

A photograph of two women in traditional Mizo attire sitting in a bamboo forest. The woman on the right wears a white long-sleeved shirt with colorful stripes on the sleeves and a headband with a yellow and red geometric pattern. The woman on the left is smiling and holding a bouquet of red flowers. The background is filled with tall bamboo stalks and green leaves.

EASTERN

**Social
Economic
and
Political History of
the Mizo**

Editors
Malsawmliana
Benjamin Ralte

This book is an outcome of the seminar paper on the society, economy and political history of the Mizo written by a well-known academicians and scholars among the Mizo. It focused from the origin of chieftainship in Mizo society based on tradition and myth to the role and importance of the press in the present day Mizoram. In between, traces on earlier Mizo society in which the importance of blacksmith and role of priest, were made in this book. The position and functions of the Mizo chief in pre and colonial period was also discussed in this book while the protest movement against the chieftainship of the Mizo finds more place in the book.

How the Mizo began to have trade and how it flourished in the south parts of Mizo as well as the economic changes and its impact on socio-political life of the Mizo was also discussed. The influence of church and how it becomes the primary agent of change in Mizo society as well as the general outline of the political unification movement also finds place in this book.

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	–	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	–	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	–	<i>x</i>
Chapter : 1		
Origin of Chieftainship in Early Mizo Society based on Tradition and Myth	–	1–10
– <i>Sangkima</i>		
Chapter : 2		
Thirdeng (Blacksmith) in Traditional Mizo Society	–	11–17
– <i>Malsawmliana</i>		
Chapter : 3		
The Role of Puithiam in Pre-Colonial Mizo Religion	–	18–31
– <i>Benjamin Ralte</i>		
Chapter : 4		
<i>Laipho</i> : A Social Institution of the Early Maras	–	32–37
– <i>K. Zohra</i>		
Chapter : 5		
An Attempt to Reconstruct the Background of <i>Lal Sawi</i> in the Mizo History	–	38–48
– <i>Lalrinnunga Hmar & Vanlalruata Rengsi</i>		
Chapter : 6		
Chiefs in the Lushai Hills District	–	49–59
– <i>C Lalthlengliana</i>		
Chapter : 7		
The Early Mizo Trade : With Special Reference to Tlabung (Demagiri) Frontier Bazar	–	60–68
– <i>J Zorema</i>		

Chapter : 8	
Orality to Literacy: Its Impact on Colonial Mizoram	- 69-80
- <i>Rohmingmawii</i>	
Chapter : 9	
Lakher Society and Colonial Encounter	- 81-87
- <i>K Robin</i>	
Chapter : 10	
Mizoram : Socio-Political Consequences of the Economic Changes (1870-1947)	- 88-96
- <i>Lalngurliana Sailo</i>	
Chapter : 11	
Church : The Primary Agent of Change in Mizo Society	- 97-102
- <i>Samuel Vanlalhlanga</i>	
Chapter : 12	
Historical Sketch of Mizo Re-Unification Attempts	-103-121
- <i>Paul B Chonzik</i>	
Chapter : 13	
Media and Politics : A Study of the Role of Press in Mizoram	-122-129
- <i>Lallianchhunga</i>	
Index	131-132

Origin of Chieftainship in Early Mizo Society based on Tradition and Myth

Sangkima

Tradition and Myth :

Tradition and myth are somewhat interrelated and difficult to separate into their respective connotations. Tradition is the handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique.¹ The story based on rituals, morals and cults which explain some natural phenomenon or religious problems is myth.² Myth cannot be used as descriptive sources on the past but their analysis can reveal the more about a society.³ Meanwhile, culture is behavior patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by means of symbols and its continuity is generally related to traditions. Furthermore, culture in relation to tradition links the past to the present.

RG Collingwood is of the view that there are two kinds of quasi-history – *theocratic history* and *myth*. Theocratic history is not a history proper ‘but a statement of known facts for the information of persons to whom they are not known, but who, as worshippers of the god in question, ought to know the deeds whereby he has made himself manifest.’⁴ Hence, theocratic history is primarily concerned with human actions. Myth, on the contrary, is mainly concerned with divine actions that are recorded as having occurred in the past ‘but in a dateless past which is so remote that nobody knows when it was. It is outside all our time – reckonings and called ‘the beginning of things’.⁵

There are two sources of information on the past: the historical and the traditional. Here we are more concerned with the latter. At the same time, Carlo Antoni says, ‘...history contained some means of distinguishing between a true vision of reality and a purely imaginary one.’⁶ The Vedic literature called *Puranas* collected between 500 BC and

AD 500, are not entirely mythical but they also contain references to historical events.⁷ These historical accounts may now be justified by connecting them with the traditional ones.

Tradition says that the first king of India was *Manu Svayambhu*. Directly born of the god *Brahma*, *Manu* was a hermaphrodite who from the male half of his body bore two sons and three daughters from whom descended a series of *Manus*. One of the *Manus* called *Prithu*, the first consecrated king of the earth, gave to the earth her name *Prithvi*. Romila Thapar is of the view that the name *Manu* provided the generic base for *Manavas* meaning 'mankind' and the king *Prithu* has the echoes of the early Aryan settlement in the Ganges-Yamuna region.⁸

The *Puranas* traces the descent of *Manu's* progeny to the royal heroes of the two epics –the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and then continue to chronicle the dynasties of the historical period. The main action of the *Mahabharata* revolves around the famous war at *Kurukshetra* between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* over land rights.⁹ The battle ranged eighteen days until at last no important chief was left alive but the five brothers and *Krishna*.¹⁰ The traditional date for the war described in the *Mahabharata* is 3102 BC.¹¹ It could have also been about 850 BC.¹² In spite of this very early date the events of the war can be connected with the historical event when the city of *Hastinapura*, the capital of one of the families (*Kauravas*) involved in the *Mahabharata* war was recently excavated.¹³ The war is also linked with the North-East India when a host of *Kiratas* and *Chins* accompanied *Bhagadhatta* who fought against *Arjuna* one of the *Pandavas* brothers.¹⁴ The war lasted for eight days.

In his book entitled *Social and Polity Formations in Pre-Colonial North East India*, JB Bhattacharjee discusses *inter alia* "Tripura State Formation in Medieval Tripura" (Chapter 4) and "Brahmanical Myths, Royal Legitimation and the Jaintia State Formation"(Chapter 5). We may now recapitulate the two stories.

The *Tripuri* are believed to have been in the *Kapili Valley* (Nowgong –now *Nagoan*) of *Assam* before they finally reached the present *Tripura*. During their sojourn there were some periods of confusion when the people were without a *Raja*. Then they prayed to *Lord Siva* for a chief and they were blessed with one.¹⁵ This may therefore be considered as the beginning when the wandering *Tripuris* had a common leadership in community.

Like other states, the formation of the Jaintia state from its indigenous ethnic base passed through different stages and the tradition of the emergence of the state has two versions : the tribal and non-tribal versions. B Pakem says :

“ The tribal version referred to the miraculous mermaid called *Ka Li Dakha* who was captured by a Jaintia gentleman called *U Luh Ryandi* from *Ka Lwai Syiem* or a royal lake at a distance of about one kilometer west of the present day Sutnga village. The Sutnga Dynasty then came out of a union of *Ka Li Dakha* and *Luh Ryandi*. Their eldest son *U Chyngklein-Am* ruled Jaintia state from Sutnga.

“The non-tribal version, however, simply indicated the Brahmanical influence in Jaintia state. It referred to a mythical fish legend where *Thakur Rani* was involved. According to this version, a certain Garo gentleman, *Landahvar* by name, married a Sutnga mermaid princess called *Mutchodduvee*. Their son *Burra Gohain* or *U Bor* (or *Mar*) *Kuhain* in local usage, was the first ruler of Jaintia state.”¹⁶

These two versions of the origin of the Jaintia state may be considered as divine origin of the state.

The rise of the first ruler of Sutnga has yet another version. The story current among the plain peoples is quoted from J B Bhattacharjee:

“..he was asleep on a flat stone under a tree on a hot day. As the sun changed its position the ray fell directly on his head. A black cobra then raised its hood and protected the boy from the sun. A Daloi (possibly of Sutnga) who was passing by saw this and became convinced that the child was of Holy Birth. He felt that this boy should be made the king of the hills. He took out blood from his own chest and put a mark (raj-tilak) on the forehead of the boy. This Daloi was instrumental in making the boy the first Syiem Sutnga.”¹⁷

R Buragohain writing on state formation in the early Tai-Ahom state says that the Tai Ahom rulers claimed descent from heavenly ancestor Lengdon and writes :

“ All the Tai-Ahom rulers throughout their six hundred years of rule claimed descent from their heavenly ancestor Lengdon, the Supreme ruler of heaven and his two grandson Khun Lung and Khun Lai who were sent down to rule over the

wide earth. Then in presence of other nobles, Lengdon finally decided to send down his two grandsons to rule over the anarchic wide earth. Lengdon dictated a 'code of conduct' to them which became the basis of Tai Ahom gentile constitution."¹⁸

According to him, the consultation of his counselors by Lengdon before sending his grandsons became a convention among the Tai-Ahom rulers to consult others before taking major decisions.

Meanwhile, A.L. Basham is of the view that from the days of Plato and Aristotle, European thought has turned its attention to such question as the origin of the state, the ideal form of government and the basis of law.¹⁹ India also thought about such questions. In India, the earliest legend about the origin of kingship occurs in one of the later Vedic texts—*Aitareya Brahmana*—perhaps of the 8th or 7th Century BC.²⁰ The legend tells how the gods and demons were at war and how the gods were badly beaten by their enemies. Consequently, the gods met together and decided that they needed a *raja* to lead them in battle. Then they appointed *Soma*²¹ as their king. This legend suggests that in the earliest times, kingship was thought to be based upon human need and military necessity and that the king's first duty was to lead his subjects in times of war.²² The story is repeated by the *Taittiriya Upanishad* in a little later but in a significant altered form.

The studies thus made above suggested that both the tradition and myth could be strong factor in accelerating the process of the emergence of chieftainship as an early state.

Origin of Chieftainship :

Chieftainship was an integral part of the social as well as the political life of the early Mizo. In the beginning, it was an evolution but in course of time it became hereditary. A large majority of the chiefs belonged to the Sailo lineage of Thangur clan of the Lushei tribe.²³ Other tribes like Fanai, Pawi, Paihte and Hualngo also formed chieftainship but only in a smaller number and they were subordinates to the Sailo chiefs. In the meantime, there were some independent Pawi and Lakher chiefs in southern part of the erstwhile Lushai Hills. It may also be mentioned that when the British occupied the Hills, the authorities appointed some government employees as chiefs in place of those chiefs who were deposed of for various reasons.

Ruled by its own chiefs in early period each village was an independent entity. In theory, the chief was a despot within his own realm and his words were law. He enjoyed power to impose even death penalty. 'On the war-path or in the council, I am chief, and my words are obeyed; behavior like that would be punished by death.'²⁴ The chief was very careful in exercising his powers mainly because the subjects of a chief could transfer their allegiance to another chief at will and it became common among the Sailo chiefs.

As noted before, theoretically the chief was absolute and for this reason, it is natural that the people flocked under the fittest ruler who could give them protection from their adversaries. Hence, Lewin records, 'The *Lal* directs in war; he is the last in the advance, and the rearmost in retreat'.²⁵ As to the evolution of the powers of the Chief, Vanlalruata Rengsi says :

'These powers of the chief did not come overnight. It took centuries of rigor, trials and tribulations to build up. The career of the Mizo chiefs wound up with the development of their villages through their tortuous meandering and hazardous sojourn from the Chin Hills. While they all prevailed on more or less the same ecological-technological considerations, their location at times either enhanced or threatened their existence. In all these, the scope was open to human endeavor, resilience, ingenuity and resourcefulness'.²⁶

With this outlined statement, the structure of chieftainship is exposed and with this background, we may now turn to the main text of the study.

All societies have traditions about how they and the rest of mankind came into being. The Mizo, too have the *Chhinlung* tradition which claims that *Chhinlung*, believed to be the original habitat of the Mizo, is said to be located somewhere in Southern China. From there they migrated to Burma, now Myanmar. According to folk tradition, they prevailed in the Chin Hills of Burma and there they settled down for centuries. It is popularly believed that chieftainship emerged among the Mizo when they settled in the hills ranges commonly known as *Lentlang* now in Myanmar.

In those early days, feuds and conflicts amongst the people themselves for various reasons were common occurrences. Raids and plunders caused by blood feuds were the common forms of warfare.²⁷ Generally, raids and wars were undertaken by a tribe or clan in the

pretext of revenge and were generally committed in a party consisting of as many numbers as the attacking party needed and in a family when a head was needed for a family purpose.²⁸ Besides, they were constantly harassed by the other neighbours whom they commonly called *Pawi*. In short, during those days people did not live peacefully due to inter-clan tribal feuds. What they needed most by then was a valiant and heroic chief who could give them protection from the enemies. Under such circumstances they were unable to eke out a living. Even people working in jhums needed protections. Even after coming to the present Mizoram then known as Lushai Hills warring continued amongst themselves and these resulted in the decimation of many villages. Again, under such circumstances each clan was competed to have their own chief.

Tradition has it that by the times when our forefathers were wandering in the vicinities Chhinlunga had two sons –Chawngthua and Chawngzova. The former had two sons named Chawngvawma and Ralhloha, and Chawngvawma begot Dongula and Thahdova. It is also said that Dongula was fathered by Nova (not the man who was connected with the floods in the Bible).²⁹ Dongula begot one Niguite whose birth is narrated in the form of folktale. According to it, Dongula had illicit sex with his own sister Lalnemi by name who then conceived a son named Niguite. He was so called because the child was born due to the rays coming from the sun. Hence, literally, *ni* means ‘sun’ and *Guite* is taken as ‘to burn’ or ‘to scorch’³⁰ and hence the name Niguite. Dongula insisted that his subjects should not know anything about the pregnancy of his sister. Ashamed of what he did, Dongula tried to convince the people by deceit and wisely devised a trick by putting an egg inside a tree trunk at his nearby house. Then he told them about the possibility of a child being born from the egg. One day when the child was born he was then placed inside the trunk pretending that the child was born of egg. To make the people believe what was going on with the birth Dongula then broke the egg and informed the people about the birth of the child. Niguite had two male issues whom he named as Ngekguka and Bawklua from whom the Paihte tribe and the Lusei tribe of Sailo clan claim decent from them respectively.

Tradition also tells that Bawklua married Lakiri³¹ and a son named Sihsinga was born to them. When he grew up, Sihsinga told his parents of his dream in which his penis was cut off and chopped into pieces and were then strewn over every hill. This dream may be taken as a prophecy that once the offspring of Sihsinga would have been great rulers spreading over every hill. Sihsinga fathered a son Ralna who

begot one Chhuahlawma, father of Zahmuaka who, with his wife Lawileri by name, had seven sons but one died in infancy.³² Chhuahlawma was a slave captured by the Lusei tribe but fostered by the Chhakchhuak tribe at Seipui village. The seven sons according to seniority were Zadenga, Paliana, Thangluaha, Thangura, Rivunga and Rokhuma. They are said to have been the progenitors of the different tribes of modern Mizo.

It has already pointed out that at the times when the tribes settled in the hill ranges of *Lentlang* in Myanmar that the different groups of the tribes had lived separately with their own leaders. But nothing is definitely known about them. Only *Hnamte* group is known as having their own chief or ruler. The *Hnamte* group is said to have congregated themselves at *Tlangkhua* and *Khawrua* vicinities. Unfortunately, their chief *Thlanpiala/Chhanpiala*, by name died of unnatural death. Hence they looked for a successor but they could not find any because no one was willing to be the leader due to onerous duty and the fearful onslaught of other tribes.³³ Having found no suitable successor among themselves, the *Hnamte* approached *Zahmuaka*, a Lusei tribe of Seipui khur and requested him to be their chief. The invitation was extended to him with one condition that no *Hnamte* be taken as slave by the chiefs.³⁴ In short, *Zahmuaka* accepted the offer of becoming a chief after the insistence of his wife Lawileri. It is said that in the beginning, *Zahmuaka* refused the offers because a leadership devoid of any privileges was meaningless. But the *Hnamte* agreed to confer upon him a privilege of getting paddy due then known as *Fathang*. He was badly needed because along with his six sons, he would be able to engage himself actively in case of inter-clan feuds. In this way, *Zahmuaka* became the first Lusei chief whose rule was prosperous and from whom sprang the six Lusei ruling clans.

Traditionally, the rise and prosperity of *Zahmuaka* and his descendants is told like this : One day a seer came to *Zahmuaka*'s village. He first entered into the house of a *Hnamte* clan asking for a halt at night. But the head of the family declined the request saying '*Lolak ka hmang mek a, ka thiang lo ve*'³⁵ meaning 'as I am engaging myself with *Lolak* sacrifice, so I am forbidden from receiving any guest'. The guest was then invited by *Thangura* to come to his house which he willingly did. As the seer hardly talked, *Thangura*'s wife was suspicious but *Thangura* treated him well by offering him *Zu* (rice beer) and he also prepared a delicious food for him. When everything was ready, *Thangura* asked the oracle to partake the meal at his stomach's full but he refused to take

it at the first instance. But when he was insisted to do so, he ate the meal. When the meal was over, the soothsayer blessed the couples with these words : 'Nangni nupa hi Belrawhmual kilin, buhchhun leh sachhiah eiin lo awm tawh ang che u'.³⁶ The English translation goes like this 'You the couples, from now on you will enjoy the privilege of being recipients of *buhchhun* and *sachhiah* dues'. Then, the fortune teller walked away.

So, after Zahmuaka was installed as successor of *Thlanpiala/Chhanpiala*, his sons were also made chiefs over the scattered villages. Thus, chieftainship had firmly been established in Burma before the Mizo moved down to the present Mizoram formerly known as Lushai Hills. Thangura, the fourth son of Zahmuaka had two sons. They were Chawnglula and Thangmanga. Thangmanga begot Sailova from whom the present Sailo family claims their origins. Like other cases in India, here also the traditional and the historical events are chronicled.

Concluding Remarks :

We may now conclude our study by saying once again that the emergence of chieftainship was a very significant event in the society through the ages. The discussion on the concept of the state is intended to explain the meaning of a state but as the nature of the state is hard to grasp, it is therefore difficult to conceptualise the state because it is yet difficult to demarcate between state and society. The fact is that even if the institution of chieftainship is said to have certain features of the state but it cannot be equated with the concept of modern state. In short, from the study it is found that like the case in Indian history as already highlighted above with regard to the emergence of chieftainship among the Mizo, the traditional part can be connected with the historical part. This is the objective of this study. After all, the study is not a study of social or state formation but a study merely undertaken to show that tradition has a crucial part to play in the origin of chieftainship in early Mizo society.

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