CHAPTER TWO

MIZO CULTURAL PRACTICES BEFORE CHRISTIANIZATION

In the pre-Christian period the Mizos followed various rituals and ceremonies, and because they had no written scriptures these were passed on from generation to generation in oral forms. Their values and beliefs along with the various social and religious practices gave them a distinct identity. Rituals and customs were also transmitted through performances and, in the absence of written archives, cultural memory played a very important role.

In *Cultures of Memory in South Asia*, D. Venkat Rao discusses some of the major differences between societies and valorized writing and those that were oral or, where writing existed, were indifferent to writing. The transmission and preservation of cultural heritage was formerly employed through scribal technique, in the form of manuscripts and printed books that were stored and circulated in libraries and archives. In the latter, however, in the absence of archival techniques, bodily performances became the primary mode of preserving heritage. Rao terms these performances “mnemocultural”, and argues that, with the advent of colonialism and the ruptures it created in these societies, mnemocultural practices were gradually supplanted by the mnemotechniques of print and the archives.

Epistemic violence irrupts any existing modes of going about or being in order to alter them permanently or decisively. In the process the prevailing modes are recoded in accord with the disruptive epistemic protocols or they are denigrated and discarded.

Pre-Christian Mizo selfhood was constituted through a series of ritual practices that both defined and expressed one’s belongingness to a tribe or clan. They included the practice of headhunting,
the feasts of merit, folk dances, folk songs, festivals, and acts performed in accordance to the
code of *Tlawmngaihna*, which are recognized as sources of Mizo identity today, even though
they are no longer performed in their original forms. Instead, these practices have been re-
incorporated into the cultural framework as symbols or symbolic elements of Mizo self-
understanding.

The focus of this chapter will be on the concept of Mizo personhood, which is constituted
through performance of cultural norms. The self is viewed here not as an essence or being of an
‘individual’; it is not an individual property, but a form of social that one is potentially capable of
achieving. It is constituted through collective, public acts of the community to which one
belongs, and is one of the ways in which ritual practice is efficacious. As Clifford Geertz points
out,

> Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance
of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give
form, order, point and direction to our lives.\(^\text{\textdagger}\)

It is important to understand the ‘self’ which is constituted through the enactment of the
repetitive acts of cultural norms. We have seen Geertz’s definition of culture as the symbolic
universe in which ‘acts are sign’. Ritual acts like headhunting, feasts, cultural festivals and
dances bring about an understanding of the relation between ritual and symbol in the Mizo
cultural universe. As an act stripped of significance, taking a human head and beheading a
human being may amount to the same thing. But for the Mizos, ‘taking of a head’ was a sign of
valour, while for the Europeans ‘beheading a human’ was a sign of barbarism. How does the
same act hold contrary significances in different cultural contexts? To understand this calls for
what Greetz terms "thick description", or a close analysis of the interwoven significances by which acts are incorporated into the cultural semiotic and become socially meaningful.

What the ethnographer is in fact faced with ... is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures. many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.iii

The Mizo concept of selfhood was fundamentally community oriented; it was not an individualistic concept. The Mizo identity/self was constituted through exteriorized acts, such as performance of rituals and public performances through the code of conduct which was called Tlawmngaihna. The practice of Tlawmngaihna was an affirmation of the self at the same time that it was an affirmation of social bonds. Subjectivity in the Mizo community was constituted through performances; as Tlawmngaihna did not existed in a written code, it was transmitted through an act of conduct in which the performance was both the constitution and the observance of the norm. Tlawmngaihna comes into being through actions, through the re-iterated performances of being Tlawmngai.

The code of Tlawmngaihna linked individual prestige with social efficacy. As E.J Thomas describes its dual significance,

The hierarchy of the task was thus determined according to these social basic needs. Thus the higher status was mostly accorded to those who displayed physical strength, courage and bravery at the time of war, hunting, jhumming and also those who dispensed various important functions according to the need of the society. It was praiseworthy
service rendered to the community that entitled the individual to a prestigious position in a hierarchy rather than their hereditary, social, political, or economical status.

_Tlawmngaihna_ was practiced in different ways by the Mizo community, warriors, hunters, young men and young women. For the community, _Tlawmngaihna_ was practiced by helping a sick person, for instance in times of cultivation; his fellow villagers were expected to weed his field for him. The chief would call for volunteers for this work and if people were _Tlawmngai_, there would be numerous volunteers who would be ready to help till the work was completed. _Tlawmngaihna_ could thus be practiced by a village as a corporate body as well as by individuals.

The Mizo community practiced _Tlm’mmngaihna_ by being hospitable to travelers. In the hills travelers were entitled to free food and lodging for a night. When there was a natural calamity, if a village was burnt down, or there was a landslide, people of the neighbouring village would contribute food, clothing and household utensils to replace those that have been damaged. Not only that, they even helped in re-building the houses.

For a warrior or hunter _Tlawmngaihna_ was exhibited during a hunting expedition: in enduring a whole day with very little food, being courageous enough to follow up wounded beasts, in thinking of his friends before himself, working to build shelter for the night and collecting firewood, a hunter was said to possess _Tlawmngaihna_. During those days the only way of sending messages between villages was through volunteers. Even a hint of someone needing to send a message to another village about sickness or death in their family would get quick response. In day time or at the dead of the night brave men would try to be the first to take the message to the other village. Young men and girls practiced _Tlawmngaihna_ through occasions of joyful celebration such as the feast of _Seckhum_ and _Khuangchawi_. At these feasts the young men and girls in the village would help the one who provided the feast in many ways by pounding
rice, collecting firewood and materials for the feast, dancing etc. They were expected to do these things as a matter of Tlawmngaihna. When deaths occurred in the village, the grave of the deceased person was dug by young men of the village on a voluntary basis. Tlawmngaihna in girls was mainly measured by the way they welcomed their suitors (inleng). A Tlawmngai girl would welcome them warmly after seating them in a convenient place near the hearth and then she would keep herself busy cooking food for the domesticated pigs, spinning cotton, rolling the thread into balls or mending torn clothes, all this while keeping the young men in good humour.

Tlawmngaihna was that morality of traditional practice of the Mizos which guided individuals in their everyday relationships with themselves and with others. Its telos was the kind of person that one became or aspired to become, under the guidance of the ethical code. The meaning of 'ethic' here is Foucault’s notion, derived from the Greek ethos or character, of a form of the self that is possible in a given society, and the self-practices that one performed to achieve it. Individuals achieve selfhood or personhood by inhabiting the forms of the self that exist in their society, by recognizing themselves in these forms.

As I have mentioned, Tlawmngaihna was an important quality that was in the conduct of the Mizos. K.C. Lalvunga, in his paper, “The Heritage we received from our Fore-Fathers”, has translated Tlawmngaihna as,

An ideal of life in which a man could not be undone in doing well to others. When a man is Tlawmngai, one cannot defeat him in doing well to others, and that self-sacrifice sometimes demands life itself.
Every Mizo was expected to abide by this code of conduct. Sympathy, compassion, and fellow-feeling were the traits which were fondly cherished by the Mizos. The codes of conduct were not fixed and universal, but flexible depending on the situation.

According to Mizo authors Thanzauva and Lianzuala believe that some resemblance can be seen between this traditional ethic and the Christian virtues advocated in the Bible. Thanzauva writes,

> The Christian principle of love, ethics and fellowship (*koinonia*) are very much in tune with the Mizo traditional beliefs and practices. 

He further writes,

> *Tlawmngaihna* is a message of Jesus Christ hidden in the tribal culture. It is active love, or love in action. If love is the essence of Gospel teaching, *Tlawmngaihna* is the hidden Gospel written in the hearts of the tribal people even before they embraced Christianity.

Similarly, Lianzuala believes that Mizo traditional culture possibly facilitated the conversion to Christianity:

> the same spirit [of the Mizos] was one of the probable factors that contributed to the fast spreading of the Gospel among the Mizo community.

Edith Chapman and Marjorie Clark the Baptist missionaries states that, to the Mizos,

> to accept the teaching of Jesus meant to be *Tlawmngai* and “to serve God at whatever cost, was to fulfill the old Mizo ideal of *Tlawmngaihna*. 
There is, however, a crucial difference between Tlawmngaihna and the Christian virtues of humility, self-sacrifices and charity. As Foucault has pointed out, Christian ethics was a mode of self-formation that was founded, paradoxically, on renunciation of the self:

That is, I think, the deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness, of Christian technologies of the self: no truth about the self without sacrifice of the self.

Its focus was on the individual's relation with himself, and the canonical forms that it took were self-examination and confession. In other words, it involved an interiorization that included not only conduct but more importantly reflections on one's conduct, to discover one's truth. A self-constitution through self-sacrifice, its objective was what Foucault terms a "government of self," which later, in the secularization of pastoral forms of power, provided the dynamics of individualization. The objective of Tlawmngaihna, in contrast, was to sustain the community, to strengthen social bonds, and it was directed not inwards to the individual soul but outwards to collective well-being. As it was superficially compatible with the Christian ethic of selflessness, it could easily be appropriated by a proselytizing translation that sought to gloss over colonial ruptures. An important clue to this point is the absence in Mizo culture of any reflection on Tlawmngaihna: the reflections that we have cited above, from Lianzula and Thanzuava come much later, after the Mizos' conversion to Christianity. Tlawmngaihna was cultivated through acts of conduct, and preserved orally in folktales that provided stories of Tlawmngai individuals as exemplars or models to be emulated, not a code to be obeyed.

Mizo folktales celebrate the acts of a number of Tlawmngai heroes, such as the legendary Chhurbura, Taitezena, Khuangchera, Vanzema, and Vanapa. Here is an example from the stories of Chhurbura, or Chhura. There was once an evil and ferocious demon called Phungpinu (a
female demon with children) who would always frighten people. One day a man from the neighbourhood called Nahaia was badly terrified by the evil demon while he was in his jhum plot. Even though Nahaia knew that cowardice was greatly condemned by the society, he shamelessly ran away and approached Chhura and pleaded for an exchange of jhum plot. Sympathetic to Nahaia's plight, Chhura accepted the request. The next day as Chhura was working on his new jhum, he too was threatened by the demon, but instead of running away, he devised a plan to capture her. He made a swing, and then pretended to go home but actually hid himself on the roof of the Thlam or jhum hut. After some time, Phungpuinu came out and sat on the swing thinking that Chhura has gone home. Chhura then suddenly pounced on her and, catching hold of her hair firmly, warned that he would take her to his village and make the children pull her hair and make fun of her. She made a deal with Chhura that, if he let her go she would give him her most prized possession, a magic horn called Sekibuhchhuak (a horn containing an inexhaustible supply of meat and cooked rice). In this way, Chhura came to own the magical horn.

Taitesena is celebrated as another Tlawmngai; L.B.Thanga describes him as 'the idol of all Mizo youth. He was always ready to help those who were in need, even at the risk of his own life. He was ready to go anywhere or do anything at any time under any circumstances. Once chief Hrangvunga of Serhmun village wanted to find out the most loyal, most dependable, selfless, devoted and bravest man among his subjects. No one was ready to go out in the dark and stormy night, but it was only Taitesena who responded to the call. When he rushed to the chief's house, the wise and grateful chief disclosed the real purpose and invited him for a drink. The chief also proclaimed Taitesena as the most 'loyal to the chief as well as the most Tlawmngai person of the village.'
Another hero known by the name Khuangchera is remembered for his die-hard valour against the European colonizers. The European had settled in the Lushai Hill, on tea plantations, and there were frequent hostilities between them and the Mizo tribes. Khuangchera was a bold warrior and hunter; his never say die attitude is what makes him unforgettable even today. He explored the long tunnel of the cave from Ailawng to Reiek all alone. He is also remembered for his Tlawmngaihna as he was the one who was always approached, whenever there was danger and when anyone needed help.

Another interesting legend is about a man named Vanzema. One day, Vanzema dived into the deep water in the river where there was a horrible monster who warned him not to come back. Unfortunately no one believed him. His friends started to make fun of him by calling him coward, and challenged him to enter the forbidden river. To convince them, Vanzema told them that he would enter into the deep water again, and that they should pull him out of the water when he made a signal with a rope tied to his ankle. He entered the water paying no heed to the monster's warning, and the monster killed him. Vanzema was very sure that he would be killed if he entered the water, but due to his spirit of Tlawmngaihna, he wanted truth to triumph even at the cost of his own life.

Vanapa, a famous Mizo legendary hero in real life is another instance. One fine day a group of young hunters went out for hunting led by Vanapa. After roaming around in the jungle the whole day, they became exhausted. Vanapa found a fig tree with ripe fruits and told the young men to pluck those fruits. Since they were very hungry, the young men started eating the fruits, and Vanapa scolded them for being selfish and not sharing the fruit equally to the whole group. Decent and courteous behaviour with others was one of the many facets of Tlawmngaihna.
The institution of Zawlbuk played an important role in the life of the village and the community as a whole. The Mizos in the pre-Christian period practiced certain rituals that needed skill and knowledge, which was imparted to them through Zawlbuk. When Mizo youth turned fifteen they were obliged to sleep in the zawlbuk, as they were responsible for protecting and helping their own people and were usually punished if they refused to obey the rules laid down by the Upas (elders). At the entrance a big tree trunk was placed horizontally. This was to ensure safety from wild beasts and enemies. Young men who stayed in the zawlbuk had to cross over the big trunk in order to enter. In the middle of zawlbuk there was a hearth where young men sat around and listened to the stories and real life experiences from their elders. Since Mizo cultural traditions were oral and performative, the Zawlbuk thus provided the most important of imparting knowledge of proper conduct. With the replacement of the Zawlbuk by western institutions, the oral and performative traditions soon disappeared and were replaced by literacy.

To administer the zawlbuk the chiefs appointed a leader called the val upa. His selection was based on qualities such as obedience, efficiency, courage and success as a hunter. The chief was the formal head, yet he exercised his authority the val upa was responsible for the conduct of the initiates among whom his word was law. Since zawlbuk was under the guidance of leaders chosen by the chief of the village, all the important decisions which concerned the welfare of the village and defense strategies of the village were discussed there. The initiates were divided into two groups, the Thangval (young men) and the Thingfawn (boys) Mizo boys between ten and fourteen years of age had two specific responsibilities, one group had to collect Thingnawi (two/three bundles of firewood) and the other group had to collect Tui (drinking water) for the zawlbuk every day. Each group was given appropriate responsibilities and monitors known as Thingfawn Hottu who were appointed by the val upa to see that the assigned responsibilities
were carried out. Young men were assigned harder work such as digging graves and carrying firewood for the zawlbuk. Occasionally the young men would be given the responsibility of supplying logs for the fire. The young men decided how they would fulfill their responsibilities, whereas the boys were given compulsory assignments. Duties such as collecting the daily firewood and drinking water were to be followed without failure. The rules were strictly implemented and any interference by the parents was not entertained.

W.H. William, a missionary in an article described the Zawlbuk thus:

Boys are important in every Mizo village having two specific duties to perform. Each must provide every day two or three bundles of wood for the Zawlbuk... in the Zawlbuk no rice beer is drunk. The lads go to their parents for their meals and, of course, help their parents on the rice-field; in fact they do most of the work. When a youth is fifteen or sixteen years old he must go into the Zawlbuk to sleep. After supper the youth convene in their large house- sing, gossip and swap tales till they feel it is time to go "courting". From this they are usually back before eleven when the village cocks begin to crow, and may suffer if they are not back by that time.

McCall describes the impact of Christianization on the zawlbuk and the knowledge that it imparted:

The Zawlbuk is the bachelor’s barrack where young boys and youths learned all the discipline that has ever been possible in Lushai social life. Naturally, some of the practices could hardly expect the sanction of strict church ideas, and this fact has provided the opportunity for Lushai religious leaders to condemn Zawlbuk, in pursuance of the prevalent tendency among Lushais to destroy and eliminate all that dates from a
period prior to the Christian era. ... Thus, abolition afforded an instant superficial relief, and, so, adequate grounds for its abolition had to be sought."

Zawlbuluk was undoubtedly an important institution, especially in a society like that of the Mizos in which the villages were perpetually threatened by human enemies and wild animals. In fact, the reason the zawlbuluk system was introduced in the first place was to defend and protect the village and the people. It was there that village defense and headhunting raids were planned. The young men of the zawlbuluk were the village’s warriors, and they were ready to be called upon for any emergency. This is why the zawlbuluk was placed near the chief’s house. Zawlbuluk also served as an information centre for the village. All the young men as well as old gathered there in the evening to share with one another the news of the day, about things seen and heard, activities and any other matter of interest. Hence, zawlbuluk was considered a developed institution which served the needs of the Mizo society; it not only shaped and disciplined the personality of the initiates but also was an institution where the younger generation was enlightened about the history of the Mizo society.

The practice of ‘head-hunting’ was taught in the Zawlbuluk, warfare and raids were planned in this institution. Headhunting was not only their distinctive feature but also a proof of their difference from the colonizers. The practice of headhunting was not merely the chopping off of an enemy’s head but was symbolic of the transmission of power, which made the taking of life permissible and through which all values were further sustained. Other characteristic values such as courage, bravery and might are attributed to the headhunter only after the head is brought back to the village. Taking of the heads proved the bravery and courage of the headhunter, it was practiced
to evaluate his valour. It was practiced in order to glorify the warrior even in death, so that the warrior is remembered as a successful headhunter.

As far as Mizo history goes the practice of head-hunting had already existed during the Run and Tiau war. The Mizos followed the practice of head-hunting, firstly, to safeguard their own territory from outsiders or enemies from other villages who were threats to their community. Secondly, head-hunting was also practiced for a ceremonial purpose; it was performed at the funeral of the chief, and a search for human heads usually happened soon after the death of a chief. Thirdly, the Mizos also took heads to supply themselves with slaves in Pialral. For this any head, even that of a human embryo, would serve the purpose. The heads would be displayed as trophies at sahlam and at the zawlbuk by the warrior to prove his worth. Fourthly, the Mizos practiced head-hunting in order to win various kinds of weapons such as daos and spears which were given by the chief of the village in honour of victory. Fifthly, brave men practiced head-hunting to gain respect from the society and also to get a wife.

The practice of head-hunting was followed in a ritualistic pattern. When the raiding party went out on an expedition, they would make sure that it was an auspicious day. It was believed that when they went on a hunting expedition, they would wait for the cry of a minivet (bawng), which would bring them success. But if the bird returned to the village it was considered inauspicious. Dream was also considered very important before a hunting expedition. It was believed that, if they had a dream about someone being murdered, or if they dream about a funeral, it was considered a good omen of success in the hunt. Therefore, they would chant a battle song called bawh hla which warriors usually sang:

_Zu din e, zanah khan e, valin ka hrang nan ti chiar ve._
Lei do e, khen that to cu nan hming, dai lai leng hnenah e.

(Has the Great Spirit sent minivet to lead above me?)

Yes — it is now auspicious to go hunting for enemies it behoves me.

After victory in the battle, the warrior had to put his foot on the corpse and give a shout of victory. Those who killed their enemies brought the heads home. But if it was a long journey, they usually scalped their dead adversary and brought home the skin from the top of the head with the hair intact. The warrior would then loudly repeat the name of the deceased three times and sing the *Bawh Hla*. This was to ensure that the spirit of the dead foe would serve him in the land of the dead. When the warrior died, the spirit of the person he had killed would welcome him and it was necessary for the latter to recognize his master’s voice. On reaching the entrance of the village, if it was daylight they would delay their entry and wait till dark. In the evening the warriors would announce their presence by firing their muzzle-loaded guns (*Tukuli Silai*) and a flint lock muzzle gun (*Awnlai Silai*) and singing a song:

*Arsi e, thiahpa chaw law, Rawlvawn arkhuan an e,*

*Zan thim e, zing hman se law, kei chu e, ka do rimnam pa ka thun e.*

Oh stars and moon, stand still, cause not the night to end,

Though the night with darkness blends; Me, I have brought home my damn opponents head.

After entering and being honoured by the girls, the warriors would dress in their best clothes, and wear a special head-dress or plume called *Tuirnal* made from a flexible bamboo. It was worn only when they danced to celebrate their victory by singing *Ting lang hla*. When the heads of the
enemies were brought home, the children were usually asked to hit the head with a dao because this act was considered equivalent to killing enemies. As a recognition and appreciation of what the hunter/warrior did, the family would give a feast.

When the warriors had finished singing their songs of prowess and victory and fired muzzle-loaded guns to their hearts' content, they would disperse and go to their respective homes. After partaking of breakfast they would dress up and wear the complete costumes befitting their rank and position in society. They would retrieve the heads from the forge and each warrior would carry the human head he had won in battle and then they would go to the village square situated in front of the chief's house. Near the altar there would be some stale cooked rice in a broken piece of pottery. The stage would be set up for the warriors to celebrate and dance the ritual dance Ting tong hla which was performed to mark the taking of an enemy's head.

After the celebration, a wooden post (thing serh) or a 'taboo post' was set at the centre of the village square. A vessel made of a large gourd was placed beside the post, and was filled to the brim with the sweetest zu. They would also put a large chopper used for cutting wood, near the post. Anyone who was brave enough and daring among the men folk, would chop the post and would return to his former place and would drink a big cup of zu. The cutting and chopping of the taboo post signified a vow to defend the chief and the community. In the evening the warriors took the heads and fixed them on the tree, in a ritual known as sah-lam. The ceremony performed over taking of the human heads was believed to be the greatest of all ai ceremonies, and a dance was performed. The more heads are added the more value element is added to the status of the 'hero'. The skulls served as symbols of his bravery, and status which he acquires not only during his lifetime, but also after his death.
A key element in understanding Mizo culture is the importance of religion for the Mizos. The term 'religion' may refer to the human recognition of a superhuman controlling power entitled to obedience and worship. It also refers to those elements of belief that constitute the larger symbolic universe within which a community understands its life experiences. Religion according to Geertz is a system of symbols that motivates the manner in which the order of existence is constituted and made to appear as real. The social life of the pre-Christian society was chiefly dominated by their religious beliefs. For the Mizos the world was inhabited by spirits, some benevolent and some evil. The evil spirits were believed to cause all kinds of illnesses and misfortunes, and in order to recover from such illnesses the evil spirits had to be placated by sacrifices known as *inthawina* which can also be understood as 'ceremonial cures'. The Mizos lived in fear of evil spirits, and their religious belief was centered on propitiating these evil spirits through frequent sacrifices. The *Puithiam* (priests) would solemnize at such events.

McCall stated that,

> before the occupation of their land by the British the Lushais were wholly animists. 

Such descriptions of Mizos religion as animistic, which means 'attribution of soul to inanimate object or natural phenomena', was Eurocentric, and privileged Christianity as the religion of reference. The term is generally used to describe the faith of the pre-literate people, depending on the memory and oral traditions rather than on sacred literature. According to the old religious belief, the Mizos believed in one Supreme Being called 'Pathian' (sometimes referred to as *puvana*), who was the protector of men, and 'ramhuai' (evil spirits or demons) who inhabited the streams, mountains, trees and big roots.
Lewis in his book *The Lushai Hills* said,

Lushai religious energies are all centered on propitiating the evil spirit, and the sorcerer’s magic is in demand to determine what animal should be sacrificed to appease the genius which sends the calamity and sickness.¹

E.L. Mendus in his book stated that,

They offered sacrifices very frequently to the evil spirits which abandoned both in the jungle and in the river to avert their anger.”²

Liangkhaia, a Mizo pastor, believes that the religion of the Mizos had its origin in their perceived need for deliverance from physical illness and from other misfortunes which they attributed to the evil spirits. The sacrificial incantation was addressed to Sakhua, which means ‘religion’ in English. The word Sakhua is a combination of two words, ‘sa’ and ‘khl/a’. ‘Sa’ means the creator and progenitor of tribe or clan or race; and ‘klu’ means protector who dispenses wellbeing to human beings. ³

The Mizos wanted to propitiate the spirits as they were believed to be the cause of their illness and injuries. As they believed in the existence of one supreme God whom they called Pathian, a god of all humanity and goodness, he was recognized as Chung Pathian (God above us). The Mizos did not believe that he had much to do within their daily life. Rev. J.M.Lloyd observes that,

Sacrifices were not made to obtain peace with God or redemption as in some religions.⁴

McCall asserts that,
“Old Lushais 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 KJUA VENG, 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.\(^{\text{xii}}\)

I will be discussing the various spirits in order to understand the religious belief of the Mizos. I will also mention how spirits visited the human world, how the spiritual world affected the present world, and the belief in the after-life. The Mizos believed in the existence of two afterworlds — Mitthi Khua (dead men’s village) and Pialral (Paradise meant for the distinguished person). They believed that after death the soul of an ordinary man would go to mitthi khua (dead men’s village) where they would have to work hard as on earth for a living. Admission in Pialral was only possible by the chosen few who had earned fame on earth by being brave hunters or by being conferred as Thangchhuah by their chiefs.

Colonel J. Shakespear in his book The Lushei-Kuki Clans described the Mizo concept of heaven thus:

The Lushais believe in a spirit world beyond the grave, which is known as Mi-thi-Khua i.e., dead man’s village— but on the far side of Mi-thi-Khua runs the Pial river, beyond which lies Pial-ral, an abode of bliss. Access to this is not obtained by a life of virtue while on earth, but the due performance of sacrifices and the killing of men and certain animals and success in the courts of Venus.\(^{\text{xiv}}\)

The Mizos believed that after a man died the soul had to pass through different stages; one of them was to pass through a lake called Rihdil (Rih-lake). This belief has its origin in a dream.
There is a story that long ago, when the Mizos had just migrated to this land, the hunters used to have a good time playing games in and around this lake. Once when a group of hunters were camping by the side of the lake, at midnight one of the hunters heard a sound of someone passing by. The voice sounded like his wife’s voice, but he thought it was his illusion, so he went back to sleep. After sometime, he heard the same voice which audibly said, “oh no! I had completely forgotten to tell my children about the meat I had kept over the fireplace in an earthen pot. With their father still out hunting, I am afraid they would have to eat without meat.” On hearing this, the hunter became very restless. When he returned home, he found that his wife had indeed died during his absence. He looked over the fireplace and sure enough found the meat inside the earthen pot at the same place mentioned by the voice. It is because of this dream that Rihdil has been considered to be the passage of the spirits soon after their souls’ release from their physical body.

There was another stage which the soul would pass by; this was called the Hringlang Tlang (a hill from where the souls can clearly view the living world). During this journey some souls are filled with so much sorrow and nostalgia that they would long for their previous life on earth. They would arrive at the Hringlang Tlang where they would encounter a beautiful mystical flower called the Hawilopar (a flower of no looking back). Then the souls would gather the beautiful flowers and would be enthralled by its beauty, and would lose all desire of turning back. In the next stage, they will reach a fountain called Lunglohtui, holding a magical water which will help them not only in forgetting their desire to turn back but also make them invisible and lead them to the Mitfi Khua, from where a man named Pawla would decide their rightful places.
It was believed that Pawla guarded the entrance of Pialral, armed with his bow, and his pellets would be as big as an egg. He would interrogate the new souls, and if he was not satisfied by their answers as to their eligibility for entry, he would send them to mithi khua. Here the entry depended on the achievements of the soul during his lifetime; he should possess the highest recognized social recognition as well-to-do people or outstanding hunters who had been successful in bringing home specific types of human or animal heads. The socially recognized persons and renowned hunters were only entitled to enter unharmed. The hunter would ceremoniously pass through by riding on the deer he had killed, while putting on a multicoloured turban with two tails of drongo sticking out of it. Entwined in the horns of the deer would be a king cobra that he had also killed. An eagle that he had captured in his lifetime would fly above his head. He would be surrounded by an entourage of wild animals the he had killed to achieve the coveted accreditation. Young men who had intercourse with at least three virgin women were also permitted to enter Pialral. Babies were also permitted to enter Pialral. Lalmama in his book, Mizo Titi has stated that if all the babies were questioned by Pawla the babies would challenge him saying:

Would you dare shoot us? If only you had let us grow up till maturity, who could not tell what great and gifted individuals we would turn out to be? It is your fault for taking us before we could prove our worth.***

In the Mizo belief, there are various spirits or supernatural beings which, at certain times could assume the form and likeness of real human beings. Those spirits are called Huais (demons), Phung (spook), Thlahrang (haunting spirits), Khawhring (evil eye), Tsualsumsu (possessed person), Ramhuai (a devil), and Lasi (fairy). All these spirits except Lasi are considered to be
malevolent and to encounter them is a horrifying experience. Lasi are generally the controllers of wild animals, and any hunter who is possessed by a Lasi will be very successful in hunting.

Though Lasi were usually seen in dreams, there are certain people who had encountered them in real life. Lasi would observe the daily activities of human beings with great interest and they were fascinated to watch a hunter in the forest, and in the process the lasi would choose men of their liking. Such hunters who had romantic link with lasi in dreams are known as 'possessed by lasi' and they would be very successful in hunting. Possession by a lasi was not permanent, at certain times and in such cases the concerned person would have to perform certain rituals and sacrifices called Lasi Khal (a sacrifice offered to restore good fortune or skill in hunting). If the sacrificial offering were acknowledged by the lasi, the old relationship could be restored and the man would become possessed by lasi once again. This ritual was performed by the hunter because in those days, if a man was famous for his hunting skills, his status in the community would be at a higher level. He could attain a good position in his lifetime as well as in his afterlife.

Ramhuai, Huais, Khawhring, and Phung were the evil spirits which caused disease and misfortune. They were believed to haunt certain places, or objects, manifested in different forms, and could disappear instantly. Shakespear The Lushei Kuki Clans mentioned that the Lushai believed that hills, streams, and trees are inhabited by various demons. These were known as Huais, those inhabiting water being called Sih huai and those residing on land Ramhuai.

Sih Huai is a small spring spirit which lives in muddy soil, called Sih. The spring remains damp and moist throughout the year and the water is generally warm and salty and is usually
frequented by wild animals. Mizos of the past believed that there was at least one family of Sih huai in every Sih. Since Sih Huais were believed to cause illness and sufferings, nobody would dare to have such a spring near their paddy field. Therefore, to avoid it, one had to perform Sih Siang sacrifice in order to appease the Huais. To perform this sacrifice, one needed a set of gongs, a red rooster, red hen, Bungpui (a banyan tree made of bamboo), 5 mithun made of clay, a couple of fishes made of clay, 5 Theirual (small bamboo tubes each of 4 inch in length), and the ritual had to be performed by a priest and his assistant.

On the day of the sacrifice the owner of the plot, along with the priest and his assistant, would go to the paddy field with the entire necessary requirement for the offering. The priest would chant an incantation near the Sih. Then he would cut the throat of the rooster and spread the blood on all the offerings except the banyan tree. He then offered saserh, which includes the tip of the wing, beak, tail and leg of the rooster. After that the priest and the owner would go back to the paddy field and kill the hen also, and then they would cook and eat the meat on the spot and leave the place. This was done to appease the Huais by offering the saserh in order to get relief from their powers.

Phung, a spirit, ghost, bogey or sometimes described as an ogress, was generally regarded as a female spirit. The Mizos described it as a huge, black and hairy woman, who haunted the streets and outskirts of a village. Phung were believed to cause insanity and epilepsy, and the Mizos called epilepsy Phungzwal which means ‘possessed by Phung’.

Khawhring was a spirit which could enter the body of a human being and a wild boar. They are believed to be the ‘evil eye’. Shakespear has written thus about the Khawhring:
The belief in Khawhring is universal and from the following translation it will be seen that the unfortunate women who were accused of being possessed by such a spirit have good reason to be grateful that the control of the country has passed into our hands. The belief is that Khawhring lives in certain women whence it issues forth from time to time and takes possession of another woman, who falling into a trance, speaks with the original hostess of the Khawhring. A missionary described to me a weird scene of excitement which he once saw, the object being to exorcise a Khawhring which had possessed a girl. Amid turmoil of shouting, drum beating, and firing of guns the spirit was ordered to quit its temporary abode and return whence it came. xxvi

An account of the origin of Khawhring translated from Mizo is quoted below:

Wild boars have Khawhring, once a man shot a wild boar while out hunting. On his return home they cooked the flesh. Some of the fat got on the hands of his sister, who rubbed her head, and the wild boar’s Khawhring just passed into her. On the next day, without any provocation, she entered another girl. She took entire possession of her. People said to her, “where are you going to?” she replied, “It is the wild boar my brother shot”. “Well, what do you want?” they said, “If you will give me eggs I will go away,” she replied. They gave her eggs and she went. Presently all those who borrowed the ‘hnam’ (a plaited cane band for carrying loads) of a girl with the Khawhring also got possessed. If one with a Khawhring has a daughter the child is always possessed, so no one wants to marry a person with a Khawhring. Even now, we being to some extent Lusheis, we do not like to let a person possessed by a Khawhring enter our houses, and if such a one sits on the bed of a true Lushei she will certainly be fined a metno (a mithun or
gail). Those possessed of Khawhring are most disgusting people and before the foreigners came they were always killed.  

Shakespeare also mentioned a ritual practiced by the Mizos to ward-off Khawhring spirit, which is called Khawhring Thiar. "Three days after the birth of a child a small chicken and seven small packets of rice and vegetables are suspended under the edge of a front verandah. This is called arte hring ban or Khawhring tir. The object is to satisfy the Khawhring and prevent it from entering the child." 

The belief in spirits established a link between the spiritual and the human world, and reveals how the human world was integrated with that of supernatural beings. Spirits such as the Lasis would marry warriors/hunters. It also shows how the religion was connected with the conditions of present life, such as disease and misfortune. This was unlike Christianity where the set of beliefs are connected with the afterlife. Confronted with misfortune and disease as a possibility in everyday existence, the Mizo sought to explain these contingencies as the effect of spirits. As Greetz writes in The Interpretation of Cultures, 

A synopsis of cosmic order, a set of religious beliefs, is also a gloss upon the mundane world of social relationships and psychological events. It renders them graspable.  

The sacrificial offering of animals and human beings was offered to protect oneself from ill-luck, and these sacrifices were thought to bring prosperity, luck and good health. Under the impact of Christianity the Inthawina, or sacrificial system, disappeared, though the belief in the existence of evil spirits did not disappear completely. The Mizo notion of afterlife was also radically different from the Christian notion of salvation. For the Mizos, it was possible to enter Pialral only if one has completed the Thangchhua (feast of merit) ceremony. It gave him a position of honour and respect in his present life. But under Christianity, one believed that the entry to
pialral was due to the sacrifice of Jesus that had made entrance possible for all those who had faith in him.

Most society believe that the soul lives on even after the earthly body has perished. But there may be difference in this belief such as: 1) that the soul of a man is preserved in the lives of his descendents, 2) that the soul after its freedom from the earthly body assumes another form, 3) that the soul is immortal and does not perish along with the earthly body, 4) on the death of the body, the soul is fully under the control of the creator.

According to Hangpuia (a clan priest), the story of Tlingi and Ngama may also be the source of the Mizo belief in the immortality of souls. Tlingi and Ngama were lovers from their youth and their love grew even stronger after their marriage. Tlingi had a tragic death and Ngama in his sorrow cried himself to death and gained entry in the dead men's village (mitthi khua). He found Tlingi but to his dismay she had become very lean and weak. In order to feed her, Ngama came back and started to offer her food on her grave. He again visited her, but this time Tlingi was much healthier and she looked happy. This practice of offering food to the departed souls came to be celebrated as a festival. This story shows the continuity between life and death, and the belief in the existence of an immortal soul. Another belief which I have mentioned above is the Rih Lake, because it is believed that the souls after leaving their mortal bodies pass through this lake in order to enter into their next life.

Another story of the continuation between the spirit world and the human world is Chawngtinkerhi. She was a human being who was married off to the Tan Mountain Lasi king. The king made her the goddess and the protector of the animal kingdom. Sichangneii was a fairy married to a human being after being abducted by him. The story of Chawngchilhi shows
the continuity between human and animal world. In this story a girl fell in love with a snake, and even bears children. The story of Thangchhawli also shows the continuity between the human and the animal world. Thangchhawli accidentally drank the water which belonged to a Keimi (a part-human and a part-tiger), and was transformed into a tigress. Another story which shows the continuation of the human world and the heavenly bodies was Hrangchhawna and Chawngmawii. These two lovers were of different villages which were at war with each other. They could not be united in life, but after death they were transformed into stars, namely Venus and Jupiter.

The pre-Christian Mizo ethics can be understood by the customs they followed. The first step in the Mizo institution of marriage was courting. Among the Lushais great freedom of courting was allowed between the young men and girls. No penalties were inflicted unless the girl got pregnant, when the man responsible had to pay sawnman (price for the illegitimate child). During the courting period, there was always a mediator called puakak (his purpose was to accompany the girl's parents and give some personal time to the couple). The Puarak also served as a witness to the whole issue of the intimacy between the couple in case of any misunderstanding between the parents or the lovers. In case a man wants to get married, he must approach the girl's parents and settle with them about the bride price. After the consent from the girl, the marriage takes place. On the day of the marriage an agreement has to be put into writing by the village writer and he must record of the price, since the bride price was never paid in full, two witnesses were needed to be presented in case if any problem was created in future. The witnesses were called Palais. The bride price had two parts, Manpui and Mantang. Manpui was regarded as the principal marriage price which was exclusively for the father and brothers of the
bride, which include four mithuns or Rs. 80, the Mantang was the subsidiary marriage price, and was divided among the nearest relatives of the bride.

Divorces took place when a man divorced his wife by simply saying: *Ka ma che* (I divorce you). If a husband by his own choice divorced his wife, he could not claim back any marriage price already paid by him. But if the wife on her own wanted separation, then she had to return the marriage price that she had received from her husband. A woman may divorce her husband by merely *Sumchhuah* (walking out on him), which means literally that she retains her *thuam* or property which she acquired before getting married. *Sumlaitan* is another way of getting divorce, in this case it is through mutual understanding that the couple decides to live separately. All the property and possessions are to be equally distributed in this system. Thus it seems that the practice of giving the bride price served the purpose of binding the couples in a commitment. As A.G. McCall asserts, "...the price constitutes a security or reciprocal price and not a mere sale price."

In the Mizos custom, the sexual offence namely adultery or *Uire* was considered to be a great disgrace for a woman. If a woman had committed adultery while her husband was alive or after his death while she's still living in her husband's house, she is regarded as *Uire*. It sometimes led to divorce, in such case, the wife was required to repay the marriage price paid by her husband, and the husband was permitted to seize all the personal property of the wife. There is an old saying that if a woman committed adultery, she would be killed by a tiger. Another saying is that the punishment of her adultery would be passed on in the family till the seventh generation.

There are two types of *Uire*, which are governed by different customs. The first kind is *Uire* during the lifetime of a woman's husband and the second is after the death of her husband. The punishments for sexual offences are as follows:
(a) When a woman’s husband dies, she performs the thlaichhiah ceremony and the thlahual in her house and then for three lunar months she has to put aside a portion of the rice she eats at each meal for her dead husband. This is known as Mitthi chaw pek (feeding the deceased). If within the three months the widow commits adultery, she is called Uire. If she had committed adultery in her husband’s lifetime. She would be punished by being thrown out of the house empty handed and would have to return whole of her bride price.

(b) After the three months’ ceremony is finished, if she commits adultery she is Uire but as she has performed the thlahual ceremony, she will not have to return the price.

(c) If a woman has children and fails to perform thlahual for her husband and commits adultery, she is to be treated in the same way as she would have been if she had committed adultery while her husband was alive, she would be required to return the price and also be deprived of his property.

(d) After her husband’s death, if the widow rebuilds herself a new house and stays there with her children in the new house but sleeps with another man, she is still considered Uire. It is considered more serious offence, since she has her children with her, and she would be punished severely.

Other sexual offences during the pre-Christian period were Hnute deh, Raizep, Zen, Mawngkow Luk, Puitlinglo Mutui, Incest, Sawn and Sawnman.

Hnute Deh means touching of a woman’s breast. Young men behave in this manner with the girl they are courting, to see how far they can go, and as a rule the girls do not object. Sometimes the girl may be annoyed and complain to the chief. If this happened, the Upa would interrogate the young man, and if the young man confessed that he merely touched the girl’s breast thinking that she liked him then the case was not treated as an offence and no fine was inflicted. But if a
young man is notorious for annoying girls indiscriminately, the chief and Upa would probably fine him Rs.10.

*Raizep* means the concealment of a pregnancy. A woman who is already pregnant gets married to a man other than the man who impregnated her. If the husband knew about it, he had the full right to inform the chiefs and the *Upa* and could turn the woman out of the house and she would have to return her price.

*Zen* is another sexual offence. When a young man visits by night a girl he has courted previously and tries to sleep with her without her consent, the offence is called *Zen*. No sexual intercourse was necessary for a case of *zen*. It would not be easy to rape a girl in the Lushai house at night, as there are at least five to six people in the house. If a man has been courting a girl and goes into her house at night and asks her to let him sleep with her, it was not considered *zen*. But if he goes on his own and tries to sleep with her without her consent, then it was considered *zen*. According to the Lushai custom it was an offence and is punishable with a fine of Rs.20.

*Mawngkaw Luk* is sodomy. In the old days the father had the right to kill the sodomite or the sodomite had his nose and ears slit open. The father of the sodomite could go and kill any mithun in the village and the sodomite had to pay for it. Shakespear has stated that,

> Rape or sodomy were punished in the same way, but the latter, if committed with the consent of the pathicus or with an animal, was not considered a crime.

*Puitlinglo Matpui* is the offence of having sexual intercourse with a girl who is underage. Under the Lushai custom if the girl was unwilling the man is to be fined Rs.40, but if the girl was willing then no fine would be inflicted. According to the Lushai custom no fine is inflicted for *incest*. If incest takes place, however, it is believed that the village crops for the year will fail.
Sawn is the Mizo term for an illegitimate child. A girl who bears a sawn is entitled to receive Rs. 40 or a sepui (mithun) from the sawn’s father and this is known as sawnman. Sawnman can be claimed as soon as the girl has been pregnant for three months and is payable even if the child is born dead or deaf and dumb. Sawnman is not payable if the child is born without all its hands and feet, as the Lushais consider that a child born without hands and feet is not human. No sawnman is payable, if the child is taken care of by its mother. If the child is a girl, the father will have to take care of her marriage when she grows up. But if the father has paid the sawnman, he could claim the child after 2 years.

Therefore, looking the above customary practices, we can clearly see the customary way of the Mizos in the Pre-Christian period, such as marriage, reason for divorce, other sexual offences and the punishments and fines that were inflicted to the offenders that prevailed. The Mizos also performed some cruel practices such as the cutting off the nose of an unfaithful wife’s lover by the angry husband and the practice of burning and burying alive of babies along with their dead mothers.
Endnotes:

1 D. Venkat Rao, Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance (Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures) 2014, p. 4.


3 Ibid., p. 10.


5 K.C. Lalvunga. The Heritage we received from our Fore-Fathers. April 1992, p. 32.


7 Ibid., p. 163.


13 Ibid., p.238.


xvi Lusei Hnam Zai. Tribal Research Institute. *Bawh Hla*. p 7

xvii Ibid.


xviii Ibid., p. 111.

xviii Ibid., p. 81.
