

Traditional life of children in rural Mizoram

R.Thangvunga*

Abstract

Children are the promise and anticipation of the future. History repeats itself simply by virtue of the permanent attributes of humanity. The past, present and future are one in the timeless frame of eternity, and time is the changing room wherein only eternity may be retouched and redirected. It is a serious mistake of humanity that children are underestimated and sidelined when the very future of that society lies as in a womb, being processed by the its external environments through the mother's nervous system.

Children are inveterate imitators of adult life, it being a form of self-induced training for future responsible life. Prior to the advent of modern education system requiring children to be forced-fed by customized knowledge and skills, children learnt and were taught the ways of men and women in society in the free institution of natural surroundings under the sun, the moon and the stars; wizened crones with drooping lips and wrinkled old men with smoking pipes fed the ears of children with strange and fearful tales of heroes and monsters to enlarge and kindle their imaginations. It was a rich and full life children of Mizo had in the dim verge of the border of civilization. This article presents the day to day, age to age life of children in the pre-colonial shifting settlements high on these blue hills.

Keywords: Traditions, identity, custom and practices

The traditions of children among Mizos. (Ages 6 – 14).

Among the Mizos it was a Spartan way of feeding a new-born baby with solid food (cooked rice) to test the baby's mettle. A baby who could swallow the chunk of rice would grow up to be a *pasaltha* (a stalwart in hunting and warfare). A mother never stay at home for long after giving birth to a baby, but had to carry on work in the

jhum so that the new-born baby had to be fed by old grannies or little sibling girls with boiled rice chewed to a paste in the tobacco stained mouth. Child mortality was high as one old man said, "Those who could not die survived." A Mizo child's first lessons are training in coordination of movements such as standing on feet – *ding*

* Former Professor and Head of the Department of Mizo, Mizoram University

le le; walking – *kal chhet chhet*; closing and opening of fist – *tum bai lek*; clapping – *beng thek thek*. At a later stage, rolling head over heels – *bingbileh* can be achieved by a healthy child. It is customary for grown-ups to place a baby on the ankles and swing it up and down while chanting, *daisulepah*, *dai-a-suleplep*, *dai thlang vawra bingbi-let*. A more advanced practice was to lift the baby standing upright on both palms, and lifting it up and down as vigorously as the baby's confidence can endure. This may be regarded as another form of martial training in courage and endurance.

1) Story-telling -

Between weaning and expectation of the next child it was customary for children to sleep with grandmas or aunts who undertook the interminable task of telling bedtime stories, while having to answer and explain questions of logical and critical nature.

2) Play -

As there was no formal school for learning letters, a Mizo child of both sexes have the whole day for play except for a brief interval for lunch and midday nap. Come evening, all children would gather at the village *lungdawh*¹ to meet their parents coming home from the day's work. There are plays and games appropriate to age groups.

a) *Tumtelek* – Girls' game of childcare. A small cloth is made into a traditionally folded bundle resembling a baby,

and is carried on the back with a lullaby,

*Ka nauwi hi mu hle hle la, bei hle hle;
I mut loh chuan keiman ka beng mu ang che!*

[Go to sleep my baby, lay your head on my back;
For if you don't I'll have to pat you to sleep.]

b) *In-khualtelem* – This also is mostly played by girls. It is a game of imitating the daily life and habits of grown-ups. As it is girl-play domestic life is generally the theme of the game. Life of hunting or field work is rarely made the subject of imitation.

c) *Pipu* – Swing. From the harmless homely swing made with *hnam*, a cane and twined rope for carrying basket, boys progressed to a more challenging swing from a high branch, usually the bunyan tree on the outskirts of the village. A strong vine called *kawihru*, the hard bean of which is the *kawi* used for *inkawibah*, is mainly used for such high swing. Starting from an elevated ground the swing would fly above the slope below at a dizzying height of twenty feet or more, creating an exhilarating experience.

d) *Thereng koh* – *Thereng* (cicada) is a popular singing insect, and there are several varieties with different melodies. At night cicadas are attracted to light and can easily be caught as they come to sing on nearby branches or walls. It is mostly boys who practise the game. Torch or bonfire is lit to at-

tract the cicada, and then boys beat bamboo sticks, chanting,

Thereng aw, lo haw, lo haw!
A lian lian kha lo hawng se,
A te te khan lo nghak se!

e) *Zawnga-leilawn* – Two rows of children make a bridge with opposite children crossing both arms by holding one's arm with one hand and the friend's arm with the other. A slight but agile boy or girl is selected to walk the bridge while all chant the game song,

Zawnga leilawn dim dim,
Chhim zawng leilawn, zawngchal leilawn,
Zawnga leilawn dim dim.

As soon as the walker leaves the bridge of one pair, that pair move to the head of the bridge, and so on till they tire of the game.

The games played by children among the Mizos are many and time does not permit coverage of them at this time. We can at least mention the names of such games and practices current among children below the age of fifteen.

pang-aw-inzial, sakuh uilut, arpa kal,
sanghar ngul lawn, inrulpui lu din,
tangkawng chaw zawng, inarpa sual, in-
buan, dawngfawh hawng thlawh, inzuan
kahlen, kahchik, pipu suih, kahpup, etc.

3) Games –

Games are not organized competition, but another form of play with definite objectives of goal and victo-

ry. These games are involuntary training in development of mind and skill in which organizing ability is built up for future responsible life.

a) *Inbihruksiak* – This is the universal game of hide and seek and needs no elaboration. Two or more children forming two groups compete in who can hide longer before being discovered. The word of readiness is "Tiik! Ka tiam!" When the hiding team is all discovered, they changed turn with the seekers. It sometimes happened a hiding child is left undiscovered and eventually goes to sleep, and given for lost till grown-ups find him or her in the late evening.

b) *Inkawibah* – A game played with a big round flat bean called 'kawi' in various mode separately by boys and girls. Girls' game is called 'inkawibah'. Each player has one bean, and the game is played between two opposing groups. Beans of one team are stood in a row and the opponents having the move shoot at the row of beans from a designated distance by throwing the *kawi* from between the legs with both hands and the beans held flat between crossed fingers. If the movers fail to hit all the beans they are considered as miss and the turn goes to the other group. The boys' game called 'inkawihnawk' consists in shooting the bean from under one leg raised by lifting one foot with one hand and throwing the bean with the other. Both these kawi games pro-

gressed in stages called 'bu'. When a successful group finishes all the *bus* they begin again from Bu one which is called 'bu let'.

c) *Invawr* – It is a juggling game with five stones or pebbles. The stones are held in one palm and at the first move only one stone is thrown up, and while the stone is still in the air the remaining four are quickly placed on the floor in time to catch the falling stone. The next move becomes more difficult and complex. A player's level in the move is marked, and when the turn comes resumes at the stage or level last achieved.

d) *Kaihbu* - It is boys' game of spinning top. Mizo top is made of the hardest wood available. A block of wood about four to six inches is cut into a shape that bulges at the shoulder and tapering at the head and the bottom. The head is slightly raised from the shoulder against which the spinning rope is wound several times downward on the shoulder for spinning.

e) *Kalchhet* – The game is played with bamboo stilts mainly by boys. The height of the footrest progresses with the age and ability of each boy. The game is played individually by trying to throw the others from their stilts.

3) **Pawnto** –

Before children go to school and be loaded with homework there used to be good leisure time in the evening

after supper. Children of both sexes come together at early evening hours after supper to the open ground or bamboo platform to play or listen to stories from any old man willing to entertain them. Ghost stories and jungle stories are favourites.

4) **Ramvah** –

It was an enjoyable adventure for boys between the age of ten to fifteen to go trekking in nearby forest and rocky streams for the mere pleasure of it as well as to train their bodies and stamina for the arduous task of hunting and other responsibilities of grown up men.

Boys are usually skilful with the bow and pellet. Shooting and trapping birds and rodents is a fond pastime of boys. Pellets for the bow are made from clay rolled in a ball the size of marble and dried in the sun or fire. Trap for birds called 'Thangthleng' made of bamboo stick is laid on the branches of a tree having edible fruits. 'Sahdal' and 'Beai' are traps laid on the ground for fowls. Squirrels are trapped with 'Thangchep' and rodents with 'Vaithang'.

5) **Thingnawi fawm** –

In all Mizo villages there used to be a big house called Zawlbuk wherein all unmarried young men gathered by night and slept so as to be always ready to stand in group in defence of the village from raids by enemies and attack of beasts of prey. It was the duty

of all boys not yet qualified to be Zawlbuk inmate to provide fuel for the fire at Zawlbuk.

6) Bai lem, pawnlem tah and buh lem thap – It was a daily pastime for little girls to play at cooking leaves on tiny model of hearth outside. Girls at an early age are given training in weaving at a tiny model of loom with bits of thread left over by adults. They also learn sifting and winnowing of rice with dust in a bamboo mat called 'thlangra lem', even as a song goes,

*Zawlbuk hnuaiah buh lem kan thap chiam a,
Hmarthanga zaiin kel be lo ang e.*

[We sift brown dust for rice beneath Zawlbuk,

While Hmarthanga sang like goat's bleat.]

7) Manner and code of conduct -

It is more an obligation than a custom for younger ones to show respect to one's elders, especially in going errands. One must always use the courteous 'Ka u'(K'u for short) in addressing one older, 'ka pu/ka pi' for married man/woman. Parents were addressed respectfully as 'ka pa/ka nu', and not in the childish 'a-pa/a-nu' current today.

8) Test of courage -

Boys over twelve years compete in courage by a game called 'meicher indahsiak'. It is a game in which a boy carries a torch at night in the jungle path as far as he dares; the others compete one by one to shift the torch farther.

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Endnote:

¹ At the main approach to the village there is a square plot where memorial stones are lined up. This is a place where some festivals are conducted.