

Socio - Cultural Heritage of the Mizos

Laltluangliana Khiangte*

Abstract

Most scholars cannot trace back very far the origin of the Mizo tribe. It is believed that some of the Mizo clans claimed that their ancestors came out of the earth through a big hole on a mountainside in the east at a place called Chhinlung, the big stone shutter. It could be around 900 AD according to the supposition made by the Mizo elders that have been handed down orally. (p.13, Mizo Chanchin : 2002) Several stories were told to explain the origin of Mizos, and some are quite interesting. The Mizos are racially said to be of Mongoloid origin and their language has been found under the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. (p.14. Ibid) They are a part of the great waves of the Mongoloid race, which fanned out of the east and the south of Asia in the past. Further evidence is strong enough that the Mizo people migrated from Yunnan province (China) through the Shan state in Burma. From that Shan state they came further west, crossing the Irrawady River in Burma, leaving some Mizo families known as the Lusei in Burma / Myanmar. The Mizo ethnic groups have been found today in the three independent states of Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

Keywords: Traditions, culture, custom, festival, traditional dance, folkloristic heritage.

The religion of the Mizos of the past has been usually described as 'animism', which lexically means 'attribution of soul to inanimate object or natural phenomena.' The term, however, is now generally used to describe the faith of pre-literate people, depending on memory and oral traditions rather than on sacred literature. It involves the belief in all kinds of spirits with a High God, including

belief in some form of life after death. Believe it or not, the Mizos, in their animistic beliefs and practices, seemed to have depended on their own genius for the development of their ideas and practices.

One of the pioneer Mizo pastors, Liangkhaia, who wrote many books including the first History of the Mizos (*Mizo Chanchin*) way back in 1920s believed that the religion of the

Mizos had its origin in the consciousness of their need for deliverance from physical illness and from other misfortunes which they attributed to evil-spirits. The earliest known sacrificial incantation indicates a time when they did not know whom they should invoke in time of need. The charm may be rendered in English as follows: "Oh, hear us and answer us, thou who were worshipped by our ancestors." After which they went on to mention their old homes and the surrounding areas which lengthened the sacrificial spell or invocation.

The Mizos of the past had a distinct community and their smallest social unit was the village. The village was usually set on the crest of a hill with the chief's house on the best location, normally at the centre of the village and the *Zawlbuk* (the bachelors' dormitory) prominently located near the chief's residence.

The village blacksmith is one of the most important persons in any village. (p.6, *Pi Pu Len Lai* by Selet Thanga: 1985) Only skillful person, having inborn talent is selected by the chief to stay not very far from his residence. The blacksmith's hut (*Pum*) will be the place where working tools have been sharpened for the villagers every morning and while waiting for their turns, reports of all information, review and discussion of everything will take place so as to inform even silent listeners about the news of the village and its surrounding areas.

Sharpening of all kinds of tools is so important for all workers and jhum cultivators and in return they will give to the blacksmith a basket of rice at the time of harvest and the successful hunter must also give a certain portion as his share. (2 p.7. Ibid)

Oral literature plays an important role in the society and whatever the older people inform as a kind of story would be handed down orally and as such, chants, songs, riddles, proverbs, folk theatre and other folk practices have been made effectively to educate all people of the village.

FESTIVALS:

The Mizos have three annual festivals called *Kut*, marking three different stages of the agricultural process, because Mizos have always been shifting agriculturists. The three festivals are - *Chapchar Kut*, *Mim Kut* and *Pawl Kut*.

(1) CHAPCHAR KUT: *Chapchar Kut* or spring festival may be considered as the most important and grandest festival of the Mizos and it is the time for merry-making and enjoyment for all. *Chapchar Kut* normally lasts three days and three nights, during which drinking, feasting and dancing continue throughout.

Oral tradition says that this festival was first celebrated in Seipui village in Burma (present Myanmar) where the ancestors of the Mizos lived many years ago. *Chapchar Kut* was cel-

celebrated to give thanks to God for saving them from all kinds of injuries and for the blessings he bestowed on them during their engagement in the jungle especially at the time of clearing of forest for jhum cultivation at the beginning of the year.

So *Chapchar Kut* is still observed today in the last part of February or early part of March every year when the felled trees and bamboos of the jhum are left to dry and the shifting cultivators have leisure time to enjoy themselves in their respective villages.

All Mizos, irrespective of age and gender distinction, participate in this grand festival. Decked in colourful dresses, boys and girls go on a dancing spree which sometimes last all through the night. Young men and women, holding one another's shoulder would dance in the village chief's courtyard day in and out during the festival to enjoy themselves. This festival (*Kut*) is no doubt, the gayest of all the three festivals. That is why some people refer to this festival as, 'a time to celebrate one's own head' which means, one may enjoy this festival in extreme joy, with no limit and without considering any other problems that surround him.

Young men and women would prepare themselves to dance in a big group called *Chai lam*. The most important item in the celebration, that is, *Chai dance* should be performed throughout the night, especially on

the first night, failing which would bar them from dancing for the rest of the *Chapchar Kut* festival.

On the third day the young men and girls assemble at the centre of the village and form a circle, every girl positioned between two youths, whose arms cross over their necks, holding in their hands clothes which hang behind like a curtain. Inside the circle is a drummer or gong-beater, who chants continuously and the young people taking up the refrain would tread a slow measure in time with the song, while cups of *zu* (*Rice beer/alcohol*) are brought to them in rotation.

Amidst hard toil, scarcity and threat of tropical diseases, the citizens of the Sailo (and other chiefs) domain would have their weary souls recharged by sharing in the celebrations of various ceremonies and festivals. Expressions of joy, freedom and solidarity through informal gatherings, singing and dancing to the rhythm of drummers and gong-beaters are important features of the community existence of the Mizos.

(2) MIM KUT: *Mim kût* was celebrated with solemnity, in honour of the dead. In this *Mim kut* or autumn festival, the first fruit of the crops were offered to the dead. *Mim Kut* may be the darkest of the three *Kuts*. The word *Mim* is derived from a popular plant known as *Vaimim* (maize) and sometimes used as a substitute for rice.

It was believed that the spirit of the relatives would re-visit their houses during this particular *Kut*. This festival is purely observed for the spirit of the dead, especially of their close relatives.

Mim Kut takes place mostly in the month of September every year when the crops, other than paddy, in the fields were reaped and when the weeding work in jhum cultivation was lighter. Some people observed the same in the last part of August. In this festival, fresh vegetables, maize bread, necklaces and clothes were offered to the spirits. The first fruits of the crops were offered to the departed souls. They were placed on a shelf near the place where water was stored in the typical Mizo houses. *Mim Kut* is not a time of joy and merriment as it is observed for the spirit of their relatives.

The souls of the dead were expected to partake of the meal. The soul of a dead person was supposed to come out of the head of the dead and remain around the village for about three months. During this period, the bereaved family would ask the departed soul to remain with them. They had to keep an empty seat for the soul at meal time. Some small portions of meat and food were kept aside for the soul at every meal.

During this period, if a widow misbehaved with another man, she would be considered an adulterous.

After this period was over, the soul was sent to the spiritual world by performing a ceremony of separation called *inthen*.

It is believed that the souls of the dead went to *Mitthi Khua* or *Pialral* after observance of the three days. Since the people bade farewell to the souls of their near and dear ones, it was not a joyful feast at all. This festival is also sometimes referred to as *Ṭahna Kut* which means the "feast of weeping". Everyone was free to eat food only after three days. During this period, there would be much singing both in the family and the community. The songs invariably spoke of the dear ones who had left this world.

Mim Kut is rarely observed today by the Mizos, perhaps due to Christianisation. The idea behind it is no longer practical and the Mizo Christians would like to observe Good Friday and Easter Sunday instead of *Mim Kut*. That is why only *Chapchar Kut* remains popular in the present time.

(3) PAWL KUT: This festival is held after the paddy harvest, mostly in the month of January. That is why January is named by the Mizos as *Pawl kut thla* (the month of *Pawl Kut*). This festival is enjoyed by the community especially by children and women in the beginning of the year. They prepare their best food and feed one another in a selected yard called *lungdawh* with great amusement and enthusiasm.

The oldest among the three Mizo festivals, *Pawl Kut* was a kind of harvest festival as well as a sort of thanksgiving festival for the community, usually held after the harvest of rice in jhum cultivation, mostly at the turn of the New year according to the present Gregorian Calendar. It is regarded as a festival for the children though adults also participate in it.

During this period, they usually have "*chhawnghnawt*" in which children in their costumes feed each other with meat, eggs and rice. No doubt, male members of the village would enjoy this festival with home-made rice beer while the women and children are involved with different kinds of merriment organised for themselves.

Although a festival for children, young men and women join the children in their amusement while most parents were drinking around their children. Some people said that the duration of feasting and drinking depended on the amount of *Zu* (liquor) available for the occasion. It was perhaps because of excessive drinking during other festivals which often resulted in shameful drunkenness that the early Mizo Christians insisted on total abstinence from drinking.

Mizo Kut had a great impact on the life of the masses because even the poorest would enjoy, as it was celebrated by the whole community. On

these occasions, they forgot all their worries. Everyone was given equal treatment. This gave the poor a sense of equality in society, since no discrimination was made between the rich and the poor. These festivals filled the people with new inspiration to work hard as well as a sense of living together in peace and harmony. These festivals reformed social life, which enhanced feelings of fraternity, harmony and oneness in Mizo society.

In addition to the above three festivals, in all the other cultural ceremonies amongst the Mizos, a community feast (*Ruai*) is placed as significant, essential, and is part and parcel of the society. Rich and poor, children and adult, men and women would partake of the grand feast as a sign of close-knit society for their life philosophy being, share and live, grab and die. No one tried to grab alone but shared his fortune with others.

DANCES OF MIZORAM: The Mizos can boast of several community and folk dances which have been handed down from generation to generation; developing under the influences of the birds, the beasts, the hills and valleys. They love to dance as much as they love to sing. The dances are expressions of the gay, carefree spirit of the Mizos. It should be mentioned here that these dances are not intended for stage performances. Rather, they have evolved for community involvement and participation.

(1) CHERAW : *Cheraw* is a very old traditional dance of the Mizos. Sometimes it is referred to as 'Bamboo dance', especially by non-Mizos, who are not familiar with the exact name, because bamboo staves are used for the dance. It is believed that the dance had existed way back in the 1st Century A.D, when the Mizos were still somewhere in the Yunnan Province of China, before their migration to the Chin Hills in the 13th Century A.D. and eventually to the present Mizoram. Some of the tribes living in South East Asia also have similar dances with bamboo staves in one form or the other with different names.

Cheraw was usually performed on the occasion of *Buhza-aih* (Bumper harvest by an individual family). Formerly, it was not a community dance but a dance performed by a few selected girls with exceptional skills. It was performed at marriage ceremonies and other merry occasions to celebrate success. On such occasions huge crowd would gather to watch the pride filled performance of *Cheraw* dance by the few expert / skilled dancers. It was also performed on moonlit nights.

Cheraw is the most popular and colourful dance of the Mizos. Men sitting face to face on the ground tap long pairs of horizontal and cross bamboo staves opening and closing to rhythmic beats. Two bamboo staves

are placed on the ground as the bases at right angle to the many pairs of bamboos, at either end of which the men open and close their respective bamboo staves to produce the rhythmic beats.

Girls attired in the colourful Mizo costumes of *Puanchei*, *Kawrchei*, *Vakiria* and *Thi-hna* dance in and out between and across the pairs of horizontal bamboos in accordance to the beats. This dance is now performed at almost all festive occasions. The unique style of the *Cheraw* is of great fascination everywhere it is performed. Gongs and drums are also used to accompany the dance.

(2) SARLAMKAI / SOLAKIA : This is an impressive dance originating from the *Pawi* and *Mara* communities of the southern Mizoram. This dance is known as *Sarlamkai* by the *Pawi* and *Solakia* by the *Mara*. In the past when different tribes were constantly at war with each other, a ceremony to deride the vanquished beheaded skull of the enemy was usually held by the victor. This ceremony was performed to ensure that the vanquished remain a slave to the victor even in death.

Any person who brought up an occasion for such a ceremony was highly regarded and respected by the people, the king as well as his elders. Therefore, every adult strove with all his capability to be such a hero. The courage and bravery of such heroes was a great consolation for the peo-

ple when faced with any external aggression. It was during this ceremony that the *Sarlamkai* dance was performed. As is obvious, it is a war dance performed to celebrate a victory in war. Songs were not sung; only gongs, cymbals or drums were used for creating beats. In the dance, boys and girls standing in alternate positions, dance in circles. They generally wear colourful dresses while the leader is dressed as a warrior.

(3) CHHEIH-LAM : *Chheihlam* originated after the year 1900 on the lines of the song known as *Puma Zai* and the dance is known as '*Tlanglam*'. It is a dance that embodies the spirit of joy and exhilaration and was performed to the accompaniment of a song called '*Chheih hla*'. People squat in a circle on the floor, singing to the beat of a drum or bamboo tube while a pair of dancers stands in the middle, reciting the song and dancing along to the strains of the music.

It was a dance performed over a round of rice beer in the cool of the evening. The lyrics were impromptu and spontaneous, on-the-spot compositions, recounting heroic deeds and escapades and they would also praise the honored guests present in their midst. While singing the song in accompaniment to the beating of the drums and clapping of hands, an expert dancer would perform a dance, chanting verses with various movements of the body; stooping low with the knees bent, limbs close to the body

and moving around as low to the ground as he can.

As the tempo of the dance rises and the excitement increases, enthusiastic people squatting on the floor would leave their seats and join the dancers as other members continue to sing along to the drum beats. In fact, unfamiliar guests present are also invited these days to join this joyous dance, especially on the day of the celebration of *Chapchar Kut*.

(4) KHUALLAM : *Khuallam* literally means "Dance of the guests". It is a dance usually performed in the ceremony of *Khuangchawi*. In order to claim a distinguished place in the society and to have a place in paradise or *Pialral*, one has to attain the coveted title of '*Thangchhuah*'.

There are two ways of attaining this title. Firstly, one could attain the title *Thangchhuah* by proving one's mettle in war or hunting by killing many animals which should include animals like barking deer, deer, wild boar, wild-gayal, viper, hawk, etc. Secondly, one could also get the title *Thangchhuah* by performing various ceremonies which included offering several community feasts and dances. *Thangchhuah* therefore, could be attained only by the brave or by the rich. The ceremonies performed in the second method are known as *Khuangchawi*. Important guests invited from other villages at the *Khuangchawi* ceremony enter the arena dancing this *Khuallam*.

The traditional hand woven Mizo cloth known as *Puandum* is wrapped over the shoulders and the dance is performed by swaying the cloth. *Puandum* has the colours black, red, yellow and green. As most other folk dances of the Mizos, this dance is accompanied by a set of gongs known as *Darbu* and no song is sung. It is generally performed in large numbers; the more the merrier. The participants are usually to be large in number if this dance is to be performed well in a function.

(5) **CHAWNGLAIZAWN**: This is a popular folk dance of one of the Mizo communities known as 'Pawi'. '*Chawnglaizawn*' is also performed at festivals and also to celebrate trophies brought home by successful hunters. On such occasions, it is performed in groups of large numbers. Boys and girls standing in rows dance to the beat of drums. Shawls are used to help the movement of the arms, which also adds colour to the dance. Only drums are used in this dance.

(6) **ZANGTA-LAM**: *Zangtalam* is a popular dance of the 'Paite' community, performed by men and women. The dancers sing reciprocal songs while dancing. The drummer is the leader and director of the dance. The steps are few and simple. It forms a good community dance in which anybody can join in and enjoy.

(7) **PAR-LAM**: The land of enchanting hills has yet another dance to its credit, that is, *Parlam*, as choreo-

graphed by Mr. L.Biakliana, who also happens to be the first Mizo novelist, hailing from Saitual village, near Aizawl. He has trans created the song, *Zo-tui thiang tê* (Far from the mountain.....) which is used as the lyric and music for *Parlam*. He taught the dance in the mid-1930s at Saitual village and it has become one of the most important dances of the Mizos, which is mostly performed by young girls.

Girls attired in colourful dresses, with flowers tucked in their hair, dance to the tune of the song which is mentioned above and sung by them. The principal movement in the dance involves the waving of hands with ribbons. A couple of boys lend musical accompaniment by playing guitars. This is a comparatively new dance form. Nevertheless, it has become a part of the Mizo culture.

(8) **CHAI** : *Chai* is a popular festive dance performed on the occasion of '*Chapchar Kut*'. It is one of the most important dances of the Mizos. In this dance, men and women stand alternately in circles, with the women holding onto the waist of the men, and the men onto the women's shoulder. In the middle of the circle are the musicians who play the drum, choreographing the entire nuances of the dance, while the one with the mithun's horn chants the lyrics of the '*Chai*' song.

For instance, to begin the dance, the drummer beats on the drum, and upon the fourth stroke of the drum the

Chai song is sung with the rhythmic swaying of the dancers to the left and right, in accordance with the beat of the drum. Depending on the nuances followed the '*Chai-lam*' has four versions, viz. '*Chai Lamthai - I. Chai Lamthai - II, Chai Lamthai- III and Chai Lamthai- IV*. The dancers sing as they dance and a few musical instruments are used.

FOLKLORISTIC HERITAGE:

Without music or songs, tribal life is incomplete. Music is practically, part of the Mizo life. From time immemorial the Mizos have had their own different kinds of *Zai* (i.e. tunes or flow of the traditional song). Singing, chanting, dancing are natural expressions of tribal ethos. In fact, Mizo *Zai* is as old as the Mizo history itself. Composers all had their own styles of composition or particular *Zai* which came to be known after the name of the composer or initiator, for example - *Laltheri zai, Lianchhiari zai, Saikuti zai, Darmani zai, Awithangpa zai* and so on. Besides these, there is another common style known as the *lengkhawm zai*, which is the traditional way of singing with two drums. It appears that the Mizos can sing with heart and soul even without musical instruments except for the local drum, made of animal's skin. That music is deeply rooted in the Mizo life is clearly observed from the fact that they may enthusiastically sing throughout the night till dawn.

When consoling a bereaved family in the community, they sing the appropriate song named as *khawhar hla*, and when attending a marriage party or any other thanksgiving function they sing songs of joy. In this way, different songs are sung depending on the occasion. So, sometimes Mizoram is referred to by some poets as 'the land of music.'

When one dies, he is buried in the common burial field called *thlanmual* and the relatives erect a memorial stone after some years have passed by. Relatives and friends gather at the house of the bereaved and *khawhar hla* are sung for about a week or so. The spirit of *Tlawmngaihna* may be best seen in times of bereavement and hardships.

Songs and chants seem to have been a natural outcome of the Mizos' poetic and nostalgic nature. The earliest couplets which later developed into triplets, then into longer, more complicated forms, seem to have first emerged not out of a conscious effort to compose, but were rather a spontaneous outpouring.

Other songs of this early period include lullabies, *hlado* and *bawhhla* of hunters and warriors. *Hlado* is sung to celebrate slain game and *Bawhhla* to proclaim victory of slain enemies. *Salu lam zai* was to celebrate a successful game hunt and *dar hla* was sung to the accompaniment of gongs. *Thiam hla* and *dawi hla* are verse forms of in-

vocations and incantations, chanted by the traditional priest and sorcerer while performing rituals. Certain sets of songs to be sung at the time of specific festivals, dances, celebrations, enjoyment etc. are abundant, as are diverse folk compositions. Beating of drum is part and parcel of almost all the traditional dances.

REFLECTIONS:

There are so many proverbial sayings since time immemorial and some people might have doubts about their origin as well. However, these are the sayings that had been told much before the existence of Mizo writing in roman script. Some of them may be reproduced here for reference.

- *The right path is steep upward to climb while the wrong path is horizontal.*
- *If the shell of a bean is good, the nut it bears is good. If the shell is not good, the nut inside is also poor.*
- *Without the support of the smaller pebbles, a big rock cannot be stable.*
- *Nothing sticks in the shin of a barking deer nor does self-praise.*
- *It is never too late to become handi-capped or a dry leper.*
- *A man who does not have the courage to help a neighbour in trouble should wear a skirt.*
- *Women and crabs have no religion. A woman's wisdom does not extend beyond the public water point.*

- *Finding a husband and a basket full of firewood is not difficult at all.*
- *A woman never reprimanded and the edge of a jhum not maintained soon becomes intolerable.*
- *The last bull-gayal often gets beaten up.*
- *A bad woman drives away her kith and kin.*
- *If a man lives long so also will his house last long.*
- *Debt of bride's price is the most pleasant amongst all debts.*

Many thought provoking sayings may be mentioned one after another in this connection. When they say, '*Nu siar nu siar*' in case of women and *pa siar pa siar* in case of men, they mean to say that a daughter will be hopeless as her mother or the son will behave as his father, but not in a positive sense. Parents have offspring of their own type, who are not very much better or worse than the parents. On the positive side as well, they used to say, 'A beautiful bull-gayal gives another beautiful bull-gayal, and ferocious one gives another ferocious type (*Sial rangin sial rang a hring, sakawlin sakawol a hring*). A beautiful mother would deliver a beautiful daughter and a brave father is succeeded by a brave son. Some may appropriately interpret this as *Like father, like son*.

One who hoards for one self alone will die and those who share with others will survive (Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi

thi) has been the genuine principal philosophy of the Mizos of the past. Sharing with others is the centre of thought and all well to do families would share their treasures at the time of *Khuangchawi* festival by arranging a series of public feast and by distributing different kinds of valuables to the public.

In those days, they did not read the Bible or any other books on moral teaching. They were not instructed to think logically and act wisely. But they were well equipped with unbelievable wisdom that has been handed down

orally. It is a pleasant enterprise to note the sayings and proverbs of our forefathers in the present era where documentation of cultural heritage is discussed.

It is clearly reflected in sayings like *Share and survive or eat alone and perish; Even the big boulder cannot be firm without the support of the smaller stones.* All these sayings, proverbs, maxims etc. have been used as the guiding moral principle of the Mizos for a long time and it is true to note that they are not inferior to other sayings and proverbs of other great nations.

References:

- Rev. Liangkhaia, 'Origin of the Mizo', *MIZO CHANCHIN* Part - I, (Aizawl: Zoram Printing Press, Aijal, 1948).
- Liangkhaia, "Mizo Sakhua", *Mizo mi leh thil hmingthangte leh Mizo Sakhua* (Aizawl: Mizo Academy of Letters, 1977).
- Dokhuma, James. *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*, J.D. Press Publication: 1992
- Shakespeare, J. Lt. Col. *The Lushei- Kuki Clans*, Part-I, 1912.
- Khiangte, Laltluangliana. *Mizo Folk Literature*, Indian Literature No.201, Jan-Feb., 2001, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi
- Khiangte, Laltluangliana. *Mizo Songs & Folk Tales*, Published by National Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi), New Delhi : 2002.
- C.L. Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, (Lunglei: The Literature Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987).
- Lalkhama, *A Mizo Civil Servant's Random Collections*, December, 200 : Aizawl.
- Thanga, Selet. *Pi Pu Len Lai*, Vawi 8 Chhutna, Lianchhungi Book Store, 1985 : Aizawl.
- Encyclopedia, Dictionary, History of Literature, Linguistic Survey of India, Glossary, Books on Mizo History, Culture etc & Other Materials & Unpublished Manuscripts of *L.T.L. Library & Archives*; B- 43, Mission Veng, Aizawl, Mizoram.