CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION:

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE MIZOS

AMERICAN INDIANS:

Though American Indians are known by various names like Native Americans, Amerinds, First Nations and American Indians, the term American Indian will be used in this study as it is the general term commonly used in the United States. The term “Indian” may also be used for brevity’s sake but the term must not be mistaken for “the people of India”.

A. Hyatt Verril (1871-1954) wrote, “The belief that the aborigines were natives of India was the first of the white men’s erroneous ideas. The error has never been corrected, and many of the present day ideas of the only real Americans are fully as erroneous as the name bestowed upon them by Columbus.”¹ Verril feels that this error made by Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) in mistaking the Natives of America as Indians was a forecast of much erroneous ideas that were to follow. When Columbus landed at the Caribbean
island of Hispaniola in 1492, he believed he had reached the Indian shores, as a result of which he called the people who lived there as Indians. Though a mistake, the name stuck and it is still used to refer to the native people of North, Central and South America.

Opinions vary on the exact dates when the American Indians must have migrated into America. Brenda C. Calloway says that the remote ancestors of the American Indians from Asia known as Paleo-Indians or also as the Ancient Ones crossed into North America from Siberia during the Wisconsin Ice Age sometime between 25,000 B.C to 8,000 B. C. in pursuit of game. Some archaeologists believe that they may have entered North America 10,000 or perhaps 20,000 years ago. They used a bridge, the land or ice bridge known as Beringia that the geological forces had created between western North America and North Eastern Asia. As they were food gatherers and hunters, they must have been following game along the Siberian coast and then across the land bridge into another continent. These peoples lived in every part of the Western Hemisphere – from the Arctic region of North America to the cold windy tip of South America.

There have been many speculations on the origins of the Indians but now it is almost universally accepted that they came originally from Asia. Perhaps the most popular theory was the belief that the Indians were the descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel. Several explorers, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, claimed to have collected evidence that some of the Native American tribes might have descended from the
Ten Lost Tribes. *The Book of Mormon*, one of the religious texts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), claims that early residents of the Americas were actually descendents from the tribe of Joseph and particularly through Manasseh. Although Washburn does not dispute the Asian connection of the Native Americans, he is of the idea that they might have stemmed from the ancestors of the marginal Mongoloid populations of southeast and west Central Asia rather than from those of the modern stocks of Mongolia, China and Japan.\(^5\)

The American Indians have their own theories of origin in their ancient myths.

In North America, native tribes spoke more than three hundred different languages.\(^6\) Estimates of the number of American Indians living in what is now the United States of America at the onset of European colonization range from two to eighteen million.\(^7\) But the European colonization of the Americas nearly obliterated the populations and cultures of the American Indians. Today no one knows how many tribes there were or their names at the time of the first European colonization, for many tribes have died out, or have been exterminated by warfare with the white men or with other tribes, while many more have joined with other tribes and have completely lost their original identity and even their languages.\(^8\) For the next three centuries after Columbus’ arrival in America, the Native population decreased by ninety per cent. The Indian people were wiped out by waves of epidemics to which they had no resistance. Smallpox, cholera, malaria, measles, swine influenza, and venereal diseases were introduced accidentally- and sometimes by design. But there are still about two hundred tribes, with the majority of their members of pure Indian blood, still living within
the boundaries of the United States. They are now variously known as Native Americans, American Indians, Indians, Amerindians, Amerinds or Indigenous, Aboriginal or Original Indians. To describe or even to mention all of them would require volumes. Ethnologists divide the Indians into sixteen groups, based mainly on the original areas inhabited by the tribes. Only three of the major Indian tribes of North America with more or less similar characteristics of folk traditions will be taken up for the present study.

They are- the Navajo of the Southwest, the Cherokee of the Southeast and the Sioux of the Great Plains:

**Navajo: Dine’**

The largest Indian tribe in the United States today is the Navajo, numbering about 90,000 (Kluckhohn 23). The Navajo migrated to the Americas southwest from points further north somewhere between A.D 1000-1300. 9 The Navajo Nation covers portions of four states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado. They, along with their blood brothers, the Apaches, call themselves Dine, meaning “the people”. Their tales qualify this as Earth People, for in their long poetic myth, they climbed to the earth’s flat disk from her dark, underground womb. Navajo is the name they were called by the Zunis and later by the people of Spain, Mexico and the United States. Living among the rocky canyons and desert plateaus of New Mexico and Arizona, they are famous shepherds and horsemen. The Navajos are some of the greatest learners and adapters among American Indians. They have proved that a red man is not a born conservative,
unwilling to change. The Navajo learned farming and weaving from the Pueblo people and later acquired livestock from the Spanish and developed silver-working skill from their contact with the Mexicans.

Their language has been identified as Athapascan, which might suggest that they came from the great Athapascan area, which stretches through western Canada and central Alaska. The Navajo are a matrilineal society. The Navajo practice a queer custom of avoiding the mother-in-law. Each Navajo belongs to the clan of his mother, though the father’s clansmen are also considered to be relatives. The relatives are very important to a Navajo but “relatives” are not limited along strictly biological lines. The members of one’s own clan are designated as ‘sisters’, ‘brothers’ or ‘fathers’. In the past, the clan was an important agency of social control. All clansmen were responsible for the crimes and debts of other members of their clan. Hence it was in their own interest to prevent murder, rape and theft on the part of the clan relatives (Kluckhohn 111). The Mizos, especially the Hmars, one of the Mizo tribes have pretty much the same custom. They have clan groups called pahnam but as theirs is a patriarchal society, the father’s clan is considered as one’s clan. These clan members are very important and they are considered as one’s relatives though they may not have biological ties. And like the Navajo, all the clansmen were responsible for each other.

The Navajo oral myths tell that they have come out of the earth from the underworld in Old Navajoland of New Mexico. They live in hogans, which
consist of one room which is not more than twenty-five feet in diameter but order is maintained by specific arrangements of things within. Their ancient myths tell of how the first Hogan was built by the Holy People; how things must be kept in their proper positions in the Hogan; why the door must always face the rising sun and why the dead bodies must be removed through a hole in the Hogan wall to the north, which is believed to be the direction of evil. North is the direction of evil perhaps because that is the direction of the Ute home. The word ‘enemy’ to a Navajo stands for the Ute (Underhill 83). In the Navajo legend, the Navajo culture hero Reared-within-the-Mountain was taken prisoner by the Ute. The Navajo myths give definite form to many Navajo notion of things. They are also the final warrant of authority for carrying out many acts and rituals in prescribed ways. All ceremonial rites are accompanied by myths which tell of the origin of the rite and how it should be carried out.

**Cherokee: Tsalagi**

Like the Navajo, the Cherokees are a matrilineal society. All children belong to the mother, and clan lineage is passed through the mother, the mother of the bride; the bride and the bride’s brother are all of the same clan. When Europeans first arrived in the North American continent, the Cherokees lived in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of what is now the United States. Grace Steele Woodward (1899-1987) calls them “the warlords of the Southern Appalachian Highlands” (*The Cherokees* 3). The name Cherokee may have developed from the Choctaw word meaning “people of the cave country.” It may
also have come from the Creek word "Chelokee" which means "people of a
different speech." Although the Cherokee language is Iroquoian, it differs
significantly from the other Iroquoian languages. The Cherokee originally called
themselves the Aniyunwiya - meaning ‘real human beings’. With no written
history, the origin of the Cherokee is a mystery even to themselves. But traditions
assert that the Great Spirit ‘Asga-Ya-galun-lati’ had given them the vast
mountainous region of the Southern Alleghenies in what is today southwest
Virginia, western North and South Carolina, eastern Tennessee, northern
Georgia, and the northeastern hip of Alabama. This legend withstood the test of
time as can be seen in the Cherokees’ petition in the Supreme Court of the United
States in January, 1830:

That the Cherokees were the occupants and owners of the territory
in which they now reside before the first approach of the white
men of Europe to the western continent; ‘deriving their title from
the Great Spirit [Asga-Ya-Galun-lati] who is the father of the
human family, and to whom the whole earth belongs.’ Composing
the Cherokee Nation, they and their ancestors have been and are
the sole and exclusive masters of this territory, governed by their
own laws, usages, and customs.  

However, the Delaware’s Walum Olum tells of the Cherokees as having
been driven southward beyond the Ohio River by the Delawares, from where they
might have proceeded to the Southern Alleghenies. However improbable as it
may sound, there is also a theory given by an 18th century trader and historian who had lived with the Cherokees for forty years, James Adair (1709-1783) that advances that the Cherokees were one of the ten lost tribes of Israel.

By the time the Europeans arrived, the Cherokee were a settled agricultural people. They relied heavily on what was called the "three sisters"—corn, beans and squash. Their diet was supplemented through the gathering of wild plants and hunting.

The Cherokee alphabet was said to have been developed by Sequoyah (1773-1843), the only person in human history to create a written language single-handedly. He developed a system of eighty-six standard symbols that represent syllables in the Cherokee language. The giant redwoods, the Sequoia trees of California, have been named after him. While many other Native languages have died, the Cherokee language managed to survive due to its writing system and helped preserve their historical records. However, as an instance to show that Native history is not always consonant with mainstream American history, in *Tell Them They Lie: The Sequoyah Myth*, a book published in 1971 by a Cherokee descendent of Sequoyah, Traveller Bird, the author insists that all the histories of Sequoyah’s life and achievements published so far are a “myth” and he maintains that Sequoyah was not the inventor of Cherokee writing. Rather, Bird writes, “this symbol system had been used …for nine summers before European invasion on Gvanahani” (19).
Through the years of broken promises and one broken treaty after another, the Cherokee were forced to move as more and more of their land was taken. The Cherokee had even fought for their rights in the court system. Although they won their case before the Supreme Court to save their lands, President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the court's decision and managed to pass the Indian Removal Act. Consequently the Cherokee and all they owned became fair game. When the deadline for removal arrived, 7,000 soldiers moved into the Cherokee homeland. The reward for "taking the white man's road" was to be driven from their homes at gunpoint. Thus began what became known as the "Trail of Tears."

The “Trail of Tears” was the name given to the forceful relocation of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee-Creek, and Seminole from their homelands in the southeastern states of United States of America to the Indian Territory in present day Oklahoma in the Western United States. In 1831, the Choctaw were the first to be removed followed by the Seminole in 1832, the Creek in 1834, then the Chickasaw in 1837, and finally the Cherokee in the winter of 1838.

This event which led to the deaths of approximately four thousand Cherokees is called Nu na da ul tsun yi—“the Place Where They Cried” in the Cherokee language. The Cherokee began the thousand-mile westward march with scant clothing and most on foot without shoes or moccasins. The Cherokee were given used blankets from a hospital in Tennessee where an epidemic of small pox
had broken out. Many of these people died of disease, cold and starvation en route to their destinations.

The Cherokee Trail of Tears resulted from the enforcement of the Treaty of New Echota, an agreement signed under the provisions of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which exchanged Native American land in the East for lands west of the Mississippi River, but which was never accepted by the majority of the Cherokee people.

**Sioux: Očhéthi Šakowiniŋ:**

The word ‘Sioux’ has origins that come from outside the Siouan language: it is a corruption of an Ojibwa word meaning ‘enemy’. They speak of themselves as Dakota, meaning “leagued” or “allied” and is also used as an adjective meaning “friendly” (Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* 1). Stephen Return Riggs (1812-1883) states that they also refer to themselves as Očhéthi Šakowiniŋ meaning “Seven Council fires”. The Sioux are a confederation of North American Plains peoples speaking the Siouan language. The three main divisions of the Sioux are known as Dakota (Santee), Nakota (Yankton) and Lakota (Teton). Historically, the Eastern Sioux (Dakota) lived in the Lake Superior area hunting, gathering and fishing in a semi-sedentary woodlands economy. Hostilities with the Ojibwas gradually pushed them into Minnesota and the Nakota and Lakota Sioux continued to migrate west, where they acquired horses and created an economy based upon the buffalo. Occupying a large area lying between the Missouri River and Bighorn Mountains and stretching up into
Canada, they were buffalo hunters who lived in *tipis* made of buffalo hides. But as the buffalo became scarce due to the increased hunting by the Indians and the white hunters who found a ready market in the East, one room log cabins took the place of *tipis*. The men hunted while the women gathered food.

Of all the nations affected by the endless invasions of European and Euro-American settlers, the Siouan Nations resisted most persistently and effectively. They began negotiating treaties with the U.S government in the early 1800s. The Minnesota Uprising (1862) occurred when the Santee Dakotas, goaded beyond endurance by the cheating government agents, traders and settlers who robbed them of their lands, killed more than 350 whites under the leadership of Little Crow in a desperate attempt to reclaim their land. As a result, 38 Indians were publicly hanged in a mass execution in Mankato and the Santee were forced westward.

**Social and Cultural Life:**

A remarkable fact about the American Indians was their well set-up social order. Indian peoples were organized into societies called tribes or nations. Some nations had treaties with each other that made it possible for them to cooperate in working out boundaries of their lands and defending themselves against outsiders. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) in his essay “Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America” (*Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 1995) emphasizes the civility and the decency of these traditional
people whom we term as savages, “Savages we call them because their manners differ from ours, which we think is the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs.” He has also given an account on how the Indians governed themselves without any prisons and with no officers to inflict punishment. The Indian child’s upbringing may have an important role to play in the Indian’s lack of the punishing conscience demanded by the European society. The Indian parent never used any whip, punishment or harsh words on their children to enforce commands or compel obedience. Social cooperation was achieved by a calculating avoidance of attitudes and actions which might antagonize his associates. Contrary to the commonly held notion, the American Indian judicial systems had great variety and complexity. That the systems were not written down was irrelevant. The Indian by training and custom knew what was expected of him, just as he could remember— better than the Europeans— the conditions of the treaties he signed with the white man. They had community meeting places where they held public councils with great decency where women were allowed to participate. The role of the women is to take exact notice of what passes, imprint it in their memories, for ‘they had no writing’, and communicate it to their children. They are the records of the council and they preserve traditions.

Christopher Columbus marveled at their hospitality and mild nature. “I swear to your majesties” said Columbus, writing to Ferdinand and Isabella, “that there is not a better people in the world than these; more affectionate or mild. They love their neighbors as themselves; their language is the sweetest, the
softest and the most cheerful, for they always speak smilingly.” So overwhelmed was Columbus by the Taino Indians’ generosity that he even thought he had heard European nightingales singing in the warm Caribbean autumn.

The Indians reckoned it uncivil to enter a village abruptly without giving notice of their approach. Therefore, as soon as they arrive within hearing, they stop and hollow, remaining there till invited to enter. Two old men usually come out to them, and lead them in. There is in every village a vacant dwelling, called the Stranger’s House. A stranger is treated with much courtesy and kindness. He is given food and shelter, and nothing is exacted for the entertainment. It was this hospitality and kindness towards strangers that led them to welcome the first settlers and share with them everything they had, which unfortunately resulted in their being ousted from their own land. An excerpt of the conversation between General Knox and an Indian chief at the close of the Revolutionary War may be quoted in this context:

‘What makes you so melancholy?’ said the General. ‘I’ll tell you brother,’ said the aged chief, ‘I have been looking at your beautiful city- the great water full of ships- the fine country, and see how prosperous you all are. But then, I could not help thinking, that this fine country was ours. Our ancestors lived here. They enjoyed it as their own in peace. It was a gift of the Great Spirit to them and their children. At last, white men came in a great canoe. They
only asked to let them tie it to a tree, lest the water should carry it away. We consented. They then said some of their people were sick, and they asked permission to land them, put them under the shade of the trees. The ice then came and they could not go away. They then begged a piece of land to build wigwams for the winter. We granted it to them. They then asked for corn to keep them from starving. We furnished it out of our own scanty supply. They promised to go away when the ice melted. When this happened, they, instead of going pointed to the big guns round the wigwams and said, “We shall stay here.” Afterwards came more: …have driven us back, from time to time, to the wilderness, far from the water, the fish and the oysters. They have scared away our game - my people are wasting away. We live in the want of all things, while you are enjoying abundance in our fine and beautiful country. This makes me sorry, brother, and I can’t help it.19

Many of the American Indian societies are matrilineal. This is why the indigenous communities have often been misperceived by white men whose observations sometimes revealed more about their own cultural biases than about the Native Americans because they were held up to the patriarchal model. The women worked hard, but labor is not necessarily servitude; most were partners in the business of survival. Within the matrilineal Iroquoian nations, women controlled food distribution which meant that they wielded considerable political and economic power.20
The Navajos and their blood brothers, Apaches count their descent through women. They have origin myths and legends that tell how they climbed the earth’s flat disk from her dark, underground womb, and the principal Navajo divinity is Changing Woman. A Navajo woman Emmi Whitehorse said, “The female owned everything, the woman ran everything. If a woman was unhappy with her husband, she just picked up all his stuff and put it outside the door of the Hogan, and that was it. He couldn’t contest it. He had to go.” The man joined his wife’s family basically to ensure the family’s survival. But once the white missionaries came, things changed. They said that men were supposed to run everything.21

Hunting and food gathering was the major source of food for the Indians. The Indian men, when young are hunters and warriors; when old, counselors. The women till the ground, dress the food, nurse and bring up the children and preserve and hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions.

Among the sedentary or semi-sedentary tribes, house-building belonged usually to the men, although the women sometimes assisted. On the plains the entire making and keeping of the \textit{tipi} were appointed to the women. In many tribes the man cut, sewed, and decorated his own buckskin suit, and in some of the Pueblo villages the men were the basket-weavers.
The erroneous opinion that the Indian man was an idler, and that the Indian woman was a drudge and a slave, is founded on a misconception of the native division of labor, under which it was the man’s business to defend the home and to provide food by hunting and fishing, assuming all the risks and hardships of battle and the wilderness, while the woman attended to the domestic duties including the collecting of wood and water, and, with the nomad tribes, the setting up of *tipis*. As most American Indian societies were hunting-gathering societies, hunting was an occupation and not a recreational activity as the white settlers understand. So settlers, perceiving hunting and fishing as recreation, called the Indian men lazy as their wives labored in the fields. And since they saw the Indians as not ‘using’ the land, they felt justified in simply taking them.

The women worked in groups, with songs and gossip while the children played about. The woman was the mistress in all that chiefly concerned the home. The houses were the women’s properties. There are several Native American stories embodying images of women. One Lakota story speaks of how a holy woman brought the sacred pipe to the people and taught them how to live in harmony. In the Iroquoian life, women owned the property and took the major decisions of life. The principal male figure in an Iroquoian child’s life was not the father but the mother’s brother, and the image of mother-dominated families is established strongly in the creation legend, which tells of how Sky Woman created the sun, the moon and the stars, how human beings originated from her and how land was formed on the back of a turtle with the help of animals.
Among most of the tribes east of the Mississippi, among the Pueblos, Navajos, and others of the South-West, and among the Tlingit and Haida of the North-West coast, society was based upon the clan system, under which the tribe was divided into a number of large family groups, the members of which were considered as closely related and prohibited from intermarrying. The children usually followed the clan of the mother. The clans were usually, but not always, named after animals, and each clan paid special reverence to its tutelary animal. Thus the Cherokee had seven clans, Wolf, Deer, Bird, Paint, and three others with names not readily translated. A Wolf man could not marry a Wolf woman, but might marry a Deer woman, or one of any of the other clans, and his children were of the Deer clan or other clan accordingly. In some tribes the name of the individual indicated the clan, as "Round Foot" in the wolf clan and "Crawler" in the Turtle clan.

Naturally careless of the future, the Indian gave himself up to pleasure when not under immediate necessity or danger, and his leisure time at home was filled with a constant round of feasting, dancing, story-telling, athletic contests, and gambling games. Washington Irving (1783-1859), in his journals, emphasizes that poverty among the Indian nations was unknown in that their wants were few, and the means of gratification within their reach. As these peoples were mostly nomads, material goods, which we associate with wealth are nothing but a burden. So to label the traditional people as poor completely misses the point as living in their natural environment, they did not feel in any way deprived by their lack of material goods. This tribal concept of ‘poverty’ and
‘wealth’ in traditional societies might not be easily comprehensible to modern societies since the possession of material goods has been people’s chief preoccupation in the modern world. It is not religion, as Karl Marx decreed, that is the opiate of the people but materialism.

Land was usually held in common. Whether hunter-gatherers or stable farmers, the Indians understood the earth as a maternal being. The American Indians never considered land as an individual property which could be owned and sold. Colonists never comprehended how a sale of land was inconceivable to the Indians. To the Indians, land could not be sold since no one could “own” the earth. An Indian chief, upon being asked by the U.S delegates for his signature to one of the first land treaties in his region of the Milk River responds, “It [the land] was put here for us by the Great Spirit and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us.”

Timber and other natural products were free, and hospitality was carried to such a degree that no man kept what his neighbor wanted. The word for "brave" and "generous" was frequently the same, and along the north-west coast there existed the curious custom known as potlatch, under which a man saved for half a lifetime in order to acquire the rank of chief by finally giving away his entire hoard at a grand public feast. This custom may be compared to the “feast of merit” prevalent to many tribes in North East India.

Among the Mizo, a person who has performed such feasts of merit is given the title of a ‘thangchhuah’. The possession of such a title makes him eligible to enter pialral ‘Mizo paradise’ after death. A person saves up all his
wealth to give a series of public feasts. The final feast is called *Khuangchawi*. On this day, the host kills *mithuns* and pigs for the entire village and distributes his possessions among the less fortunate people. Among the Cherokee also, a somewhat similar custom is prevalent in the form of war dance of which mention has been made in chapter-III of the thesis. Thus, these traditional cultures though branded as ‘uncivilized’ societies with no proper social set-up are, in truth, more sensitive to the need of others and a great deal of economic balance is maintained through cultural traditions.

Old age was respected in Native American society. Alice Fletcher (1838-1923) in her *Indian Story and Song* (1900) tells of an Omaha folk story in which the warriors showed their respect to Zon-zi-mon-de’s old age by allowing him to be the first to touch the body of the fallen enemy, an action considered to be a great war honor. The Indians also had great reverence for their ancestors. Upon surrendering his land to Governor Isaac Stevens in 1855, Chief Seattle had said, “To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground.”

**Religious Beliefs:**

There is no such thing as that can be termed as ‘American Indian Religion’ in particular because of the diverse religious beliefs of each tribe. There are, however, some similar traditional religious belief systems shared by most American Indian tribes which can be said to be in conflict with the
institutionalized religions. For the American Indian, religion is not institutionalized but rather personally experienced. Religion is integrated into their whole culture and social structure. And ‘worship’ is in the relationship one shares with all creation because everything – animate or inanimate – is believed to have life, and therefore must be respected. The social structures and cultural traditions of American Indian peoples are infused with a spirituality that cannot be separated from their daily activities like agricultural work or hunting. Almost every act was accompanied by religious rituals and ceremonies. A buffalo hunt would be accompanied by prayer, picking corn would be accompanied by ceremonies and building a new house would be accompanied by blessing rituals.

The Indian believed that every animal, plant, and object in nature contained a spirit. Practically all Indians believed in a Great Spirit or a Creator who they believed resided in the sky and that his visual manifestation was the sun. Different tribes have different names for this Great Spirit, also translated as Great Mystery. The Algonquin speakers address it as *Manitou* and the Sioux as *Wakan Tanka*. But some researchers like James R. Walker, *Wakan Tanka* suggest that the term ‘Wakan Tanka’ designates a class of gods, rather than the English equivalent of the Great Spirit. Among some tribes, the Great Spirit was believed to have a wife whose visual manifestation was the moon.

One of the oldest and most widespread religious stories or myths among indigenous peoples is the emergence from an underworld or cave-womb which was very dark just as the inside of a womb or belly would be. The symbol of the
earth as source of all life and forms is the basic motif of these emergence myths. The symbol of Mother Earth is prominent because it is a woman who experiences the mysteries of birth, growth, and change in ways that are more profound than man.

In the Navajo creation myth, the people emerged from the underground worlds to this present world which they believe is the fifth world. Earth is considered their mother from whose womb they sprang forth. And Changing Woman, the wife of Johonah-ěh, the Sun symbolizes the earth’s ability to rejuvenate herself with the change of seasons. Changing Woman renews her youth and she has the ability to transform herself as the seasons progress. In the Navajo creation myth, Changing Woman was impregnated by the Sun and she gave birth to the Twin Sons who rid the earth of its monsters. Several versions of the Navajo myth ascribe human beings to a miraculous transformation of corn which existed in the lowest mythological world with First Man and First Woman.

The emergence stories of how people had emerged through a cave or a hole from an underground world, like a plant sprouting out of a mother’s womb tell of their intimate connection with the earth. Linda Hogan (1947- ), an American Indian writer of Chickasaw descent, in her book *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (1999), assigns a distinctly female symbolic meaning to caves and says that they are places of great spiritual significance. She states that “caves are not the places for men. They are the feminine world, a
womb of earth, a germinal place of breeding. In many creation stories, caves are the places that bring forth life” (31).

The Cherokee creation myth, as collected by James Mooney (1861-1921) in his *The Cherokee Myth*, describes the earth as a great floating island surrounded by seawater. It hangs from the sky by cords attached at the four cardinal points. The story tells that the first earth was formed when Dâyuni'sî (Beaver's Grandchild), the little Water Beetle came from Gälûñ'lätî, the sky realm, to see what was below the water. He flew over the surface of the water, but found no solid place to rest. He dived to the bottom of the water and brought up some soft mud. This mud expanded in every direction and became the earth. This myth about global flood is a common motif to several myths and it is also similar to Mizo creation myth. But whereas in the Cherokee myth, it was Water Beetle who had brought up the mud from the bottom of the water, in the Mizo myth, it was Porcupine who had brought up the soft mud and Earthworm expanded it by the process of eating and excreting out the mud. But what is common to both the myths is the active participation of animals in forming the earth, thus offering an insight into the peoples’ cosmology where all things, including humans and animals, are inter-related.

The Cherokee pantheon of gods includes gods in the heaven above, on the earth beneath, and in the waters under the earth but of these, the animal gods constitute by far the most numerous class, although the elemental gods are more important. Among the animal gods insects and fishes occupy a subordinate place,
while quadrupeds, birds, and reptiles are invoked almost constantly. Plant gods rarely figure but the ginseng is quite prominent in the sacred formulas and it is addressed in the formulas as the "Great Man" or "Little Man". A number of personal deities are also invoked, the principal being the Red Man. He is one of the greatest of the gods, being repeatedly called upon in formulas of all kinds, and is hardly subordinate to the Fire, the Water, or the Sun. The Sun is sometimes referred to as the Great Spirit but the ancient myths refer to the Sun as Une’lanû'hï, ‘the apportioner’.

In addition to numerous good spirits, the Indians believed in the presence of evil spirits or devils. Most of the Indians considered that these evil spirits could be easily hood-winked. This may as well be said of the Mizo, an instance of it found in the Mizo trickster story of Chhurbura which tells of how Chhura hoodwinked the demoness at Nahai’s jhum. As they felt that good spirits would not harm them, they devoted a great deal of time and effort in propitiating the evil spirits. It was this which led the missionaries to assume that the Mizos and the American Indians were devil-worshippers. This tribal concept of a gentle God is explained by Frances Densmore in “Native Songs of the Two Hybrid Ceremonies among the American Indians”(1941): “It has been said that all primitive religion is based on a desire for unitivity with supernatural powers that are friendly to man. The white man’s religion is based on that of the Jews, formulated at a certain period in their history and containing the idea of an angry God that must be appeased.”²⁷
A number of Indian tribes, especially in North America believed in visions and spirit communications. If an Indian wanted advice on some matter beyond his comprehension, he would go to a remote spot, fast and pray until he had a vision and the spirit gave him explicit directions as to what he must do. Medicine and religious rituals were closely interwoven. “Medicine” was anything that had either a beneficial or a detrimental power or influence. It includes witchcraft, dreams, spiritualism, prophecies, visions, unusual or peculiar objects— in fact anything the Indian considers lucky or unlucky, or just plain mysterious.

The Indians shared a relationship with nature which was kept alive by their religious beliefs. The relationship was something spiritual. Fritjof Capra (1939- ) in his book, The Web of Life (1996) writes, “When the concept of the human spirit is understood as a mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging… to the cosmos… it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence” (7). The Native Americans worked nature into their rituals and customs. They had several ceremonies associated with the ecology. The Sun Dance ceremony, known as ‘The Offering’ by the Cheyenne is associated with the return of green vegetation and the increase in animal populations (especially the buffalo) during spring and early summer. It expresses a tribe’s unity with the earth and dependence on it for sustenance. Leslie Marmon Silko (1948- ) in her book Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit (1997) writes about the Pueblos’ hunting: “All phases of the hunt are conducted with love: the love the hunter and the people have for the antelope and
the love of the antelopes who agreed to give up their meat so that human beings will not starve”(26).

The Mizos:

The Mizos are an ethnic group native to North Eastern India, and some groups are also scattered in Western Myanmar and Eastern Bangladesh. Mizo does not comprise of a single tribe but it is rather a standardized term used for a number of tribes including the Lusheis, the Maras, the Hmars, the Paites, the Pawis and several others who have more or less similar stories of origin, similar cultural traits and belong to the same language family. In historical records, they were also referred to as Kukis.

The origin of the Mizos, like those of many other tribes in the North-East India, is shrouded in mystery. There are different theories about their origin. The generally accepted idea is that they came to Burma as part of the great Mongoloid wave of migration from China. Their sojourn in Western Burma, into which they eventually drifted around the seventh century, is estimated to last about ten centuries. They are believed to have reached their present habitat, Mizoram probably between 1400 and 1800 A.D from Burma but opinions vary on the exact dates of their immigration. A.C Ray in his book, *Mizoram*(1972) said that Mizos belong to the Mongolian race, which had fanned out in the east and south of Asia in the past. Mizos are said to be the Assam-Burman sub-group that branched off from the Tibeto-Chinese race. Some
historians like C. Lianthanga are of the opinion that Chhinlung is in fact Shinlung, which lies in the bank of Yalong River in China (1). Improbable as it may sound, there are theories that suggest that they might also have lived in the Oxus –Jaxartes Basin east of the Caspian Sea under the Aechemenian Empire between 539-333 B.C, after the Hebrews and the Canaanites had been taken away as captives to Babylon in 586 B.C., from where they had migrated at several periods to the Mongolian plateau.  

Some historians are of the opinion that the Mizos came from some place in Central Asia, probably Yunnan, a province of China adjacent to Burma from where they further migrated to the Shan state of Burma. Then they continued on their sojourn, crossing Irrawaddy River in Burma further West until they reached the present state of Mizoram.  

Mizoram is one of the North-eastern states of India sharing borders with the Indian states of Tripura, Assam, Manipur and with the neighboring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. A very ancient legend speaks of the construction of a long and a thick wall in China. As the construction progressed, they found their work very tiring and decided to search for a new healthy home where they could live comfortably. Their search ended in the present state of Mizoram. The name ‘Mizo’ is a compound word derived from two words ‘zo’, which means high altitude and ‘mi’ meaning ‘people or human’. The Mizo ancestors were basically hunters and foragers who moved from place to place in search of food and game. The forest and hills provided them with shelter and food and as such they did not feel the need of cultivating food throughout their migration. Because of their constant
move, the habit of acquiring wealth and movable properties was not so feasible for them.

Legend has it that the Mizos originated from within the earth. There was a big cave called Chhinlung which literally translated, means ‘closed stone’. It was from this cave that the ancestors of the Mizos are said to have come out. But the well-known Mizo historian, L.B Thanga is of the view that Chhinlung is not the name of a place but the name of a Chinese prince and should be spelled as Chin Lung. He was the son of Shih Huang- Ti, the first emperor of the Ch-In dynasty who built the Great Wall. The prince incurred the displeasure of his father and left his kingdom and settled in Burma. The Mizos working at the Great Wall supported the crowned prince and they might have gone with him in exile in the area of Koko Nor Lake and area west of it. During the peasant revolt, they might have joined the people who had taken shelter in the caves of the mountain range immediately to the South of Sian, the centre of the Chin dynasty. The mountain range might have been named later in memory of the crowned prince as Chin Ling-Shan Mountains. 31 It is also maintained that the Kukis (Lushais or Mizos) were the people of Ku Lake or Ko Ko Nor in China, a very big lake north west of the Chin Ling Mountains and the literal meaning of “Kuki” might be “People of the Ku Lake.” 32

There are also some among the Mizos who claim themselves to be descendants of Manasseh, though it seems highly improbable, and they call themselves Bnei Manashe and they relate their history of exile from across the
silk route finally ending up in India and Myanmar. Although there is no written document supporting the claim, oral sources like the “Sikpui Hla”, one of the oldest folksongs seems to support the claim. There are also many folk songs which mention Manmasi, who according to some, might actually be Manasseh. The Mizos, especially the Hmars – one of the Mizo tribes, claim that Manmasi was their great ancestor.

There are also theories, though improbable as it may sound, that claim that the Mizos were one of the lost tribes of Israel who came to India as slaves brought by Alexander the Great. After the death of Alexander, the Mizos are said to have travelled through Hindu Kush and reached Tibet, from where they went on to China and then to Burma in search of a place to live in and this was how, the missionaries claim, they reached Manipur and the Lushai Hills. But of course, there does not seem to be any scientific evidence of that either.

Socio-cultural life of the people:

Although the Mizos did not have writing, they handed down their traditional values and social mores orally. They were passed through generations through time-proven processes of story-telling. The Mizos had a surprisingly well set-up society. In every village, there was a male dormitory called Zawlbuk, where young men were taught and trained all the values of the society and they were moulded into responsible adult members of the society, thus enabling them
to build a strong community-based foundation, as opposed to the Western
concept of individuality.

As in most traditional societies, old age was respected. N. Chatterjee
may be quoted in support of the view: “the prestige of age in their [Mizo] society
was accepted as very great due to the image of the accumulated wisdom
generated through their past experiences of life…” The American Indian
societies are found to be very similar in this social characteristic of respect for old
age.

Like the Navajo and the Cherokee, the Mizos are known to have a lively
sense of humor. They appreciate ridiculous or incongruous situations, either
accidental or prepared. The nature of the language permits some quite subtle digs.
There are certain adverbs that cannot be easily translated into English like ‘liah
luah’ or ‘ten tun’ which suggest a fat person without the necessity of using the
adjective thau ‘fat’ and adverbs like ‘thing theng’ which would suggest a very
thin person and several more. The Navajo also have similar language peculiarities
which permits the use of certain verb forms which can be used in place of the
correct forms. For instance, if a fat person is seated in a hogan, someone may use
the verb form which means “the round object is in position” instead of the correct
form meaning “the living object is in position” (Kluckhohn 98).

Mizo society, as it existed in the past was deeply community-based. As
a result it was seldom possible for a man to exercise unfettered and autocratic
dominance over women. But nevertheless, the position of women in Mizo society was not very enviable. The popular Mizo proverbs like “Old fences and women can be replaced,” or “the words of women are no words as crab meat is no meat” testify to the fact that women were looked down upon. The very term hmeichhia, the Mizo term for ‘woman’ is derogatory. Women’s words were not to be heeded. Even if a man leaves his wife for another woman, his act is justified by the popular saying-“Fences and women can be changed”. Even in case of divorce, women can have no claim over the property or over their own children. The children belong to the husband. In case of the husband’s death, the children are claimed by the husband’s family. A female child was treated as an outsider, one who toils for the family before marriage and as one who is not supposed to voice her feelings in the family or in the society. Women were always thought to be lacking in wisdom and it was not becoming of a woman to be too vocal with her feelings. If a woman dares to voice her feelings on issues of importance, she would be instantly shut with the retort “hmeichhia te te” which is a phrase used to sink the position of a woman to the lowest level. Pu Thanga was one of the few Mizo male writers who had voiced his disapproval at the treatment of women in Mizo society. In his book Hmalai Mizo Awm Dan (1992), he warned that the future generation would be in danger of going astray if the society does not reform its perception of women.

The Mizo proverbs speak volumes about the status of women in the Mizo society. Proverbs are not only reflections of life, but they are also ‘informal instructions’ into the ‘ways of a culture’, emphasizing and prescribing the
appropriate role behavior, values, ethics, social relations and rules of etiquette. Therefore proverbs carry tremendous power and influence. It may be concluded that the Mizo society is strictly a patriarchal one whereas most American Indian tribes are matrilineal.

**Religious Beliefs:**

The Mizos believed in the existence of two worlds- the physical and the spiritual. They believed that the spirits guided the living beings in the physical world. There were good spirits as well as evil spirits. They believed that the spirits guided and took care of all the living beings in the physical world. They also believed in a Great Spirit called *Pathian* whose abode is believed to be in the sky. The common assumption that *Pathian* is a male may be arguable. As it is a spirit, it is assigned no gender. This god is believed to be an ever-gentle god, bringing no harm to humans. Mc Call in his *Lushai Chrysalis* says:

Old Lushai (Mizo) believed naturally in the existence of one supreme god, a god of all humanity, and goodness; but their spiritual repose was disturbed by spirits of evil known as *ramhuais* who had to be propitiated perpetually, so that *Khuavang* the spirit of kindness and magnanimity could bring comfort. It was the *ramhuais* who brought illness or injuries to humanity and who punished the breakers of oaths (68).
So they spent more time in propitiating the evil spirits known as *Ramhuais*. Offerings were made to the spirits who were thought to inhabit mountains, rivers, stones, trees or caves. There are a number of myths and legends about mountain spirits and river spirits. This is what led the early missionaries to assume that Mizos were devil worshippers. There are other supernatural beings:

(a) Pu Vana, god of nature and believed to have power over thunder and lightning.

(b) Vanchung nula, damsel of the heavens and believed to be the goddess of rain.

(c) Khuanu, mother of nature who gives blessings.

(d) Vanhrika, god of wisdom and creativity.

This pantheon of gods seems to be more or less of equal rank. There is nothing in the myths which suggests that there were ‘higher gods’ or ‘lower gods’. Thus Mc Call’s statement that the Mizos believed in a supreme God called ‘Pathian’ may be debatable, for the Mizo myths do not suggest any monotheistic tendency as is expressed in institutionalized religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The forms of monotheism in these institutionalized religions represent the supremacy and dominance of a divine being as the absolute and supreme being. *Pathian* is no more dominant and more important at a particular moment than *Khuanzingnu* or *Khuanu*. *Khuanu* and *Vanhrika* are as important as *Pathian* in creation myths. Other gods and *huias* ‘spirits’ are also equally invoked in prayers. The Mizos are also said to worship the spirits of the East and West known as ‘khal’. In poetry, Khuanu was more often mentioned as the creator than Pathian. It was perhaps
due to the white missionaries’ assumption that Pathian was the Supreme Being, and also because it was considered male that the name is used for God in Biblical translations.

Sacrifices were made to the spirits of mountains, rivers, stones, trees or caves; but no names were assigned to them as gods and goddesses. Since their livelihood depended on the bounty of the earth, they had rituals and ceremonies performed to propitiate the spirits present in the jhum before they cultivated the land with certain sacrifices and songs:

Khaih, khaih, khaih…
Vawiin chu rawn in khawm rawh aw.
Mim za fang za kan rawn dil dawn e.
Nun tluak, pang dam kan rawn dil dawn e.
Upa leh upa inkawm ila,
Nula leh nula inkawm ila,
Tlangval leh tlagval in kawm ila,
Naupang leh naupang inkawm ila.
Hei le, buh za kan ngen ani e.
‘Khaih, khaih, khaih…
Come hear our prayers.
Accept our sacrifice
That we may have abundant harvest
Corns in hundreds, grain in hundreds
We ask good crop, good health,
Let us sit together
Old and old
Maiden and maiden
Young man with young man
Children with children
Here! We ask for abundant crop’

During Chapchar Kut sacrifices were made to the spirits of nature for protection during the entire process of cultivation. There are three annual festivals which are closely connected with agricultural operations. They are: Chapchar Kut, Mim Kut and Pawl Kut.

The Mizo concept of the other world, beyond the physical, where the spirits of the dead go is interesting. There are two places where the spirits of the dead are believed to go after death- Pialral (Mizo paradise) and Mitthi Khua (Land of the dead). Pialral is supposed to be a superior world than Mitthi Khua, and is not accessible to all. Only outstanding hunters and socially accredited persons who have performed a series of ceremonial feasts can gain access to it. These persons are called ‘thangchhuah’. This spiritual world has a certain route through which the spirits have to travel in order to reach their destination. The Mizo myth has it that the spirits pass through Rih Dil (Rih Lake), then reach Hringlang Tlang where they can have a good view of the mortal world and here they weep with nostalgia. A little further grows the mystical flower Hawilopar and as soon as the spirits tuck the flower behind their ears, they no longer have
the desire to turn back to the physical world. Further off lies the fountain of forgetfulness called *Lunglohtui* the water of which takes away all memories of the past life and the spirits no longer have any yearning for the physical world and they hasten to reach their destination. At the entrance of the next world, they are accosted by Pawla who stands guard with a massive catapult and pellets as big as eggs. Every newcomer becomes a victim of Pawla’s catapult and the injury so received from the catapult and pellets lasts for three years. But it is said that Pawla dare not touch the infants and the *thangchhuah*. The *thangchhuah* are allowed to ceremoniously enter *Pialral* with much pomp, mounted on a bear or an elephant and the eagle hovering above him with all the animals he had killed following him.

Even after conversion to Christianity, this native concept of after-life has not lost its imprint on the mind of the people. The mythical *hawilopar, Rih Dil, lunglohtui* and *Pialral* continue to fascinate the people as it can be seen from their continued reference not only in love songs but in church hymns as well, thus creating a beautiful synthesis of the native and Christian beliefs:

Pialral ram nuam ka thlen ve hun chuan,

Khawvel boral tur hi ka chhuahsan ang;

Aw, hring lam taksa ka ngai lovang,

Nunna thing leh Lalpa ka vuan ang…. (*Mizo Rohlu, 1999*)
The poet, Pastor Chhawna here uses *Pialral* to mean heaven. The lines quoted express the poet’s eagerness to reach *Pialral* (here heaven) leaving behind this mortal world, which is soon to pass into oblivion. He says that when he reaches heaven, he will no longer yearn for this physical world and gladly meet his Lord.

And in the popular Mizo Christian song “Hawilopar Krista” composed by T. Romana:

…Hawiloparmawi Krista ka thliak ta
hmangaih takin min chelh renga
Ka lungawi e ka zai zel ang
ka hawi kir san phal tawh lawng…

‘I have plucked Christ, my hawilopar/ With love I’ll hold on to him/ I will keep on singing for I am content/ I will never turn away from him’, the poet calls Jesus his ‘hawilopar’. He uses the mythical *hawilopar* to symbolize Jesus’ love which makes him forget the mortal world.

There are many such references to the Mizo belief narratives in contemporary Mizo poetry that make the study of Mizo literature quite baffling for a person without knowledge of the myths and legends.

These myths handed down generations shape the people’s world-view and though these myths may have been forgotten by the present generation and at
times rubbished as concocted stories by the uneducated folk, there is still the undeniable hold of these belief narratives on the subconscious mind. Though christianized and modernized, there are still beliefs that still persist and continue to have a hold on the people among which the myths on Lasi and Khawhring are fascinating.

**LASI:**

There are many lores on Lasi. As Mizo society was a hunting-gathering society, Lasi lores especially had to do with hunters. They are believed to be animal guardians, mostly in the form of beautiful maidens who make love to brave hunters. There are several stories that tell of a Lasi ensnaring a hunter with her beautiful looks. She takes him to her ‘elfin grot’ and feeds him with the choicest food and the hunter forgets all about home and family. The Lasi are said to reward the hunters with whom they have fallen in love by blessing them with plenty of game.

**KHAWHRING:**

J.H Lorrain in his *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* defines *khawhring* as a malignant spirit which approximates to what is called the ‘evil-eye’ in English. The ‘evil eye’ is a look that is believed by many cultures to be able to cause injury or bad luck and sometimes even death for the person at whom it is directed for reasons of envy or dislike. But the concept and its significance varies
widely from culture to culture. The envious person casting the evil eye does so intentionally or unintentionally.

Several studies have been conducted on the ‘evil eye’ some of which are Edward S. Gifford’s *The Evil Eye: Studies in the Folklore of Vision* (1958), a horror movie *Two Evil Eyes* (1990) written and directed by Dario Argento and George A. Romero, anthropological essays on the evil eye, *The Evil Eye* edited by Clarence Maloney (1976) and an exhaustive exploration on the subject by Alan Dundes in his essay “Wet and Dry, The Evil Eye: An Essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview”.

Alan Dundes described the ‘evil eye’ as a fairly consistent and uniform folk belief complex based upon the idea that an individual, male or female, has the power, voluntarily or involuntarily, to cause harm to another individual or his property merely by looking at or praising that person or property. Unguarded good fortune provokes someone with the evil eye.

The Mizo *khawhring* also does not differ much from the concept of ‘evil eye’ except that it is not necessarily the gaze which causes harm but rather it is the *khawhring* spirit in the possessor which ‘bites’ *seh* or *ei* the victim. The person who has been seized by *khawhring* suffers great pain, especially colic-like pain in the stomach and makes demands in the voice of the *khawhring* possessor. A *khawhring* possessor can be either male or female.
To exorcise the *khawhring* spirit, the exorcist takes the root of a certain herb called *ailaidum* (*Amomum dealbatum*) soaked in water and a red cock. He chants the following:

Perhte ching dar khai za (three times)
Khua vul vul maw,
Tuiruong kuomah khua vul vul maw,
Khaw lu a hring maw, khaw mawng a hring maw
Chhuak rawh, chhuak rawh.
Mi ring a chhum ang, sa ring a chhum ang,
Ni khi ka nu ti ning law
Thla khi ka pa ti ning law…. (Dokhuma 95-98)

The words are directed at the evil spirit, exhorting it to leave the body of the possessed and threatening it of dire consequences if the spirit refuses to leave. He then adds coal to the concoction and after applying it on the patient’s stomach lets him drink in regular intervals. The cock is sacrificed and two small effigies of the exorcist and of the *khawhring*, both made of clay, are kept, the latter immersed in water in a pot and the former kept on top of the pot.

There are still some cases of *khawhring*, though the process of exorcism has differed. The commonly used items now are *fartuah* (*Erythrina Stricta* blossoms but only the white species), the horn of *saza* or *sasen* (wild goat) and sometimes a net. The canine tooth of a tiger is worn in finger rings or necklaces
to ward off *khawhring* spirits. A person believed to possess the *khawhring* spirit is usually shunned by the society and is exiled from the village. Punishments can also be of a more serious nature.

But this belief may also be studied from a different light whatever evils may result from the belief. If Mizo traditional society is to be understood properly, it is a society in which there is not much ‘individual property’. Most properties are more or less collectively owned. Land is also collectively owned. And goods are also not in abundance as in the materially advanced societies. There are cultural traditions that create a balance between the poor and the rich as we can see in the potlatch ceremonies like *khuangchawi* in which an economically well-to-do person of the village gives a series of public feasts and distributes all his goods and precious possessions, from his gun to his domesticated animals among the less fortunate people of the village, thus creating a balance in the economy. He is also in turn rewarded by being eligible to enter *pialral* after death. Likewise, this theory of *khawhring* may perhaps be said that in one way, it warns one against possessing goods to the extent that one becomes the envy of others.

The Mizos believe that the spirits of the dead are constantly present and so it may be said that they worship their ancestors although it can scarcely be said to be a Mizo religion. “At every feast or sacrifice a small portion of flesh, rice and a little rice beer is placed on a shelf under the eaves for the spirits of the dead
members of the family. This is called “rau- chhiah”. A little of the first fruits of each crop is also placed as an offering to the dead parents and loved ones.

One of the principal Mizo festivals, *Mim Kut*, is a festival or feast held in honor of the departed souls. Food and the first fruit of vegetables are offered to the dead and songs of mourning are sung. The origin of *Mim Kut* can be traced back to the story of “Tlingi and Ngama”.

Tlingi and Ngama were childhood friends whose friendship blossomed into love and they eventually got married when they came of age. But unfortunately Tlingi died soon after. Ngama was beside himself with grief. One day it so happened that he fainted and lost consciousness on his way from the jhum out of sheer grief and sorrow. In the state of unconsciousness, he visited the world of spirits *Mitthi Khua* and met Tlingi. But he was shocked to see Tlingi so frail and thin. Tlingi was starving and she expressed her desire to taste the vegetables they had grown at their jhum. When Ngama regained consciousness, he gathered all the best vegetables and placed them at Tlingi’s grave. When Ngama visited *Mitthi Khua* again, he found Tlingi healthy and robust. She told him that it was because of the food he had offered her at her grave.

*Mim Kut* was observed for three days during which the spirits were believed to be with the people. After three days, they are believed to depart again to the spiritual world.
The Mizo society had no class distinctions. The village, the smallest social unit, exists like a big family and the chief as the father and ruler. Every happening or event in the village like the birth of a child, marriage, death or festivals involved the whole village and the people were ready to lend a helping hand to anyone who needs it. The Mizos cherish the noble quality of ‘tlawmngaihna’, an ethical code which has no equivalent in English. It can at best be described as selflessness, the act of keeping the others first and the self second. In war or peace, in dealing with individuals or in day-to-day public life, it was this spirit of ‘tlawmngaihna’ which aided their thoughts and actions. N.E Parry said, “It is really a very good moral code enforced solely by public opinion … Tlawmngaihna, therefore, deserves every encouragement, as it were allowed to fall into desuetude it would be most detrimental to the whole of the tribe.”

Theft was unknown to the Mizos. Anyone committing this crime was considered to be abnormal and it was believed that this disease was heritable and it was impossible for such a person to get a life partner.

Though continents apart, there are certain commonalities to be found in the cultural practices and religious beliefs of the Mizo on one hand and the Cherokee, the Navajo and the Sioux on the other. The belief in the existence of good and evil spirits, the community-based society in which the concept of individual property loses prominence, respect for the ancestors and the belief in the spiritual inter-connectedness of all nature, are shared by both the Mizos and the American Indian tribes. A more in-depth comparative study of their creation
myths may also be made for further research. There are also certain differences between the cultures, one of which is in the peoples’ attitude towards women.

Thus the purpose of introducing the peoples and their cultures is to have a better understanding of their folk poetry. In order to understand the poetry of the people, it is important to first understand the history, culture and religious beliefs, out of which such poetry emerged. In the study of ancient folksong, Zoltan Kolady said, “as far as the social function of folksongs is concerned… we have to know not only the songs, but we need to know how and for what purpose the folk use them.”39 The American Indian and the Mizo folk songs are heavy with embedded meanings that can be extracted only by a reader with a good knowledge of the cultures that produced them.

The present study, after having introduced the two peoples, the American Indians and the Mizos, will introduce their folk poetry in the next chapter.
NOTES


5. Washburn, 4.


7. Dey, 3.


17. Washburn 17.


27. Frances Densmore, “Native Songs of the Two Hybrid Ceremonies among the American Indians”, *American Anthropology* 43(1941):77-82.


29. Varghese 49.


29 Nov. 1979.


65.


38. Lal Biakthanga, 11.