

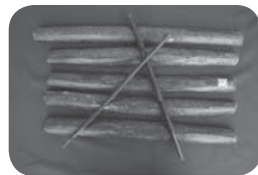
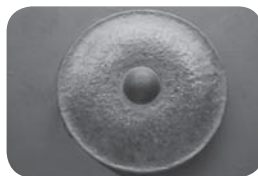
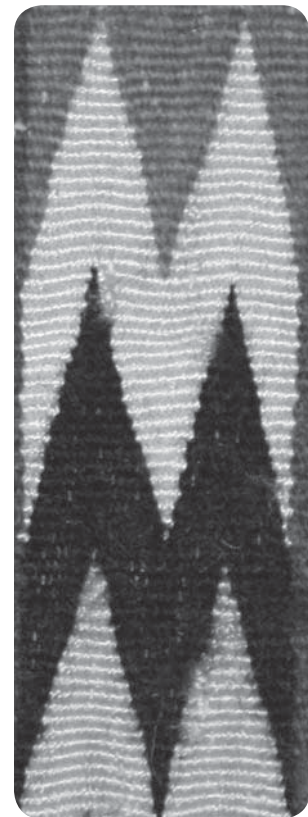
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Mizo Folklore



Guest Editor: Margaret Ch. Zama



## NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai, dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the Centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues folklore advocacy with public programming events and digital technology with applications to voice the cultures of the marginalised and historically disadvantaged communities. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Tata Education Trust.

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# Whither Folklore? The Mizo Context

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Mizoram, like its sister states of the Northeast region, has been in a state of flux and transition for the last few decades. Globalization is now part of everyday jargon just as the IT Revolution and the MTV generation are a reality and not a passing fad. Under such circumstances one may well ask, whither folklore? Does it still hold interest, relevance and value for the present generation?

On the other hand, since folklore is an integral part of a culture and its people, it remains an intrinsic part of one's identity. So when we talk of a generation pervaded by new values and interests on the one hand, and on the other that the foundation of its identity is inseparable from its ethnic roots, we begin to have a situation rift with conflicts. For example, we have folk stories that depict heroes who belong to the social order, "culture heroes" who represent the common values of the people. Today, we prefer to see ourselves as individuals first, who need not necessarily conform blindly to tradition. Thus, the degree of admiration and identification with such heroes may be fleeting and tenuous for most, and perhaps not accepted as role models at all.

The status of folklore in Mizoram today is that our folk artifacts are seen as mere show-pieces for museums or the archive. Our folk stories are unable to compete with TV cartoons. Folk games, songs and dances, alas, are reserved for annual displays at cultural meets and festivals. This situation is further compounded by the fact that despite its potential, serious scholarship in folkloristic studies is yet to make a meaningful impact.

But all is not lost. Folklorists have, through the years, been raising basic questions about the field of folklore and brought about a shift in study and focus. They are not only asking questions like, "Who are the folk?"<sup>1</sup> but also changing gear from the texts, (myths and folktales), to the study of its contexts, and folklore as performance and

enactment. Extending the study of myths and folktales beyond the written texts can lead to a fuller understanding of their nature and role in human life. It was Malinowski who drew attention to the importance of context and said, "The text of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless."<sup>2</sup> Keeping such trends of folkloristic studies in mind, innovative ways of depicting and fusing folklore into the modern context through the performing arts like modern dance and drama must now be seriously explored by the Mizo. Our neighbouring states of Manipur and Assam have already developed this aspect into a fine art. Filmmakers have successfully revived interest in their reinvention of world famous folktales, while today a folk singer and musician can perform for a worldwide audience through television networks and thus extend his particular brand of folk art beyond his circle. "In sum," says Dan Ben-Amos, "the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative and transcultural."<sup>3</sup> So, paradoxically, the very tools of our contemporary world which usurp folklore and make it redundant, can actually be used effectively for its propagation and revitalization. We may venture to state here that the dividing line between folklore and popular culture could wear very thin.

Of course, not all folk values of the past can fit present society. One obvious reason, of course, is that ideas and values are susceptible to cultural change. "But living lore reminds us of interests and values still current; folklore is not mere antiquarian. If we are interested in people, it is not unlikely that we will be interested in folklore. Such lore gives a fascinating sense of continuity with the past in both pleasure and wisdom."<sup>4</sup> The collection of articles in this issue reflects many such facets.

C.Lalsiamthanga and Lalsangzuala through their contributions on "Rih Dil: A Lake that Lures" and "Reiek Tlang and its Lores" respectively, reveal interesting samples of just how rich the

Mizo folklore scene is with regard to place-lore, which is an emerging trend in contemporary international folkloristics. Ulo Valk states that "Without place-lore man would be surrounded by an empty physical space of alien natural surroundings; place-lore links generations and provides them with a shared identity – the narratives of belonging."<sup>5</sup> The article on "Mizos and the Afterlife" from C.Vanlallawma showcases the rich body of myths and tales associated with sacred beliefs while the article on "Khuangchawi" from R.Lallianzuala provides insight into cultural traditional practices wherein feats of merit occupy an integral space and social relevance. The article titled "Machiavelli in Mizo Folk Tales" from R.Thangvunga highlights the possibilities that folktales can open up to new interpretations and this versatility is what gives relevance to old tales in today's world.

The contribution from Lalrindiki T.Fanai on "Narratives of Mizo Puan and Mizo Indigenous Patterns" is a sampling of the wealth of cultural material that has evolved alongside the history of the community, revealing the linkage of memory, culture, and creativity with indigenous products. The article "Narratives in Mizo Traditional Dances" from Margaret L.Pachauau unfolds the possibilities of folk tradition and culture being given a continuity and relevance through performance and dance forms for the present generation. The article from R.L.Thanmawia on "Heritage of Mizo Traditional Song and Music" provides a study of the emergence of Mizo indigenous song and music as well as the lores that accompanied it. "Mizo Folk Songstresses" from Ruth Lalremruati makes an interesting statement about how women composers and songstresses left their indelible mark on a society that was strongly patriarchal and gender discrimination was an accepted norm.

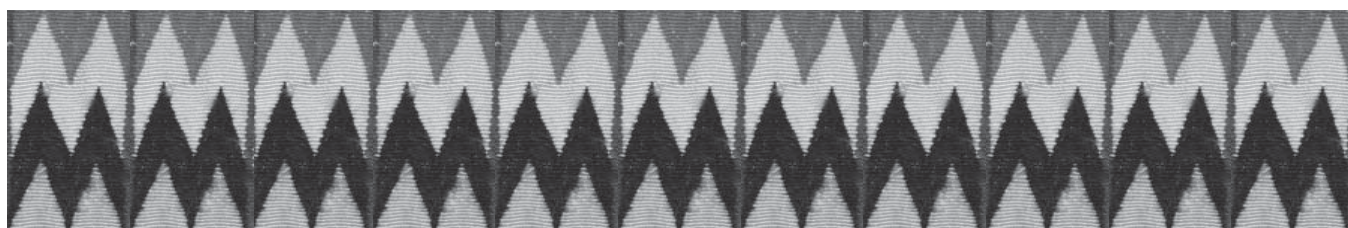
While examining the status and future of folklore and indigenous culture in Mizoram, an interesting dimension that cannot be ignored is

the influence of the Church and its ambivalent mindset towards the practice and continuance of some aspects of old traditions. An example is the celebration of annual cultural festivals which, in their original form were marked by community drinking, feasting and dancing, but have now been sanitized to the extent where even the dance performances and enactment of traditional practices smack of fabrication. The dominant idea now is to sell and mass produce for tourists and the export market. The Church's influence on the mindset of a state that claims to be 100% Christians cannot be brushed aside. Can folklore survive and have meaningful contribution to a society that is for the present much too preoccupied with the culture of materialism, and one whose yardstick for social acceptance is dictated by the Church?

This becomes a complex issue, for at the other end of the spectrum, culture and folklore are a means of maintaining the value and self-respect of a people. It serves the need for a national identity and pride. If we are keen to preserve and cherish our folklore, let it be the genuine stuff and not just a "fabrication of fakelore."<sup>6</sup>

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dundes, Alan. "Who are the Folk?" in *Frontiers of Folklore*, ed. William R.Bascom, Boulder, Colo., Westview Press, 1977. pp 13-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Malinowski, B. *Myth in Primitive Society*, Kegan Paul, London, 1926. p 29.
- <sup>3</sup> Paredes, ed. and Bauman, Jt.ed. *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore*, Austin University of Texas Press, 1972. p 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Boswell and Reaver, Jt Authors. *Fundamentals of Folk Literature*, Oosterhout, Anthropological Publication, 1969. p 206.
- <sup>5</sup> Valk, Ulo. "Notes on Assamese Place-Lore", *Indian folklife*, Serial No.31, November 2008, p13.
- <sup>6</sup> Dundes, Alan. *Folklore Matters*, University of Tennessee Press, 1989, p 41.



# Rih Dil : A Lake that Lures

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“Rih Lake is the largest lake in Mizoram, but is situated in Burma,” goes the common saying. This is an awkward claim to make, but it is a fact due to arbitrary political boundaries. The purview of this paper, though, is to depict how and why the legendary lake is believed to have been the inevitable passage that spirits of the dead crossed on their way to their future abode known as *Mitthi Khua*. Some even believed it was the final abode of the spirits. The many myths about this mysterious lake have been a source of inspiration for several Mizo writers and composers, and have immensely enriched their literary output.

According to legend, there was a girl named Rihi who had a cruel stepmother. One day, the father took Rihi’s younger sister deep into forest and killed her. Rihi eventually found her dead sister and was inconsolable. A good spirit known as *Lasi* to the Mizos found Rihi weeping and revealed to her the healing powers of a particular magical tree with whose leaf Rihi revived her sister back to life. In order to quench the thirst of her younger sister, Rihi turned herself into a small pool of water with the help of a leaf of the same magical tree. Later, Rihi was compelled to change herself into a white *mithun*, and wandered around in search of a permanent place where she could be safe.

While she was roaming around looking for a safe haven, her urine formed *rih note* or small lakes wherever she went. It is believed that such lakes can still be found in the Vawmlu Range, Zur forest near the village Natchhawng; a place above Bochung village; the area of Khawthlir village, all of which are in Myanmar. She eventually surveyed Sanzawl village for her permanent settlement not far from which flowed the river Run. But the demon spirit of the river threatened to suck her dry if she settled there permanently. It is believed that Rihi then surveyed the valley of Champhai but found that unsuitable too. She finally settled in the present location in the form that she cherished the most – that of a lake. The name Rih retains the name of Rihi.

## The location:

Rih lake is situated at a distance of about two miles from Tiau which is the boundary river between Mizoram (India) and Myanmar, and is within the village area of Rihkhawdar in Myanmar. The village itself is an establishment of adventure that lures the visitor to explore the mysterious and supposedly demon-haunted

lake. It is 14 miles from Champhai in Mizoram and 63 miles from Falam, a town of Myanmar.

## Area and depth:

Although there has been no exact measurement taken so far, it is approximately one mile long and half a mile wide with a circumference of about three miles. The south-west floor is supposedly deeper than that of the north-west. The peculiar characteristic of the lake is that it becomes abruptly deep immediately after the water’s edge.

## The Dangerous Swamp:

Most of the land surrounding the lake is swampy and is covered by water during the monsoons, but remains jellylike and covered with different species of grass and vegetation for the rest of the year. Cows, buffaloes and horses graze, and often meet their death in the swamps and visitors are warned to be careful.

## Adventures on the Scene:

Believing that there would be ivory and other valuable treasures inside the lake, a group of people believed to be Turkish or Portuguese traders, ventured to drain the lake by digging the least formidable side, which was the south-western side. This is believed to have been in around 1700 A.D. In the course of their digging, when the water began to flow out, they saw a big, long dragon facing them. Though it did not appear to be dangerous and aggressive, the sight proved so dreadful that some of them later died of the trauma of the sight, and no one ever dared to risk their lives for the same interest later.

## Belief in the presence of a Dragon in the Lake:

It is possible that the dragon just spoken of may have a link with the ‘*Naga*’ (snake) of the Burmese belief which has a close connection with the Buddhist Phungyis or monks of Myanmar and their religious practices. There was, and still is, a belief that a big snake-like dragon lives inside the lake. A Burmese Phungyi and a specialist in dragon studies had told Zakhuaia (L), author of the work *Rih Lipui*, about the presence of dragons both male and female in the lake and further informed him that dragons can be seen or sighted only by those whom the dragon chooses.

Zakhuaia writes about an incident narrated by a Gurkha, who was chowkidar of a bungalow which stood at a distance of about of 400 ft from the lake, about how the dragon used to take the poultry at night. The chowkidar was initially afraid to confirm the incidents, but after repeated losses he decided to ambush the dragon and shoot it. But when the dragon appeared, he dared not shoot it because it was too long – while its head was inside the chicken coop, part of its tail was still inside the lake.

#### **Belief in the connection between the Dragon and spirits of the dead :**

Due to the above claims and other lores about it, Rih Dil came to be called the city of demons. The Mizos already held the belief that demons had the power to cause illness and even death to humans. This belief may also be a reason for them to presume Rih Dil as an abode for spirits mentioned in the opening paragraph. It is no wonder then that the inverted reflections of the trunks of trees in the water were considered to be the fencing of the city of the dead and known as *Mitthi Pal*.

It is this mythical link of the lake and the spirits of the departed souls that continues to fascinate and fire the imagination of Mizos, for, as with many other cultures, they too highly value the notion of immortality in one form or another in a dimension that may be inexplicable to man. Rih Dil can be said to represent this concept and one which Mizos cannot disown for it is associated with nostalgia and longing for the afterlife. It thus continues to be visited by Mizos by the hundreds every year.

#### *Endnote*

Zakhuaia, author of *Rih Lipui*, was chowkidar of Rih (PWD) Bungalow for about 25 years from 1964 and had the opportunity to observe and study Rih Lake and the myths connected with it.

#### *Reference*

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## Mizos and the After-life

C.VANLALLAWMA

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In philosophy, our subject would be termed 'Doctrine of Immortality of the Soul'<sup>i</sup> but, in layman's terms, it may be explained as 'a belief that the soul cannot die'. Most cultures believe that the soul or spirit lives on even after the earthly body has perished.

#### **Root of Mizo Belief:**

The Mizo belief in the immortality of the soul goes back a long way, much before recorded history. Somewhere around the year 1935 a priest (Sadawt) Hangpuia stated, "Our knowledge about the immortality of the soul is evident from the story of Tlingi and Ngama."<sup>ii</sup> According to Hangpuia, this story is the origin of Mimkut, which is one of the oldest of Mizo festivals and may also be the source of the Mizo belief in the immortality of the soul.

#### ***Rih Dil (Rih Lake):***

The importance of *Rih Dil* in Mizo culture and belief is not only due to its physical beauty but also because of

the belief that all the spirits of the dead pass through this lake on their way to the next life.

#### **Belief in *Mitthi Khua* and *Pialral*:**

The above can be translated as Village or Abode of the Dead and Beyond River Pial or Paradise. Perhaps due to the reasons highlighted earlier, the belief that the souls of the dead would gather at some place also became prevalent. The quality of life at such a place (*Mitthi Khua*) was considered to be inferior to this life.

In the year 1893, Rev. G.O. Newport presented a paper 'Mission work among the Lushais' at the Missionary Conference in Bangalore. The content of the paper belonged to Mr.J.H.Lorrain (called 'Pu Buanga' by the Mizos) who was a pioneer missionary of their land. What he wrote about the Mizo belief was:

"Two places or conditions are held to exist after death. One of these is called *Pialral* and corresponds to our heaven. The other is called

*Mitthi Khua*, but it seems doubtful whether this is simply a place of ordinary existence for those who are not good enough for heaven, or whether it corresponds to our hell. A big river 'Pial' flows between these two places, and no one can pass over it from one place to the other. Mighty hunters, great warriors go to *Pialral*, where they live at ease with no trouble of any kind. They hunt and enjoy themselves. No women can go over there, but small children of both sexes who died before they left their mother's breast, they enter in and reside there".<sup>iii</sup>

When someone dies, the soul/spirit immediately proceeds towards *Mitthi Khua*. During this part of the journey, they are filled with great sorrow and nostalgia for their former life on earth. After sometime, they arrive at a place called '*Hringlang Tlang*'—a place from where mortals can be viewed. Here, their nostalgia and longing become unbearable and they weep and shed copious tears. Just beyond *Hringlang Tlang*, grows the beautiful mystical flower called '*Hawilopar*'—the flower that does not look back. The departed spirits then pick the flower, after which they lose all desire to turn back. Further off lies a fountain called '*Lunglohtui*' whose water helps not only to make them lose all their desire for earthly existence but also their yearning for previous life disappear. Their yearnings are then believed to be focused only on the place lying ahead—*Mitthi Khua*.

They then proceed undisturbed towards *Mitthi Khua* until they reach its entrance where they are accosted by a massive individual called Pawla, holding a pellet-bow in his hand with pellets believed to be as big as eggs. He would interrogate the newcomers and if dissatisfied with their answers regarding their eligibility, such as having the highest social accreditation or being an outstanding game hunter, Pawla would volley shots of massive pellets from his bow. The effect of a hit from his bow was said to cause an injury lasting three years.

However, the socially accredited persons and renowned hunters were not questioned or harmed. They were allowed to pass through into *Pialral*, ceremoniously riding on the deer they killed during their lifetime. Babies were also permitted to pass unhindered.

It is said that the non-privileged ones, in their fear of Pawla, would hesitate to approach him but they would be dragged out of their hiding place by Pawla's wife Sanu so that they could be shot at by her husband. When someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, Sanu is held responsible. The following song reflects this:

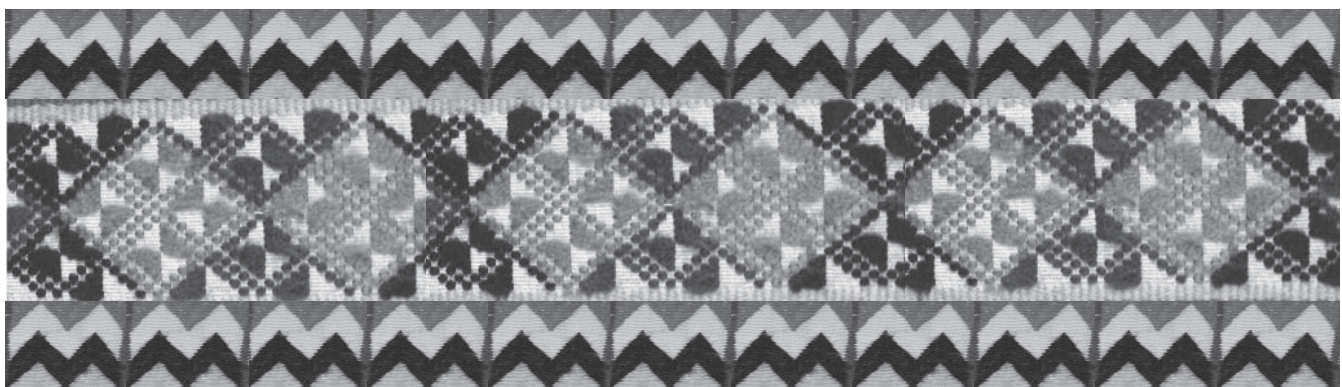
*What if Sanu had not decided to take you by the arm,  
My darling baby, clear the way,  
And let them pass right through.*<sup>iv</sup>

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- Challiana, *Pi pu Nun*, p.43
- Lalmama, *Mizo Titi*, p.9,10

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- i W.S.Sahakian and M.L.Sahakian, *Ideas of the Great Philosophers*, New York, Barns & Noble 1966 p.108
- ii Pu J.F.Laldailovan in1978 wrote about this in *Thu Ngaihnaom Bu*.
- iii Rev.G.O.Newport, "Mission Work Among the Lushais", *Harvest Field*, February 1894
- iv Zawla, K., *Mizo Pi Pute leh An Thlahte Chanchin*, 5th edition, Gosen Press, Aizawl, 1989, p 43-44.



# Machiavelli in Mizo Folk Tales

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To assume that the subject of this article will be considered superficial and inconsequential, if not outright irresponsible, is not ruled out. The pristine simplicity of primitive cultures are assumed impervious to such insidious cynicism as Machiavelli's ideas, but the present examination is made on the premise that every community or nation suffers from the illusion of a previous golden age or pre-historic utopia. Perhaps such an illusion relieves an innate sense of insecurity, inadequacy and even inferiority and saves them from an unequal comparison with others considered more civilized or stronger. This attitude has the euphemistic name of 'patriotism'. A patriot therefore is the apex or spearhead of the accumulated ego of a community in a defensive attitude, and ethnic identity appears to survive on the assumption of such a Utopian past. This is indicated by the zeal with which the external trappings of tribal past is preserved even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for no holier virtue than to have the satisfaction of being different.

## I. Aims and Objectives

For the educated elitist group of a community, it could be considered naive not to be aware of the fact that men in all ages and places share an identical human nature, that the vision of our glorious past is only a mirage, that men steal, rape, kill and pillage others then as now. It is the aim of this study to attempt to show that our dim past can throw some light to understand human life in general beyond what written documents have revealed so far.

## II. Why Machiavelli?

To be ignorant of the name of Niccolò Machiavelli today is to be in danger of self-deception. For, to many in the past, he represented the Devil himself. In fact, the Devil himself has been called *Machiavellian*.

In a corrupt and decadent society in which man's natural badness and egoism have more or less free scope, where uprightness, devotion to the common good, and the religious spirit are either dead or submerged by license, lawlessness and faithlessness, it is only an absolute ruler who is able to hold together the centrifugal forces and create a strong and unified society. Machiavelli showed his 'modernity' in the emphasis he laid on the State as a sovereign body which maintains its vigour and unity by power-politics and an imperialistic policy. He is chiefly known, of

course, for his amoral advice to the prince, for his 'Machiavellianism'.<sup>1</sup>

Machiavelli was no angel; neither was he a devil. He was a pragmatist who realized the necessity of facing life in its sordid reality for the much needed good, free of moral considerations. For what is moral but the general good? He could be termed a prophet of political necessity in an age when nations committed mutual annihilation. His was the only reasonable answer to the contemporary problem of Italy.

Machiavelli was born in 1469 in Florence, Italy, and died in 1527. During the Renaissance, the Florentines exercised power over a great many other Tuscan cities. During Machiavelli's lifetime, the chief family menacing the republican institutions of Florence was the Medici. As a loyal supporter of the Medici family, he wrote his famous book, *The Prince*, an exhortation of Lorenzo de' Medici to make himself strong to unite Italians against foreign occupation. Machiavelli was commissioned by the 'Ten of Council', among other Florentines, as an agent at the courts of various princes. Such a career, conditioned by a strong political ideal, served the fuel for the astute political wisdom of Machiavelli. A sample reading from *The Prince* will give us sufficient indication as to how people had reacted to this work. The text is the Norton Critical Edition, translated by Robert M. Adams:

Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.... I know everyone will agree that among these many qualities a prince certainly ought to have all those that are considered good. But since it is impossible to have and exercise them all, because the conditions of human life simply do not allow it, a prince must be shrewd enough to avoid the public disgrace of those vices that would lose him his state. If he possibly can, he should also guard against vices that will not lose him his state; but if he cannot prevent them, he should not be too worried about indulging them.

...a reputation for liberality is doubtless very fine; but the generosity that earns you that reputation can do you great harm. For if you exercise your generosity in a really virtuous way

as you should, nobody will know of it,...Hence if you wish to be widely known as a generous man, you must seize every opportunity to make a big display of your giving. .. And there is nothing that wears out faster than generosity; even as you practice it, you lose the means of practicing it, and you become either poor and contemptible or (in the course of escaping poverty) rapacious and hateful.

... if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good general rule about men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain. While you serve their welfare, they are all yours,... But when the danger is close at hand, they turn against you...People are less concerned with offending a man who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared : the reason is that love is a link of obligation which men, because they are rotten, will break any time they think doing so serves their advantage; but fear involves dread of punishment from which they can never escape.

....How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and live with integrity than by craftiness,...yet we see from recent experience that those princes have accomplished most who paid little heed to keeping their promises, but who knew how to manipulate the minds of men craftily. In the end, they won out over those who tried to act honestly. .. Thus a prudent prince cannot and should not keep his word when to do so would go against his interest...Doubtless if all men were good, this rule would be bad; but since they are a sad lot, and keep no faith with you, you in your turn are under no obligation to keep it with them. [p 42-48]

Most utopianists "place man outside history in a social world free of political conflicts and tensions so that he can live in permanent harmony and peace. Machiavelli's ideal political order was one in which man lives in time and is subject to its ravages."<sup>2</sup>

Having placed Machiavelli and his principles on the reference table we can now use him as a torch in our exploration of the dark cavern of antiquity recorded in the oral legends of our tribe. The question already forming in our minds is : How can Machiavelli be brought to bear on a primitive society not known to have any political system? Such discomfort may be alleviated by narrowing the extent of his policy, i.e. on morality vis-à-vis empirical expediency.

### III. Legends & Stories <sup>3</sup>

#### 1. *Chhura and Chengkek* <sup>4</sup>

One day Chhura came upon a *chengkek* tree

bearing ripe fruit. As he climbed, the small tree bent lower and lower and would break if he climbed any higher. Chhura got off the tree and fondled the fruits from the ground, mumbling, "If it were Nahaia, he'd just do it this way," and sadly went on his way home empty handed, but not empty-headed.

#### 2. *Chhura and Sekibuhchhuak* <sup>5</sup>

Chhura made a swing in his *thlam*<sup>6</sup> which was very much coveted by a *Phung*<sup>7</sup> living in a hollow tree beside his *jhoom*.<sup>8</sup> Having missed his lunchpack for some days, Chhura decided to teach this *Phung* a lesson. One day, he made a hole in the roof exactly above the swing and pretended to go home. Returning secretly, he hid on the roof. Thinking Chhura had left, the *Phung* stole up and started swinging, singing gleefully, "Chhura is away!" only to be caught by her tangled hair from above. Threatened direly to be made the children's plaything, the *Phung* offered for her ransom a magic axe. Chhura asked if the axe required effort, and was told that it did. After some bargaining, Chhura agreed on the treasured *Sekibuhchhuak*, took it home, hid it safely and used it sparingly. Now Chhura had an elder brother named Nahaia who came to learn about the *Sekibuhchhuak* and what it could do. Nahaia was not a bad character at all. In fact, he had a good head upon his shoulders to keep him and his family alive without much exertion. He advised Chhura to change the logs on his porch with a *vaiza*.<sup>9</sup> As soon as it was done, Nahaia raised a frightful cry, "Fire! Fire! Chhura! Your *Sekibuhchhuak* must be saved at all cost!" Out came the *Phung*-catcher with his famed *Sekibuhchhuak*, and the *vaiza* logs did their job. The *Sekibuhchhuak* flew and landed smartly on the waiting hands of Nahaia, who coolly departed saying, "Nahaia will have what Chhura rejected."

#### 3. *Chhura at Mawngping village*

In his heroic and adventurous quest, Chhura came to a certain village, and it being late, decided to stay the night. After a heavy dinner he went out, and to the villagers' shock and wonder, passed stool! The whole village surrounded Chhura like St Paul in Lystra. Too late Chhura realized he must play god, and started creating anuses on the children with the help of a heated skewer and put them inside a large recovery basket. The drama ended with Chhura hanging inside a basket over a deep pool.

#### 4. *The death of Chhura*

A hero's life must end in a tragedy, and Chhura must not be an exception, or we are deprived of a hero. Fatefully he came to a village where

a strange game was being performed. People young and old, men and women, sat in a row swaying left and right, and chanting, "*Ngheng tawlhah, ngheng tawlhah, a ruh no no chhuakah.*"<sup>10</sup> It was a push-out game in which any who could not bear the pressure was pushed off the seat, and another enters the fray. Chhura joined in and truly proved his mettle by retaining his place but alas, for too long! While others took turns to have meal, Chhura carried on till the legend ended with a soft thud of falling body, and Chhura was, by a technical knock-out, out cold!

#### IV. Critical observation

Look at simple Chhura. He is within reach of what he wants. He is alone. He knows what Nahaia would have done in that situation. But he would rather go home empty-handed than be like Nahaia. Why? Do you call him stupid? Hamlet could kill Claudius when the latter was praying, but he didn't. Why? Thomas Becket could seek safety from King Henry V's goons by closing the door of the Cathedral, but forbids it and dies a martyr. Why? What holds back these people from their desires and safety? A principle, a conscience, a moral scruple. What would Machiavelli have done in such situations? For Nahaia or Chhura or anybody, the end was the possession of the object of desire. Nahaia would care only for the fruit, but Chhura weighs the means, the how, the motive, and refuses to compromise his way with another. Nahaia, to this day, has the fruit Chhura left.

We do not know if Nahaia ever worked hard to have enough food. But we know the little coward exchanged *jhoom* with Chhura because of the *Phung* that lived there. Fortune, that favours the bold, awarded Chhura the famed *Sekibuhchhuak*. With plenty of hard-earned food, (*mautam*<sup>11</sup> was not recorded), the *Sekibuhchhuak* was lying idle. This was impossible to resist for an inveterate *mautam*-loving Nahaia. (*Mautam* can happen any time to anybody who wants it for an excuse to have *Sekibuhchhuak*). The little Machiavellian was not slow in forming a plan. And why *vaiza*, of all the trees on the wooded slopes of Mizoram? The wood is not good even for fuel. But it is good for making people with *Sekibuhchhuak* slip on it and throw the precious thing over to other hands. And perhaps that's why the Millenium Centre was built – so that people can throw their *Sekibuhchhuak* while slipping on slippery gawags.

There are some children born requiring surgical operation for anal opening. But an entire village *Pu Vana* knows since when! It should be interesting to conjecture how life used to be in Mawngping. The

citizens had intake only; they didn't give out. The corrupt gene must have traveled across centuries to us today, who, like Mawngpingians, only receive but do not give, and live a parasitic life in a land full of promises and possibilities.

What Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest and Machiavelli's theory of political survival have in common is that the 'fight' is ultimate. Even a friendly game of cards, if not played to win, yields no pleasure. If Chhura died playing a game, so would you if you don't watch and learn how people do. The game of '*Nghengtawlhah*', like so many games children play, dramatizes down-to-earth social and economic life.

Then, as now, life was hard, unfeeling, cruel, hopeless and morally unrewarding. The world then, as now, had no soft corner for people with soft constitutions and impractical ideals. Machiavelli in Mizo folklores is only the tip of his cold nose. He is with us, in all of us. Let us admit it and make a virtue of our imperfections by being honest with ourselves.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Frederick Copplestone, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Vol. 3 Late Mediaeval and Renaissance Philosophy, Part II*. Image Books, NY, 1963, pp. 131, 133.
- <sup>2</sup> Felix Gilbert, from *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, Princeton UP, 1965; reprinted in *The Prince*, tr & ed by Robert M. Adams, Norton Critical Edition, 2005, p.150.
- <sup>3</sup> The tales are branded by the author.
- <sup>4</sup> *Chengkek*—a fruit having very sour edible rind and a sweet kernel wrapping the seeds. The fruit is bright red when ripe, and very attractive and decorative. The tree is rarely strong enough to support a man's weight, so the fruit is plucked from the ground.
- <sup>5</sup> *Sekibuhchhuak*—Mizo version of Cornucopia (Horn of Plenty), with the difference that it dispenses rice from one end and meat from the other when the magic word is spoken.
- <sup>6</sup> *Thlam*—"a jhoom-house." Lorrain, J.H. *Dictionary of the Lushai Language, 1940*
- <sup>7</sup> *Phung*—a sub-human (female) being, distinguished from a spirit or demon,
- <sup>8</sup> *jhoom*—"a Lushai cultivation." Lorrain. *Dictionary*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Vaiza*—a tree whose bark is used for making ropes; and the peeled wood becomes quite slippery.
- <sup>10</sup> Meaning: 'Push, push and push, weakest out and out.'
- <sup>11</sup> *mautam*—famine coinciding with cyclical flowering of bamboo, when rats multiply exceedingly.



# Khuangchawi

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**K**huangchawi was the last and the most prominent public ceremony performed by a Mizo in the pre-Christian era. In pre-Christian Mizo society, the ultimate objective was to attain Paradise after death. Persons who qualified for this were known as *Thangchhuahpa*. There were two kinds of *Thangchhuah* – Domestic *Thangchhuah* known as ‘*In lama Thangchhuah*’ and Forest *Thangchhuah* known as ‘*Ram lama Thangchhuah*’. In order to achieve forest *Thangchhuah*, a person had to be a renowned hunter. Domestic *Thangchhuah* was performed by the well-to-do who conducted a series of ceremonial feasts. The final stage was known as *Khuangchawi*. The person who performed *Khuangchawi* was known as *Khuangchawipa*.

The ceremonial function of *Khuangchawi* could not be conducted on a whim. Certain needs, such as the following, had to be first fulfilled:

- (I) **Chawng buhden:** The preparation of the local brew was called *chawng buhden* and was prepared from rice. A day would be fixed for *chawng buhden* and a large amount of rice grain had to be hulled by all the young men and women of the village and this work would be done manually with a *sum* (a mortar for husking the rice grain) and *suk* (the pestle made of wood specially meant for hulling rice) that was owned by every family. In such manner, the husked rice would be fermented and measured in terms of *ngan* (about 4 litres). The *Chawngpa* was expected to have at least a hundred *ngan* of brewed drink for the ceremony.
- (II) **Sathing zâr:** To cook the rice, meat and other dishes for the community feast, sufficient firewood was required and the mass collection of firewood was known as *sathing zâr*. The firewood would be collected from the nearby forest and brought to the village clearing. The green firewood would be exposed to the sun for a few weeks. On the day of the *sathing zâr* (firewood collection), the intended *Khuangchawipa* had to feed the volunteers with the meat of a full-grown goat.
- (III) **Thingthiah:** This is a religious ritual of sticking five or seven or nine (odd number) pieces of ginger onto the wall of the house belonging to either the maternal grandfather or maternal uncle. In order to perform *thingthiah*, the man who was to perform the *Khuangchawi* public feast had to prepare the stick for the pieces

of ginger. He could entrust only his close friend or son-in-law or any *Thangchhuahpa* with the errand of sticking the *thingthiah*. And this messenger, accompanied by a large procession, was not allowed to speak to anyone until the task was completed. After fixing the *thingthiah*, drinks would follow. Sometimes dinner prepared with pork was also served. In this *thingthiah* ritual, a dance called *thingdim* also known as *Khuallam*, meaning ‘dance in welcoming the guests’ would be held.

- (IV) **Thingfâr Zân:** On the first day of the *Khuangchawi* ceremony, the neighbours and the sons-in-law of the *Khuangchawipa* would prepare *Seluphan*, sacrificial posts upon which the skulls of the slaughtered *mithuns* were to be hung. In the evening, the whole party of firewood collectors, *seluphan* workers and house repairers, would drink the special *Chawngtilreh zu* or drink that was contributed by the sister or daughter of the *Khuangchawipa*. The night would be spent in drinking, singing and dancing and it was called *Thingfâr zan* (Night of the *Thingfâr* ceremony). On the floor of the house of the *Khuangchawipa*, the young men would sit together in a single semi-circle with their legs stretched out between which a young women would sit. This practice on *Thingfâr zan* was called *inngai*. During the *Sumdêng zu* drinking ceremony, *sumdêng zu* would be served first to the one considered the most brave and *tlawmngai* or self-giving in a special mug known as *Nopui*.
- (V) **Chawngchen:** On this *Thingfâr zan* (night of the *Thingfâr* ceremony) after the *Sumdêng zu* drinking ceremony began, the highlight of the night known as *Chawngchen* would follow. The *Chawngpa* would stand up in the middle of the semicircle and announce that he would select a song and start the dance.
- (VI) **Khuangchawi:** The last and the final stage of *Thangchhuah*, would be performed by preparing a special stretcher made of bamboo, wood and canes, known as *Khuanghlâng*, large enough to accommodate the near and dear ones of the *Khuangchawipa*. On the evening of the *Khuangchawi* day, the sons-in-law of the *Khuangchawipa* would carry the *Khuanghlâng* and the whole village would encircle the

stretcher in a procession. From the uplifted stretcher, the *Khuangchawi* family would throw out precious ornaments and valued possessions like silver coins, brass pots (*darbel*), brass-gongs (*darkhuang*), gun (*silai*) and even *mithun* (*sial*). In place of the real *mithun*, a length of rope would be tossed and the one who got the rope would later claim the *mithun* from the *Khuangchawipa*.

The *Khuangchawipa* would be truly majestic on this particular day. The grandeur of the feast served in the evening would be enhanced by the *thingdim* (*Khuallam*) dance.

Since *Khuangchawi* required a large stock of brewed liquor, firewood and also fine weather, October was favoured for this festival. October is, thus, still known as the month of *Khuangchawi* (*Khuangchawi thla*) in the Mizo calendar.

## Narratives in Mizo Traditional Dances



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Mizoram is the twenty-third state of India and is a mountainous region, bordered by Bangladesh in the west, Myanmar in the east and south and Assam and Manipur in the north. The majority of the Mizos are Christians and are an inherently vibrant, sociable and closely knit society. Song and dance are integral to the Mizos, both in times of sorrow and in celebration. The fact that Mizo traditional dances have undergone various stages of fusion and transformation remains a debatable aspect of research till today. This critique shall focus only upon six of the predominantly major dances of Mizoram

namely, *Khuallam*, *Chawnglaizawn*, *Chai*, *Sarlamkai* / *Solakia*, *Cheraw* and *Chheih*.<sup>1</sup> Dance is referred to as *Lam* in Mizo. These dances have been chosen because they have been retained as symbols of traditional as well as popular culture dynamics till today. It must be mentioned though that there are many dances, apart from those reflected here, that remain a part of Mizo culture.

### 1. *Khuallam*:

*Khuallam* literally means dance of the guests and is a dance that is performed in the ceremony called



*Khuangchaw*.<sup>2</sup> This dance is one of the oldest dances of the Mizos. Some Mizos refer to this dance as *thingdim*. Initially women did not participate in this dance and it was only much later that it became a dance which incorporated them. There are various steps in this dance, and these include *Kaltluang*, *Kalthelh*, *Arpui Chawmthai*, *Vasir Len*, *Vakawl Len*, *Ar Khaw Thim Dai* to name but a few. In order to claim a distinguished place in society and to attain entry into paradise or *Pialral*, one had to attain the coveted title of *Thangchhuahpa*.<sup>3</sup> There were two ways of attaining this title. One was by performing various ceremonies which included offering several community feasts accompanied with dancing. The ceremonies performed in this tradition are known as *khuangchawi*. Guests invited from the other villages at the *khuangchawi* ceremony enter the arena by dancing the *khuallam*. This dance is performed in large numbers, to the accompaniment of a set of gongs known as the *darbu* and no song is sung at the time of the dance.

## 2. *Chawnglaizawn*:

*Chawnglaizawn* is a popular folk dance that originally belonged to one of the Mizo communities known as *Pawi*. One of the more remarkable features of the dance is that it is performed on two diametrically opposite but special occasions. In the first instance, the dance is performed by a husband in mourning for his wife. In the second instance, the dance is performed at the time of festivals, to celebrate the trophies that are won by successful hunters. On such occasions, it is performed in groups of large numbers. Young men and women standing in rows dance to the beat of drums, while waving colorful traditional shawls. Only the drum is used as a musical accompaniment in this dance.

## 3. *Chai*:

*Chai* is a popular dance which is performed on the occasion of *Chapchar Kut*,<sup>4</sup> one of the most important festivals of the Mizos. This dance was originally performed only at the time of this festival. There are various songs that are associated with *chai*, and these are *Pi Hmuaki Zai*, *Lalvunga Zai*, *Neihlaia Zai*, *Lera Zai* to name but a few. *Zai* means song in Mizo. In this dance, men and women stand alternately in a circle with the woman holding on to the waist of the man and the man to the woman's shoulder. In the middle are the musicians who play upon the drums and horns of the *mithun*. *Chai* is popularly regarded to have four versions. The dancers sing as they perform. Only a few musical instruments are used for this dance.

## 4. *Sarlamkai / Solakia*:

This dance originates from the *Pawi* and *Mara* communities who are located in the southernmost part of Mizoram. The dance is popularly known as *Sarlamkai* by the *Pawi* and *Solakia* by the *Mara* and *Rallulam* by the rest of the Mizo community. In the old days, when the different tribes were constantly at war with each other, a ceremony to deride the head taken of the slain enemy was usually held by the victor. It was during such a ceremony that the dance was performed. The dance is a warrior dance and was performed in order to celebrate a victory at war. Songs are not sung during the dance and only gongs or cymbals or drums are used, in order to render rhythmic beats to the dance. Men and women have both participated in this dance since its inception. They stand in alternate positions and dance in a circle, wearing colourful clothes while the leader is dressed as a warrior. The gongs lead the dance and they determine the steps that are related to the dance.

## 5. *Cheraw*:

*Cheraw* is a very old traditional dance of the Mizos and is believed to have existed prior to the advent of Christianity in 1894. The dance is usually performed on the occasion of *Buhza Aih*, which is the celebration of a bumper harvest of an individual family. Apart from this, legend denotes that it was performed to ensure a safe passage for the soul of a mother who died in childbirth. Thus, the dance is generally performed with care, precision and elegance. It is not a community dance. It remains a dance that is performed by a few select girls with exceptional skills in dancing. *Cheraw* today remains the most popular and colourful of all Mizo dances. Men squat upon the ground, facing each other, even as they tap long pairs of horizontal and cross bamboo staves, that open and close in rhythmic beats. Girls in colorful costumes of *puanchei*,<sup>5</sup> *kawrchei*,<sup>6</sup> *vakiria*,<sup>7</sup> and *thihna*<sup>8</sup> dance in and out between the bamboo staves. This dance is now performed in almost all Mizo festive occasions.

## 6. *Chheih*:

The unique style of *chheih* originated after the year 1900, on the lines of the song known as *Puma Zai*. It is a dance that embodies the spirit of joy and exhilaration and is performed to the beat of the song called *chheih hla*. People squat in a circle on the floor and sing to the beat of a drum or bamboo tube while a pair of dancers stand in the middle, recite the song and dance along to the music. The lyrics are spontaneous. They recall



the heroic deeds and escapades of heroes of a bygone era, and they also praise the guests in their midst. An expert dancer performs the dance on his own, while chanting verses, with various movements of the body. As the tempo rises, the excitement increases, and the audience squatting upon the floor leave their seats to join him. Today the *chheih* dance is performed on various occasions, towards the evening when the day's work is over.

Dance remains central and intrinsic to the life of the Mizo community, not merely in terms of artistic parameters but also as a reflection of an entire panorama of the ethos and sensibility of the Mizos, in its myriad dimensions.

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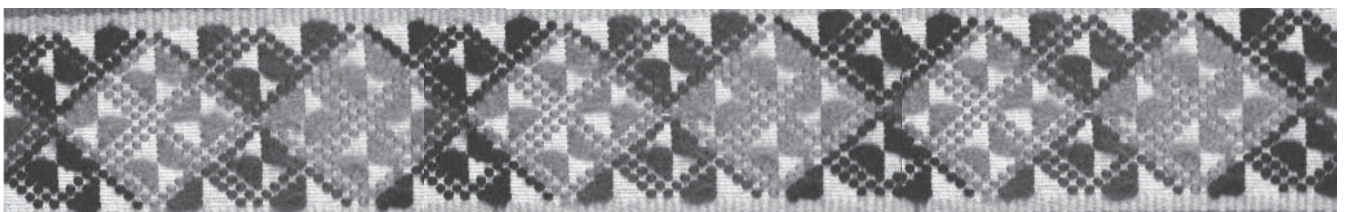
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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Specifications made on the basis of statistics denoted by the Government of Mizoram.
- <sup>2</sup> The name of a feast given by chiefs and other well to do Lushais.
- <sup>3</sup> The title given to a man who has distinguished himself by killing a certain number of different animals while hunting, or by giving a number of feasts. The possession of this title is required to ensure entry into '*Pialral*' or paradise.
- <sup>4</sup> The name of the spring festival which is held between the cutting and the burning of the jhooms.
- <sup>5</sup> Traditional Mizo cloth, decorated with colourful stripes, worn by men and women.
- <sup>6</sup> Traditional Mizo upper garment ornamented with broad coloured bands on the back and front.
- <sup>7</sup> Mizo headgear decorated with parrot's feathers, beetle wings and seeds etc and worn on festive occasions by women.
- <sup>8</sup> Amber necklace.



# Narratives of Mizo Puan and Mizo Indigenous Patterns

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The term *puan* in Mizo means cloth in general and denotes, in particular, the traditional costume of Mizo women and men. The traditional way of wearing a *puan* is to wrap it around oneself from the waist to the ankle. The length of the *puan* is normally sixty to sixty-five inches. Loin-loom is used to weave the *puan* and it takes a week or more to finish a plain *puan*, and a month or more for one with patterns.

Some of the most important traditional Mizo *puans* are :

## 1. *Puanchei or Puan Laisen*

In literal terms, *puan* means cloth, *chei* means to decorate, *lai* means middle and *sen* means red. Both terms above mean 'decorated cloth' or 'cloth with a red middle'. In *Puan Laisen*, the red colour runs through the middle horizontally. It was and is still used for wedding costumes and for very special festivals and dances.

## 2. *Ngotekherh or Puan Hruih*

This is also an important Mizo traditional *puan*. The older term used for this *puan* is *Puan Hruih*. *Hruih* is a technique of weaving. The background of *Ngotekherh* or *Puan Hruih* is white with horizontal shadowy black stripes which is produced by using white and black weft alternately in the white vertical warp. Both men and women wear this *puan*.

## 3. *Puandum*

When literally translated, this is 'black cloth', and assumes different names according to its different functions. The background is black and both the horizontal edges are red. The multicoloured bands are arranged horizontally between these edges. Traditionally though, it consists of black and red colours only. *Puandum* is very significant in Mizo culture.

## 4. *Tawlhlopuan*

The attribute of courage or bravery is associated with this *puan*. The design of this *puan* consists of a black background with vertical stripes of red, yellow and white.

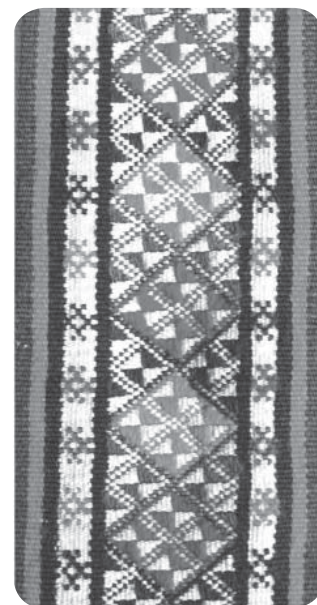
Some of the Mizo traditional patterns integrated in the *puan* are good examples to illustrate man's skill in translating artistic expressions. They are as follows:-

## 5. *Lenbuang thuam*

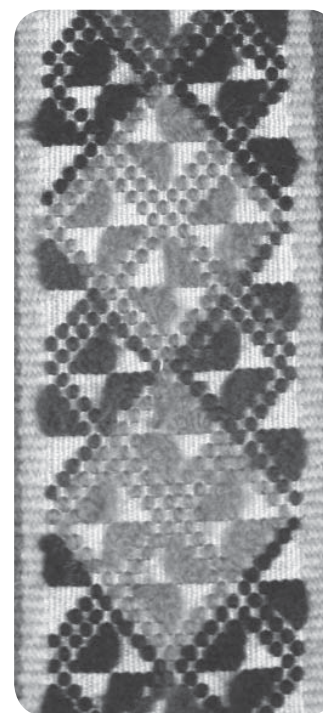
*Lenbuang* is the name of a tree and *thuam* means 'the junction of two or more boughs or branches'. This a very common pattern in a Mizo *puan* and is woven into different shapes.

## 6. *Disul*

*Di* means 'sungrass' and *sul* mean, "the long grass or weeds on or by the side of a path which brush against passers-by and thus point in the direction in which they have gone." This pattern is considered to emulate a design in the compounded word. It is also combined with other patterns.



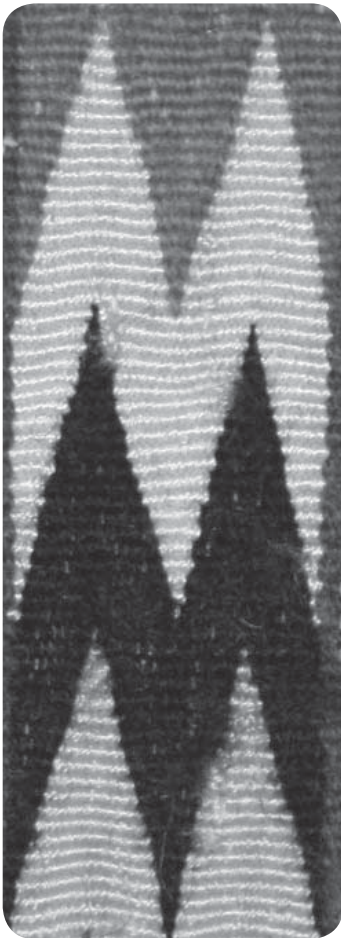
Disul konghnhnih



Lenbuangthuam



Ngotekherh



Sakeizangzia II

### 7. *Sakei zang zia or Keipui zia*

The word *sakei* or *keipui* means 'tiger', *zang* means 'the back of the animal' and *zia* is 'pattern'. This pattern emulates the striped pattern of a tiger's skin.

### 8. *Senior zeh or senior par*

By the very term 'senior', it can be assumed that the pattern is a later improvisation. The word *zeh* means pattern and *par* means 'to bloom' and, here, it also means 'flower'.

### 9. *Sawhthing par*

*Sawhthing par* means 'ginger flower'. This pattern is combined with other patterns but generally the shape of 'ginger flower' is woven or placed on top of other designs.

### 10. *Arsi par*

*Arsi* means 'star' and *par* means 'flower'. This pattern is an imitation of the stars in the sky.

### 11. *Kikiau*

*Kikiau* simply means 'zig zag'. Within this pattern, smaller patterns of four or five are arranged in a diamond shape and are woven in zig zag pattern.

### 12. *Kawkpui zik zial*

*Kawkpui* is the name of a fern. *Zik* means 'tender part of the leaf' and *zial* means 'twist or twirling'. It is a pattern that evolves from the twirling of the tender part of a fern at the tip.

### 13. *Herhsawp par*

*Herhsawp* means a bamboo stool. The pattern resembles the shape of the stool.

### 14. *Pangpar*

Different flowers like roses, tulips etc. are also used as patterns for the *puan*. In a *puan* with floral patterns and the colour combination is where the skill of the weaver is often reflected.

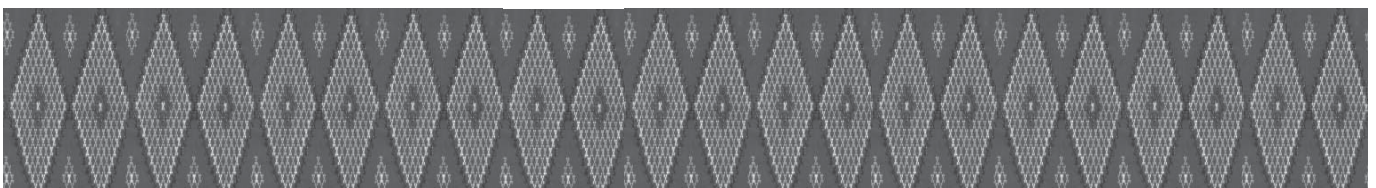
In modern Mizo *puan*, the traditional patterns have been modified and a number of new patterns that do not necessarily emulate nature or traditional tools have evolved. Some of them have a combination of different traditional patterns whereas some are just patterns without names.



Senior I

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# Heritage of Mizo Traditional Song and Music

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The origins of Mizo traditional music and song is unknown. This makes it difficult to chronicle, but song-chants in the form of couplets developed during their settlement at Thantlang in Myanmar between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. More progress is seen in the songs from the settlement at Lentlang in Myanmar, estimated between late 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The couplets evolve into triplets. Though the song-chants are simple in nature and convey no great philosophy, they are songs of individual experiences.

The Mizos are believed to have occupied present Mizoram from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The pre-colonial period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was an important era in the history of Mizo folk orature. In this period, the songs progressed in both form and content while the flow of language became more polished. Most of the songs are named after the composers.

**Classification:** The study of the Mizo folk songs based on an indigenous system of classification shows about one hundred types of folk songs. (Lalruanga: 32) This paper will only make a broad classification of ten, as follows:

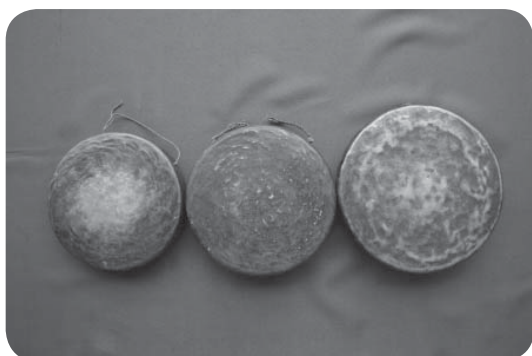
1. **Bawh hla:** This is the chant raised by the victorious warrior when returning from a successful raid to show his superiority over the enemy, and to let his people know that a successful raid has taken place. No other members of the raiding party can chant *bawh hla*.
2. **Hlado:** This is the chant raised by the hunter after a successful hunt. The difference of *hlado* from *bawh hla* is that *hlado* can be chanted on the spot, on the way home, just prior to entering the village, or at the celebration that ensues. Anyone who has witnessed the success of the hunt can chant *hlado* at any time and place.
3. **Thiam hla and Dawi hla (Invocation & Incantation):** These two-verse forms are chanted by the Priests and sorcerers while performing various rituals and ceremonies.
4. **Dar hla:** These are tunes meant for musical instruments, so *dar hla* literally means gong song and has three musical notes.
5. **Puipun hla:** These are popular songs composed for festive occasions and are used for community song and dance. This category of song has several types such as *chai hla*, *chawngchen zai*, *salu lam zai* and *tlanglam zai*.
6. **Lengzem zai:** These are love songs that have no distinctive form but are generally named after the theme.
7. **Songs named after tribes:** Some of the Mizo songs are named after a particular sub-tribe such as *Sailo zai*, *Saivate zai*, and so on.



Sekikhuang



Darkhuang



Darbu

8. **Songs named after a village:** A few songs are named after a village such as *Lumtui zai* (songs of Lumtui village), *Darlung zai*, *Dawn zai* and *Tlangkhaw zai* etc.
9. **Songs named after modulation of the voice:** A few songs are named after modulation of the voice or sounds such as *Kawrnu zai*, *Zai nem*, *Vai zawi zai* and *Puma zai*. To illustrate, *kawrnu* is a cicada species whose sound is gentle and low. So the tune of *Kawrnu zai* would resemble the sound of the *kawrnu*.
10. **Songs named after individuals:** A great number of Mizo folk songs are named after individuals. Most are the original composers of the particular tune while some are named after a beautiful maiden or a hero.

### Musical Instruments:

From times immemorial, the Mizo have been using different musical instruments. Even though we cannot date their exact origin, "the Mizo of Kabaw valley during late 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. had developed their music as nearly as they have done today." (B.Lalthangliana, *History*: 71) The early traditional Mizo musical instruments are simple and crude but they served their purpose. They can broadly be divided into three categories:

#### I. Percussion Instruments:

**Khuang:** Most of the musical instruments used at the time of festivals and dances are percussion instruments like the *khuang*, *dar*, *bengbung*, *seki* and *talhkuang*. The *khuang* or Mizo drum occupies a significant place in Mizo society. It is made from a hollowed out tree and wrapped on both sides with animal skin. The big sized one is *khuangpui* or big drum, the medium one is called *khuanglai* and the small sized called *khuangte*. If it is long in shape, it is called *kawlkhuang*. Lianhmingthanga believes that the Mizo had inherited the drum from the Chinese through cultural diffusion and this process might have been passed on through the Burmese with whom the Mizo had close cultural contact from the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the Pagan period at the close of the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

The use of *khuang* is found in one of the oldest Mizo myths called '*Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi*' in which *Thlanrawkpa*, the Guardian of man and animals, hosted a grand feast for all living creatures. The *khuang* is the only traditional Mizo musical instrument that has continued to be popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditionally it had no important role in religious functions but today the use of drum is indispensable at every church service.



Khuanglian

**Dar (gong)** is another popular musical instrument that comes in various sizes made of brass, such as *darkhuang*, *darbu* and *darmang*. *Darkhuang* is the biggest of the gong instruments, is costly and a very treasured possession. The tale of Chawngvungi and Sawngkhara tells of how Chawngvungi's parents demanded a famous gong that belonged to the groom's family and which was reluctantly surrendered by them.

**Darbu** is a set of three brass-gongs of different sizes and is usually played by three experts, but some do so individually by tying one gong on either side of the body with a rope and holding the third

by the left hand. The *darbu* produces three distinct, rhythmic notes and is mainly used for *Khuallam* and other traditional group dances.

There are many songs collectively called *Dar hla* (songs on gong) to be played by *darbu*. One of the famous *Dar hla* is connected to the legend of Liandova and his brother who were orphaned at a young age. One day, the village hunting party killed a gigantic python and having taken the choicest parts of its meat, they gave the entrails and stomach to the two boys. But unknown to the others, they became rich overnight because of the treasures that the python had swallowed which included a great number of necklaces and a beautiful set of *darbu*, which they hid away.

*Darmang* is the smallest type of gong. It has no effect without other gongs or instruments, but is used for timing traditional dances.

*Bengbung* is an indigenous instrument similar to the xylophone, the Vietnamese *T'run*g and the Thai *Ratna Ek*. It's a series of flat wooden bars, producing three musical notes. Later more tubes and bars have been added to produce more musical notes. *Bengbung* was usually played by girls.

*Talhkuang* is almost the same as *Bengbung* but larger. It is made of three wooden pieces which are curved out with varying depths for producing different notes. It is played with a wooden hammer. *Talhkuang* used to be played at *Lungdawh*, the great platform at the village entrance, and when a chief erects memorial stones.

*Seki* is the horn of the domestic *mithun* which when beaten against each other is meant to lead or keep timing for other musical instruments like *darbu* etc. It was commonly used at group dances.

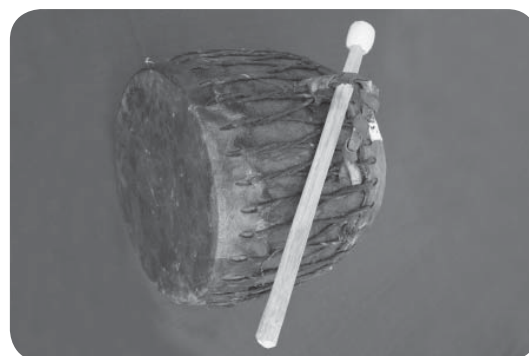
**II. Wind Instruments:** The Mizo has five varieties of wind instruments such as *rawchhem*, *tumphit*, *mautawtawrawot*, *phenglawng* and *buhchangkuang*.

*Rawchhem* is similar to the Scottish Bagpipe. Nine small bamboo pipes or hollow reeds of different sizes and lengths are inserted to a dried gourd. One pipe serves as a mouthpiece while the rest produce different notes controlled by the player with his fingers.

*Tumphit* is made of three small bamboos of different size and length and are tied in a row with canes or strings. The upper ends are cut open at different lengths to produce different notes. *Tumphit* was considered indispensable for *Rallulam* and *Chawng* festival.

*Tawtawrawot* is a bamboo trumpet made of different sizes of bamboo tubes inserted and joined together according to size with the last tube being as small as the size of a forefinger from where the trumpet is blown. A dry gourd with the bottom cut off is joined to the bigger end of the bamboo tube. The whole length can be more than five feet.

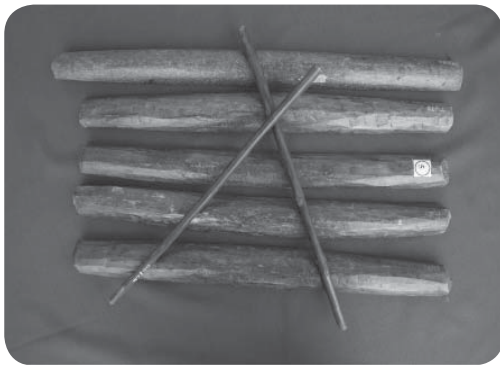
*Phenglawng* is the Mizo flute made of bamboo which originally had three holes for three notes. It is probably of very early origin as it earns mention in an old Mizo folktale about a little monkey who would happily play on his *phenglawng*. This roused the envy



Khuangte



Rawchhem



Bengbung



Talhkhuang

of Runginu, a female partridge who bluffed the monkey into taking a nap. As soon as he slept, Runginu seized the *phenglawng* but the monkey woke up and caught her tail. She flew off with the flute but without her tail. This, we are told, is why the partridge has a bobbed tail today.

*Buhchangkuang* is a simple flute made of reed or paddy stalk and played by young girls.

**III. Stringed Instruments:** The Mizo has three varieties of stringed instruments such as *tringtrang*, *lemlawi* and *tuium dar*.

*Tringtrang* is Mizo guitar with one string. A piece of bamboo shaft is fixed to a hollow gourd to which is tied a string made of *thangtung*, the fibre of the Malay sago palm. The gourd is cut open and covered with the dry bladder of an animal. *Tringtrang zai* referred to folk songs named after the instrument, but its popularity was not widespread.

*Lemlawi* was an indigenous instrument made of a small piece of bamboo with a string tied at both ends and played with the help of the hand and mouth. The sound produced is controlled by the mouth.

*Tuium dar* is a simple instrument again made of bamboo with three strings which produce three different notes, the cane-like strings carved from the outer covering of the bamboo. The strings are raised by the insertion of two pieces of bamboo at both ends and is played like a guitar.

The Mizo society has often been called a singing tribe. B.Thanmawia states that "Music to the Mizo is as indispensable as air is to man and beasts" (12). They sing on all occasions, eg. during condolence of a bereaved family, songs appropriate for the occasion will be sung throughout the long wake at night and the next day. It is the same at a marriage party, and they will sing or hum tunes while at work, or even while walking.

An old tale tells of the Kawilam clan who celebrated *Chapchar Kut* festival with such merriment that people forgot to work for nine months! It was only when a parrot dropped a straw in their midst did they realize that their granaries were empty and they had to migrate to other villages!

The traditional Mizo tunes are soft and gentle and can be sung for long periods without tiring the singers. Musical instruments are not always needed and enthusiastic singing can take place to the accompaniment of clapping hands.

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# Mizo Folk Songstresses



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**M**izo folk songs may be regarded as one of the most popular forms of their folk orature. The folk songs are lyrical in nature, short in length, musical, and easily understood. It reflects the social heritage, milieu and culture of the Mizo of a particular period. The entire Mizo culture, as it were, can be said to be reflected in them.

Several folk songs have been named after the women composers themselves. Some of them, though composed by others, continued to be named after them. The Mizo folk songstresses were endowed with a remarkable variety of expressions which reflected in their compositions. Some of the notable Mizo folk songstresses are described below.

**Pi Hmuaki** is claimed to be the first known songstress of the Mizo. Her name can be traced back to 1600-1650 AD when the tribe settled between the Run and Tiau rivers. Some of her songs disclose her profound love of her village Ngente, a few miles away from Tiau River:

*Kan Ngente Khua khaw nun nuama kha  
Thla ka fam hma'n ka nghilh rua lo ve*  
(Our Ngente village a place of joy,  
I will not forget thee till I die)

*Kan Ngente khaw chhuahtlang dai rawnah,  
Lungrual taka tuan lai ngai iang e*  
(I yearn for our contented lives together,  
in the happy valley of our Ngente village)

Her songs are spontaneous and they contain no rigid themes for she is versatile, and flexible. It is said that she was a born songstress as she could compose musical verses at any moment without restraint. Her verses contain two lines; they are simple, natural and musical.

**Darpawngi** is another noteworthy composer of folk songs. Her songs can be categorized according to their tunes and themes into three groups: *Thlek zai* (songs of head turn), *Lusun zai* (songs of mourning), and *Thinrim zai* (songs of anger). Most of her songs are lamentations for the death of her son, and her rebellion against the repressive village chief. Her songs are arranged in a three-lined verse form except for *thinrim zai*. *Thinrim zai* has four lines in each verse and the second line is an echo of the first line. She courageously protested against the injustice of authority through her songs.

**Laltheri** is another folk songstress who through her songs, contributed significantly to the social protest against the growing class discrimination facilitated by the repressive village chief. She brought about a change in the social status of the Mizo women through her songs. She was the daughter of a powerful chief, Lalsavunga but broke tradition by falling in love with Chalthanga, a commoner, who was beheaded at the behest of her angry brothers. Laltheri protested against the murder by refusing to wear clothes and abstaining from food. When asked to wear clothes, she replied in a song:

*Ka nemte puan ka chawi lovang ka nu,  
Ka di thandang zalna mah, chhimhlei tualdaihah.*  
(Oh mother, I will not have my clothes on,  
even my beloved lies in the cold grave)

Her songs clearly declare the depth of her feelings. Her powerful grieving finally touched the hearts of her proud Sailo brothers. And the chief Vanhnuailiana, her brother, agreed that such cruel incidents would not take place in future.

**Lianchhiari** is another noteworthy Mizo folk songstress. As the daughter of a chief, the first part of her composition reflects her pride in the prominence of her family:

*Ka tawng a uang em ni !  
Tlangin lo ngai rawh u,  
Zova siahthing ril khi;  
A din chhung keimahn*

(Think not of me boasting too much, our courtyard is fully decorated with the skull of wild animals. Our family will be conspicuous so long as these decorations stand firm)

Love is the main theme of the majority of her songs. Her songs are four-lined verses while other songstresses mainly composed in two or three-lined verse form. She weeps for her lover Chawngfianga, who is a commoner, and tells of their tragic love story through song narrative. Her songs are marked by sentimental and emotional tones.

In the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Mizo were blessed with a gifted songstress named **Saikuti**. Unlike some of the previous songstresses, she did not compose songs solely for personal reasons. Her songs were composed in a two-lined form except for

her songs in Awithangpa's tune which contained three lines. Her versatility with any theme and the use of simple language made her songs immensely popular with the people. We can see her closeness to nature from her use of imagery and metaphors drawn freely from it. In her song, the eagle, the horn bill and the dove are often used to symbolize a lonely lover:

*Muwanlainn van zawlah di a au,*

*Keipawh ka di mual a liam e ralah ka au ve.*

(The lonely eagle up on high calls for its mate, likewise, I too call for my love that has gone afar)

Among the variety of themes, her songs of great warriors are worth mentioning. She not only sings on the subject of their brave deeds but also challenges and encourages the young men to be courageous.

To sum up, the contribution of Mizo folk songstresses on the development and evolution of the genre of Mizo songs up to the present day has been powerful and meaningful.

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## Reiek Tlang and its Lores

LALSANGZUALA

Department of Mizo, Mizoram University

Translated by MARGARET CH.ZAMA

**R**ieik Tlang, or Reiek Hill is situated ten miles west of Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, and in between them flows the State's longest river known as Tlawng Lui. Reiek Tlang itself is just a little more than 4000 ft. in height. When viewed from the east it appears to stretch out into a wide expanse while towards the south-west it is banded by high rocky ledges and steep precipices. Towards the north of the peak of Reiek Tlang the village of Reiek is situated. Some distance below it, sits the village of Ailawng.

Just below the peak of Reiek Tlang is a vast open track of grassland, but the peak and the rest of the ledges are all exposed layered rocks. An old famous Mizo myth called *Van Indona* or War of the Heavens is believed to have taken place here on this very hill, and the chief participants belonged to this place as well.

The queen of the demon spirits of Reiek Tlang was Khawluahlali and she had a beautiful daughter named Ngaiteii. She ruled well and all the demon spirits of the hill were happy and lived in harmony until trouble finally arrived in the form of the demon spirit of the Tlawng river who decided to flow southwards through the passage between the two hills of Reiek and Lungdar. However, the demon queen Khawluahlali

would not hear of it. The very idea of the river dashing along the banks of her territory where her subjects lived was something she could not tolerate. Because the demons of the hills were considered superior to the river demons, the Tlawng river demon had to concede defeat. Disgruntled and greatly offended, he decided to show his anger by taking a circular turn and coursing back. This spot is still known as 'Tlawng nuar' or 'Tlawng in a temper' and lies right beneath the great height of the protruding rock that juts out of the peak of Reiek Tlang.

This victory was considered a great achievement by the demon spirits of Reiek Tlang and they were confident that this was the end of their troubles. While they were happily preoccupied dancing and celebrating, the *Chawngchen*,<sup>1</sup> the demon spirits of the famous Chhawrpial Tlang, lying towards the west of Reiek Tlang, arrived to raid and make war with them. Busy with their celebrations, the Reiek demons were unaware of the great threat posed to them. Seeing this, the demons of Chhawrpial planned to kill them all by crushing them from a great height with the weight of the great protruding rock of Reiek Tlang. With the aid of great wedges, they started to hammer at this great projection and caused cracks to appear. Realizing the

impending doom of the Reiek demons, the demons of Khuangkhai Tlang, though aware of their inability to join the actual war due to their small number, revealed to the Reiek demons the conspiracy of the Chhawrpial demons to destroy them and take as slaves any who remained alive.

On being thus informed, the demons of Reiek left their Chawngchen celebration and immediately transformed themselves into *sialsir* or falcons, flying out in great numbers. Thus began the great battle that took place in the air high above the 'Tlawng nuar'. Blood and feathers scattered and flew about as they battled on as birds high up in the air, and many plummeted to earth without heads, and some without their wings. The fierce battle ended with the defeat of the aggressors and it is said that those who finally managed to return to Chhawrpial Tlang were very few in number.

This great battle caused many lives to be lost and their blood darkened the waters of the 'Tlawng nuar' below. Though victory was theirs, their happiness was marred by the death of the demon queen's beautiful daughter Ngaiteii, who died in the battle. The queen went into deep mourning for her daughter and would watch the sunset sitting upon the great rock projection at the peak of Reiek Tlang, her thoughts filled with nostalgia and sad memories. It is said that the edge of the rock projection bears the dented imprint of her bottom as well as that of the cotton yarn balls that she wound while sitting on the edge for long hours. Besides this, one can also see the fissures and cracks on the great rock caused by the wedges of the Chhawrpial demons in their efforts to dislodge and roll it down.

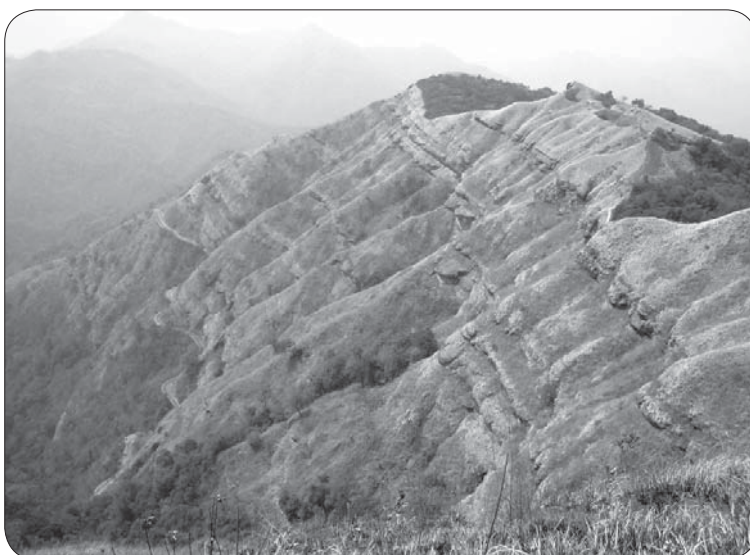
It is remarkable that this same demon queen figures in several other Mizo myths, such as the war with the demon spirit Sahmula of the famed Mawmrang Tlang of the north, and another with the demon spirits of Inbuk tlang, now situated in Myanmar.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The name of a sacrifice involving a 3-day celebration of feast and dancing given by an individual or a family of high status in the village community, which was the first of a series of sacrifices and feasts to ensure entrance to the Mizo Paradise known as Pialral.



Reiek



Reiek hr

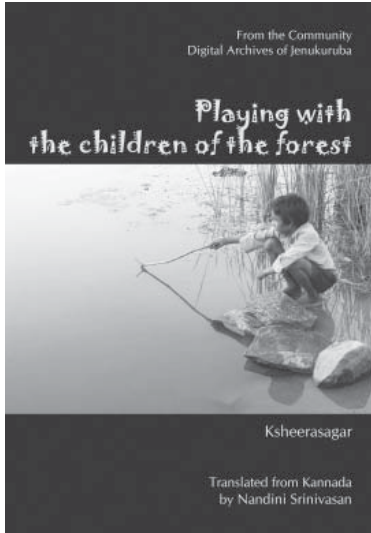


Reiektlang

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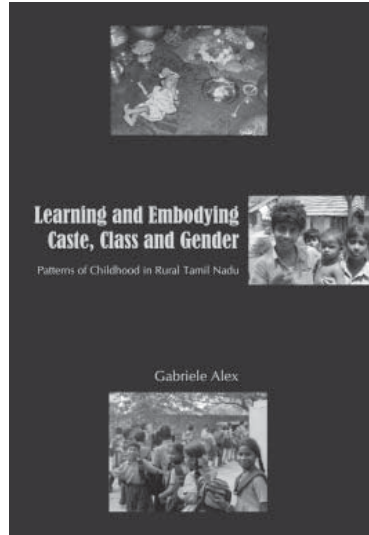


Playing with the children of the forest by Ksheerasagar

Beetles become live pin-wheels, mushrooms turn into bombs and lion ants tell directions in this intimate and delightful glimpse of the life of Jenukuruba children on the fringes of forests near HD Kote, Karnataka. Ksheerasagar's fieldwork observations record the lives of this indigenous community, inter-woven with their natural environment, with candour and empathy. Amidst a constant struggle for food, water and land, the endlessly inventive children find many ways to play with the birds, beetles and plants of the forest they have been displaced from. This book paints a picture darkened with social injustice with a tender affection for the children it portrays.

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) brings out this English translation of Ksheerasagar's Kannada novel "Kaadina Makkala Odanaatadalli" to interest the outside world in the Community Digital Archive for the Jenukuruba people of HD Kote.

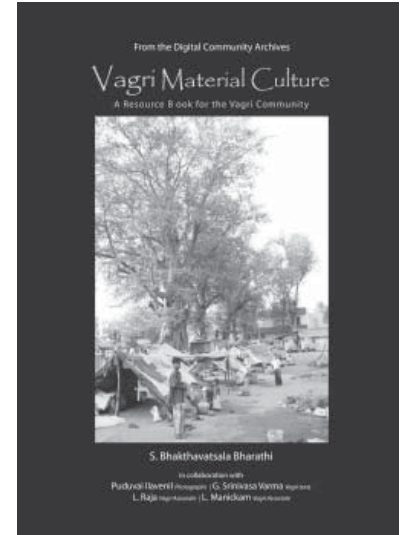
Ksheerasagar who is a part of the Jenukuruba Digital Archives, run by NFSC, with a grant from Tata Education Trust, has worked extensively with the Jenukurubas of Mysore and has studied Karnataka land reforms and birds and butterflies.



Learning and Embodying Caste, Class and Gender: Patterns of Childhood in Rural Tamil Nadu by Gabriele Alex

This book is based on ethnographic research carried out mainly among children and youths of different status groups in a rural low caste village in the Tañcāvūr district in Tamil Nadu, South India. It takes a new approach by investigating the phase of pre-adulthood under the heading of the classical anthropological themes, but also by making children informants and contrasting their viewpoints to those of their parents and grandparents generation. It adds a new perspective on the current debates on children and childhood in South Asia by providing an ethnographic study. Emphasising the fact that, depending on factors such as caste and class, gender and ethnicity there are many childhoods, these specific ethnographic insights deconstruct ideas of a pan Indian model of childhood.

Gabriele Alex is a Senior Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Department of Socio-Cultural Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. She is currently working on medical diversity in Tamil Nadu, South India.



Vagri Material Culture—  
A Resource book for the  
Vagri Community  
by S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi

As a part of the ongoing community digital archiving process, we documented Vagri material culture intensively across a wide region, covering eight districts in Tamilnadu. Material culture is the generic term that includes all kinds of tangible things used by the Vagri. Their material culture forms an excellent base for learning the language and understanding the cultural concepts (lit.: Vagri heathenism). Further, a realm of communication and symbolism through tangible artifacts is achieved in every sensory existence. Vagri material culture, though the inventory is rather small, is largely functional, utilitarian, adaptable, innovative and flexible. Vagri material culture adheres to modernity through acculturation, assimilation, absorption and adoption of many modern inputs.

S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, studied Social Anthropology at Master's level and received PhD from Mysore University. He has been specialising on the cultures of south Indian societies. He has created this resource book in collaboration with Pudukkottai Ilavenil (Photographs), G. Srinivasa Varma (Vagri Texts), L. Raja (Vagri Associate), L. Manickam (Vagri Associate).