

## **Localisation of the Gospel, Cultural Revivals and Zo Christianity: Colonial Encounter and the Zo Hnahthlak**

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### **Abstract**

Colonial encounter initiated a two-way trajectory among the Zo hnahthlak (Zo/Mizo people): one it threw open the process of Proselytization, Education, Medicine and an alien style of life and belief system; second it threw open the process of the assimilation of the chauvinistic traditional Zo practices into the Judeo-Christian, Victorian influences popularly referred as the 'Localization of the Gospel'. Among many things the paper first attempts to engage in locating the commonalities and differences in the outlook of Christianity and the traditional Zo way of life. Second, it attempts to chart the spread of Christianity and the many revivals in the Lushai/Mizo Hills. Third, it attempts to accentuate the marked indigenization and emergence of Zo Christianity and practices such as 'spontaneous dancing and singing' ('HlimRui'), spiritual healings etc. Fourth, it attempts to chart the contestations over the idea of Zo Christianity and the shifts and faults underling cultural revivalism and mushrooming of 'faith healers', self-styled free churches among the Zo hnahthlak

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Religious Conversion never occurs in an empty space, like an encounter it engages in multifaceted layers in a living space, a space where cultures are constantly in the process of making and unmaking. The colonial encounter experienced in the then Lushai Hills actively engaged in the process of taming the wild tribes from 'head-hunters' to 'soul hunters'. Needless to say, the colonial encounter was marked by the project of understanding the 'oriental'. This underlying concern can be located in the several colonial documents and memories of colonial administrators and missionaries who worked endlessly among the Zo hnahthlak.

The colonial encounter injected western ideas concerning education, health and medicine, hygiene and house-keeping, belief in Christianity and the unquestioned acceptance of the superiority of the white man's belief system and life style over that of the native's understanding and appreciation of their world system. However, the white man's ideas and hegemony were not accepted without stiff resistance. The series of border skirmishes and 'wars' waged by the Zo chiefs and reciprocal British initiatives to tackle the troublesome wild tribes stand proof to this contest over territories and ideas.

The Colonial Raj through the Chin Hills Regulations of 1896<sup>1</sup> and the Inner Line Permit<sup>2</sup> maintained its monopoly and gave a free-hand to the Christian mission to penetrate in these remote areas.<sup>3</sup> The British Government occupied the Lushai Hills to keep the frontiers quiet. Hence the administration was least concerned so long as the Lushais did not break the law.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of "Circle Administration"<sup>5</sup> in 1910-1902 facilitated the smooth relations between the Chief<sup>6</sup> and the Officer-In-charge of the Circle. Each circle administration had a Circle Interpreter who was a *New Elites*<sup>7</sup> at the administrative level much like the 'Black Coats' (*New Elites*) at the religious level. The emergence of the '*New Elites*' marked the birth of a 'Middle class'<sup>8</sup> which was conspicuously absent in the traditional Zo society. The creation of the *New Elites* at the administrative level and also the religious level was fueled by the Missionary activities of education. 'A new class of educated Lushais came up under the sponsorship of the Missionaries. This middleclass explanation is effective for understanding 'identity politics' among the tribes in Mizoram. The introduction of money economy thus boosted the emergence of the middle class in the Zo society.<sup>9</sup> The common people were gaining new status and acquiring purchasing

<sup>1</sup> The Chin Hills Regulations was passed on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1896. It authorized the Superintendent or the Deputy Commissioner to order any undesirable outsider to leave the area and tax the residents, permanent or temporary, houses, clans and villages.

<sup>2</sup> M.L. Bose, *Historical and Constitutional Documents of North East India*, Delhi, N.A., 1979; Also See, N.N. Acharyya, "Modernisation of Mizoram", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 5<sup>th</sup> session, 1984; Sangkima, "Cachar-Mizo relation (AD 1832-1890)", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 16<sup>th</sup> session- Silchar, Shillong, Modern Offset, 1995a; Sangkima (ed.), *Cross-Border Migration Mizoram*, New Delhi, Shipra Publications/ MAKAIAS, Kolkata, 2004b.

<sup>3</sup> A.C. Ray, *Mizoram Dynamics of Change*, Calcutta, Pearl Publishers/ICSSR, 1982, p. 69. In a letter written to the treasurer of the Lakher Pioneer Mission, Shakespear wrote in 1906 while he was the British Resident at Manipur: 'Your remarks as to the danger of these Hills tribes becoming Hinduised is very real and Manipur is an (important) instance in point. The Manipuris have become Hindus within historical times...' Reginald. A Lorrain, *Five Years in Unknown Jungles: For God and Empire*, London, Guwahati, Spectrum Publications, 1912, (reprint 1988), pp. 235, 259.

<sup>4</sup> A.C. Ray, *Ibid.*, 1982, p 65; S.K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in Northeast India*, Patna, Orient Longman, 1973, pp.1 8-19.

<sup>5</sup> The British introduced the system of "Circle Administration" and the Mizo Hills was divided into 18 Circles, 12 in the Aizawl sub-division and 6 in the Lunglei sub-division.

<sup>6</sup> The institution of chieftainship, which was hereditary, underwent certain changes under the influence of the British for instance the eldest son began to inherit chieftainship. In the administration of a village the chief (Lal) was assisted by a Council of Elders (Lal Upa). These Elders were selected or nominated by the Chiefs themselves. E.J. Thomas, *Mizo bamboo Hills Muzum Change (Mizo Society Before and After Independence)*, New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> The New Elites were the direct product of British colonialism and their existence totally depended on their allegiance to the foreign rulers. McCall traced the origin of a new class, the intelligentsia, to the spread of Christianity. The mission employed local people as salaried Church executives and school teachers in the villages. In none of the villages the Government maintained any salaried staff. As the mission had to rely on the willing support of the people this class was heavily courted by the Mission. McCall observes: "we cannot blame the missionaries for this but the administration would be open to blame if it did not take count of this situation". A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 1949, (2003), pp. 216-217. Naturally the nouveau elites eulogised and emulated the colonial masters and in doing so they became the 'mimicked man', the 'kala sahebs', the new privileged class in the Mizo society.

<sup>8</sup> For details, See, B. Datta Ray, *The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in North-East India*, Delhi, Uppal Publishing House, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> 'A new class of educated Lushais came up under the sponsorship of the Missionaries. Western Education of the middle class made their entry into government and non-government services easy. Tribes were ably aided into this through the provision of reservation, which were available not only for employment purposes but also in higher education and politics. These measures and avenues made possible the emergence of the middle class. Christianity meant medical care, education, English language and a richer material life.' The education policy generated a feeling that 'education' and 'Christianity' were the only means to salaried jobs, which would bring freedom from the drudgery, toil and uncertainty of cultivation. Having a missionary education thus began to

power and in turn felt confident enough to challenge and raise their voices against traditional autocratic authority of the chiefs. The exposure to the outside world through foreign travel during the world wars opened the gates of consciousness and the overwhelming 'tidal wave of colour' which had been influencing other colonised people began to have its ripples even in the Zo Hills.

Despite these changes, the internal affairs were left to the chief and his elders who ruled their units according to the customary laws of the land and the British administration intervened only when the chiefs went beyond their jurisdiction. Initially, the British manipulated the traditional chiefs and their elders and later when these traditional power structures were fully under their control, they increased their numbers by acting as 'kingmakers' in the Zo hills or Lushai Hills as it was called then. When the Lushai Hills were taken over by the British, there were some odd 60 chiefs but when the British left the Lushai Hills in 1940s their number increased to more than 400.<sup>10</sup> The increase in the number of new chiefs speaks in volumes about the divide and rule policy of the British and their role as 'King-makers'.

The pattern of the policy of the British towards the Chiefs in the Lushai Hills was a mirror-image of the policies followed elsewhere in the colonial world having tribal population.<sup>11</sup> Initially the British supported and relied on individual Chiefs and after some time they strategically created newer centers of power and gradually ousted the traditional structures. The British skillfully manipulated both these elites to maintain its indirect hold over the Zo territory.<sup>12</sup>

In effect, the British Superintendent and the Mizo Chiefs continued to rule as virtual dictators, and no organized protest was possible due to the support provided by the District Superintendent to the Chiefs. Towards the end of colonial rule, the resentment against the Chiefs had gained momentum all over the Lushai Hills. Western education, occupational security along with a sense of economic confidence and the exposure to the foreign worlds<sup>13</sup> made the first-generation youths confident to control their own destiny. They found it difficult to accept the traditional authority and the unquestioning obedience that it called for that is they wanted freedom from the chiefs and the customary discipline. This individualism was principally based on their superior academic qualification cemented by comfortable salaried jobs.<sup>14</sup> The formation of the Young Lushai Association in 1935 accelerated the anti-chief wave and also McCall's District Chiefs Durbar<sup>15</sup> (1941) helped shape the political consciousness in the Lushai Hills.

signal the sure possibility of securing government jobs or such other modern salaried occupation. This permanent 'paid-in-cash' ('pawisa' / 'sum chhuana' in Mizo) occupation seemed to be a ready-made solution to all ailments of semi-migratory tribes and Jhum economy.

<sup>10</sup> A.G. McCall, *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Mair Lucy, *New Nations*, London, Widenfeld & Nicholson, 1963.

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Ray, *Op. cit.*, 1982, p. 65; N.N. Acharyya, *Op. cit.*; Lalchungnunga, *Mizoram: Politics Of Regionalism and National Integration*, New Delhi, Reliance Publishing House, 1994, pp.35-36; C.R. Nag, *Mizo Polity And Political Modernisation*, Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1998, pp. 67-72.

<sup>13</sup> Similar trends took place in Africa where experience in Foreign Service during the wars increased the political consciousness among the people. The discontent of the returned soldiers led to the demands of the Africans for control of their own destiny. See, Mair Lucy, *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> A.C. Ray, *Op. cit.*, 1982, p.66.

<sup>15</sup> McCall's Durbar had a strong impact on politics in Mizoram; First, it united the Chiefs (traditional as well as ascribed) on a common platform, made them coordinate and voice their feelings against the British and also it led to a new found oppressive psychology among the chiefs. Second, the main objective of McCall was to keep down agitation of the commoners and New Elites and Neo-rich in Mizoram. But the British objective boomeranged and

It is pertinent to note that the Colonial Administrators and Colonial Missionaries though often at crossroads due to the very nature of the goal/missions towards the wild tribes of the North East of British India worked in a loose collaboration in the Lushai Hills. The Missionaries both Colonial and native were looked as those holding the key to the world of education, medicine and Heaven. The material progression that contact with any of these two sets of colonial power accelerated was very difficult for the Zo tribes to resist. The steady rise of salaried persons among the Zo *hnahtlak* introduced newer class categories in the British sense of social stratification and changed the traditional ordering of things and people's position which was largely birth based. The salaried class eventually shaped and positioned itself as the 'middle class', working class regular salaried persons with strong Christian morals and faith (*Pathian ring*).

## I

### Commonalities and Differences

#### Christianity and the Traditional Zo Way of Life

The annexation of the Zo territory by the British brought about some structural-functional changes. For instance, in the pre-colonial times the 'Traditional Elites'-the Lal (Chiefs), the Lalupas (Elders) and Village Officials were the medium through which, religion, culture, administration, jurisdiction, economy and politics were determined. The Village Officials like the Puithiam, the Sadawt and the Tlakpawi, who were different categories of priests, helped the Chief to perform the religious functions. The other officials like the Khawchhiar, the Tlangau, the Zalen, and the Ramhual etc. helped the Chief to perform administrative-judicial and socio-economic functions.<sup>16</sup> The twin process of the systematic replacement of the 'Traditional Elites' by the 'New Elites' i.e. the 'Black Coats' at the religious level and the retention of the Traditional Elites at the political-administrative level<sup>17</sup> took place as a result of colonial contact. However, this does not suggest that the traditional elites were totally uprooted or displaced from their positions of authority; it merely meant that a new center of power was created by the British to counter-check the hold of the Traditional Elites. The Lushai Hills under the Government of India Act, 1935, was administered as an 'Excluded Area', over which the State Government of Assam had no jurisdiction. The district was administered by the special powers of the Governor, there was no representative from the district to the State Legislature nor was any political activity permitted. As a result, the British Superintendent and the Mizo Chiefs continued their dictatorial rule. The end of colonial rule and the fear of the New Elites of reverting back to the Pre-Colonial system of administration of the Chiefs lead to a Commoners Movement, resulting in the birth of a political party called the Mizo Union on April 9, 1946.<sup>18</sup> This was one of the first instances of rebellion against tradition in the Mizo society, resulting in the permanent parties) at the political level. The British skillfully manipulated both these elites to maintain its indirect

the voices of commoners had to be given an outlet in the form of political self-assertion in the 1946 Durbar elections under A.R McDonald. The commoners were given right to elect their own representatives (A.C. Ray. *Ibid.*, 1982). The British objective also boomeranged at another level that is at the level of the unity among the two types of chiefs namely 'traditional chiefs' and 'ascribed chiefs'. The British did not apprehend the possibility of a unity between the two types of chiefs.

<sup>16</sup> Lalrimawia, "The Lushai Chiefs under the British Rule", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 3<sup>rd</sup> session, 1982; E. J. Thomas, *Ibid.*, 1993; A. C. Ray, *Mizoram*, New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1993, pp. 72-74; C.R. Nag, *Ibid.*, 1998, pp.15-21.

<sup>17</sup> Lalrimawia, *Ibid.*, 1982; E. J. Thomas, *Ibid.*, 1993; A.C. Ray, *Ibid.*, 1993; C.R. Nag, *Ibid.*, 1998, pp. 25-29.

<sup>18</sup> N. N. Acharyya, *Op.cit.*; C.R. Nag, *Ibid.* p. 72.

hold over the Zo territory.<sup>19</sup> The New Elites were the direct product of British colonialism and their existence totally depended on their allegiance to the foreign rulers. Naturally the nouveau elites eulogized and emulated the colonial masters and in doing so they became the 'mimicked man', the 'kala sahebs', the new privileged class in the Zo/Mizo society.

The two external symbols of power, namely the British Superintendent (Politico-Administrative head) and Christian Missionaries were considered to be superior<sup>20</sup> by the primitive tribes because of numerous reasons.<sup>21</sup> Most evidently because the British were able to defeat and subdue the most powerful and revered Zo Chiefs at the physical level; and partly because the Whiteman's way of life and religion delivered them from fear of evil, death and uncertainty at the psychological level. As evident from the names given by the Zo tribes to these colonial symbols for instance 'Lal man tu' (one who catches the chiefs) implying to the Superintendent; and 'Thlarau man tu' (one who catches the spirit) implying to the Missionaries. Christianity thus began to play an overwhelming role in Mizoram because of these internal and external factors.<sup>22</sup> Religion and Politics were thus considered superior, powerful and therefore more alluring, this led to the 'male-fying' of religion and politics as the domain of the superior and reserved for men. By the same token, the Mizo patriarchy under the impact of Christian traditions began to view economics and the notions of business and profit to be both sensuous and materialistic and linked them with the notions of original sin and sexuality. The arena of Economics was automatically ascribed a secondary existence and women being excluded from the realms of spirituality and politics became fit alongside the marginal groups i.e. the 'Vai' and the 'Poi' (Burmese) to occupy it<sup>23</sup> and form the 'Triad of the Marginals'.<sup>24</sup> The Zo patriarchy under the impact of Christian traditions began to view economics and the notions of business and profit to be both sensuous and materialistic and linked them with the notions of original sin and sexuality. The 'Nexus of Patriarchy' associated the 'Triad of the Marginals' - women, Vai's and Poi's (Burmese) with moral degradation, sin, immorality and everything signified by the word 'Khawvel' (worldly). The stereotyped depiction of women as greedy, materialistic, vain

<sup>19</sup> N. N. Acharyya, *Ibid.*; Lachungnunga, *Mizoram: Politics of Regionalism and national Integration*, New Delhi, Reliance Publishing House, 1994, pp.35-36; C.R. Nag, *Ibid.*, pp. 67-72.

<sup>20</sup> The Zo tribes used the word 'Sap' a corrupted form of the Hindustani word 'Sahib' to refer to the Europeans i.e. white men. B.B. Goswami observed during his field work and interaction with the local people in Mizoram that 'There is not a single Mizo either in urban or in rural areas who told that the Mizos in general can become better or superior than saps'; and also that 'the saps are better than the Mizos for they have golden hair, beautiful eyes, tall and white complexion' etc. For detailed reading on the construction and imagery of the Superiority of the white races in the minds and psychology of the Zo tribes Mizoram, see B.B Goswami, "Out-group from the Point of View of In-group: A Study of Mizos", in S. M. Dubey, *North East India: A Sociological Study*, 1978, pp. 99-110.

<sup>21</sup> B.B. Goswami in S.M. Dubey, *Ibid.*, pp. 104-109.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick. S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India*, Delhi, ISPCK., 1983, pp. 47-48.

<sup>23</sup> Gurpreet Mahajan, "A Gendered Diary: Subject Dharma Kumar", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (June 3, 2000), p. 1899, gives a similar explanation for the exclusion of women from the realms of spirituality. My argument carries forward Mahajan's lines and locates the ultimate option left for the women in the Mizo society i.e. the realms of economics, which according to the Mizo patriarchy is both sensuous, and materialistic. Typically signified by the word 'Khawvel' (worldly).

<sup>24</sup> Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, "Politics of Silencing: Echoes of the Margins from Mizoram", *Indian Journal of Political Science (IJPS)*, Vol. LXII, No. 4, (Oct.- Dec., 2007); Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, "Emergence of Women from 'Private' to 'Public': A Narrative of Power Politics from Mizoram", *Journal of International Women's Studies*. Bridge-water, Vol. No. 9, (3 May 2008a); Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, "Manufacturing of Spaces: The 'Others' in Zo/Mizo Politics", *South Asian Journal of Socio-Political Studies (SAJOSPS)*. Vol.9, No.1, (July-December, 2008b); Anup Shekhar Chakraborty, "Mustering Empowerment experiences from Mizoram: A Leap from 'Private' to 'Public' Living Spaces", *Global South SEPHIS e-magazine*. Vol.4, No.4, (July, 2008c).

and immoral (sexual) and the projection of Vai's as cunning, shrewd, lustful and the Poi's as greedy, rich and foolish in most of the folktales and sayings reflect the underlying patriarchal biases acting against the 'Triad'. The attitude of placing women at the periphery in the post-colonial situation can be traced to these internal factors and external factors.

Ever since the Welsh missionaries came to Mizoram in 1894; Christianity, in some form, brought about 'temporal relief' to women<sup>25</sup> through the systematic decline of the traditional symbols of patriarchy namely, the Zawlbuk<sup>26</sup> and the Chieftainship.<sup>27</sup> The oppressed section passively welcomed the change and failed to understand the underlying politics of proselytization. The Colonizers initially supported the cause of women and the marginal; but once the mission of proselytization was achieved, the cause of women and marginal was systematically sidelined. The freedom from tradition was temporal; it was no more than eyewash and did not help in changing in the positionality of women, children and the minority tribes and other marginalized groups in the Zo society. Further reaffirming the argument that sole motive of the British Raj was not just to encourage missionary interventions but largely to tame the wild tribes of the frontier regions and annex their land so as to serve the commercial interests of the British Tea Plantations in the North- East of India.<sup>28</sup>

The missionaries modified the teachings of the Gospel and presented a Customized-Localized Gospel<sup>29</sup> to suit the understandings of the primitive tribes. For instance, the missionaries and the New Elites/ native new converts i.e. the Black Coats often equated Pu Pawla with St. Paul who had a similar function in the Christian belief system. The Missionaries and the 'Black-coats', in order to win over the natives, also began to simultaneously equate 'Pathian' (the traditional Mizo/Zo male divinity of the heavens) with the 'image' of the Biblical 'God' (Father) of the Trinity; and projected Jesus as the son ('Fa-pa') of 'Pathian' etc. in order to suit the sensibilities of the Zo tribes. There were plethora of reasons for the passive acceptance of the Gospel by the

<sup>25</sup> Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Crab Theology: A Critique of Patriarchy-Cultural Degradation and Empowerment of Mizo Women*, Episcopal Divinity School, UMI Dissertation Services, Michigan, A. Bell & Howell Company, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> The 'Zawlbuk' was the male dormitory and symbolized male hegemony and vigour in the Mizo society. It was one of the pillars that upheld the chieftainship in traditional Mizo society; however, it was not practiced among all the Zo tribes. The members or the 'Tlangvals' (boys, men) of the Zawlbuk could act in a high-handed manner for instance, if a girl of the village refused to entertain these men during the ritualized practice of 'Nula-rim'. They would go in a group and shake the posts or the stilts of the hut in which the girl and her family lived till it fell down. This practice was known as 'Bang Sawi' and not even the Chief could intervene; to avoid such social embarrassment no girl dared to displease her suitors during the 'Tlaileng' (evening stroll) 'Nula-rim' process. Westernization contributed to its decline and eventual extinction from the Mizo society.

<sup>27</sup> Lalrimawia, *Op. cit.*, 1982; Lalrimawia, "A Brief Survey of the Administrative Development in the Lushai Hills (1890-1947)", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 4<sup>th</sup> session, 1983; N. Chatterji, *The Mizo chief & his Administration*, Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 1975; Sangkima, "Zawlbuk and Its Abolition: A Significant Event in the History of the Mizos", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 8<sup>th</sup> session, 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Zairema, *God's Miracle in Mizoram (Glimpse of Christian work among Head-Hunters)*, Aizawl, Mizoram, Synod Press, 1978, p.1; B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, H.F. Howard, & C.G.H. Allen, (ed.), *Gazetteer of Bengal & North-East India*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1979, (2001); Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram Encyclopaedia*, Vol. I, Bombay, Jaico Publishing House, 1990, p.144.

<sup>29</sup> I use this term to stress on the indigenization of the Christianity into the Mizo belief system and vice versa, i.e. Christianity as practices and preached in Mizoram. (Stress intended to include all tribes professing Christianity in Mizoram: A.S.C). I owe this insight on the tactics of indigenization of Christianity & its usefulness on Mizo society, identity etc. to my supervisor Dr. Bonita Aleaz, Reader, Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta. For a detailed reading on uniqueness of Mizo Christianity, see, Lalrinawmi Ralte, Chapter-VII, "Dance: An Example of Crab Theology", *Op. cit.*, 1993, pp. 193-209.

marginalized sections and the active resistance of the hegemonic group i.e. the 'Traditional Elites' to defend their power within the traditional fold. The whole process of interpreting the Gospel according to local situations proved very useful to the western missionaries and as a result the erstwhile enemies could be easily befriended i.e. the Chiefs and the Elders themselves began to convert.

Localization of the Gospel contributed to dual process of the assimilation of the chauvinistic traditional Zo practices into the already male centric Christian religion<sup>30</sup> and vice versa. There were many commonalities as well as differences in the outlook of Christianity and the traditional Zo way of life.<sup>31</sup> The missionaries sidelined the cause of women and the marginalized as they found this strategy to be more useful for their goal of mass proselytization. In order to gain the confidence and support of the patriarchal mindset, the church introduced Victorian morality, which became the guiding beacon for judging everyday Mizo social relations. Thus in a way the language of the mission became sexualized and gendered<sup>32</sup> fusing the elements of patriarchal chauvinism inherent in the Mizo socio-religious system with that of the patriarchal biases in the Judeo-Christian traditions.

The introduction of Christianity and the internalization of the abstracts from the Old Testament like the story of the Creation-Genesis, the fall from Eden and Original Sin etc. further justified the repression of women. Thus controlling the sexuality of women and mapping their spatial domain<sup>33</sup> became the holy goal of the Zo Christian world. In other words notions of spirituality, divinity and God<sup>34</sup> began to be used as weapons to oppress Mizo women. Language (spoken words) and symbols (dress code and colours) were used as weapons to show Zo/Mizo women their spatial position and inferior status in the social hierarchy. For instance, men in the Zo/Mizo society consider 'puanfen' (skirts) to be the symbol of femininity i.e. inferior and make it a point never to wash 'skirts', whatever the situation be, this is true for male domestic helpers as well. Men in the Mizo society, usually try to dictate terms to their women, as to what they wear, whom to marry etc.<sup>35</sup> Women in the Mizo society has been ascribed the role of an 'out-let' (thereby reduced to the position of the sexual organs) to creation but not the status of a procreator, for such a revered position is reserved only for the male-the vigour,

<sup>30</sup> Christianity as a religion is male centric it moves around the pivot of the Trinity- the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Christianity revolves around the 'Father-Son Axis' and this axis gets filtered into the individual family system itself. Thus the male gets to play a more prominent role while the female get to play a subservient role. In case of the Mizo society this filtering of the 'Father-Son Axis' psychology led to the further male-ifying of the already male society.

<sup>31</sup> Sangkima, "Position & Status of Women in the Traditional Mizo Society", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 9<sup>th</sup> session, 1988; Rami Sena Samuelson, *The Mizo People: Cultural Analysis of life in a Mizo village in the 1980s*, Ann Arbor, U.S.A, University of San Francisco, UMI, 1990, p. 22; Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op. cit.*, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Shelly Mathews, *First Converts- Rich Pagan Women & the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism & Christianity*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> I owe this insight to Professor Rudo B. Gaidzanwa. 'Silence becomes useful to both- those who inflict it as well as those on whom it is inflicted. That is to say 'silence' becomes a weapon for male hegemony (maintained through 'Fear Psychosis') and at the same time it also becomes a weapon for women in her own domain- the household, the private arena. (At the CODESRIA/SEPHIS Extended Workshop, Dakar, 2006). Emphasis added: A.S.C

<sup>34</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father- Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, U.S.A, Beacon Press Daly, 1973, pp.19-20.

<sup>35</sup> For instance wearing of trousers (men's clothing) is scorned, so is the wearing of salwar kameez ('Vaikawr', Indian dress). Likewise marrying a 'Vai' leads to social ostracization and stigmatization of the children ('Vai fa').

the powerful *Pasaltha*. It was for this reason also that the men in the Mizo society consciously and unconsciously treated women as a sexual being whose urges need to be repressed and directed.

Indigenous Zo religion, which revered women deities like '*Khuanu*' amidst the male god - '*Pathian*' and a neutral divinity - '*Khuavang*', was completely erased.<sup>36</sup> The role of women attaining or being capable of attaining divinity was totally wiped-out by Christianity, which prescribed and reserved such positions 'Only for Men'<sup>37</sup>, and this resulted in 'God', being imagined and perceived only as male.<sup>38</sup> This exclusion of women resulted in a systematic distortion of all the symbols of Christian theology by patriarchal bias.<sup>39</sup> Christianity sustained patriarchal elements in the Zo/Mizo society and erased the matriarchal elements in order to maintain the hold of patriarchy (both traditional & new) and thereby, sustain the British rule. Masculinity was equated with sexual activity and knowledge, while femininity was equated with passivity and innocence.<sup>40</sup> Thus women's 'subordination' or 'passivity' and 'sexuality' or 'innocence' determined the Zo way of life both on earth and after, either overtly or covertly. The whole process of undermining women results in what Ralte (1993) calls de-humanization of women and the inherent contradictions have compelled women to live in a sort of schizophrenic dilemma. However it would be unfair to blame the impact of westernization in toto for the entire crisis in the Zo/Mizo society, the British through Christianity merely reinforced Mizo laws and code of conducts especially moral laws as is evident from the Chin Hills Regulations of 1896.

The transition from the indigenous traditional religion to Christianity had both liberating as well as oppressing effects on women and the marginalized sections of the Mizo society.<sup>41</sup> Most writers focus on the positive effect of proselytization on the primitive Zo tribes and turn a blind eye on the wholesale slaughter of the indigenous Zo/Mizo culture.<sup>42</sup> No doubt Christianity accelerated the momentum of change in the Mizo society from a primitive stage economy to a modern one and had evangelical effects on the Mizo society ushering in the high tide of western enlightenment, rationality, education -scientific temper, morality, politics, and the power to read and internalize the 'Holy Gospel'. It however failed to end the conservative attitudes and bring about a change in the position of women and the marginalized.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>36</sup> L.H. Chhangte, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, Bombay, GLS Press/ Serkawn, Lunglei, Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987, pp. 32-34; Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op.cit.*, pp.130-131.

<sup>37</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, & John. L. Esposito, (ed.), *Daughters of Abraham- Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity & Islam*, Gainesville, U.S.A, University Press of Florida, 2001, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether in Haddad & Esposito, *Ibid.*, 2001, pp. 65-80.

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, Boston, Boston Press, 1993.

<sup>40</sup> Foreman, Martin Foreman, (ed.), *AIDS and Men: Taking Risks or Taking Responsibility?*, London, Panos Institute and Zed Books, 1998, p.31.

<sup>41</sup> Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op.cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Frederick. S. Downs, *Op. cit.* 1983, pp.14-15; E. J. Thomas, *Op.cit.*,1993; Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op. cit.*

## II

### The Spread of Christianity

#### The Revivals in the Lushai/ Mizo Hills

The spread of Christianity in the Mizo Hills witnessed many revivals: 1906,1913,1918, 1930,1935, 1948,1984, 1988 and 1990; 'spontaneous dancing and singing' ('*HlimRui*') marked these revivals. Women played a significant role in the display of uninhibited dance in their calling for the divine. Fanon's understanding of 'dance as liberation for the colonized' maybe employed to understand the reasons why Mizo women who in normal everyday situations play such a timid role of silent spectators take refuge to uninhibited display of dance during these revivals and spiritual healings. Change in the Mizo society has been considered to be a change for convenience rather than progress and naturally it has been caught in the dilemma of tradition and modernity. For instance, changes in the laws of Inheritance,<sup>44</sup> which can be considered to be reflective of modern democracy culminating in the new found 'Economic independence' of women, has not resulted in changing the power relations in the Mizo society. The Mizo *Hnam Dan*<sup>45</sup> i.e. traditional laws continue to dictate the terms of Marriage price,<sup>46</sup> dowry and divorce. Even though Mizo women enjoyed considerable freedom<sup>47</sup> in *Nula-rim* (courting), marriage, sex, and divorce, they somewhat played a muted role when it came to the matters of property, decision-making, and politics. These freedoms granted to Mizo women are not backed by evangelical motives but are accepted merely for the fact that they are advantageous to men.<sup>48</sup> Women face challenges even in the field of the Mission and find it difficult to break the glass ceiling even in the field of being ordained.

In order to gain the confidence and support of the patriarchal mindset, the church introduced 'Victorian morality', which became the guiding beacon for judging everyday Zo/Mizo social relations. Thus in a way, the language of the mission, fused the elements of patriarchal chauvinism inherent in the Mizo socio-religious system, with that of the patriarchal biases in the Judeo-Christian traditions. The internalization of the Bible, for instance, 'the story of the Creation', 'the fall from Eden', 'Original Sin', 'stereotypical depictions of the Jews' etc. further justified the repression of women in particular, and the marginals in general. Controlling the sexuality and mapping the spatial domain<sup>49</sup> of the 'Triad of the Marginals' thus became the

<sup>44</sup> Women have the right to inheritance under the Lushai District Act, No.1, 1956 (Inheritance of Property). A daughter or a wife can inherit property only if the deceased has no heir on the male side. Women, however, are entitled to their own property i.e. the dowry, called 'thuum', which she gets during her marriage from her parents. A written 'will' formally executed may now confer woman the right to inherit the family property.

<sup>45</sup> The traditional laws or the 'Mizo Hnam Dan' are a novel attempt of combining the British laws and the traditional Kuki-Chin-Lushai customary laws. They were compiled by B.C Carey and famously known as the Chin Hills Regulations of 1896.

<sup>46</sup> The Indian Christian Marriage act is not applicable in Mizoram and the customary law has fixed the bride price at rupees 420/- reducing women to a cheap purchasable commodity.

<sup>47</sup> This freedom however does not suggest that the terms of justice for men and women are equal nor does it enable women to enjoy an advantaged position in the Mizo social system. It basically provides freedom of choice as determined by the patriarchy. This has to be understood in the light of the Engelsian debate. I owe this insight to Dr. Samita Sen, Reader, then associated with the Department of History, University of Calcutta. (At the CODESRIA/ SEPHIS Extended Workshop, Dakar, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> E. J. Thomas, *Op. cit.*, p.16.

<sup>49</sup> I owe this insight to Professor Rudo B. Gaidzanwa. 'Silence becomes useful to both- those who inflict it as well as

holy goal of the Zo Christian society. In other words, notions of spirituality, divinity and God<sup>1</sup> began to be used as weapons to oppress women.

The inherent contradictions between 'tradition and modernity' in the Zo society continue to undermine the very existence of women and the marginalized. For instance, the criteria requisite for entry into heaven (*Pialral*) in the Traditional Mizo society required that men (married or single) should have sex with as many women as possible during one's lifetime for attaining '*Pialral*' in the case of women, it was just the opposite. Women had to preserve her virginity and in case she lied about her sexual purity she would anyway be caught by Pu Pawla, who like St. Paul [Peter] would be waiting at the gates of '*Pialral*' (heaven) and detect all illegal entry. Here, it must be noted that no single women (even if virgin) could enter heaven alone, she was to be escorted either by her father or husband i.e. male relations because women were believed to be directionless, just like the crab and therefore would lose her way. Moreover, spinsterhood was not respected and marriage was a norm expected for women and the pivot around which the life of women revolved.<sup>2</sup>

Proselytization replaced indigenous way of life including past time games, everyday life activities such as evening chats/gossips among peer groups of both sexes etc., by activities like attending Sunday schools, choir practices, church services etc. The conversion to Christianity has added another dimension to contradictions at the level of 'social conduct' and 'private conduct'. The Zo/Mizo society today is in a dilemma whether to opt for the glitters of the contemporary globalized liberal societies or to tread the path of the Holy Gospel and strive for the life beyond or strike a balance between the two. This dilemma is specially found among the young educated youths who have completed their education in other states of India and have returned back to Mizoram to work in their home state. It becomes very difficult for the Zo/Mizo youths to digest the dictates of the church and the moral police especially, when it comes to dress code and watching television programmes etc. There are instances where the church has imposed restrictions<sup>3</sup> on inter-community relationships, using the internet for chatting, surfing (pornographic material), listening to 'heavy metal' music etc.

### III

#### Indigenization and Emergence of Zo Christianity

Christianity manifests itself very differently in different places conditioned by specific social realities. The Christian experience among each of the Zo tribes is needless to say very different clannish, intra-tribal, inter-tribal, animistic/traditional practices coupled with cartographic zoning of the Zo people have largely affected the moorings to the same. Christianity amidst the ostensible homogeneity among the Zo *hnahtlak* is veritably fragmented. Heterogeneity with a projected homogeneity is one of the marked paradoxes of Christianity among the Zo *hnahtlak*.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Daly, *Op.cit.*, pp.19- 20.

<sup>2</sup> Lalrinawmi Ralte, *Op. cit.* pp. 25-29, 43-49.

<sup>3</sup> I consider the voyeuristic attitude of the church and its agencies to be a contributory factor to the rapidly increasing rate of corruption, drug abuse and sexual liaisons in the Mizo/Zo society. 'People want a way out of the oppressive restrictive social system' and the easiest route to flow away into the realms of fantasy is by taking refuge to drugs (keeping in mind the regions easy proximity to the international drug smuggling routes) and other means to enjoy the life they have been denied by the moral police.

The Cartographic zoning for instance injected a sense of marked difference among Zo tribes in the region. The Welsh Presbyterian actively worked among the Northern tribes while the London Baptist Missionary Society worked among the Southern tribes. It is very interesting to note that the cartographic zoning also affected the projection and degree of belief in Christianity for instance Northerners began to stereotype Southerners as 'less believers'; and Southerners stereotyped the northern Christians as 'less believers' while retaining and claiming the position of 'strong believers' for their respective tribes.

The denominational divide also worked very interesting complexities among the Zo Christians. For instance, Roman Catholics are considered to be non-Christian in belief system because of the relegated position of Mary; and interestingly the localized Christianity as practiced among the Zo does not proscribe divinity to women.

It is interesting to note that '*Being a Zo*' and '*Being a Christian*' are the two issues around which religious identity politics in Mizoram is developed. The first issue has problems of parameters of definitions and it remains contested. While the second issue has elements of experientialness embedded to it as evident from the casual everyday use of language '*Khristiannilo in an hrethiamlovang*' ('Non-Christians will not be able to understand') to brush side those who do not belong to the Church as not being able to understand the Bible and its teachings. Both these issues are projected in the state-building process of an '*Ideal Zo Christian State*'. The use of traditional musical instruments like the *Khuang* (Burmese brass bell), alongside western instruments like the guitar or the option of wearing of traditional '*puanchei*' (wrap around worn by Mizo women) for Zo/Mizo women as an alternate to the wedding gown as many such examples to show the marked indigenization of the practices of Zo Christianity. The Whiteman's way of life and religion<sup>4</sup> delivered the tribes from fear of evil, death and uncertainty of a war prone migratory life at the psychological level.<sup>5</sup> 'Religion and Politics' thus began to play an overwhelming role in Mizoram<sup>6</sup> and began to be considered superior, powerful and therefore more alluring.

A great force in the process of Zo integration has been the Christian faith, which in fifty years turned Mizoram and many Zo inhabited areas into a Christian land. The newly zealous Zo converts took it as their privileged burden to tell the Good News to their kindred tribes and many had volunteered to go to the heathen Zo areas to preach the Gospel. These apostle-like preachers carried the good tidings along with new Christian hymns in the Lushai dialect, which the pioneer missionaries employed as a vehicle to spread the Gospel. As a result, Lushai (*Duhlian*) dialect quickly developed into a rich language to become an effective instrument for spreading the gospel and Zo integration. The first Bible translation and many other pioneering publications among the Zo tribes were in Lushai that subsequently came to be known as the 'Mizo language', a language that became the link language of the Zo people. Wherever Zo preachers carried the Gospel and new churches were planted, they also implanted Zo-ness, thus paving the way for a re-unification. Therefore, next to their common ethnic root, Christianity has become the most important bonding force of the Zo people. A 'Zo' professing any other

<sup>4</sup> David Hardiman, "Healing, Medical Power and the Poor: Contests in Tribal India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, (21-27 April 2007), pp.1404-1408. Also See, George Mark Moares, *A History of Christianity in India: From early times to St. Francis Xavier A.D 52- 1542*, Vol. I, Bombay, P.C Manaktala & Sons Private Ltd., 1964, pp. 246-264.

<sup>5</sup> R.A. Lorrain, *Op. cit.* 1912, pp. 222-224.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick. S. Downs, *Op. cit.*, 1983, pp. 47-48.

faith except the traditional religion (animism) is considered by the majority Zo Christians as not only a renegade but an alien. Being a Zo and a Christian is like a coin with two faces.

The Church's influence is really deep and daily life is encircled by it. The church has become Mizosised through *ruathre* (community feasting) and '*zaileh lam*' (song and dances). Zaliana observes:

Alongside religion, the 'Denominational' factor has greatly influenced the Zo/Mizo politics. The undivided Aizawl district had a more welcoming attitude. While in the south (*chhim*) one had to have a local network or local connections to have a footing into the politics of that region. Most of the political leaders in Mizoram come from *Chhim* (southern). Excluding Lalthanhawla most leaders from Ch. Chhunga, Dengthuama, Laldenga, T. Sailo and others all had *Chhim* (southern) links and were under London Baptist influence. They also were the first set of Mizos to come under the influence of western education, religion and politics.<sup>7</sup>

The influence of religion can also help understand why the early leaders decided to do away the clannish affiliations and its markers for creating an egalitarian political identity cutting across clan and sub-tribe identity. For instance, politicians and people at large in Mizoram hardly use their clan names or tribe names and instead use their first names. Politics in order to survive and create an '*Ideal Zo Christian State*', therefore crucified clannish identity and its markers at the altar because 'if there is no crucifixion there is no rising'.<sup>8</sup> The church leaders in turn maintain a dignified, respectable and non-partisan stand. It is because of the role of the Church and its agencies that the Election Commission labelled Mizoram as a role model for other states in India. Humor at times reflects the societal actuality for instance a popular aphorism: '*Mizoram-ah chuan Sawrkar a lalber a, Kohhran a thuber*' ('In Mizoram the Government is the highest authority, and the Church has the final say') well sums up the dominance of the Church and its agencies. The government and the bureaucracy have not been able to touch the masses as the Church. The elites try to go with the tide and without any spirituality they enter the Church activities in order to gain popularity and mass appeal. So in short, they dictate terms in their interest through the church.<sup>9</sup> Christianity spread like forest fire in Mizoram after the 60s MNF rebellion precisely because the post-rebellion psychological trauma compelled people take refuge in culture and religion in order to find solace. The post-rebellion trauma was exploited by the evangelists to convert because to convert more people to the fold of Christianity meant a more secured life for the evangelist in the next world.<sup>10</sup> Similarly there was a growth in music and education in the post-rebellion times. The growth and rise of music and education can be seen as 'healing' the Zo/Mizo society. Christianity, Education, Music, in other words, "Religion" and "Culture" became important markers of *Zo Identity*. The predominance of religion in *Zomi* politics reflects itself through the constant references made to God (*Pathian*). Similarly, the traces of nationhood reflect from the stress on the geographic locationality of the *Zomi* territory.

<sup>7</sup> Pu Zaliana, Personal Interview, Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Pu Zaliana, Personal Interview, Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Pi Vanramchhuangi. *Personal Interview. Op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Pu Lallianchhunga (Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University), Personal Interview, Chaltlang Campus, Aizawl, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2008.

#### IV

##### Contestations over the Idea of Zo Christianity

Healing and spirituality have transcendental commonalities and links. The experience of proselytization and the waves of revivalist movements coupled with the lament for the loss of a nostalgic past resulted in the emergence of paradoxes in Christianity among the Zo people. The emergence of faith healers or '*khoithei dam thei*', and self-styled free churches are interesting off shoots of Zo Christianity.

The open reception that the 'wild tribes' gave to the alien region infused enthusiasm in the Colonial Administrators who in turn began to employ suitable tactical moves to suit the psychology of the tribes and their understanding of the divine. For instance, the introduction of the '*Customised-Localised Gospel*' facilitated to an extent the unification of the different warring clans under a common 'Lushai' identity and common '*Duhlian*' dialect in the Zo/Mizo Hills. The introduction of the '*Localised Gospel*' was not easy for the Missionaries as is evident from the B.M.S. Report presented by R.A. Lorrain in 1913 where he mentions:

Our first message as soon as we could speak the language was a Saviour from Sin. But the people had no sense of sin and felt no need for a Saviour. ... We proclaimed Jesus as a vanquisher of the devil... This to the Lushais was "Good News" indeed and exactly met with great need.

The Christian Church rendered three major services among the tribes of the region: first, it liberated the tribes from the fear of evils spirits and from the evils of head-hunting and continuous war-fare and blood-revenge; second, it established centres of education and; third, it provided extensive medical service at a time when no Government or other private agency bothered about the tribals.<sup>11</sup> Christianity, through the weapons of Education and Medicine, attracted the savages, mostly in the case of the Zo Hills as is evident from the accounts of Missionaries like Lorrain ((1912)1988). The attraction to 'Western Medicine', on the part of the 'wild tribes' can be rationalised through the logic of 'Social healing' and 'physical healing'.<sup>12</sup> Medicine brought about emancipation from 'pain' which had always been the innate desire of the tribes lacking indigenous medicinal knowledge. For instance, the Zo/Mizo tribes had limited knowledge of 'herbs and cure', and relied more on the 'ritualised nature of treatment', that is sacrifices and appeasing evil spirits/demons.<sup>13</sup> These 'ritualised treatment' were slow and the success rate were poor. On the other hand western medical science provided instant remedy to physical ailments. Naturally, western medicine began to have large following and the Missionaries found this faith and ready acceptance of 'western Medicine' to expand their cause. For instance, D.E Jones in the 1<sup>st</sup> Years Reports mentions that 'Some are ready to believe in Christ if they will be kept from illnesses'. And the attraction to 'Education' can be rationalised through the logic of the incentives added to the education process in the initial stages. For instance, Lorrain ((1912) 1988) mentions about the 'free food', 'free lodgings' etc. provided to the tribes as incentives to attract them to schools. Such incentives like 'free food', 'free shelters' would mean great things for tribals residing in the remote inaccessible hilly terrain without a permanent economy and productive agricultural know how.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Fuchs, *The Aboriginal Tribes of India*. London/Madras, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1973, p.236.

<sup>12</sup> George Mark Moares, *Op. cit.*, 1964.

<sup>13</sup> See, G.H. Loch's letter to R.A. Lorrain, dated 18 April 1911 cited in R.A. Lorrain, *Op. cit.*, 1912, (1988), p.262.

The most important factor that contributed to the popularity of Christianity among the Zo tribes was the psychological emancipation that it promised. These tribes were not 'demon worshippers' but 'demon appeasers' as is evident from their rituals and practices. The Gospel with message of a powerful male God and promise of emancipation from pain not just in this life but also the next attracted the wild tribes all the more. Naturally the Missionaries were successful in winning the confidence of the tribes of the region. The Khasis were the first among the tribes of the region to have converted to Christianity way back in 1812-13 and the Missionary activities were initiated in the Naga Hills in 1840s and in the Zo/Mizo/Lushai Hills in 1894-95.<sup>14</sup> In this sense of time frame the Zo/Mizo were late arrivals to the Evangelical missions. However, the success rate in the Zo Hills has been the maximum in terms of mass conversions.

The spread of Christianity in the Zo Hills was partly due to the waves of revivalism<sup>15</sup> which, paradoxically, converted more people in a wave than could be done by sustained proselytization. In these revivalist movements large number of people would profess their oracle-like powers. There would be great mass dancing, with drum beats, hysterical singing of hymns and sometimes, also bouts of *Zu* (rice beer) drinking. These moves made Christianity more adoptable to the people with their age-old superstitions, habits and customs, and provided the meeting grounds of the new religion with the old animism, drawing more and more people to the new faith.<sup>16</sup> The missionaries by highlighting the issues of exploitation, oppression and domination and by addressing the issues of health, disease, education and language, tried to construct or help construct the contrasting nature of tribal-'non-tribal' identity/culture. The Missionaries and the Colonial Raj thus helped in the construction or imagination of a distinct tribal identity. All geared to accelerate the dual process of proselytization of tribes and taming of the 'head-hunters' so as to benefit their larger interests that is 'Tea Gardens (Tea Industry)' and the security of 'its people' (natives; and immigrant labourers (who today form the category of 'Tea-Tribes') in the adjoining territories of the Raj.

The colonial encounter contributed towards the process of injecting Christian code of life into the core body of the *Nexus of Patriarchy* among the Zo/Mizo<sup>17</sup> tribes. The resultant effect of which was that the nostalgia of a romanticised past, crowded by visions of a once brave and honourable people, who practiced the code of '*tlawmngaihna*'<sup>18</sup> in letter and spirit, began to be strongly nurtured, alongside the notion of a progressive and enlightened Christian society. The desire to create an *Ideal Zo Christian State* has been strongly portrayed and at times has led to the voyeuristic intervention of the church and its agencies in both the private and public

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Fuchs, *Op. cit.*, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> The administration and the mission were both equally adverse to revivalism. McCall thought that the periodic revivalist movements showed that the Lushais had a tendency to fall back upon irresponsible behaviour. He suggested that the mission should be able to keep these movements under control. Much would depend "upon the ability of the Missionaries and their supporters to correlate Christianity and Lushai agriculture, homes, industry, schools and in fact and every practical experience of Lushai life. This task will be difficult. But if the Mission do fail, great lawlessness may prevail". A.G. McCall, *Op. cit.*, 1949. (2003), pp. 49, 228.

<sup>16</sup> A.C. Ray, *Op. cit.* 1982, pp.60-61.

<sup>17</sup> The great debate on whether to be called 'Mizo' or 'Zomi' has shadowed the politics of identity building in Mizoram for a long time. The general accepted term to refer to their identity is '*Zofate*' or '*Zo hnahthlak*' (children of the Zo people).

<sup>18</sup> Unconditioned service to people or community based on 'good will', sympathy, empathy, courage and honour.

arena. The dual operation of Conversion and Colonialism introduced marked structural and functional changes in the everyday life of Zo/Mizo society.<sup>19</sup>

In 1951, during a Revivalist Movement in an obscure village 'Buallawn', a local headman fell into a trance, and had a vision that persuaded him that the Zo/Mizo were Jews and descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel.<sup>20</sup> A group of believers then set off on foot for the *Promised Land*, thinking it might be just over the horizon. Some went north, to see a train for the first time and got as far as Assam the neighbouring Indian state. Others went northeast and reached Nagaland. No one made it to Israel, but the story of the vision and the abortive journey to 'Zion' continues to inspire believers. The belief in the vision eventually led to the formation of a Mizo Israel Zionist Organisation (MIZO) in 1974 which sought the Israeli Premier to recognise their 'new-found identity'. Eversince, there has been a substantial following of the new found identity. The 1991 Census records 792 Jews in Mizoram and 373 in Manipur, and lists another 497 persons under "Enoka Israel" living in the area aptly named 'Salem Veng'. What is interesting about this is the "socio-political manifestation of the Zo/Mizo search for identity which reinforces their regional feeling to a great extent".<sup>21</sup>

The Zo Re-unification Organization (ZORO) demanded recognition of the Zo/Mizo scattered in various states of India and neighbouring countries as one 'ethnic race' and unite all Zo/Mizo under one umbrella. The demand was supported by the 'Mizo National Front' and the 'People's Conference Party' at different times.<sup>22</sup> This Zo-Reunification movement was paralleled by a movement to unite the Zo/Mizo with the state of Israel. Controversy exists, however, as to when exactly the Zo/Mizo first claimed ancestry from a lost tribe of Israel. What is known is that in the 50s, a villager in Northern Mizoram named Kawlavisioned that 'an angel revealed to him that the Zo/Mizo were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel and should return to the land of their forefathers.' Kawla developed a following and gradually the belief evolved among some of his followers that the Mizo should not only return to their ancestral land, but also practice their ancestral faith of Judaism.

The Zo/Mizo attracted special attention of a Jewish Rabbi, Eliyahu Avichail of Jerusalem, who had set up an organisation in 1975 called Amishav, to seek the return of the descendants of the lost tribes to Israel. Upon hearing the claim of the Zo/Mizo, the Rabbi began to teach them the rudiments of the Jewish faith, and prepare them for their return to Israel. Gradually a movement towards embracing Jewish practices grew and by 2003, thousands of Zo/Mizo had embraced the Jewish faith and/or had moved to Israel.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Frederick. S. Downs, *Op. cit.*, 1983, pp.14-15; E.J. Thomas, *Op.cit.*, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> S. K. Mukherjee, "Jewish Movement in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram", in M.N. Karna (ed.), *Social Movements in the North-East India*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing Company/NEICSSR, Shillong, 1998, pp.189-198.

<sup>21</sup> Lalchungnunga, *Op.cit.*, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> For details See, Prasun Sonawalkar, "Uncertainty Grips Mizoram Govt", The Times of India News Service, Guwahati, 07 June, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 08 June 1990; *The Times of India* "JD decision shocks Mizoram", The Times of India News Service, Aizawl, 16 June, New Delhi, 17 June, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> Despite the lack of scientific evidences Israel is keen to bring Bene Menashe back to Israel. One of the evident reasons being that Israel is facing crisis of human resources and declining birth rate has raised its difficulties. The current birth rate in Israel is far below that of Palestine which has the highest birth rate in the world. It means Israelis fear to be dominated by growing Palestinian population in the coming decades. The Zo/Mizo are also suffering from an identity crisis in India. The protracted insurgency and the disgruntled-ness over the post-Peace situation made it a breeding ground for spiritual adventurers offering salvation, identity and the prospect of emigration and riches abroad. Given all these facts, it cannot be refuted that Israel is expanding its occupation, and involving other



The Chhinlung Israel People's Convention (CIPC)<sup>24</sup> founded by Lalchanhima Sailo<sup>25</sup> in 1994 uniquely combined two claims: one that the Zo/Mizo were the 'Lost Tribes of Israel' and the second, a call for independence. In 1994, the Centenary year of the first Christian Missionary visit to Mizoram, Lalchanhima Sailo met an old Mizo Sabbath observer Sanzoa, who strongly believed in the 'Israel Theory' and had always, preached that the children of Israel should be unified. Under his inspiration, Sailo decided to publish an advertisement in the newspaper calling all Zo/Mizo who believed they were the children of Israel to gather together.

Initially the CIPC called for establishing a 'State Human Rights Commission' in Mizoram and distributed magnetic cassettes purporting the claim of the Zo/Mizo as the 'Lost Tribe of Israel'. It campaigned against the Indian government on several economic issues and demanded wavier on loans made to the state of Mizoram. It protested against the inundation of Zo/Mizo territory by dams built across the border in Bangladesh and asked the Indian government to demand compensation. It helped refugees from Myanmar settle in Mizoram and in the rest of India and Zo/Mizo who wanted to move to Israel. The CIPC in 1994 submitted a thirty-page memorandum to the United Nations, India, Israel and a number of other countries. The memorandum demanded recognition of the Zo/Mizo as a lost tribe of Israel, on the basis of oral history, and political independence and unification of all Mizo areas in India and neighbouring countries. It also claimed that the Mizo were never part of British India or Burma as they had lived in a legally defined, 'excluded area' divided arbitrarily by the British and that as a separate administrative area it had a right to independence when the British de-colonised the South Asia region. The popularity of the CIPC surged after 1998, when the CIPC organised its 'identity referendum' in which thousands of Zo/Mizo from the adjoining areas voted in favour of the CIPCs 'Lost Tribe' identity and the call for independence and unification of the *Zo hnahtlak*.

As the CIPC grew, a nexus developed between its belief in descent from a lost tribe of Israel and Jewish movements.<sup>26</sup> Lalchanhima Sailo maintained a warm relationship with Rabbi Avichail and the Israeli embassy which eased the process of immigration for the Mizo to Israel.<sup>27</sup>

nations also in this game. New Delhi's 'don't disturb them' policy unfortunately fails to see the hidden agenda of the Zionists.

<sup>24</sup> The Chhinlung-Israel Peoples Convention is campaigning across the state to change the name of the Mizo tribe to Chhinlung-Israel. It also talks of a greater Chhinlung-Israel state that would include the Mizos of neighbouring Burma and Bangladesh.

<sup>25</sup> Lalchanhima Sailo a Shillong born, descendant of a Mizo chief, former employee of the Food Services Corporation of India, and holder of law and history degrees from JNU in Delhi and Osmania University in Hyderabad joined the Mizo People's Conference Party in 1990 (Brigadier T. Sailo's Party). In 1992, while attending an International Seminar on 'Studies on the Minority Nationalities of North-East India: the Mizos' (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> April) at Aizawl, he argued against efforts by Indian intellectuals to assimilate Mizo identity with that of the Assamese. In 1993, he was initially projected as a candidate for the state legislature but the People's Conference withdrew its support, disgruntled, he was forced to run as an independent.

<sup>26</sup> This became evident when Lalchanhima Sailo decided to adopt the faith of the Bet-Israel sect (a Jewish sect was founded by Jonathan Kahn an American Jew, who believed in the restoration of Israel and Jesus Christ). In 2000, an Indian Christian preacher, P.P. Job spoke in Mizoram on an invitation by Jonathan Kahn. Kahn blew the 'shofar' (the traditional Jewish ceremonial ram horn) in the Assam Riffle field of Aizawl. He said that, 'the stick of Ephraim and Judah should stick together', suggesting a connection between the Jews and Mizos. Sailo, who was till then a nominal member of the Presbyterian Church felt that Jonathan Kahn's talk on the restoration of Israel could be understood to mean the restoration of a lost tribe of Israel, the Zo/Mizo, in an independent Israelite state in South East Asia. The connection between Lalchanhima Sailo and the CIPC with Jewish movements was not limited to Jewish-Christians.

<sup>27</sup> Although Lalchanhima Sailo himself did not convert to Judaism, he did not deny that there was a possibility of

Individuals like Lalchanhima and researchers like Zaithanchhungi<sup>28</sup> continue to defend the lost tribes' theory, so much so that the 'Zo-Israel-Chhinlung Identity' movement has mass appeal and is steadily contesting though not directly confronting the 'Zo-Christian-Chhinlung Identity'.

The Presbyterian Church's concern was not only that Zo/Mizo were adopting an Israelite and Jewish identity in large numbers. There was the fear that the Israelite identity movement would upset the status quo of peace and prosperity in Mizoram in the changed times. For instance, life in the post-Peace Accord Mizoram under India was good with large flow of finances into the state from the Central Government making Mizoram one of the wealthiest states in India. The multi-fold development in and around the capital Aizawl, and its elevation from a small town to a 'City' connected by air within a short span of the Peace Accord, impressed upon the Zo/Mizo people the positives of living with India.

The growth in education and rise in Literacy (second highest in India); the reservation policies in Medical Colleges, Engineering, the accelerated pace of development all brought about a mellowing down of attitudes at both ends. The Zo/Mizo constantly began to contrast the grim memories of the insurgency times and the continuing turmoil in the neighbouring North-Eastern states of Manipur and Nagaland with that of the changed wave of peace and development in Mizoram. The Church feared that call for an independent Mizoram by the supporters of the 'Lost Tribes' could develop into an insurgency like situation. The Church felt that Mizoram as an independent country would be weak and defenceless. Likewise, an independent Mizoram would weaken the Indian Union as a whole and it would set an example for other Indian states to follow.<sup>29</sup> The Church in Mizoram and the Indian State put a check on the Jewish missionaries in the North-East India as it could affect Indo-Arab and Indo-Palestine relations. Individual efforts have also been directed to counter the *Chhinlung-Israel movement*. One such critical voice was that of P.C. Biaksiana, who argued that 'there was no similarity between Mizo and Israelite custom'.<sup>30</sup> The belief about being a tribe of Israel arose out of a religious revival, out

him doing so in the future, saying, 'Let time tell who I am'. He admitted that his movement was a stepping stone for Zos/Mizos to convert to Judaism 'as our movement grew more and more people became Jewish or started to follow Judaism.

<sup>28</sup> Zaithanchhungi was a relative of one of the members of the original group that went to seek or reach Zion following the vision of the headman in 1951. Formerly a successful insurance agent and the wife of a state legislator, and a former teacher she went to Israel in 1983. There she met Eliyahu Avichayil, an Orthodox rabbi whose Amishav organization searches the world for descendants of the lost tribes. He showed immediate interest in her story, saying Jews had been scattered as far as China. He urged her to return to India to catalogue Mizo history. She came up with a list of apparent similarities, including the building of altars, the sacrifice of animals, burial customs, marriage and divorce procedures, a belief in an all-powerful deity and the symbolic presence of the number seven in many festivities. Zaithanchhungi saw other links in musical instruments and household practices. 'I was a non-believer, but after my research I now believe very firmly that the Mizo are of Jewish descent'. Yet she herself remains a Presbyterian.

<sup>29</sup> These concerns of the Church in Mizoram further stand as proof that the Church is not against India and is not the cause of insurgencies and secessionist movements in the Northeast as commonly perceived by many Indians.

<sup>30</sup> In June of 2003, Biaksiana presented his report on the CIPC before the church elders in the Presbyterian Pastorate of Champhai. He claimed that the CIPC assertions, both about being a lost tribe of Israel and independence were full of lies. The elders who had become members of the CIPC were taken aback. Attacked harshly by Mr. Biaksiana, they said that they only sympathized with the CIPC call the independence and unification. P.C. Biaksiana continued his movement against an Israelite identity for the Mizos and the CIPC. He conducted a seminar at his home church in Cannan Veng area of Aizawl and in November of 2003, he published a book called, 'CIPC leh Mizo Israel' dissecting the positions of the CIPC and condemning them for their wrong teachings.

of a dream in a remote village in Mizoram. The Bible constantly spoke about the Israelites and the Mizo held them in high esteem. From this developed a tendency among certain Zo/Mizo to identify with the Israelites.

Lalchanhima Sailo countered Biaksiamia's criticism in a televised programme by arguing that 'the Mizos do have customs that resemble those of the Ancient Israelites'.<sup>31</sup> 'Building an independent Mizoram was possible by non-violence. The mistake of the Mizo National Front was that they had not used international law and diplomacy to achieve their aim. Lalchanhima argued that he was following 'the provisions of the Indian constitution, the United Nations and Gandhi. Resolution 242 could apply to the Mizos as a lost tribe of Israel and an independent Mizoram would not be landlocked. It would include the port of Chittagong in Bangladesh as well as the Arakan region of Myanmar.'

Over the years, the 'Zo-Israel-Chhinlung Identity' has invited protracted arguments and counter-theorisations on lines of the 'Zo-Christian-Chhinlung Identity'. The controversy over the 'lost tribes of Israel' is clearly visible from the newspaper and book stalls which continue to sell Biaksiamia's book 'Mizo leh Israel' alongside the pro-Jewish newsletter, 'Israel Tlangau' with pictures of Amishav's new President Michael Freund, a supporter of the lost tribe theory of the Mizos. The Zo/Mizo in the streets are divided over whether to adopt a 'Zo-Israel-Chhinlung Identity' or a 'Zo-Christian-Chhinlung Identity'.

Both contested theories of the 'Zo-Christian-Chhinlung Identity' and the 'Zo-Israel-Chhinlung Identity' remain open to contestations and newer interpretations. The tussle between an overtly Christian Identity and a Jewish Identity continues to resonate in public debates. The Biaksiamas and Lalchanhimas in Mizoram are yet to solve the riddle of Identity and the 'double helix' of the DNA continues to be a contested strand. Interestingly, both contested theories build up their narratives in and around the 'Memory of Zopui-Chhinlung' (Traditional Myth-Memory of the Zo people). The 'Zomi movement' belongs to the genera of the 'Zo-Christian-Chhinlung Identity' while the 'Zo-Israel-Chhinlung Identity' stretches and links the 'Chhinlung Theory' to that of the 'Lost Tribes of Israel'; and provides a solution in the form of either creating an independent 'Israel State in and around Mizoram' or migrate back to the 'promised homeland'. Questions of racial roots aside, the Bene Menashe serves as an example and metaphor of subterranean crisis of identity.<sup>32</sup> The confusion over identity is plainly visible in the narrow and precipitous streets of Aizawl the capital city. One side is Bethlehem, the other Salem, another side is Cannan and mid-way is Zion Street, with an intersection called Israel Point. Shops, schools, homes and institutions carry names such as Israel Stores, Zion Tailors, Solomon's Cave, Exodus Press, Bethesda, Beer-seba, Nazareth School, Mount Carmel School. Names and identities randomly plucked from the entire Judeo-Christian spectrum continue to exhibit the contest between the New and the Old Testaments.

<sup>31</sup> Lalchanhima Sailo countered Biaksiamia's arguments by pointing that 'the high priests did not sacrifice with pig and the lower priests who sacrificed with pig would not eat the meat. A kind of Sabbath was observed. They had a kind of circumcision as well. They buried their dead by first bathing and clothing the body before burial. 'They had always referred to Menashe who is Menashe, the son of Joseph, their great ancestor.

<sup>32</sup> Mona Zote, "Heaven in Hell: A Paradox", (Section IV: The Conflict of Identities) in Geeti Sen (ed.), *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-East*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press/ India International Centre, 2006.

### Some Closing Observations

The colonial encounter experienced in the then Lushai Hills actively engaged in the process of taming the wild tribes from 'head-hunters' to 'soul hunters'. Needless to say the colonial encounter was marked by the project of understanding the 'oriental'. This underlying concern can be located in the several colonial documents and memories of colonial administrators and missionaries who worked endlessly among the *Zo hnahthlak*. The colonial encounter injected western ideas concerning education, health and medicine, hygiene and house-keeping, belief in Christianity and the unquestioned acceptance of the superiority of the white man's belief system and life style over that of the native's understanding and appreciation of their world system. The issues discussed in this paper accentuate the skillful maneuverings of the traditional element of the Zo religion for survival amidst the mass movement towards conversion. Such maneuverings reflect the specific discomforts and comforts in the process of engagements in conversion among the *Zo hnahthalk*.

