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THE MIZO: IDENTITY, ORIGIN, AND SOCIETY

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THE MEANING AND USAGE OF "MIZO"

The term *Mizo* serves as a collective designation for the numerous clans and tribes inhabiting present-day Mizoram. They form one of the ethnic communities extending from the northwestern region of Burma (Myanmar) into the northeastern frontier of India, unified by common customs, dialects, and cultural traditions. Historically, they were identified by different names—*Kuki*, *Chin*, and *Lushai*. As Grierson records, "The Mizo were first known as Kuki because they were the first batch to have arrived in Mizoram during the reign of the Tipperah Raja, Chachag who flourished around 1512 AD" (1).

When the British annexed the region in 1872, they encountered the Sailo chiefs of the Lusei clan, hence naming the area *Lushai Hills* and its people *Lushai*. The meaning of *Lushai* remains ambiguous. One view interprets *Lu* as "head" and *Sei* as "elongated," describing those with hair knotted high on the head, while T.H. Lewin suggested, "It stands for the word head cutter in English, for the word *Lu* means head and *Shai* means to cut" (370).

Clan names among the Mizo are mostly derived from personal ancestors. Liangkhaia believed that "a person named Luseia must have been one of the ancestors; later they began to call themselves Lusei" (14). Over time, transliteration errors confused *Lusei* with *Lushai*. The former referred to a single sub-tribe, while the latter was used broadly for all the hill tribes. Mizo historians generally employed *Lushai* to denote the wider community and *Lusei* for the specific sub-tribe.

Determining when the word *Mizo* first came into use is challenging. Vanchhunga notes, "Since the remote past the Mizo elders, while talking about their history, always call themselves as Mizo or 'we the Mizos'" (1). Zatluanga offers that the term originated when "the people settling on the plain named their folks living on the hills as Zomi or Mizo, meaning 'people of the cold region'" (1). This idea was rejected by Lalthangliana, who traced the name to *Zopui*, a village established around 1765 near the Tiau River, under the chieftain Lallula. K. Zawla, however, interprets the term as a compound of *Mi* (people) and *Zo* (hill), asserting that "their settlement in the hill area gave them the name Mizo" (11). Though *Zo* is often equated with "highland," Vumson argued that "Zo might mean highland but never highlanders" (5).

Thus, the term *Mizo* is best understood not as a tribal name but as a cultural and ethnic identifier encompassing all clans sharing a common heritage and language across Mizoram.

THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE MIZO

The origins of the Mizo remain shrouded in myth and oral tradition. Prior to the introduction of writing by British missionaries in 1894, Mizo history was preserved orally, resulting in multiple interpretations. Some folktales even mention that the Mizos once possessed a written script "written in a form of scroll or parchment, which they have lost on their ceaseless wanderings… it was consumed by a dog owing to their disregard and carelessness" (Zawla 4).

Most scholars agree that the Mizo belong to the Mongoloid group that migrated from China into the hills of eastern India. A key legend holds that they emerged from a cave called *Chhinlung* (literally, "closed stone") somewhere in the northern hills of Burma. Liangkhaia dated this story to around 900 A.D. (13). Some, like Vanchhunga, believed that Chhinlung was actually the name of a Burmese chief, while Hrangthiauva and Lal Chungnunga identified it as a village named after that chief (4). Others even connected Chhinlung to Prince Chin Lung, son of Huang Ti of the Ch'in dynasty—the emperor famed for constructing the Great Wall of China.

Baveja recounts an old legend that links the Mizos' migration to their labor on a "long and thick wall," implying that "as the construction progressed the Mizos found that their work was very tiring and decided to bolt from the area" (1–2). Though speculative, such tales reflect the community's consciousness of distant origins.

Thanmawia concludes that "there are many possible theories as to the origin and location of the Chinlung, but the general conclusion is that the Mizo had once settled in central Asia" (*Mizo Poetry* 7). From there, they are believed to have moved southward into Myanmar around 800 A.D., settling along the Chindwin River and later in the Kabaw Valley between 800 and 1300 A.D. (Lalthangliana, *Culture* 4). Their earliest town was Khampat, where they lived peacefully and prosperously.

K. Zawla attributes their migration from Kabaw to a severe famine called *Thingpui Tam* (10), while Lalthangliana suggests they fled due to Shan invasions around 1300 A.D. (4). Before leaving, the Mizos reportedly planted a banyan tree as a symbol of remembrance, vowing to return when its roots became new trunks (Thanga 3). From there, they moved towards the Chin Hills, settling clan-wise in different regions—Lusei in Seipui and

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Khawkawk, Ralte in Suaipui, and Chawngthu in Sanzawl, among others (Liangkhaia 43).

Finding the terrain infertile, they journeyed westward and finally reached the Lentlang range between 1450 and 1700 A.D. (Lalthangliana, *Culture* 5). Thanga records that "from Khampat the Mizo immigrated to India into two groups… the first stage made their first halt at Lentlang… about the year 1466" (4). Here, they mastered cultivation and weaving and began consolidating under the powerful Sailo chiefs of the Lusei clan. By 1810, "the Lusei under the Sailo Chiefs had merged their location by occupying the area between Champhai and Demagiri northward up to the borders of Cachar and Sylhet" (Nag 82). This marked the transition from their migratory past to settled life in present-day Mizoram.

THE STRUCTURE OF MIZO SOCIETY

Preliterate Mizo life was shaped by the hardships of subsistence and survival. Their society revolved around agriculture, hunting, and a communal moral code known as *Tlawmngaihna*. As Thanmawia explains, "Tlawmngaihna is an ideal of life in which man could not be outdone in doing good to others… and that self-sacrifice sometime demands life itself" (*Mizo Values* 15). This principle fostered humility, service, and unity within the community.

Village organization centered on the Chief (*Lal*), assisted by elders, and the *Zawlbuk*—a bachelors' dormitory that functioned as both a training ground and defense post. Boys were taught discipline, folklore, and warfare, and were molded into responsible adults.

Bravery was the highest masculine virtue. Warriors displayed enemy skulls and hunting trophies as proof of valor. As Zawla records, "In case the place of the killing is too far to bring home the head, he must bring home a large part of the skin from the head" (95). Although headhunting existed, McCall's suggestion that it was done "to propitiate evil spirits… and to gain the respect of a prospective bride" (38) remains debatable; most evidence points to it being tied to defense and social prestige rather than ritualistic compulsion.

Women, on the other hand, were valued for their beauty, diligence, and weaving skill (*La deh*). From childhood, girls were trained in domestic chores and weaving—activities that symbolized both creativity and endurance. Courtship customs like *Nula rim* (night visits) and *Inlawm* (mutual field work) reflected both social freedom and discipline. J.H. Lorrain defines *Inlawm* as "to take turn and turn about at helping one another in any kind of work… for mutual advantage or pleasure" (206). These customs fostered emotional bonds and community solidarity.

Mizo society was patriarchal, monogamous, and deeply moral. Zu (rice beer) was central to social life—used in celebrations, rituals, and mourning, yet moderation was the rule. Marriage, chastity, and family honor were highly esteemed, and women who upheld virtue commanded social respect.

Among the highest social ideals was the attainment of *Thangchhuah*—a status earned through valor (*Ram lama Thangchhuah*) or wealth and feasting (*In lama Thangchhuah*). The grandest ritual, *Khuangchawi*, required immense resources and conferred immortality of name. As belief held, only the *Thangchhuah Pa* and his wife might enter *Pialral*, the paradise of eternal rest.

CONCLUSION

The story of the Mizo is one of migration, resilience, and moral depth. Their myths—though veiled in legend—mirror an enduring quest for identity, belonging, and dignity. From the caves of Chhinlung to the hills of Mizoram, the Mizo people preserved not just a lineage, but a worldview anchored in courage, communal harmony, and ethical living.

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