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Lead Article

A Brief History of Mizo Identity

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Abstract

This article examines the historical construction of Mizo identity, arguing that it is the product of contingent historical processes rather than a primordial or immutable reality. It begins by highlighting the importance of historical methodology, emphasizing the need for evidence-based inquiry and cautioning against the influence of identity and ideological chauvinisms in writing history. Through a critical review of Mizo historiography, the article demonstrates how origin narratives, particularly the chhinlung chhuak tradition, have shaped popular understandings of Mizo identity while often blurring the distinction between myth and history. It argues that Mizo identity emerged through successive historical developments, including migration, inter-clan interaction, the rise of the Sailo chiefs, and the territorial and administrative transformations of British colonial rule. The article concludes by examining contemporary contestations surrounding the ethnonyms "Mizo" and "Zo," underscoring that ethnic identities remain historically contingent, politically negotiated, and continually redefined.

Key words: *Mizo identity; ethnogenesis; historiography; historical methodology; colonialism; Mizoram; ethnicity.*

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Introduction

The study of Mizo identity is something that has animated many discussions on various fora within Mizo society. Most discussions revert back to the question of origins – who are the Mizos? Where have they come from? - the word in Mizo for origins being *ṭobul.* Over the past decades several efforts have been made by Mizos in the direction of locating their origins - the idea of having moved into the region is not something that is denied. This search for origins has usually led to seeking links with people groups further east to as far as southern China. Such a search is prompted by the well-known origin myth of *chhinlung chhuak* (lit. emerging from a cave with a capstone) as well as the known history of migration from the east. The entanglement of myth and history is often difficult to disentangle. Another course in which the search for origins has ensued is in the direction of archaeological remains within the state, the attempt mainly being to date the period of the settlements. The most well-known site is Kawtchhuah Ropui in eastern Mizoram, a site spanning roughly 45 square kms that includes 170 carved menhirs. The period when this settlement was established has always been a point of interest and recent ASI assessments dated it to the 14th-15th centuries (CE), although nearby excavated pottery suggests an earlier neolithic culture. Another recent report has led to the dating of the Dungtlang settlements, said to have been inhabited in four stages anywhere between the 5th and 19th centuries (CE). The objective of these studies, among others, is to trace the earliest settlements, and thereby rightly or wrongly, to pin down the earliest Mizo settlements in Mizoram. Besides these two directions in which Mizo identity studies have taken, another means has been in the delineation of the tribes and clans that fall within the Mizo category. Mizo is a generic name for a group of tribes, and which tribes fall into the category (and within that which subtribes fall into a tribe) has been a matter that has also taken much ink. There is very little consensus on the matter even as identities are elastic and affiliations keep changing. A final way in which identity is studied is through cultural studies

wherein various aspects of identity such as cultural and religious, political and economic practices, language etc., are usually studied. It is usually the practices of the pre-colonial period, studied in synchronic time, that are regarded as authentic and considered worth studying. Besides these directions that identity studies in Mizoram have taken, a point worth noting is that in the case of the Mizos, perhaps due to the high literacy rate, there has been a huge interest in identity studies especially in the vernacular and several academics and non-academics have weighed in on the topic. Such works have usually incorporated ideas that consider identity as primordial, as static and unchanging, with a large number depending on oral stories.

In light of the above discussion, what the paper attempts to do is two-fold. Since writing about the past has become a popular past time, I begin by making a brief statement regarding the method of history, which should play an important role in the writing of Mizo history and identity. The second aim is to show identity as a historical process. The above-mentioned studies do not take into consideration the idea that identities are not stable and that they evolve over time and the same is true of the Mizo identity. The historical process shows the contingencies that are involved in the making of the identity. What we know of identity today, or even how we understand it is the result of different circumstances as well as discourses that have emerged in course of time. Unless one has a long-term view of the evolution of identity, unless one understands the discourses around it, the study of identity cannot be valid. The first section of the paper thus will talk about an important aspect of the methodology of history, which is necessary to write good history. In the same context, I address the issue of the historiography of Mizo history writing in the second section. The third section will outline, albeit in brief, aspects regarding the contingencies in the creation of Mizo identity, the processes through which that identity came to be formed; and finally, I will conclude in the final section with a brief remark on what I think are the challenges to the Mizo identity today.

I

Ramachandra Guha, a well-known historian of India, in a very short essay high-lighted what he called the chauvinisms a good historian has to beware of (2022). Chauvinism, in other words refers to the prejudices, or pre-conceived notions that bias the judgements we make, and in this case the writing of history. The task of the historian is to make judgements on the basis of the evidence we have, and the supposition is that these chauvinisms come in the way of providing proper understanding of the evidence. According to Guha, there are four very common chauvinisms that we must be mindful of in order to write good history -- namely, disciplinary chauvinism, methodological chauvinism, and finally the chauvinisms of identity and ideology. All of them, according to Guha, can prevent a person from truthfully uncovering the past. I will specifically focus on the latter two as these two aspects, identity and ideology, have often been the lens through which we, the Mizos view our history, thereby colouring our understanding of our past.

Let me however first give a rather general example to explain what we mean by these chauvinisms. A very glaring example, in terms of identity framing our histories, that can be seen in the realm of Indian history, is when historians of 'mainland' India have understood the history of India as only the history of north India or south India, failing to recognize the presence of northeast India or other regions in their histories. Similarly, since histories were written by the upper-caste, and by men, the histories of Dalits and, of women, were not only ignored, they were subsumed with the others or not considered worthy of study. These are very rudimentary examples of how the chauvinism of identity can make us have a warped understanding of the past, i.e., we take for granted certain identities and fail to recognize the presence of others. In terms of the chauvinism of ideology, one of the most influential ideologies in Indian history has been that of Marxism. As we all know, Marxist historiography in the traditional sense essentially sees historical evolution as a product of dialectical materialism. In other words, moving away from an earlier historiography that saw politics and rulers,

important men as the focus of history, Marxist historians began to focus on structures of society, namely class, and from there to see forms of exploitation. While Marxist history produced many fine historians, and their histories were important in showing the nature of class, we can safely arrive at the conclusion that forms of interpreting history based purely on economic explanation provides for only a one-sided, warped explanation.

I have referred to these two forms of chauvinism because the writing of Mizo history is deeply mired in these two, namely the chauvinisms of identity and ideology. In the case of the latter, Mizo writings have of course not necessarily incorporated Marxist historiography as such, but we need to beware of ideology as a prism through which we interpret history. The chauvinism of identity sometimes also leads us to search for a glorious past in a manner in which evidence does not substantiate it. During the Indian national movement, many nationalist leaders propagated a glorious age in order to oppose the denigration by British historians of India's past. The idea of a glorious age emerges from what is known as a presentist interpretation of history, i.e., a means of looking at the past through a present-day lens, rather than looking at the past on its own terms. It romanticizes the past and gives a warped view of history, ignoring the problems associated with the period (Thapar 1968). Let me now give examples of these chauvinisms in the understanding of Mizo history to elucidate the point.

A very common understanding of Mizo identity can be seen in the MNF manifesto for independence that was submitted to the PM on 30th Oct 1965. Let us consider some of the assumptions it makes:

The Mizo from time immemorial lived in complete independence without foreign interference. Chiefs of different clans ruled over separate hills and valleys with supreme authority, and their administration was very much like that of the Greek city-states of the past. Their territory or any part thereof had never been conquered or subjugated by their neighbouring states. However, there had been border disputes and frontier clashes with

the neighbouring people which ultimately brought the British Government to the scene in 1844. The Mizo country was subsequently brought under the British political control in December 1895 when a little more than half the country was arbitrarily carved out and named Lushai Hills (now Mizo district) and the rest of their land was parcelled out of their hands to the adjoining people for the sole purpose of administrative convenience without obtaining their will or consent. Scattered, as they are divided, the Mizo people are inseparably knitted together by their strong bond of tradition, customs, culture, language, social life and religion, wherever they are. The Mizo stood as a separate nation, even before the advent of the British Government, having a nationality, distinct and separate from that of India. In a nutshell, they are a distinct nation, created, moulded and nurtured by God and nature (bold typeface mine).

From the above statement, it is clear that a popular assumption is that there was an identity called Mizo from time immemorial – what scholars refer to as a primordial identity. The question that needs to be asked is: did the various communities in the region, led by village-chiefs who in some cases allied with each other, recognize themselves as Mizo in the pre-colonial period? Sid neighbouring chieftaincies of the region that, mind you, often warred against each other see themselves as a political or ethnic unit. Moreover, following from a recognition that there was a primordial identity is the understanding that there was a sort of contiguous territory inhabited by the Mizos, a Mizo country which the arrival of the British disintegrated, and although not mentioned here, included territories in Myanmar, Manipur, Tripura and Bangladesh. Whether one agrees with the MNF agenda or not, the one thing that is clear is that this construction of Mizo identity is not historical, with very little evidence to substantiate it. Such constructions are what Guha has ascribed to as prejudices of identity and ideology. They are the instrumentalist use of identity for political gains or what we may term the politicisation of identity - the product of identity and ethno-nationalist (ideological) chauvinisms.

In order to come to an understanding of Mizo identity we have to parse through common-place understandings such as the above and compare them with what historical evidence shows us. As I have alluded to earlier, historians can write only on the basis of evidence; interpretations can be based on that evidence and much as we would like to say more, unless there is evidence, historians have to leave many things unsaid.

II

When anyone undertakes research on history, an important component of that is something called historiography. Historiography essentially means the process and interpretation of writing history. Before one undertakes research, it is important to understand how other writers have understood the topic in the past, and the circumstances under which such histories were written. It is therefore important to study how some of the historical writings have impacted our understanding of who we are as Mizos.

At a very general level, one can say that the writing of Mizo history in Mizo and in English largely takes on two different trajectories. Most history writers in English tend to be professional historians, and they tend to focus on the colonial period, including the arrival of Christianity and its impact (e.g., Sangkima 1992; Hluna 1992, Zorema 2007 and many others). This is in tune with the traditional practices of history writing wherein the need for sources is a very important aspect of the methodology of history. And, since we began to have written sources in the colonial period, the tendency has been to focus on different aspects of colonial rule. Such works tended to focus on the various administrative and political changes in the then Lushai Hills district, the work of the colonial officials, the missionaries, and the transformations that occurred in Mizo society. Unwittingly, such histories also tend to take for granted the political boundaries set up by the British as the starting point for the writing of Mizo

history. In many of the English works, the Lushai Hills District and the Lushais therein are also conflated with the word Mizo.

Writings on history in the Mizo language, on the other hand, have tended to be done mainly by non-historians; the first examples of historical writings in Mizo were by pastors, teachers, government officials, and, in more recent times, by people engaged in the study of Mizo literature (and even more recently, anyone who has an opinion and can post it on the internet). In such works, myths and facts are often seen as part of the same continuum and in more recent writings, the burden of evidence weighs very lightly on the shoulders of the writers. More importantly, it is the writings in the Mizo language that focus on origins that have tended to have an impact on how the people see themselves as Mizos, and it is on those works that I will weigh in on. Let us now see how the past was constructed by such writers.

The earliest work in Mizo on Mizo history was the work of Pastor Liangkhaia. In 1938, for the very first time, he published a short history of the Mizos entitled *Mizo Chanchin* (Mizo history) and in 1948 a second part was added to it (Liangkhaia 1938). The *Mizo Chanchin* was not Liangkhaia's first attempt at writing a history since we know from the *Mizo leh Vai* that he had responded to a competition to write an essay on Mizo history in 1926 and had been awarded the first prize along with a princely sum of Rs. 50. Liangkhaia was born in 1884 – this was before writing came to be invented for the Mizos. There are a few significant things to note from his history. The first of course is that Liangkhaia recognized the profound significance of writing a history. In his preface he lamented the fact that many Mizos did not know their past despite the fact that one read the histories of many other people. He was therefore taking upon himself the task of writing it to make the Mizo past known. His statement is possibly not totally true even as he himself writes that what he had written was based on what many people in his travels had told him. What he therefore meant perhaps was that all the different oral histories he had heard required

systematization, required rationalization, required a sense of direction, which he in his own way was going to provide. In other words, the idea of being a people was closely related to having a clear history. It is also interesting to note that rather than just depending on the myths (in fact the origin myth was included only later by him in the 1974 revision of his work[*]), empirical details were very crucial in his writing, and his attempt was to clearly highlight significant details especially after the arrival of colonialism and Christianity. Liangkhaia's work is significant in that his writing represented the ideas of a man who was engaging keenly with modernity, but who was also deeply rooted in his tradition. His work also became the framework by which others, following him, wrote their histories.

How then did Liangkhaia understand 'history'? Since speculations about the past existed, since myth and history were closely intertwined, how did Liangkhaia, a man who stood in the interstices of tradition and colonial modernity, navigate through these frames of thinking? Liangkhaia took to the use of the word *chanchin* for history, rather than vernacularizing the English word, history. Other authors such as VL Siama, who had written a few years later, had taken recourse to the use of the word 'History' as seen in his own work titled, *Mizo history* (1953)[†]. Liangkhaia on the other hand did not adopt that usage although the term would not have been alien to him. His use of the word *Chanchin* (instead of history) is presumably indicative of the difficulty he found in navigating different world views. One can only speculate, but judging from what came to be written in Liangkhaia's

[*] I am grateful to Prof. Lalngurliana Sailo, Dept of History, MZU for going through the draft and pointing out the differences in the editions of Mizo Chanchin.

[†] V.L. Siama brought out the first textbook on Mizo history in 1953, commissioned by the Board of School education.V. L. Siama, *Mizo History,* Lengchhawn Press, [1953] 1991. Other important contributions included those by Vanchhunga, *Lusei leh a vela hnam dangte chanchin*, Dept of Art and Culture, [1955] 1994, K. Zawla*, Mizo Pi Pute leh an Thlahte Chanchin,* Self-Published [1964] 1993, Zatluanga, *Mizo Chanchin*, Directorate of Art and Culture, [1966] 1996, and many more.

'history,' the past was a combination of what was brought down through oral narratives, and attempts at reconstituting such narratives based on new knowledge and the Christian worldview that he had adopted. History also became much more linear even as he saw progression and evolution in the nature of Mizo society. Liangkhaia was trying to make sense of the oral narratives that he was exposed to fit into a model that could be deemed historical thereby making judicious calls based on that.

Another important point that we can glean from Liangkhaia's work is the use of the ethnonym Mizo in the title of the book. The district was called Lushai Hills district, and while J. Shakespear who had written the first monograph (1912) had used Lushai to describe the people therein, Liangkhaia had preferred to use the word Mizo for the same group of people. Shakespear had distinguished between a tribe called 'Lushei' (present Lusei) and the people of the district (consisting of Luseis and non-Luseis) whom he had referred to as Lushai – in other words using the latter as a generic name to describe members of the many tribes that inhabited the region. He however also spoke of the prevalence of the word 'Mi-zo' to refer to the people therein (Shakespear 1912: xiv). Quite interestingly, Liangkhaia had refused to follow the existing colonial exonym and preferred to stick to an ethnonym that had no doubt come about in the context of conditions that were being created by colonial modernity and engagements with it. Naming was a political act that has repercussions to date. One does not know the origins of the word Mizo (i.e. when it was first used), but we know for instance that there was a news bulletin called *Mizo Chanchin Laishuih* (1898), and the *Mizo leh Vai* which began publishing in 1903, suggesting that, for many in the Lusei/Duhlian speaking areas, the word Mizo was understood to be an accepted/acceptable ethnonym.

An important aspect written by Liangkhaia regarding the Mizo identity is the story of origins and migrations. As mentioned earlier, the 1938 version of Mizo Chanchin did not have the *Chhinlung chhuak* story and it was inserted only in the 1974 edition. One is not sure why he did this,

but one must remember that this period was also the height of the movement for independence led by the Mizo National Front, and it would not be far removed to think that the movement had an influence on him even as the origin myth does support various claims of the 'nationalists.' Nonetheless, it is interesting that Liangkhaia says that there were many origin stories that he had heard of during his pastoral tours, but he was writing down only the most common and what he felt was the most probable. This suggests that Liangkhaia and others following him have played no small role in establishing the ideas regarding Mizo origins by choosing one over the others. Liangkhaia tried to historicise the myth, but being the empiricist that he was, he was very tentative about the conclusions regarding the same. According to him, the *chhinlung chhuak* story corroborated perhaps with the stories of a prince in China, who was expelled by his father. It was possible that Mizos were descendants of the prince and his followers who later settled in Awksatlang and from there on moved on to Thantlang and Lentlang. Liangkhaia also set the period to possibly the 8th century. According to him, all who migrated from Awksatlang referred to themselves as *chhinlung chhuak* and they came to inhabit the present-day regions of the Chin Hills, Manipur, Mizoram, hills of Satikang (Tripura) and Cachar (in Assam). Liangkhaia added a caveat by saying that this story of the Chinese prince was mere 'hearsay,' but it could also easily be true (2002: 13). It also appears that Liangkhaia did not consider all the *chhinlung chhuak* as Mizo. What seems most likely from his work is that, to him, only those who inhabited the then Lushai Hills were Mizo, and those who lived outside the hills were 'kindred' tribes or what we now understand as Zohnahthlak. He, for instance, mentions that there were several groups of people who entered the Lushai Hills earlier than the Mizos but had moved on to other regions. These he did not consider as Mizo.

Although Liangkhaia's connections and conclusions were exploratory, the format he adopted soon became a model for others to follow, expand and historicise. For instance, in more recent times, writers

like B. Thangliana have made more definite assumptions about some of these myths. According to him, the word *chhinlung* is derived from Qinglong (Chinglong) in Guizhou province in China, where live the Buyi and Miao (also known as Hmong), who use the Zhuang Dong and Miao-Yao languages (which, according to Thangliana, are also part of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages). According to Thangliana there was a migration from these regions to Southeast Asia, the origin of the Mizo migration into present-day Mizoram (Thangliana 2001). At a personal interview, long ago, he even showed me pictures of what he believed to be the Khampat Bung, which he had located and identified personally in Burma.

It is difficult to ascertain the truth behind such speculations, with evidence for all these connections being merely conjecture. However, one thing is clear: that the formalisation of the migration story has had an impact in the Mizo imagination as an important identity maker and marker. It has contributed to the particular ways in which the various 'tribes' in the region have regarded each other. In the first place, it led to an emphasis on representations of relatedness among the various 'tribes;' *chhinlung chhuak* ('emerging from *chhinlung*') became the basis on which closeness or proximity was defined. For instance, for Liangkhaia, although there were linguistic similarities between the Lushais, the Meiteis and the Burmese, as he recognised their languages as being part of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages, the latter two were not regarded as 'one people' with the Lushais, because, according to him, they were not *chhinlung chhuak*. In other words, for Liangkhaia it was not linguistic similarities that made a people, but belonging to *chhinlung chhuak*. And to Liangkhaia, those who acknowledged to have emerged from *chhinlung* and thus those who were Mizo included the Lusei, Ralte, Hmar, Pawi, Paihte and minor others, of which Liangkhaia mentioned twelve (Khawlhring, Khiangte, Chawngthu, Chawhte, Ngente, Renthlei, Tlau, Pautu, Rawite, Zawngte, Vangchhia,

Punte), making the total number of clans or 'tribes' seventeen[*]. At the same time, as we have seen earlier, it appears that Liangkhaia was pinning territory to an identity such that similar and kindred tribes outside the borders of the then district were not to be considered Mizo.

Notions of who were *chhinlung chhuak* have not remained static, and the category has often been used as a template for expressing inclusion, as well as for others, to express exclusion. Thus B. Thangliana, for instance, does not accept Liangkhaia's enumeration; he broadens the scope of those who are included as *chhinlung chhuak*. He widens the geographical scope to include those in Burma, Tripura, Bangladesh and Manipur, namely the Ashos (plains Chin of Burma), the Chho/Shos of the Chin state of Burma, the Ha-lams ('tribes' of Tripura), Hmars, Lais/Pawis, Lushais, Maras, Miu-khumis (of Bangladesh), the Paites, Raltes and the Thado-Kuki groups of Manipur (2001).

B. Thangliana's broadening of the Mizo umbrella has also won credibility at a popular level in recent times. A contemporary song called *hnam hla* or 'song of the nation/tribe/clan,' sung by a well-known local singer, refers to all those who have emerged from *chhinlung* as belonging to one womb and therefore beckons them to act in unison, while urging them to continue to live the 'Mizo way of life'[†]. Although not explicitly, there is a suggestion in the song that all those who once belonged to this one womb were now scattered and considered themselves separate. The importance of the song for our purposes lies in the fact that the 'tribes' that are included in the list of those who are Mizos include the Thados, Lais, Maras and Paites. The Maras were not amongst those included as Mizo by Liangkhaia and he included the Thado under the Hmar, showing the changing conceptions of who the Mizos believe constituted their group.

[*] The same number is given by Siama and Zatluanga. K. Zawla and Vanchhunga do not give a list of 'tribes' considered Mizo.

[†] Lalrindiki Khiangte (Da-duhi), *Chhul khat kual* ('From the same womb'), composed by C. Durthanga.

This brief survey of Mizo historiography has shown the overdependence on an origin story in order to show relatedness. However, the problem with such a view is that, as we have seen, the understanding of that relatedness is never static. Some want to opt out, while others want to opt in at any given point of time, and still others are also opted in. There are different contingencies that have in the past contributed to ideas of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, in identity studies, in my understanding, one has to clearly distinguish between what is, and the varied people's projection of what is hoped for. The two should not be conflated in order to understand one's identity.

What then can history tell us about Mizo identity?

Speculations about Mizo pasts try to hold together two contradictory strands that are often not recognised by Mizo authors. First, at one level there is an assumption that there was a primordial Mizo identity; thus migrations are seen as Mizo migrations, the narration often referring to them as one unified unit, implying that they were a self-conscious group that had existed since *chhinlung*, as well as at Thantlang and Lentlang. The second strand contradicts the previous one by referring to the existence of several tribal groups fighting against each other in the context of migrations and the search for new lands for swidden farming. How then does one reconcile these two strands of understanding? Can they even be reconciled at all? In other words, who then is a Mizo? I think that history has some pointers in that direction. I must state here that all aspects regarding the topic cannot be addressed in this paper. These include the socio-cultural aspects including religion, language, customs and traditions that have gone into the making of Mizo identity. I will therefore focus only on the aspects related to the boundaries of the Mizo identity.

I begin by stating that the story of migrations written about by Mizo writers is not entirely mythical. As a historian I cannot say anything about *chhinlung* (personally, I think it should be left at the stage of a myth), but the fact that many groups were migrating westward was corroborated by

early colonial writers such as Shakespear who have informed us that if the British had not arrived on the scene and arrested the movements, there would have been more movements of people from the east to the west.

It is in movement that clans and 'tribes' that currently form part of the Mizo group were seen as having come together. For instance, some writers allude to the fact that certain groups were named on the basis of the direction they took in the migration. Hmar can also mean 'north' and also refers to a 'tribe' that mainly settled in the northern reaches of the state in contemporary times. Similarly, according to Zatluanga, the Paihte, meaning 'go', were the first to leave the Chin Hills (Zatluanga 1996: 116). There also exist names of clans such as Chhakchhuak, which essentially means 'one who has come from the east'. There are other ways in which this movement is also given meaning. At Thantlang and Lentlang, wrote Liangkhaia, each *hnam* ['tribe', 'clan' or 'nation'] had their own settlement', implying that each settlement was a homogenous unit (Liangkhaia 2002: 43). The story goes on to suggest that some clans were considered antagonistic to each other, wars being fought and captives taken from each other, thus suggesting the development of diversity among them. The rival groups thus pushed each other, and their movements led to new alliances, with new identities being formed. It was under such circumstances that the Sailo chiefs were said to come to gain supremacy over several 'tribes' and clans. Thus, for instance, in one of the more popular stories about the creation of the Sailo rulers, we have the following narrative. According to Siama:

> While the Mizos were on the west of the river Run, the Paihte were to the east. The Chhakchhuak and the Paihte fought a war in which the former took captive a man from among the Paihte, who became their slave. The Chhakchhuak treated him well and even allowed him to marry. The slave had a son, Zahmuaka who married a lady of the Lawitiang clan. They had seven sons. The Hnamte lived in a neighbouring hill and as their 'leader' did not

> have a son, the clan and the leader felt it appropriate to ask Zahmuaka to come and lead them. When the Hnamte leader died, Zahmuaka was approached. Initially Zahmuaka hesitated, but in the end he agreed, not because he wanted to but because the clan insisted. The Sailo who came to rule large parts of Mizoram was one of the sons of Zahmuaka (Siama 1991: 13-14).

It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of the details, but one thing that is common to all such narratives is the tussle between 'tribes' and the rise in this context of the Sailo chiefs (who themselves were said to have emerged from a non-Lushai clan), which was something that the British could corroborate. Many local writers (and also corroborated by colonial administrators) attribute the formation of the Mizo identity to the establishment of these Sailo chiefs meaning that at the time of the arrival of the British wherever the Sailos held sway were the areas that came under the Lushai Hills District (with additions in the course of the colonial rule such as the Zongling areas), and those areas came eventually to be regarded as 'Mizo'. The Maras, Chakmas and Brus (other 'tribes' that inhabit Mizoram) were generally not under the Sailo chiefs, nor were related Mizo tribes in Manipur or Myanmar, none of whom consider themselves 'Mizo'. At the same time, we also know that many of the villages that were ruled by these chiefs were not homogenous tribal units. Historically speaking, though, while the movement and the leadership of the Sailos are considered 'historical', we will have to admit that the history of actual alliances and wars cannot always be corroborated. Thus, while there is a sense in which the event is unambiguously historical, there is an element of the history itself being mythologized (Parkin 2000). Nonetheless, what can be ascertained is that the movement of the tribes led to the gaining of ascendancy of certain chieftaincy clans within certain territorial limits, which coincided with the arrival of the British.

The second aspect that I would like to focus on is the reality of colonial rule and its implications for the creation of Mizo identity. I have argued it in my book *Being Mizo,* and so I will only summarise it here (Pachuau 2012). The argument is that the creation of the Lushai Hills district with definite boundaries led to the further crystallisation of the Mizo identity. I argue that identity moved from being kinship and chief-based to that of a fixed territorial identity. Many laws brought about by the British, specifically the various boundary regulations, as well as the making of permanent settlements and the suspension of wars between chiefs, aided in this process. In fact, this change was recognised by the people of the first half of the twentieth century. In January 1926, Makthanga, the editor of *Mizo leh Vai,* contrasted the pre-colonial and colonial situations as follows:

> In those [pre-colonial] days, all chiefs lived according to their own will; they fought with other chiefs in order to grab the lands of other clans, or in order to be famous, so that people would say, 'so and so chief killed an enemy, took captives'; brothers would thus kill brothers, kin would kill kin… Now, should we regret that we can no longer fight wars, take captives or have village festivals for taking heads? Not at all! Now, people from all lands have become *tual khat* [members of 'one mound'; fellow-villagers], we have become brothers and it is easier for us to have compassion for one another…and therefore from the time of our ancestors we are much more *thawveng* ['carefree']; people from every land, every settlement, have now all become part of one *tual* ['mound']; we can now live and go anywhere…the government has, according to what it considers sufficient, created boundaries for us (Makthanga 1926: 17-24).

It is clear from the above observation that colonialism was seen as having brought in new ways of relating with one another, new ways in which people saw each other; more importantly, it had introduced a sense

of territoriality by which notions of belonging were to be determined. Rather than seeing themselves as the inhabitants of different territories or as the subjects of different and contesting chiefs, Mizos now began seeing themselves as the inhabitants of a common territory that belonged to everyone. They were therefore no longer strangers to each other is what Makthanga was suggesting, the allusion being the creation of the Mizo as the inhabitants of 'one space'. During the first half of the twentieth century, the journal also published several articles that could have emerged only as a result of an increasing *hnam* or 'nation-hood' feeling. This can be seen, for instance, in the ways in which the Mizos were beginning to compare themselves with other groups of people. Thus in the May 1928 issue, there is an article by Vanchhunga, a pastor and a widely travelled man, in which he responds to what were, according to him, people's insistent queries asking 'whose land is the best' and 'which *hnam* ('nation/tribe') is the best'. Vanchhunga's conclusions were predictable; yet the article showed an increasing identification of a particular territory as being Mizo or Lushai (used interchangeably by him)[*]. What differentiated the 'Lushai land' from others was that '[it] is not too hot, nor is it very cold, it is not very difficult to obtain food, there is no area that is particularly bad nor any that is particularly good. We can talk to our rulers [the chiefs] in the same language, there isn't too much of a divide between the more prominent 'tribes' and the lesser 'tribes' (*hnam ropui leh hnam chhia*) and lots of wild animals and domestic animals'. These were the reasons he gave that made the 'Mizo land' more superior (Vanchhunga 1928: 120-122). Significantly, Mizoram was written in these early days as 'Mizo ram', not as 'Mizoram' as is done today, stressing the sense that it was the 'land of the Mizo', and not anybody else's land (the equivalent in English would have been 'the Mizos' land').

[*] According to him, he had visited *Pawi ram* (land of the the Pawis)*, Burma, Hringchar* (Silchar)*, Rengpui* (Tripura)*, Halkha* (in Burma)*, Meitei ram* (Manipur) *etc.*

In the context of the development of Mizo identity, thus, we can say that two very important features marked it: one of course was the story of movement, and the second was the arrival of the British and their success in crystallising the identity within set boundaries. No doubt, within these territories the crystallising of identity did not remain complete, but one can say that the territorialising enabled a consciousness to emerge within the boundaries, which was further crystallised on the eve of Indian independence and culminated with the eruption of the Troubles (*Rambuai*) wherein the demands of Greater Mizoram were articulated, the inclusion of all *chhinlung chhuak* as Mizo. The rise of political parties such as the Mizo Union and the politics that emerged soon after independence were also crucial in developing the Mizo identity, such that the ethno-nationalist songs of Rokunga that tied identity to a particular space were made possible. It is no wonder then that, for example, Paites whose domicile is outside the state of Mizoram do not consider themselves Mizos, whilst the same Paites whose domicile is in Mizoram are considered Mizos and recognise themselves to be so, too. In other words, **location** or territory has always played a very important role in determining the identity of a community or a person, and it is no different in the region, too. Thus, can one ask the question who were the Mizos in the pre-colonial era? Historically and strictly speaking, such a question would be redundant as the ethnonym would not have been recognizable among the various communities who consider themselves Mizo today. It is, however, also true that the self-identifying groups in the pre-colonial period also acknowledged notions of relatedness, acrimonious or otherwise out of which the modern day identity of the Mizos came about. The right question to ask therefore is what were the contingencies that brought about this identity and historical research should therefore be more focused on this question.

III

To conclude, I would briefly like to touch on the challenges to the ethnonym, 'Mizo'. In *Being Mizo*, I problematised the name Mizoram,

which as we all know literally means ‘land of the people of the hills’. The problem in the name is that contiguous regions also are as hilly or mountainous. Thus, in a sense, there is nothing specific to the place. Where then do the boundaries between communities lie? One can argue that it is in the politically demarcated boundary lines. But we all know that borders are porous and identities do not end at human-created boundaries. Since the time of the Mizo ‘national’ movement, there has been a push to incorporate all related/*chhinlung* tribes in contiguous regions as Mizo, which has not always been successful. There is also a counter challenge to this Mizo self-aggrandizing tendency and there are therefore contests to the Mizo identity, the Mizo ethnonym. The contest comes in two forms; one is from tribes and communiteis within Mizoram who do not subscribe to the Mizo identity. The obvious ones are the Gurkhas, Chakmas and Brus (which Mizos do not necessarily want to include either) but also Maras and some Lai. There is also contest to the ethnonym from tribes outside the state who believe that the name Mizo is too narrow as it refers to only Lusei speakers, but at the same time recognize a relationship between the various tribes. An alternative term, that of Zo, has increasingly gained currency especially in the English-writing academic world (thereby legitimizing its use), sometimes due to expediency, and at other times to set a different political agenda. Phrases such as Zohnahthlak, or even Zoram that are commonly used legitimize the use of the word Zo as a generic name to encompass all tribes that were designated as Kuki-Chin-Lushai by the British. In other words, Mizo is subsumed under Zo; Mizo becomes one of the tribes of the Zo peoples. One must however recognise that naming is political, and acceptance or denial of a particular ethnonym has long-lasting repercussions considering that the region is rife with identity issues. The recent troubles in Manipur and Myanmar have heightened the issues regarding ethnicity and ethnonyms given that the cleavages that had relatively stabilized over time are once again being shaken. We also must be aware of the clout of the diasporic communities that are increasingly

having a say in the identity discourse. I believe we need to negotiate carefully the identity issues of Mizoram, lest it takes us in directions that none of us want.

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The same number is given by Siama and Zatluanga. K. Zawla and Vanchhunga do not give a list of 'tribes' considered Mizo.

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