

Leisure, Sports and Entertainment: Politics and Lifestyles in Mizoram

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Abstract

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 tribes. Proselytisation 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 notion of 'Leisure', 'Sports', and 'Entertainment' has undergone severe mutations via the Colonial encounter and post colonial engagements. Interestingly 'Lifestyle' has been redefined and packaged extensively through commercial manipulations. The study attempts to accentuate the contours and contortions within the same.

Keywords: Leisure, Sport, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Mizo, Mizoram.

I

Leisure, Sports and Entertainment in Pre-colonial times

Major A.G. McCall in his *Lushai Chrysalis* elaborately discusses indigenous Lushai games.¹ Wrestling (In buan) among the Lushai was unique in the sense that 'the object does not lie in pressing your opponent on his back on the ground, but in closing with him and manoeuvring to lift him off his legs. It is foul to place the leg in such a way as to cause an opponent to fall. It is unsporting to use weight by dragging down an opponent from almost a sitting posture. With these restrictions the contest can be hard and long, each seeking his chance to apply a heavy attack to lift the other off his feet. Successful wrestlers challenge up the line till they have established a claim to challenge the local champion. Visitor to a village are often challenged, but they are never compelled to accept. If they refuse, however, they are soon placed in their proper social perspective.'²

Games played with beans (Koi bah) were common among girls as well as boys, the former holding the bean in two hands, the latter in one. The object of the game is to

¹ A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, Aizawl, Tribal Research Institute, 1949 (2003), p. 191.

² *Ibid.*

hurl beans at stationary ones on the ground in such a way that any hits are moved at least one foot away. There were various stages in a complete round, and

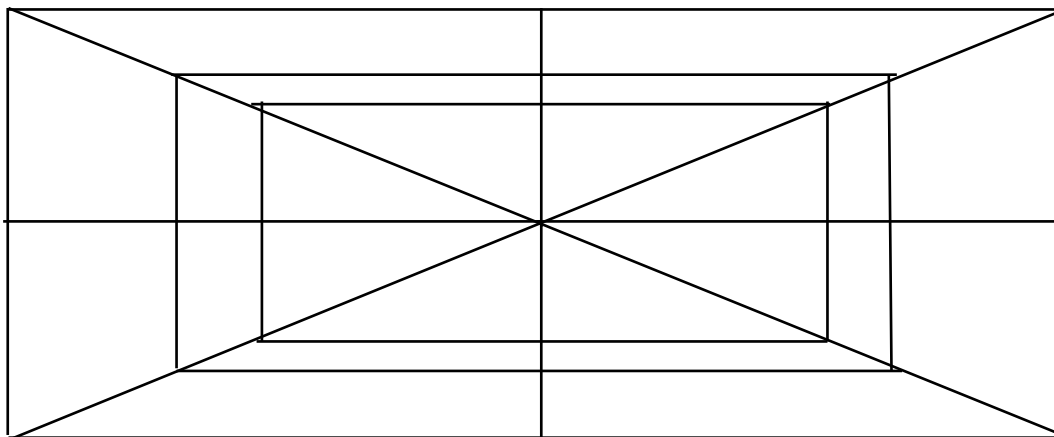
'the party who knocks away the other's beans most successfully wins a round. The game continues, and is counted in round, which have been won till the time comes when play just has to stop. The aiming has to be very skilful, and many of the young people become real experts in crashing on to the beans on the ground from quite distant shies. Hide -and -seek (in biruk siak) is played in the house, the children hiding anywhere. When all have been found out the one first caught becomes the 'He'.³

Tops produce a competitive game. These are very cleverly and patiently made out of hardwood trees by hand, success lying with the owner who can keep his top spinning for the longest time.⁴

A touch-last game is good fun. This is played in the open streets, the houses acting as places of refuge. Once on a house-step the player is safe, but if he stays too long he would be disqualified, the game being to cover as much ground as possible between refuges without being caught by the 'He'.⁵

There is one clever game of skill played on a design (See Below). Each player has ten men, and play is by turn. The object is to get three men in complete line vertically or horizontally. When this occurs, the successful player can seize any one of his opponent's men. The one who captures all the opponent's men wins. Moves may only be made to or from adjacent marks.⁶

Design on Which the Game was Played



³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁶ *Ibid.*

McCall laments the loss of these native elements of the *Lushai* people (Zo/Mizo people) in his book *Lushai Chrysalis* and blames the Colonial activities for the large scale onslaught on tribal ways of life.

II

The Colonial Encounter & The Zo/Mizo People

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 'orient'. 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 rationalized 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 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.⁷ 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 took place as a result of colonial contact.⁸ 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 centre 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

⁷ Lalrimawia, "The Lushai Chiefs under the British Rule", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 3rd session, 1982; E. J. Thomas, *Mizo bamboo Hills Murmur Change (Mizo Society Before And After Independence)*. New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1993; AC Ray, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 72-74; CR Nag, *Mizo Polity And Political Modernisation*. Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1998, pp.15-21.

⁸ Lalrimawia, *Ibid.*, Thomas, *Ibid.*, Ray, *Ibid.*, Nag, *Ibid.*, pp. 25-29.

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 led to a Commoners Movement, resulting in the birth of a political party called the Mizo Union on April 9, 1946.⁹ This was one of the first instances of rebellion against tradition in the Mizo society, resulting in the permanent displacement of the Traditional Elites by 'the Politicians' (political parties) at the political level. The British skillfully manipulated both these elites to maintain its indirect hold over the Zo territory.¹⁰ 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 'kalasahebs', 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 superior¹¹ by the primitive tribes because of numerous reasons.¹² 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.¹³

III

Leisure, Sports and Entertainment in Contemporary times

Arrival of Christianity 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. With the introduction of Christianity, the Zo/Mizo people began to have a more

⁹ NN Acharyya, "Modernisation of Mizoram", *Proceedings*, NEIHA, 5th session, 1984; Nag. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Acharyya. *Ibid.*, Lalchungnunga, *Mizoram: Politics of Regionalism and national Integration*, New Delhi, Reliance Publishing House, 1994, pp.35-36; Nag. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-72.

¹¹ The Zo tribes used the word 'Sap' a corrupted form of the Hindustani word 'Sahib' to refer to the Europeans i.e. white men. BB 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 BB Goswami, "out-group from the point of view of In-group: A Study of Mizos", in SM Dubey, *North East India: A Sociological Study*, 1978, pp.99-110.

¹² Goswami in Dubey, *Ibid.*, pp 104-109.

¹³ S Frederick Downs, *Christianity in North East India*, Delhi, ISPCK, 1983, pp. 47- 48.

settled way of life and this 'permanence' in settlement opened avenues for regulation of free time according to the terms of the Church. For instance, evenings would be used for choir practice and Church services which was considered to be more constructive and useful in religious terms. The other arenas where Zo life changed amidst the wave of proselytization include education and schooling. Children of both sexes began to invest more time in pursuing education and needless to say leisure and free time became too limited. With the urge to excel in education and primacy given to schooling and textual/rote education the appending elements of education such as sports and constructive use of leisure began to be neglected. The timings and the curriculum in schools left very little for engagement in exploring sports and native wisdom in sports and entertainment.

The troubled times of the secessionist movement of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the experience of counter-insurgency in Mizoram adversely effected the traditional mode in which evenings were spent by the Zo/Mizo people. The decades of evening curfews imposed by the Government in the name of maintaining 'law and order' weeded the culture of 'pawnto' or activities during leisure hours in the evenings which included children's games such as 'in biruk siak' (hide and seek) and also activities meant for adults such as dancing, sharing of adult jokes ('zahmoh') etc. It is interesting to note that the sharing of adult jokes ('zahmoh') continued to circulate within the confines of the house (individual or in clusters) even during the wave of curfews. The same was not true for activities that involved greater spatial flexibility such as childrens' games. Naturally, the traditional games and sports weaned into oblivion.

The introduction of televisions in the early 80s in Mizoram and VCRs introduced greater elements of globalised images into the terrains of Zo culture. The images of football, basketball, Hollywood western movies and music began to seriously hold the attention of the Zo people and introduced a new 'west-toxicated' class of Zo people. By the late 80s the west-toxicated class began to endorse newer gadgets like the Nintendo Video games, which by the mid 90s took greater evolved forms of gaming. The improvisations in the field of gaming and play-stations led to the birth of new categories of Zo children who no longer played out in the open rather "they played at home"; and this was considered to be better by many, as it limited the scope of children venturing outside the "home". Outside the "home" began to be stereotyped as contaminating and polluting due to the excessive influence of drugs¹⁴, sex and medical conditions such as HIV/Aids. In other words staying indoors and limiting the interaction of children especially male children with 'outdoor activities' was seen as effective measure to condition the influence of external forces of 'evil'. The notion of evil as envisioned and practiced by the Zo/Mizo people is heavily laced by the facts of the colonial encounter and the effect of proselytization. The injection of Christian ethics and modes of life changed and gave a newer vision to the erstwhile wild tribes to neatly classify sacred and profane, evil and non-evil etc. 'Evil' or Sualna exhibits

¹⁴ *The Assam Tribune*, '17 Drug abuse deaths in Mizoram', Aizawl, 09 January; Guwahati, 10 January, 1994.

itself in myriad hues and shapes the contours and contents of the socially accepted norms or order of things in everyday life which is again shaped by the realities of the Zo/Mizo cosmology.

Concluding Observations

The notion of sports, leisure and entertainment has undergone a metamorphosis and has entered into the arena of virtual space. The urban children play more in virtual space than in real, and the rural children as steadily emulating their urban counterparts. The rise in life style disease like obesity, diabetes etc.,¹⁵ among the Zo/Mizo people strongly reflects the effect of the changing notions of sports, leisure and entertainment. The traditional values associated with the notion of sports as an activity associated with leisure doubling as entertainment has been replaced by the idea of treating sports as an activity leading to a permanent job in the SAI (Sports Authority of India, Mizoram) for a select few having the prerequisite political connections and skills in sports. The discussions in this chapter accentuate the contours and contortions in the field of sports, leisure and entertainment among the Zo hnahthlak (Zo/Mizo People).

¹⁵ Government of Mizoram, *Statistical Handbook(s) of Mizoram*, Aizawl, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, (1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010).