis did not call themselves Kuki and their generic title is Lushai. They were numerous and are an aggressive people, offshoots of the mighty Singpho horde which stretches from Assam, some parts of China and of Burmah (Burma), as far as the Shan country, near Siam in the south and of which his old enemies the Shendus (Lai) were also a branch. Lewin gave the idea of Lushai as "Lu" meaning Head and "Sha" meaning Cut so that Lushai would signify a "Decapitator". But he concluded by saying that the generic name of the whole nation is "*DZO*" (T.H. Lewin, 1912: 189,245,246).

J. Shakespeare in his *The Lushei Kuki Clans* states that the term Kuki like Naga, Chin, Shendu and many others are not recognized by the people to whom we

apply it. It is understood that they are closely allied clans with well-marked characteristics belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock. In the Lushai Hills nowadays the term is hardly employed, having been superseded by Lushai (J. Shakespeare, 1975).

AG. McCall in his *Lushai Chrysalis* states that no one has satisfactorily explained how the name Lushai originated through one idea is that it is a colloquialism for the term used by man of olden days to typify the people with the long heads, or perhaps the wise heads, the word Lu meaning ahead and the suffix Sei meaning long. But this explanation finds little or no support locally. When the Chins pushed the Hualngo out from Falam country of present-day Myanmar in the early 19th century, the Hualngo seems clearer on their origin claiming that they originally sprang from the rocks at Seipui in the Chin Hills of Burma, as time went on, the inhabitants of Seipui became known as the son of SEI which gave rise to the name Lushei since modified to Lushai (A.G. McCall, 1949: 19,20).

From the above, it is clear that the Mongoloid stock of a race who was believed to have their origin somewhere in China do not have common nomenclature to hold all its sub tribes under one umbrella. Some historians said that the term Zo/Jo/Dzo refers to this ethnic tribes, but because of the absence of written records among them, the term Zo/Jo/Dzo could not be accepted by some of the sub-tribes even though they seem

to have the same origin based on their own legend.

Identity Crisis of the Zo people in Bangladesh and Myanmar: Finding from the fields

From the interview conducted by the author among different clans/sub-tribes of Chhinlung/Shinlung/Khul origin in Myanmar and Bangladesh, the term Chin is believed to be originated after their settlement in present-day Myanmar, but this term could not be accepted by others who left Chin Hills long ago. Today, the identity of Chin itself still posed some trouble for the people living in Myanmar who trace their origin to Chhinlung.

These same ethnic tribes were referred to as Kuki by the Bengalis, but as mentioned earlier, the people whom they called as Kuki did not call themselves as Kuki. The term Old Kuki and New Kuki were employed depending on the time of their movement.

The term Lushai was used by the British when they occupy the Lushai Hills (present Mizoram). But the people whom they referred as Lushai did not recognize themselves in that name. Some writers tried to employ the term Lusei to be the origin of Lushai, but this also lacks a scientific proof. Instead, the people settled in the so-called Lushai Hills now calls themselves as Mizo. The term Mizo became popular lately in the 1940s. Most of the people living in present Mizoram have no problems with the nomenclature Mizo, but as it is used lately, numbers of

the same ethnic tribes outside Mizoram felt that they were not included in the identity of Mizo. Some prefer to call themselves as Zomi, Laimi and other nomenclature with reference to their sub-tribe/clan.

Therefore, this ethnic tribes who belong to the Mongoloid stock of race face nomenclature tussle for their identity, the Identity which will bind all the ethnic

tribes together. Even though they accept that they have the same origin, there is no single nomenclature truly accepted by the sub-tribes of Chhinlung origin. This seems to be the major barrier that makes them different and as long as there could be no nomenclature accepted by all, the identity of this subtribe may still be in a tussle and worst may fall more and more apart in the centuries to come.

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