CHAPTER- III

THEMATIC STUDY OF THE ORAL POETRY OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE MIZOS

Music enveloped the individual and social life of the American Indian and the Mizo like an atmosphere. There was no important personal experience where it did not bear a part, nor any ceremonial where it was not essential to the expression of religious feeling. The song of a tribe was co-extensive with the life of the people.

In *In the Presence of the Sun* (1992), N. Scott Momaday (1934-) says, “Poetry is a very old and elemental expression …In poetry we address ourselves really, without pretension or deceit, without the intervention of interest. At its best poetry is an act of disinterested generosity.”¹

The poetry of the American Indians was embodied in their songs and rituals, and this poetry is frequently of such a high order that it is impossible of a white man to supplement the poetic thought of an Indian.² Almost all the American Indian tribes of North America, though without a common system or a
common language disclose similar traits characteristic of oral music in general, and of the red man in particular. Revealing the inner life of a traditional people, the Indian's song is a record of birth, marriage and death; of his gods and of his entire experience. He has ceremonial songs, dream songs, weather and medicine incantations, war, hunting and children's songs, personal narratives, chief and council songs, songs for legends and in honor of individuals, and dance and game songs. To the Indian and the Mizo, belief, tradition, history and thought are preserved in the ritual of poetry and song. The study will analyze American Indian and Mizo poetry based on the themes of ritual, war, nature, love, grief, blessing, supernatural connection and history.

**SONG AS RITUAL:**

The Indian and the Mizo used songs to secure blessings in every undertaking. They have songs of travelling, house building, hunting, war, gambling, in short for every occasion of life, from birth to death, not to speak of pre-natal and post-mortem songs. But perhaps the most interesting and the most elaborate of their metrical compositions are those connected with their sacred rites- their religious songs. In *The Navaho Legends* (1897), Washington Matthews (1843-1905) proves beyond doubt that the Navajo religious systems and traditions are remarkably elaborate and detailed and far from being “religionless and “traditionless”, 3 the Navajo have myths and legends so numerous and elaborate that, as Matthews said, “one can never collect them all, a
pantheon as well stocked with gods and heroes as that of the ancient Greeks, and prayers which, for length and vain repetition, might put a Pharisee to the blush.”

They have numerous rites which are accompanied by a number of songs, each numbering about 200 or more which may not be sung at any other rite. These songs are sung mainly to maintain individual and communal life and health. The Navajo alone have many types of chant. There are about “24 chantway systems” used for curing, plus Blessingway and Enemyway and their sub-varieties which, respectively bring luck and exorcise alien ghosts. Washington Matthews has given a very elaborate account of the Night Chant and the Mountain Chant in *The Night Chant* (1902) and *The Mountain Chant* (1888) respectively. Most chants have two or three night-forms and five night-forms. The Mountain Chant is held for nine nights. The Night Chant which is sung when the dance of the masked gods is held, is supposed to be effective as a cure for insanity, deafness, and paralysis. It is also referred to as “Yeibichai”. The Bead Chant is said to be sung for skin irritations according to Gladys Reichard (1893-1955), but Kluckhohn (1905-1960) and Wyman (1897-1988) maintain that the Bead, Eagle, Feather, Wind and Awl chants are sung for head affections. The Shooting Chant is armor against diseases caused by snakes, lightning and arrows. Evil Way chants are used to cure “ghosts sickness”. Sickness caused by foreign ghosts is treated by Enemyway. The chants are so numerous that it will not be possible to study them individually but the common theme that runs in all the chants is the idea of purification. They lay great emphasis on the transformation from neutral to sanctified.
The point of Navajo rituals is to shape the participants’ inner life, and thereby to reorient them to the world. Navajo chants are social experiences as they guide experience along well-worn channels, toward an inner reorientation to the world as the patient, the singer, the helpers and the family are united with the Holy Persons, the world-creators. A chant may specify more than 100 prayers and songs that the singer must repeat exactly if the ritual is to have effect. The songs invoke a Holy person, which leads to a request that the Holy Person remove and disperse the malevolence that besets the patient, as one prayer from the Enemyway chant, as recorded by Father Berard Haile, says to Pollen Boy:

Nicely you shall put my foodpipe in its condition again!
Nicely you shall put my windpipe in its condition again!
Nicely you shall put my heart in its condition again!
Nicely you shall put my nerves in their condition again!
Nicely I shall walk about, without ailment I shall go about,
unaffected by sickness I shall be going about!
Without monsters seeing me I shall be going about!
Without beings which are evil seeing me I shall be going about!
With monsters dreading me I shall be going about!
With monsters respecting me I shall be going about!
Governed by this I shall be going about!
After conquering monsters I shall be going about!
Pleasant again it has become!

..........................
Pleasant again it has become!

The patient is guided from a position of pain and fear to one of strength. A chant of the Mizo Daibawl, a curing ceremonial may also be rendered in the same context:

Chibai!

Ram chawngnu i ti maw
Ram chawngpa i ti maw
Ram chawnglala rum vung vung i ti maw,
Sum seng zawlah sum sem ta’ng a ti maw,
Ka rawchea a tha hlang tang a ti maw….

Daibawl is basically performed as a cure for fever. Sacrifices are offered at a certain spot outside the village to the spirit or spirits which must have caused the illness. The cause of fever is attributed to two spirits – tuihuai ‘water spirit’ and ramhuai ‘spirit of the woods’. The chant, which is the most important part of the ceremonial, is chanted by the puithiam ‘priest’ or ‘medicine man’ and it is addressed to the spirits calling them ‘Ram Chawngnu’ and ‘Ram Chawngpa’ beckoning them to hear their prayer and accept their offerings.

The Navajo themselves speak of their ceremonies as “sings” which may indicate the importance given to “singing” in the ceremonies. John Collier gives a description of the significance of ‘a sing’ to the Navajo as he describes his experience attending a Navajo curing ceremonial:
There was happiness, although we were talking about the most painful facts….For at the curing sings, all who attend are happy…the sing restores harmony, goes back to the sources of light, brings the rain of light…through the union of happy emotion and confident willing on the part of every man, woman and child who has joined the ceremony.”

A Navajo sing is a communal healing. The Navajo practice a complicated art of living. Through this art whose uninterrupted use comes down the centuries, although poverty and insecurity go on increasing, the Navajo are not poor or insecure as they create out of this human material a house made of wonder:

House made of dawn,

House made of evening light,

House made of the dark cloud

........................................

Happily may I walk.

Happily, with abundant showers may I walk

Happily with abundant plants, may I walk.

Happily on the trail of pollen, may I walk

Happily may I walk.

May it be beautiful before me.

May it be beautiful behind me.
May it be beautiful below me.
May it be beautiful above me.
May it be beautiful all around me.
In beauty it is finished.

It is because of this that Collier says, “In terms of life, not of goods, it is we who are poor, not the Navajo” (42). The ceremonials are renewers of life and all the ceremonials involve communal sharing.

Unlike the Navajo, a very limited number of chants are known to the Mizo. This may be due to the fact that these chants are mostly esoteric and therefore not easily comprehensible to the common man. Another reason may also be the fact that these chants, especially the magic charms are greatly valued by the medicine men and they do not teach anyone other than their assistants who have been initiated for the purpose, not even to their kin. Sometimes, they sell it for a substantial price. The principal types of Mizo chants are: Hlado — chanted over slain game, Bawhhlà – chanted over slain enemies, Dawi Hla— magic charms, and Thiam Hla— sacrificial chants.

WAR AS THEME:

War was an absorbing interest in both the American Indian and the Mizo cultures. These peoples shared a natural passion for war, which may be seen in the Cherokees’ admission to the white men who visited their strongholds,
the southern Appalachian Highlands: “We cannot live without war. War is our loved occupation” though the warlike Cherokee, forced by circumstances beyond their control had to transfer their concentration on war to problems posed by the white man by the turn of the eighteenth century. On the significance of war to the Mizo, R.L Thanmawia says, “One of the forces which did most to shape Mizo life for nearly three centuries was the frequent wars with the neighboring tribes or the wars among themselves.” So war being a common occurrence, it has developed as an important theme of their poetry.

Since no important task is undertaken by the Indian without preparation and prayer, before setting out on the war-path, religious ceremonies are performed and the protection of the supernatural being is invoked. Many of the so-called war-songs are religious in character, many again are expressions of grief for slain comrades, or songs in praise of the valiant dead.

As Julia M. Buttree says, war songs formed a large part of the repertoire of every Indian. This may as well be said of the Mizo. We can find instances of it even in lullabies that a mother sings for her child:

A khi an khian rammu an kal dial dial e,
Ka nauvi pa tel ve maw, ral that ve maw?
‘In a distance, I see warriors returning home,
Is my child’s father among them?’
By “war songs” it must not be understood as only those that are sung before departing for the war-path. A song of departure to the war path, invocation to the spirits for success, honor chant upon the safe return of the warriors, a recounting many years later of his prowess - all these ideas are embodied in the term. Even songs of good will and peace are so termed. The English translation of a few of these will illustrate the idea:

> The day we brought home heads from Bawmzo,
> Saikhua resounded with chants over victory.  

> Just as I am killing the enemy,
> Celebrating in the local yard,
> On my head hornbill’s feathers,
> Magnificently I move here and there.

The dream songs of the warriors of former days are sometimes sung in the war dances of the Sioux, the name of the warrior thus honored in this manner, and the dream songs of forgotten warriors may remain in use, the name of the warrior being lost and only the song remaining.

Following is a Sioux war song they usually sang on the warpath:

> Friends
> Take courage
> Right here
> We are coming
They see us.

This song is also sung on the day preceding the Sun Dance at a dance called the Braves’ Dance. The melody is particularly forceful and direct. It is a song which would inspire confidence and is at the same time rhythmic for dancing.

Sun Dance is a religious ceremony practiced by many American Indian tribes, especially by the Plains tribes. It was basically a religious movement born out of misery and oppression in the early reservation period (1890-1900). It has also been defined as a ‘redemptive and transformative movement’ by Joseph Jorgensen in *The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless*. The object of a Sun Dance was to make sacrifices to the Great Mystery or the Great Spirit, which includes dancing, singing, fasting, tobacco offerings and in some cases, self torture.

Songs of victory are usually sung on return of the victorious warriors. These victory songs celebrate the brave warriors and are filled with triumphant taunts of victory like the following Mizo “Bawhhla”:

```
Truly, I was born a warrior
To defeat the enemy and hunt game.¹⁷

And,

Phunthanga demanded ivory,
Thanchhuma is locked in the stock,
Oh, what a somber sight.
```
Blame not my Zopui village,
Where we chopped off Thlanrawna’s head,
Commemorated with trophy posts in rows.\textsuperscript{18}

Or the Cheyenne victory song that tells how the triumphant warriors have left their slain enemies to the wolves. The song is also descriptive of the Cheyenne himself, who on the war-path must be as the wolf, often hungry, lone and enduring:

\begin{verbatim}
Ho ye! hear ye! Come ye! Feast ye!
O wolves!
Feast, be merry,
Yo, ho, gather
At the dawn.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{verbatim}

Bravery was praised in the highest degree and brave warriors were idealized in Mizo society. The best blessing that a person could give to a newborn was that he might become a \textit{pasaltha}, ‘a brave’.

Most notable of the War Dance is the ‘giveaway’ associated with it. When a Mizo Pasaltha performs a War Dance, he gives away his most precious possessions. Henry Timberlake writes about a similar practice in the Cherokee War Dance:
The Indians have a particular method of relieving the poor, which I shall rank among the most laudable of their ceremonies…. When any of their people are hungry, …or in distress, orders are issued out by the head man for a war dance, at which fighting men and warriors assemble…relates the manner of taking his first scalp and concludes his narrative, by throwing…a string of wampum,…or anything he can most conveniently spare….The stock thus raised, after paying the musicians, is divided among the poor.”

On killing his enemy, the Mizo pasaltha would trample the dead and declaring his own name, he chanted the Bawhhla ‘War chant’. This was to prove his superiority over the slain enemy. A war dance would be performed to rid himself of the evil spirit of the enemy, and when he died the soul of the slain enemy would escort him to Pialral. This may also hold true for the American Indian. The Indian War Chants had no other purpose than to make war upon and kill the ghost of an enemy. The practice of offerings and prayers made to the earth when victors rejoice over a defeated enemy has its origin in the creation myths when the monsters were slain by the Twins with the help of their Sun father. The death of the monsters, who were enemy prototypes, with their unburied corpses made the earth ill and impair the earth’s vitality and so the earth needs to be placated.

The Navajo, the Cherokee, and the Sioux had a number of rituals that had to do with war. The Navajo Enemy way is one such war ceremony which
lasted for three days and three nights. The ceremony was originally conducted for warriors returning from war to rid him of any evil spirit of the enemy. Since there are no longer Indian Wars at the present time, the Enemy Way is now basically a healing ceremony.

The ceremony involves a number of myths pertaining to the earth and sky and the relationship of natural forces – mountains and clouds, men and animals. The myth, the songs and all the action of the three days’ drama recall the exploits of the Holy Twins aided by the powers of the universe, repeat them for earthly blessings, and establish them as authority.

It is said that the first Enemy Way ceremony was performed by Changing Woman for her twin sons when they returned home after slaying the first monster Yé’iitsoh and thereby restoring Hozhó ‘harmony’ to the world and people. In the Navajo Monster Slayer myth, the Holy Twins, Monster Slayer and Child-of-the-Water killed all the monsters on the earth with the help of their father, the Sun and made the present world, which is the fifth world according to the Navajo belief, fit for the Earth Surface People or the Dine’ to live.

Associated with the Enemy Way is a Girl's Dance, also known as Squaw Dance by the white man, to which young men are invited by marriageable young women. But the term ‘squaw’ is derogatory. An American Indian writer, Katsi Cook (1952-) writes in Reinventing the Enemy's Language(1997): “One word which has been used since colonial times to denigrate Indian women is the
word ‘squaw’… ‘squaw’ comes from the Mohawk word *otsiskwah* (oh-gee-squaw), which means ‘it’s slippery’, describing the vagina. Being called a squaw is like being called a cunt”(44).

There have been many erroneous ideas regarding the indigenous people and one such is regarding war – “war cries, head hunting, scalping” and so on. A. Hyatt Verrill writes in his book, *The Real Americans* (1954) that “many Indians never heard or uttered a ‘war-hoop’ and would not have known what it meant” and that on the contrary, they “moved as silently as possible, and anything even faintly resembling a war whoop would have been fatal to them. They were led and guided by the counterfeited notes of birds, chirps of insects, the hooting of an owl…even when they attacked they did so silently, or at the most shouted taunts of defiance at their foes.”

When the plains Indians attacked, they often yelled and shouted, but there was no typical recognized or universally used war whoop. And as to scalping, he says that scalping was restricted only to a few tribes and that most tribes never scalped a fallen enemy until after the whites began paying bounties for the scalps.

Similarly, the Mizos were also described as uncivilized headhunters, dancing around their kill – “… the Lushais were known only to the outside world as a much feared savage whose headhunting expeditions often brought sorrow, death, slavery to those who were unfortunate enough to have their homes within their raiding distance of their mountain fortresses.” or “they [Mizos] were justly regarded as dangerous neighbours on account of their headhunting expedition.”
True, in times of inter or intra-tribal wars the Mizo did often take, if victorious, his enemy’s head. But heads of slain enemies were taken as war trophies, which could not in any way amount to hunting for heads. An important reason for taking the heads is that in the old days, raids were conducted far away from home, sometimes needing many days’ journey. So a triumphant warrior could not possibly carry home the dead body of a slain enemy from such a far distance, that too on hilly terrains with no proper roads and absolutely no means of transportation. In such a situation the best he could do was to take home the head as testimony to his achievement. Sometimes, scalps were also taken in place of heads.

The very terms “war songs” or “war chants” are misnomers in the tribal context. War is a state of organized, armed and often prolonged conflict carried on between states and nations typified by extreme aggression, large scale destruction and huge loss of lives. The tribal concept of ‘war’ was quite different from the modern sense of the term. “Raid” or at least “battle” would be more appropriate terms to be used. A battle is a small part in a war and war is more of strategy and planning while battle is actual fighting that takes place. In fact, the Mizos do not use the term “indo”, which means “war” for their so-called ‘wars’ but instead they use the term “rûn” (pronounced as ‘roon’) which means “raid”. These raids were conducted by a small party consisting of a few braves for the purpose of looting, as in the case of the Ute and the Navajo, to achieve honor, or to prove their courage.
SONG AS A CONNECTION WITH THE SUPERNATURAL:

The traditional people believed poetry to be the medium of connection between man and the supernatural. As Densmore says, “In Indian folk poetry, we find a full, expressive revelation of the inner life. For them music is a medium of communication and contact with the supernatural.”\textsuperscript{25} They believed that the mysterious power of spirits in nature was stronger than human power and they try to seek out this spirit of the supernatural by fasting and singing. Sometimes animal spirits come to them in a dream when they are on a fasting vigil and give them songs which become their most sacred possessions. These animal spirits become their Guardian Spirits for life and the songs their “medicine”.

For an Indian, song is not just a metrical piece of composition but something which is more sacred, that which connects him to the mysterious power of nature. The Indian regards the song not as a possible source of applause or wealth, but connects it with mysterious power. It is a means through which a super-human strength comes to him.

Densmore compares the white composer to the American Indian composer: “The white musician composes songs addressed to his deity. The Indian waited and listened for the mysterious power pervading all nature to speak to him in song. The Indian realized that he was part of nature, not akin to it.”\textsuperscript{26}
The use of songs in the treatment of the sick is common to the American Indian tribes as well as to the Mizo tribes. For the Indian, these healing songs would usually be received in a dream but the term “dream” is not to be understood as a state of unconsciousness. Densmore compared the white man’s understanding of the term to that of the American Indian. She writes: “To a white man the term “dream” is connected with unconsciousness, but the Indian term implies an acute awareness of something mysterious.”

In times of danger, it is a song which comes to his aid. In *Teton Sioux Music*, Densmore records a dream song which Lone Man, one of her informants on the subject, sings when he finds himself in danger:

```
In erratic flight I have sent
a swallow nation
the erratic flight I have caused
before gathering of the clouds
the erratic flight I have caused
my horse as a swallow
it was flying, running.(162-63)
```

The song alludes to the swallow whose flight precedes a storm and it expresses a warrior’s desire that his horse may be as swift as the swallow in dodging the enemy during the fight. Before Lone Man sings this song, he made this prayer: “Again, Great Grandfather, one of your songs I have remembered and I shall sing now.” By Great Grandfather, the singer here means *Wakan Tanka* ‘the
Great Spirit’. The song was given to Lone Man in a dream when he was on the warpath. It was the belief of the American Indian that ‘song’ was a gift of the Great Spirit. Donald Bahr attempts to explain this American Indian concept of song composition as something which is more of a supernatural endeavor than it being a purely human activity: “…throughout Native North America …dreams, or relatedly “visions” were and are understood as means for humans to acquire songs as gifts from the supernaturals. Presumably the supernaturals had the songs before, during, and after transmitting them to humans.”28 We find a good illustration of this native concept of song being a gift from God in the Apache myth of “Origin of Curing Ceremonies”, which says that when people did not know how to cure the sick, One Who Made the Earth gave them songs to cure the sick and the myth reminds the people that the songs were not of their making but given to them by One Who Made the Earth. It was as if they did not conceive this pattern in their own minds but was bestowed upon them by the One Who Made the Earth. It was as if the knowledge of what they should chant or sing had suddenly been transmitted to them from outside.

Brave Buffalo, a powerful medicine man in the Standing Rock reservation, said that a buffalo appeared to him in a dream when he was ten years old and asked him to follow it. The buffalo led him on a path that did not touch the earth. There they traveled until they came to a lodge filled with buffalo. There, the following dream song was given to him:

I will appear, behold me, he yo
I will appear, behold me, he yo
I will appear, behold me, he yo
A buffalo said to me, he yo
I will appear, behold me he yo

The song became his medicine and gave him the power to treat the sick. All treatment of the sick among the Sioux was in accordance with dreams. Even a powerful medicine man did not attempt to treat the sick unless he had received a dream telling him to do so. But if one receives such a dream, he was not to disregard the obligations of such a dream. Each man treated only the diseases for which his dream had given him the remedies. In fact, many of the Ghost Dance songs and Sun Dance songs and curing songs are composed in a state of dream or trance. The power of ‘song’ can also be seen in the Navajo legend of the Twins who set out to meet their father Sun. To reach the house of their father, they had to face many dangers strewn on their path but they overcome all dangers with the help of the “sacred songs” their mother, Changing Woman and their grandmother, Spider Woman gave them.

The Sun Dance is perhaps the best known of all Indian religious festivals. At the same time, it is the most misinterpreted. It has been frowned upon by missionaries and government officials alike because of its “bloody” features. They were horrified at the severity of self-torture, which was an important aspect of the dance, as they did not understand the Indians’ attitude that it was a poor sacrifice to offer material possessions as a token of gratitude to the Great Mystery, Wakan Tanka. They believed that all possessions came from
Wakan Tanka and so to offer them to him was like giving back his own. So, the only sincere sacrifice a man could make was his own body and blood. Frances Densmore wrote that it was the element of pain which ennobled the ceremony in the mind of the Indian. Densmore wrote: ‘In the Sun Dance the Indian considered that he offered to Wakan’tanka what was strongest in his nature and training – namely, the ability to endure physical pain. He did this in fulfillment of a vow made in time of anxiety, usually when on the war path.’\textsuperscript{31} The brave warrior sends a prayer to Wakan Tanka addressing him as ‘grandfather’ as in the opening prayer of the Sun Dance:

\begin{quote}
Grandfather, \\
A voice I am going to send \\
Hear me! \\
All over the universe \\
A voice I am going to send \\
Hear me, Grandfather. \\
I will live \\
I have said it.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

The Sun Dance was called by the Sioux \textit{Wiwan’yang waci’pi}, which literally translated means “Sun-watching dance.” A month before the Sun Dance the Wakan’han ‘medicine men’ prayed for fair weather, singing, burning sweet grass, and offering their pipes to the sky, the earth and the cardinal points. The following song was specially favored for securing fair weather. It was a dream
song of Dreamer – of – the- Sun, who had once made a vow and participated at the Sun Dance:

May the sun rise well *he a he*
May the earth appear
Brightly shone upon.

May the moon rise well *he a he*
May the earth appear
Brightly shone upon.  

This was one of the songs that were sung by the medicine man as a part of a ritual that was performed so that the people might have fair weather during the Sun Dance. As song was considered to be powerful and sacred, it was sung to invoke the supernatural. It was a medium through which people could converse with the spirits.

**SONG AS PRAYER FOR BLESSINGS:**

The Mizo believed that being in the good graces of the *huais* protected them from disease and other disasters. They therefore served *zu*, an intoxicating beverage made from rice, and sacrificed animals like a pig or a hen to the *huais* as propitiatory offerings. They had ‘good spirits’ and ‘bad spirits’ and they feared the bad spirits harmed human beings by inflicting them with diseases and they
believed that they even destroyed the crops and so elaborate sacrifices were offered to placate these bad spirits. The concept of a Jehovah-like God who chastised the wicked had little meaning to the Indian and the Mizo for whom the Great Spirit or Pathian was an ever-benevolent God who took care of humans and protected them from harm, whom they did not need to appease. Thus most sacrifices were made to the evil spirits to propitiate them.

All food came from the earth; the wild fruits, the roots, the cultivated maize and the animals, all derived their living power from the Great spirit and yielded their life to man that he might live and be strong. So since everything essential for human sustenance is given by the mysterious power, it is important that they should in turn seek for supernatural assistance through rituals and songs.

As music was believed to be a medium of communication between man and the unseen and as success depended upon help from the mysterious power in every avocation, in every undertaking, and in every ceremonial, the Indian and the Mizo appealed to this power through song. When a man went forth to hunt, then he might secure food and clothing for his family, he sang songs to ensure the assistance of the unseen power in capturing the game. In the Mizo ritual “Dawi No Chhui”, which is a sequence of five rituals, Hnuaitie ‘spirit of the lower world’, Hnuaiipui ‘spirit of the upper world’, Chung ‘spirit of the Sky whom they believe to have authority over rain and light’, Vansen ‘a benevolent being who resides between the red and black clouds’ and Lasi ‘guardian spirit of all animals’ are invoked to give their blessings:
Lasi, accept my offering,
Following the path of the Sun
Following the path of the Moon.
Following the path of the cloud

Sky, accept my offering,
One who roams in the upper world, accept my offering
One who roams among the clouds, accept my offering,
One who dwells among the romei (mist, haze), accept my offering.

Vansen, accept my hluikhuang (red cock),
One who roams in the sky, accept my hluikhuang,
One who dwells in the Sun, accept my hluilkuang,
One who dwells in the Moon, accept my offering.\(^{34}\)

The Mizo believed that one could kill wild animals only with the permission of the *Lasi*. Though the *Lasi* gave meat, which was needed for man’s sustenance, to the hunters, they were said to mourn the death of the animals, a reference of which we find in the following Hlado:

On the day a hunter hunted for animals,
Khuanu cried in the morning.\(^{35}\)
Here, Khuanu is used to mean the creator, believed to be a female and the term is also used to refer to ‘nature’.

The buffalo can be said to have played a very important part in the life of the Plains tribe like the Sioux. It was the provider of food, clothes, moccasins, materials for their ‘tipi’ and tools and even fuel for their fire. In fact, so important was the buffalo to the people that tribal life disappeared with the disappearance of the herd. The following is one of the songs they sing when going on a buffalo hunt:

He! They have come back racing,

He! They have come back racing,

Why, they say there is to be a buffalo hunt over here,

Why, they say there is to be a buffalo hunt over here.

Make arrows! Make arrows!

Says the father, says the father.

Give me my knife,

Give me my knife,

I shall hang up the meat to dry--_Ye´ ye!_

I shall hang up the meat to dry--_Ye´ ye!_

Says grandmother--_Yo´ yo!_

Says grandmother--_Yo´ yo!_

When it is dry I shall make pemmican,

When it is dry I shall make pemmican,
Says grandmother—_Yo´ yo!_  
Says grandmother—_Yo´ yo!_  

When going on a buffalo hunt, it was customary among the Sioux to send out a small advance party to locate the herd. On finding it, these men returned at once at full gallop to the main body of hunters, but instead of stopping on reaching them, they dashed past and then turned and fell in behind. It is to this custom the first line: “they have come back racing” refers. The cutting up of the meat after a buffalo hunt was a joyous activity. Neighboring bands are invited for a common rendezvous, ceremonies and prayers are held and the buffalo songs are sung. Another song of the Buffalo Hunt, which is also one of the most important songs in the Ghost Dance, is:

The whole world is coming,  
A nation is coming, a nation is coming,  
The Eagle has brought the message to the tribe.  
The father says so, the father says so,  
Over the whole earth they are coming.  
The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming,  
The Crow has brought the message to the tribe,  
The father says so, the father says so.
This song of the buffalo hunt summarizes the whole hope of the Ghost Dance religion, which is, the return of the buffalo and the departed dead, the message being brought to the people by the sacred birds, the Eagle and the Crow.

Navajo religion is particularly oriented toward prayer, because the origin of the world is believed to be in prayer. On a conceptual level, we can see this in the Blessingway, which has its origin in a myth. Once for a long cosmic interval, gigantism, darkness and evil predominated throughout the whole earth; then through a mighty effort the forces of beauty, love and joy subdued them, and scattered them everywhere, but never completely annihilated or sought to annihilate them; and to man, then recreated or newly born, the Blessingway was given.\textsuperscript{38} So the myth recounts the occasion of the first ceremony, by which the world was made. Literally translated, Blessingway means ‘the way to maintain and restore \textit{hozho} i.e, an environment of perfect beauty.’ It is used when building houses, before journeys, at marriages and it is a part of many other rites. One such Blessingway or \textit{hozhonji} song, which tells of how the first two hogans ‘Navajo house’— one in the east and one in the west belonging to the gods of sunrise and sunset respectively – were made, is sung whenever a new hogan is built:

\begin{verbatim}
Lo, yonder the hogan
The hogan blessed!
There beneath the sunrise
Standeth the hogan
The hogan blessed.
\end{verbatim}
Of Hastseyalti-ye
The hogan,
The hogan blessed.

Built of dawn’s first light
...........................
Built of mixed All-Waters pure
............................

There beneath the Sunset
Standeth the hogan,
..........................

Built of afterglow
...........
Built of Yellow Corn
.................
Built of gems and shining shells
....................

Evermore enduring,
Happy evermore,
His hogan,
The hogan blessed….³⁹
The metaphors employed in the song create a sense of ethereal beauty. Nature is pictured in all its glory with the use of such images as sunset, sunrise, dawn, yellow corn, shining gems and white shells, which evoke a feeling of wonder and beauty.

One of its main purposes is to purify the house and call the blessings of the gods. Blessingway is a ceremony that places the Navajo in tune with the Holy People, particularly Changing Woman, and so ensures health, prosperity and general well-being. Blessingway may be sung over an expectant mother, over a new house, over newly chosen headmen or over those persons who are to leave the family for a long time for some difficult tasks. The songs sung in the girl’s puberty rite and in marriages are also from Blessingway. It is thus precautionary, protecting, prophylactic but ‘not a cure’.  

The Mizos have a similar ritual that is quite akin to the Navajo Blessingway. The ritual is in a sequence of three: (a) Kawngpui Siam, (b) Fano Dawi, and (c) Khawkheng Thawi. The Kawngpui Siam is a ritual performed to invoke the spirits to bless the people with success in hunting and war. The following is one such Kawngpui Siam chant:  

Kawng ka siam e, kawngpui ka siam e,  
Milu lawi nan ka siam e,  
Salu lawi nan ka siam e,....
‘Making the way, making the way,
That enemies may fall,
That meat may be in plenty…’

The singer sings that he is ‘making the way’ for good fortune to come to the people. ‘Good fortune’ for the Mizos means ‘victory in war and success in hunting’. As Mizos are a warring tribe, victory in war or raid is considered to be one of the highest blessings that one may hope to achieve. And in all hunting societies, food security is judged in terms of the availability of meat, which is one of the staple foods. So, a successful hunt guarantees food security for the people.

The following Fano Dawi chants, repeated a number of times:

Lengrual ram tuan pheilai khai sang sela,
Kumin hian kan thlawhhma tluang rawh se.

And,

Dum hluam hluam rawh, sawmfang kan thlawh,
Mima chi, fanga chi dum hliam hluam rawh

are prayers offered to the spiritual powers to bless the people so that their ‘jhums’ will yield good harvest. The second song mentions the crops that are usually grown by the people in their jhums – corn, cucumber and rice, and invokes the spirits that these crops may be harvested in abundance.
NATURE AS THEME:

Though there may not be much similar cultural traits between the American Indian and the Mizo or for that matter, the American Indian and the North-east Indian tribes, there are, however, certain persistent characteristics that distinguish these indigenous peoples from the European and one of these which may apply to both these peoples is their intimacy with nature. This closeness with nature perhaps stems from their complete dependence on nature for their survival. It is the Indian intimacy with nature which, Wilcomb E. Washburn feels, separates the Indians from whites: “The Indian relied directly upon nature for his life, and, perhaps more important, was fully conscious of that dependence…the Indian’s mind was turned constantly toward the natural environment which was the source of life and death and of reward and punishment.”

In the poetry of the Indian and the Mizo, we can see the poet’s mind constantly turning toward the natural environment which was the source of his inspiration. He never thought of the animals without a personality or without a soul. Margot Edmonds and Ella Clark affirm this: “…North American Indians believed that spirit dwelled in all of nature ….They believed that everything in nature possessed a life or spirit within, even the sky, earth, mountains, trees, waters, animals, birds-and man.”

These traditional cultures believed that everything in the universe, animate or inanimate, have spirits in them and all objects of nature are treated with reverence. It is in this respect that the American Indians can be said to be
deeply religious, though ‘primitive’ cultures have always been perceived as ‘religionless’. Their religion can, of course, not be defined in terms of the organized or institutionalized religions because it does not really adhere to the three concepts common in major religions: (a) a belief in a God, (b) a belief in an afterlife, (c) a belief that this life has consequences on the next. The purpose of religion, as perceived by the Indians, is not to try to reject or to change what exists, but to accept the realities of the world and all things in it and to appreciate their contributions to life. Everything that exists has a purpose” and thus “no spirit”, including that of a human, “is superior to that of another.” It was because of this belief, says Haviland, that in traditional American Indian culture, even a berdache, an intersexed child, is not derided or viewed as a “freak of nature”. He or she is simply thought to have been given winktes, two-spirits by the Great Spirit and thus is respected as much as a girl child or a boy child. 44

This belief in the interrelatedness of all things in nature may be looked upon as the source of American transcendentalism. In fact it is this raw, natural environment of The Americas, the home of the American Indians for centuries, that had inspired in Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) a belief system that espouses a non-traditional appreciation of nature. It was against this backdrop that he wrote his essay “Nature” (The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 1995) in which the foundation of American transcendentalism was put forth. The American Indian understanding of nature had also greatly influenced H.D Thoreau’s American consciousness. “Why, then, make so great ado about the Roman and the Greek, and neglect the Indian?” wrote Henry David Thoreau
(1817-1862) in his Journal in 1857. Robert Sayre, in trying to study the influence of the Indian in Thoreau’s works describes Walden to be a “record of the vision quest of a Transcendental Savage” whose quest is focused in “wild or savage nature”. Thoreau saw the America’s Indian as the ideal human, “one with nature”— and not the way Americans in general has presented the Indian.

The Indian view of the relationship between man and nature was well expressed in the work of an early nineteenth century German philosopher, the Reverend Frederick A. Rauch in his Psychology; or a View of the Human Soul; including Anthropology (1846) although it was intended to be belittling and condemnatory:

The savage is so wholly sunk in the life of nature, that he does not distinguish between its activity and that of the mind, but views both as merged into each other. We, accustomed from youth to separate soul and body, mind and nature, find it almost impossible to transfer ourselves into the life of the savage in this respect; and yet this sphere of thinking and feeling in reference to nature, constitutes the most essential portion of the intellectual existence of the savages.(68)

An idea on the Indian’s kinship with the earth, sky and all nature can be seen in the following song of an Eskimo shaman woman:
The great sea
Has sent me adrift
It moves me
As the weed in a great river
Earth and the great weather
Move me
Have carried me away
And move my inwards parts with joy. 45

The poet finds happiness in nature so complete that she imagines herself as floating adrift in the sea and she compares herself as a weed that grows in a big river. She sees herself as a part of the cosmos. And this understanding of herself as being a part of nature brings her such immense joy that her whole being is engulfed in that joy.

To understand the Indian perception of nature, Alice Fletcher deserves to be quoted at length:

The natives of America thought of the cosmos as a unit that was throbbing with the same life-force of which they were conscious within themselves; a force that gave to the rocks and hills their stable, unchanging character; to every living thing on land or water the power of growth and of movement; to man the ability to think, to will and to bring to pass. This universal and permeating
life-force was always thought of as sacred, powerful, like a god. To it a name was given that varied in the different languages; in the Omaha tongue it was called Wakon'da. Through Wakon'da all things in nature were related and more or less interdependent, the sky, the earth, the animals and men. Nature was, in a sense, the manifestation of Wakon'da, consequently it was regarded as something more than the means by which physical life was sustained and became the religious and ethical instructor of man.”

The ceremonies create and enhance a sense of community, not just with their fellow humans but with the spirit realm. These ceremonies are also the means by which traditions are imparted. In gathering–hunting traditions, every animal hunted, every plant used for food, shelter, healing, or ceremonial use is spoken to and offered ‘tobacco’ in the case of the Indian and ‘zu’ in the case of the Mizo. In American Indian tradition, it is the Corn Mother who is asked for her assistance and offered a gift, realizing that humans are dependent on the spirit realm for every aspect of life and that gratitude is shown through symbolic gifts in turn. The Green Corn Ceremony of the Cherokee, held during the full moon when the first corn crop is ready to harvest, is a thanksgiving for the crops. It is marked by dancing, singing, playing, feasting and cleansing and old grudges are forgiven. Lieutenant Henry Timberlake gives an account of this ceremony in his Memoirs: “…the green corn dance” is “performed in a very solemn manner, in a
large square before the town house door … and the song in which they offer thanks to God for the corn he has sent them, far from unpleasing.”

One very interesting ceremony of the Navajo and their brothers, the Apache is the *Kinaalda* ‘Puberty Ceremony’. The ritual, in dramatizing a young woman’s passage from childhood to womanhood, as a whole dramatizes the creation of nature and its perennial renewals and marks the earth’s fertility. That the Indian has been a lover of nature and her many moods is seen in his dances and songs. In his dances, the Indian imitate the actions of birds and animals. In the Grass Dance, the men imitate the eagle and graceful birds. In the buffalo Dance, they imitate the buffalo.

The habits of the birds and animals, the voices of the winds and waters, the flickering of fire, the majesty of mountains and the mystic radiance of the moonlight, the sound of thunder and the approaching of rain in the arid desert -- all appealed to him. The following poems from the Night Chant of the Navajo illustrate the idea:

**Song 1**

Truly in the East

The white bean

And the great corn-plant

Are tied with the white lightning.

Listen! rain approaches!
The voice of the bluebird is heard.

Truly in the East

The white bean

And the great squash

Are tied with the rainbow,

Listen! rain approaches!

The voice of the bluebird is heard.

**Song 3**

The corn grows up. The waters of the dark clouds drop, drop.

The rain descends. The waters from the corn leaves drop, drop.

The rain descends. The waters from the plants drop, drop.

The corn grows up. The waters of the dark mists drop, drop. ⁴⁸

As has already been mentioned, the Indian believed that there was spirit in all nature and it is this spirit that he seeks to supplement his own power when he sings, addressing the animals before he sets out for hunting:
Hunting Song

(Navajo)

Comes the deer to my singing,
Comes the deer to my song,
Comes the deer to my singing.
He, the blackbird, he am I,
Bird beloved of the wild deer.
Comes the deer to my singing.
From the Mountain Black,
From the summit,
Down the trail, coming, coming now,

......................

In the luck of the chase.
Comes the deer to my singing.
Comes the deer to my singing,
Comes the deer to my song,
Comes the deer to my singing.

The concept of ‘hunting’ in the traditional cultures is very different from that in the so-called ‘civilized’ cultures. For traditional cultures, hunting is not a ‘game’ or a ‘sport’ to show off their shooting skills but a ‘need’ for survival. They live because the animals give them their meat. It is more like the animals sacrificing their meat for the humans. Hunting was conducted with love. It was more like the animals agreeing to sacrifice their meat so that humans can
survive. This may somehow relate to the Yi ritual in which the hunters beg their prey for forgiveness and state why they have to take their life.\textsuperscript{50}

In the Mizo Hlado ‘Hunting Song’:

\begin{verbatim}
Khisa e sen ziar mai law, thlang khat e, i sa kan lakan e,
Phulzing e, vawng zauh u law, manglian e, zu bik i hun u law.
Tlangan e, khisa ten e, tuaitaw a rawn tlan e,
Valan e, thangkim emaw ka than e, bualdim I nih reuh hi le.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{verbatim}

the poet addresses the deer and admires its beauty. Then he tells the \textit{Phulzing} to extend its boundary, probably to receive the soul of the deer. \textit{Phulzing} means ‘meadow’ or ‘prairie’ but here, it refers to \textit{Mitthi Khua}, land of dead. There are also oral songs that tell of the \textit{Lasi} and \textit{Khuanu} shedding tears every time animals had to be sacrificed for human sustenance, of which mention has been made in Chapter-I of the thesis.

Mention may also be made of the Mizo ‘\textit{Kang Ral}’, a day observed in mourning for the animals, birds and insects killed while clearing the land for ‘jhum’. It was observed as a day of mourning and people stayed indoors and no one would go to work (Dokhuma 121). Though this rite has lost all significance and no longer observed today. There are also certain cultural taboos against rampant killing of animals like:
(a) very young animals even if caught are usually set free; even the lamest excuses like “gibbon, why did you make our water dirty?”
(b) “how dare you say lizards can come back to life and humans can’t?” are supposed to be given before killing animals as it is considered taboo to kill animals for no reason
(c) the use of nets with too tiny holes are avoided because only the adult fish, not the fry are to be caught,
(d) a *pasaltha* ‘a brave’ does not kill the female of the species and there are certain animals which are considered taboo to kill.
(e) It is considered taboo to destroy the nests of certain birds like wagtails and tailor birds
(f) Nursing animals are avoided
(g) It is taboo to torture or kill a lemur
(h) Rare animal species are usually left unharmed (Zofa 144 - 45)

and there are many other taboos and beliefs other than those mentioned that are reflective of the people’s benevolent attitude towards animals.

In the American Indian as well as the Mizo societies, the game a hunter killed was shared equally among the whole community and he had no personal claim to it though it was “his” in a real sense. The rules of his society imposed the requirement of sharing his luck or skill with less fortunate or skillful members of community. The psychic income heaped upon the successful hunter normally made up for the deprivation he might otherwise have felt as a result of the
obligation to share with the less successful and more dependent members of society. The great hunter was one of the most admired and honored members of the community. \(^5\)

Contrary to the Christian belief, the traditional Mizo belief is that the animals also have spirits or souls and they too like human souls enter the “land of dead” after their death.

Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott claims that:

The typical traditional American Indian attitude was to regard all features of the environment as enspirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and volition, no less intense and complete than a human being’s. The Earth itself, the sky, the winds, rocks, streams, trees, insects, birds and all other animals therefore had personalities and were thus as fully persons as other human beings. (243)

Callicott’s contrast between these ecocentric beliefs and practices and destructively anthropocentric Euro-American beliefs and practices is exemplified in the film Dances with Wolves (1990), in which a cavalry officer, John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) joins a Sioux band and learns a deep admiration for them. In a pivotal scene, they come across a field of buffalo carcasses with only the hides and tongues missing, leading Dunbar to muse that the white hunters who
presumably killed them were ‘without soul, with no regard for Sioux rights’. Later, when Sioux hunt the buffalo, it is an entirely different experience which is as D. Ingram argues, ‘the Sioux hunting buffalo for sustenance rather than for financial profit, within a ritual context, and in an environmentally harmonious way’. In accordance with the Sioux’s seemingly timeless traditions, all the body parts of the animals are utilized to make a vast range of artefacts.

American Indian environmental philosophies have made a great impact on the development of a rapidly growing literary theory known as Ecocriticism, a term coined by William Ruekert in 1978, which addresses issues concerning ecology, landscape and the environment that have previously been overlooked by the literary academy.

Ecofeminist critics in particular have correlated native animism with both ecology and feminism, drawing in part upon matrifocal and matriarchal traditions in some Indian tribes. The ecofeminists argue that parallels exist between the oppression of nature and oppression of women in patriarchal Western cultural tradition. In Western cultural tradition, nature is seen as a female which needs to be tamed with an axe, a snare, a gun or a bulldozer just as a woman is tamed and ‘transformed’ to do man’s bidding. The extraction of resources from nature’s bosom is compared to the seduction of female land by male oppressors. On the other hand, indigenous cultures, which believe in human being’s emergence from caves, symbolical to a woman’s womb, speak of their
intimate connection with the earth. Their ecological practices and traditional knowledge systems are believed to be more friendly and considerate to nature.

In contemporary ecofeminist readings, spiritual ‘ecology’, or animism, not only complements scientific ecology, but is at times posited as a superior wisdom. In the assessment of J. Donald Hughes in *North American Indian Ecology*, American Indian traditions deserve to be seen as ‘an ethnic science’:

Indians were keenly observant and rational, but would make explanations that would be excluded even as hypotheses by modern Western science, because they were often subjective and mystical. But they were always based upon empirical observation and experience.⁵⁴

Hughes compares the white and Indian traditions when he says that “Indians were living in ecological balance with the herds of buffalo”(42) before mass hunting by whites began.

America’s rapidly growing wealth in the nineteenth century was based on destruction and consumption of forests and wildlife so astonishingly voracious that, in places, it amounted to an ‘ecocidal’ campaign to exhaust and refashion whole habitats.⁵⁵ Forty to sixty million bison were reduced to fewer than one thousand animals by the end of the century, while the vast flocks of passenger pigeons, totaling an estimated 5 billion birds, were wiped out completely.⁵⁶
The peoples’ attitudes to life and nature were also reflected not only in their ritual poetry but also in their love poems, which formed an important genre, especially in Mizo folk poetry.

**LOVE AS THEME:**

Love is a dominant theme in Mizo folk poetry, though that it may not be so poignant a theme in American Indian folk poetry, probably because the ethnographers did not care to venture much into that field or perhaps because the Indians were not so verbally expressive with their emotions. Frances Densmore, who had worked in the field of Indian music for more than four decades and whose collections of the Indian music and songs number more than fifteen volumes, has said that songs concerning the passion of love were not sung by the old-time Indians, except in the working of ‘love charms’.  

Though there are many love songs on the Indian reservations at present, they are modern and do not represent a phase of life which is creditable to the traditional Indians. This does not mean that the Indians did not consider love to be a worthy theme for a song, but in fact this is an evidence of their delicacy and sensitiveness as well as their silence concerning whatever was deepest and most sacred in their feelings. Julia Buttree explains that to say that the Indians had no love song may possibly mean that there were no love songs as we understand “in our modern sense of the term”. The Indian knew how to leave a great deal unsaid and he trusted more to silence than people of the modern generation do.
Thus the feeling of love was expressed in subtle terms rather than in a profound manner like the following Dakota song:

Up the creek I stand and wave,
See, all alone I wave!
Ah, hither,
Ah hither,
Haste thee to me!\(^{59}\)

American love songs are suggestive rather than being a full expression of the emotion. To illustrate this, an Indian poem recorded by John Greenway may be quoted: “Throughout night I keep awake/ Throughout night I keep awake/ Upon a river I keep awake”\(^{27}\) which according to Greenway’s Indian translator means: “I am out all night on the river seeking for my sweetheart.” When Greenway pointed out to him the absence of the word ‘sweetheart’ in the song, the man replied that the word was not there but it was understood. As Mary Austin has pointed out, the Indian never said all his thoughts \(^{60}\).

Alice Fletcher had recorded some songs of love in her *Indian Story and Song*:

As the day comes forth from night,
So I come forth to seek thee.
Lift thine eyes and behold him,
Who comes with the day to thee \(^{49}\).
Fletcher explains, “The words of many love songs refer to the dawn, the time of day when they are usually sung.” The Indian lives so close to Nature that he sees his own moods reflected in the moods of nature. The following song figures the dawn of love in the breast of the singer:

Lift thine eyes, my maiden,
To the hill-top high,
Night and gloom will vanish
When the pale stars die,
Lift thine eyes, my maiden,
Hear thy lover’s cry!

From my tent I wander, Seeking only thee,
As the day from darkness
Comes for stream and tree.
Lift thine eyes, my maiden,
To the hill-top high.
Lo! The dawn is breaking,
Rosy beams the sky, …. (54).

Frances Densmore has also collected a few love songs from the Chippewa. The songs are very simple in form and they contain very few words:
**Song 1**

A loon,

I thought it was.

But it was

My love’s

Splashing oar. ⁶⁰

**Song 2**

He must be very sorrowful,

Since he so deceived

And forsook me,

During

My young days. ⁶¹

**Song 3**

Oh

I am thinking

Oh

I am thinking

I have found my lover

Oh

I think it is so! ⁶²
These songs are sung with the accompaniment of musical instruments. It is not the words which are considered essential, but it is the melody, the peculiar rhythm that conveys the meaning of the song more directly than words do.

Concerning love songs it was said among the Sioux that "in the old days all the love songs were associated with a man's qualification to wed, this being determined by his success in war or in the buffalo hunt" (Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music* 370):

Go thou forth with the warriors,
Go thou forth to war;
Go thou forth with the warriors.
When I hear the Crier shout your name with the victors,
Then, ah then, I will marry you.
I will stay in the village,
I will sit with the women
All day making moccasins,
Listening always for the signal cry that the warriors come.
Then, ah then, I may marry you.

There is also excellent poetry in the Mizo love songs like:
my heart longs for my love today
he roams with the eagle at Farkawn.63

The love songs recorded by Willard Rhodes among the Plains Indians contain very few words and more vocables which is a marked feature of Indian poetry:

We-a he- a, We-a he- a
We-a he- a, We-a he- a
We-a he- a, We-a he- a he yo ha,
We-a he- a, ya ya, We-a he- a ya ya
When the dance is over, sweet heart,
I will take you home in my one-eye Ford
We-a, he- a, he yo ha,
We-a, he- a, We-a he-a ya yaaa

And

We ne ya he-a he-a, we ne ya he-a
We ne ya he-a he-a, we ne ya he-a
We ne ya he-a he-a, we ne ya he-a
We ne ya he-a he-a, we ne ya he-a
We-a he-a eee, eee-e,
My sweet heart he ne ya he ya,
She got mad at me because I said hallo to my old timer,
But it’s just okay with me ya ho we-a eee-e.64
There is exquisite poetry in Mizo folksong on the theme of love in Lianchhiari Zai and Laltheri Zai. There are love poems even in the oldest songs. To illustrate a few in English translations:

Imitating lovers of Buang village,
The cicada sings a melody in yonder trees
Joyful harbinger of harvest time.

And,
Painful, oh painful beyond all bearing,
Yearning for you like a young bird for its mother
I pine, I feel faint all day long.\(^65\)

Often, birds are messengers of love in Mizo folk songs:

Hasn’t my tender message reached you?
Hasn’t my messenger, the eagle told you
That I love you and I miss you, my darling?\(^66\)

In the folktale of Zawlpala and Tualvungi, it was a dove which was sent to convey the death of Zawlpala to Tualvungi in a song:

Hui hui e, ka ti hui hui e,
Tuanah Zawlpala a thi e,
Tualvungi’n va ral rawh se ka ti hui hui e.67

‘Hui hui e, I say hui hui e,
Zawlpal lies dead,
Let Tualvungi come for the wake , I say hui hui e.’

It is in their love songs that the Mizos reveal their closeness with nature. Sometimes, the poet identifies himself with the birds and animals and shares in their grief:

Dove of the forest near my jhum,
Do cease crying please
I too spend many a day crying for my beloved.68

SONG AS HISTORICAL NARRATIVES:

Webster’s *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* defines history as “an account of what has or might have happened especially in the form of a narrative, play, story or tale.” Folklorists today are inarguably interested in the role played by folklore in establishing identity of the tribe. The oral narratives identify the people, offering a vivid picture of their intrinsic values and their view of life. They give an insight into the tribe’s history. Jan Vansina (1929-), in his book *Oral Tradition* (1972), has said that among the peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past(1).
In the native sense, these oral myths and narratives are history though the incidents may not be factually accurate. The definition of ‘history’ as given by the eminent historian, William Cronon, no doubt denies historical status to the oral narratives, since according to him, historical narratives “cannot contravene known facts about the past” and that they must conform to “the biological and geological processes of the earth[which] set fundamental limits to what constitutes a plausible narrative”(1347-48). But Arnold Krupat in *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (2002) argues that the American Indian oral narratives qualify as history because they are what a culture considers as truth. He refers to Greg Dening to argue that history is – “public knowledge of the past—public in the sense of being culturally shared”(qtd. in Krupat 49), oral narratives and narrative poetry are history because they conform to what is culturally agreed upon as knowledge of the past, and it is that agreement rather than their factuality that confirms their truth. The Sioux historian Clyde Dollar explains, “the idea of an historical fact…from the Indian side…is something one has been told by his elders and therefore is not to be questioned”. Dollar continues,

Indeed, among the high Plains people, there is little interest in the subject matter of history per se beyond the repeating of its stories, and a deeply searching pursuit of data and facts on which to build veracity in history is frequently considered rather pointless, perhaps ludicrous, decidedly nosy, and an occupation closely associated with eccentric white men.69
The larger part of Mizo and American Indian history has been written in a colonial perspective and the historians have made shockingly little effort to understand the life, the society, the culture, the thinking and the feeling of these traditional peoples. It is through the oral narratives and songs that they ‘tell’ their own history. Whatever may be the findings of the historians and social scientists, the fact remains that these peoples have their own history to tell.

The *Sikpui Hla*, one of the oldest Mizo folk songs, gives an account of how the Mizo ancestors crossed a big red sea, reminiscent of the Biblical account of the Israelites’ march from Egypt:

While we are preparing for the Sikpui feast,  
The big red sea becomes divided.  
As we are marching forward fighting our foes,  
We are being led by a cloud during day;  
And by pillar of fire during night.  
Our enemies, ye folk are thick with fury,  
Come out with your shields and spears.  
Fighting our foes all day,  
We march along as cloud-fire goes afore.  
The enemies we fight all day,  
The big sea swallowed them like beast.  
Collect the quails,
Drink the water that gushes out of the rock.\textsuperscript{70}

Another song that may be illustrated in this context is:

Shan fa tlang khua put tling tle ng e,
Ka do thlunglu bakah chhaih,
Ka mi thah ka hai mi do.
Thal khatin ka eih den ring.\textsuperscript{71}

The very language employed suggests that it is a very old song. Though the meaning is rather difficult to discern, it mentions a place called Shan which may perhaps be the present Shan state of Myanmar.

There are many such songs which give us a glimpse of the people’s descent and their route of migration. The chant or invocation of the \textit{puithiam} ‘priest’ for \textit{Sakhua} ‘sacrifice to the family guardian spirit’ mentions place-names and makes offerings to the mountain spirits thus mapping locations and landscapes. The Navajo poetic myth abounds with place-names and narrates how the supernatural beings, called First man and First Woman ordered the world and set up the boundaries of the Navajoland or ‘Dinetah’.

In the Ritual of Condolence of the Iroquios Nations, a ritual performed on the death of a high chief, the chant ends with a roll call of the twenty-three ancient villages, thus reaffirming the historical places of the people\textsuperscript{72}
The Mizo and the Indian have a song for every aspect of life—love songs, mourning songs, hunting songs, war songs, hunting songs, healing chants, war chants and so on. In this sense, folksong becomes the age-old account of these peoples without writing.

Alan S. Downer, Alexandra Roberts, Harris Francis and Klara B. Kelly in “Traditional History and Alternative Conceptions of the Past” (Conserving Culture, 1994) write, “For people who believe in supernatural beings, myth is history” just as “for people who accept that humans have or had supernatural powers, legend is history”. Almost all Indian rituals are associated with myths. All the Navajo chants recall accounts of the mythic past. The Enemy Way chant recalls how evil came about during the wanderings of the Diné from the lowest world, the Mountain Chant and the Night Chant recount the experiences of the Navajo prophet Dsilyi Neyani. This retelling of the myths in the songs restores the world of perfection as at the time of its creation. The Navajo Blessingway tells of how Changing Woman, one of the most revered Navajo Holy Beings, took two Navajo children and taught them the prototypes of all Blessingway ceremonies which ensure continued harmony, renewal, and restoration in the world. Navajo history, ceremonies, songs and life are thus intertwined.

Oral traditions tend to store traditional history by associating particular stories with particular places, which therefore are very much part of the “text” of the story or song. Failure to protect places associated with traditional history
jeopardizes the places and the entire traditional conception of the past. The native concept of history and the importance attached to places is well explained in the words of A.S Downer, et al:

…traditional history…refer to the history that members of an ethnic or other community tell about themselves in their own terms….The test of validity of a traditional history is not whether the recounting of events is accurate when taken literally …but whether a particular reconstruction is culturally valid and accurate. If a society accepts the mythic and legendary elements either literally or symbolically and the reconstruction is culturally valid…then it must be accepted as a valid reconstruction of the past, no matter what literally impossible or fantastic beings or events it incorporates.74

The rituals and customs associated with the festivals also form an important segment of social folk custom. Songs always had a special status in the lives of the Mizos and the American Indians. Much before people developed ‘writing’, they expressed their thoughts and emotions in songs, which were then incorporated into the languages of people. Folk songs and folk tales were born out of such full and spontaneous expressions which were then orally passed on from generation to generation. In the old Pueblo tribe, as in most oral cultures, everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest person, was expected to listen and be able to recall or tell a portion of, if only a small detail from, a narrative
account or story. It is from folk songs that we can understand the importance of ‘places’ and ‘landscapes’ in ‘storing’ episodes of traditional history. In the Navajo myth, the Navajo cultural hero Dsilyi Neyani, home sick for the land he had left, is overcome by the sight of the San Juan River and expresses his nostalgia in a song:

That flowing water!  
My mind wanders across it.  
That broad water! That flowing water!  
My mind wanders across it.  
That old age water! That flowing water!  
My mind wanders across it.

The “Walum Olum”, an ancient epic poem of the Delawares gives a historical account of the people from their creation to the coming of the white people. In this ancient poetry, there is a sense of exultation, beauty is celebrated, the earth and all things in it are celebrated.

Thus poetry acts as a record of the people’s history. Historical narratives were remembered and passed down in songs.

SONGS OF GRIEF AND BEREALEMENT:

In Mizo poetry, an ever-recurring theme is loneliness. So also it is in
Indian poetry. Crying originated in loneliness and from crying came a song. When Child-of-the-Water left his mother, Changing Woman in the Navajo myth, she was overcome with sorrow. She cried and from her crying came a song. But when Child-of-the-Water joined his brother, the latter wept for joy but no song flowed out with the tears.\textsuperscript{77}

R.L Thanmawia says, “The Mizo folksongs were characterized by pessimism, and they were very rich on the theme of lamentation and mourning.”\textsuperscript{78} The Mizo poets ‘made’ beautiful poetry in their grief. Almost every culture has languid lovers who are most happy when they are unhappy. Out of grief comes powerful poetry like the songs of Laltheri as she lay down mourning for her dead lover:

\begin{quote}
Mother, I shall not wear my clothes
As my lover lies cold and dead deep down.
\end{quote}

And,

\begin{quote}
Sailo princess may die out of loneliness,
Never I die without food.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

The song refers to Laltheri’s reply when her mother cajoles her daughter to come out of her grief.
Dirges are found among all peoples, though the forms they take and the emotions they transpire are infinitely varied. When her beloved son died, Darpawngi gave vent to her sorrow in verse:

As Awmlai\(^{80}\) roamed the hills,
He snatched away my beloved
And left a scar so deep.\(^{81}\)

The Mizo songs of mourning and lamentation are expressive of their theory of life after death. The following is a song from the Mitthi Rawp Chawi Lam, which means ‘a dance for the dead’, a religious ceremony performed to honor the deceased members of the family and “it may also aim at entertaining the spirits of the dead.”\(^{82}\)

Mitthi rawp chawi, Mitthi rawp chawi
Mitthi rawp chawi, Mitthi rawp chawi\(^{83}\)

Excellent poetry flows out of grief as the following Dakota song of “Mother’s Vow” recorded by Alice Fletcher. The song is addressed to the Thunder God to whom a mother had promised her first-born. She was much grieved to part with her son when Thunder God takes him:

E dho he!\(^{84}\)
Behold! On their mighty pinions flying,
They come, the gods come once more
Sweeping o’er the land,
Sounding their call to me, to me their own.
Wagi-un! Ye on mighty pinions flying,
Look on me here, me your own,
Thinking in my vow
As ye return once more, wa-gi-un!  

Though the Indian and the Mizo had a song for every experience of life, it would be a mistake to fancy that songs floated indiscriminately about among the Indians and could be picked up here and there by any chance observer because “every song had originally its owner. It belonged either to a society, secular or religious, to a certain clan or political organization, to a particular rite or ceremony, or to some individual.” Geronimo, the brave Apache shaman and war chief who was a thorn in the white man’s flesh until his death in 1909 as a prisoner of war, told how his family had owned his most powerful “medicine” song:

The song that I will sing is an old song, so old that none knows who made it. It has been handed down through generations and was taught to me when I was but a little lad. It is now my song. It belongs to me.

Song, to an Indian or to a Mizo was his prized possession. The right to sing a song which belonged to an individual could be purchased, the person
buying the song being taught it by its owner. The speech of an old Ojibwa to Burton explains why the Indians were so secretive about their songs: “…the white man …has made us live in reservations, forbidden us to hunt in the forests, taken away our land. He has taken from us everything Indian that we possessed except our songs, and now you come and would take away those too.”

In continuation of the thematic study of the oral poetry of the American Indians and the Mizos, the following chapter will dwell on the technical aspects, the poetic device of the oral poetry of the two traditional peoples in a comparative perspective.
NOTES


8. Collier, 42.


12. Julia M. Buttree, *Rhythm of the Red Man*


14. Thanmawia, 45.


18. Thanmawia, 46.


27. ---, *Teton Sioux Music*, 219-23.


30. Ghost Dance was a ceremonial dance connected with the spiritual movement which originated among the Paiute in Nevada in the 1880s and quickly spread to other tribes. Wovoka, the prophet of the religion prophesied that the old Indian life would be restored with the coming of a messiah who would bring back their dead ancestors and the buffalo and he told the people to prepare for the event.


32. ---, *Teton Sioux Music*,92.

33. ---, *Teton Sioux Music*, 99-100.

34. Lalzuia Colney, Personal Interview, 4 June 2011.


59. Curtis, 83.

60. Frances Densmore, Poems from Sioux and Chippewa Songs (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution, 1917) 92.


66. Thanmawia, 42.


68. Thanmawia, 42.


71. Thanmawia, 133.


74. Downer, et al., 43.


77. Reichard, 284.

78. R.L Thanmawia 49.

79. Lalbruangliana Khiangte, introduction ix.

80. Awmlai is the personification of death.


83. Lalbiakliana 62.

84. *E dho e* is a sighing vocable and *wa-gi-un* is a Dakota term for the thunder bird.


86. Fletcher, 114-15.
