

ZAWLBUK AND ITS ABOLITION: A SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE MIZOS

Sangkima

Zawlbuk, a Mizo word for 'bachelor's house' had occupied a high degree of social magnitude in pre-British Mizo Society. It was a place where youth were shaped into responsible adult members of the society. It also sustained and provided a pure and uncorrupted life among the members of the society. N.E. Parry the Superintendent of the then Lushai Hills accredited the importance and the contributions of the Zawlbuk in the Mizo Society in the following words: "I ascribe much of the indiscipline among the Lakhers to the fact that they have no bachelor's house or equivalent to the Lushei Zawlbuk". It was the nerve-centre of the Mizo Society.

Theories

There are two theories for the origin of the Zawlbuk. The probable theory is that in early times it was a common affair among the tribal people to attack the people of another tribe for some reasons. This led to inter-tribal feuds endangering the peaceful living of the common people. More detrimental than this barbarious act was an inter-clan feud which commonly occurred among the tribes for want of being dominant over the other. Therefore, killing of an enemy became a legalised deed among them that the man who brought home the head of an enemy was admired and respected as a 'warrior'. Therefore, fighting between two chiefs or villages became a common phenomenon. For this reason, it became a necessity for all young men to sleep together in one common place in order to protect the village from the enemy. To meet such possible attack, a collective action with prompt move was more desirable. This could be done when all the adult

members of a village slept in one place. Hence, the Zawlbuk institution originated.

Another theory suggests that when people were less in number the entire village used to live together in one big house as an enlarged family due to two reasons: traditionally a village was situated on the hill top and this involved scarcity of flat land enough for the construction of houses. They, therefore, began to build a big and long house enough to accommodate the entire village to live in; secondly there they stayed together for fear of attack from another village.

These theories of origin are also considered responsible for the practice of head-hunting among the Mizos.

Origin

The origin of Zawlbuk may be traced from China where "Long Houses" or "Communal Houses" were found among the tribes who are dominantly settled in the southern provinces. Besides these houses, bachelor's house, and among some of the tribes girl's houses, was separately maintained in which only adolescent boys of twelve or thirteen years of age as minimum were allowed to sleep. The bachelor's house was strikingly different from those of the communal houses.² In the bachelor's house only adult members of the village lived, whereas in communal house an entire village lived together.³

It may be conjectured that the bachelor's house was brought down by the tribes who migrated to the different parts of Southeast Asia including India where various tribes of Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples are found. It was found mainly among the patrilineal tribes and became a practice,⁴ however, even among the matrilineal Indonesians. Both the

Khasis and the Garos, however, lack the bachelor's house. It may be noted that among the Mon-Khmer speaking peoples only the Palaung had both the communal house as well as the bachelor's house. The same system was also practised by the Nagas who called it Morung.⁵ We may, therefore, assume from the statement made above that the Mizos had brought the Zawlbuk down from China centuries ago. This conclusion also suggests the original habitat of the Mizos. The Pawi (Lai) and the Lakher (Mara) tribes now mostly concentrated in Southern part of Mizoram also lack the same institution the reasons of which is not definitely known. The Pawi, however, claim that being a dominant clan or tribe they do not find any reason to have the Zawlbuk institution. In the case of the Lakhers (Mara) they may belong to the Mon-Khmer speaking peoples among whom such institution was hardly found.

A Brief Description

Every village had the Zawlbuk but it was the choice of a village to maintain more than one. In big villages, however, there were more than one. It is said that in Selesih village there were more than 7 Zawlbuk located at the most central place in a village. It was constructed in a manner facing towards the chief's house and not far off from it. It had a verandah at the entrance. Next to it was a wall not touching the floor by about three feet and made without door. At about five feet inside the wall another wall of about three feet was raised. A log as big as the whole village could carry and sufficiently to cover the entire breadth of it was collected from the forest and placed it on the raised wall after peeling its bark. This log was popularly known as 'bawhbelh'. Every village had a hankering to have the biggest 'bawhbelh' which was considered as a show of pomp.⁶ A smaller village with less population could place two logs over the other in a stable position. The open space

between the 'bawhbelh' and the wall was used as a place for stocking firewood. The level of the floor was paved down by about two feet just inside the 'bawhbelh'. This was done in view of defence purposes.

At the far end of the Zawlbuk there used to be a raised platform of about six feet wide and one foot high covering the whole breadth of the Zawlbuk. This portion known as 'Bahzar' or 'Dawvan' was used as a sleeping place. The wall at the back portion was made as the wall at the entrance. The space thereby leaving an opening between the two walls was known as 'awkpaka'. A fire place was placed at the centre of the Zawlbuk and was filled up with earth right from the ground. The floor was strongly built as the dwellers used it to provide them facilities for various indigenous physical exercises like wrestling etc. Therefore, the floor was strongly woven in particular design known as 'chhuatpuitah'. The walls were woven too in a different design known as 'bawhtah' thereby giving the walls very strong. The size of the Zawlbuk should be big enough to accommodate all the young men and young folks of the village.

The Hierarchy of the Zawlbuk Group

In fact, the chief of the village was the de facto head of the Zawlbuk by virtue of the position he held. He did not, however, interfere in its day to day administration. The administration was managed by the leader of the Zawlbuk called 'Valupa' appointed by the chief. The inmates selected one among themselves who was recognised and considered as having an undisputed quality. The Valupa was the second most powerful man in the village next to the chief. He was respected and obeyed by every people due to the qualities he possessed. He commanded the Zawlbuk dwellers who collectively acted as the chief's army. Sometimes, the chief had to yield to him for he

directly commanded the Zawlbuk dwellers. He was assisted by his trusted friends chosen among the inmates. The adult members of the Zawlbuk dwellers formed another group. They were the common men in the village.

It was the duty and responsibilities of all the boys of the village who had attained 11 years of age to supply firewood to Zawlbuk every evening. If anyone was found failing to do so, a severe action was taken against him. He might be forced to collect the firewood from the jungle in the night itself. Sometimes the boy was ordered as punishment to supply ten bundles of wood in addition to his usual supply the next day. No parents dared to come forward to oppose the order given to their wards. Therefore, in order to avoid such harsh punishment inflicted upon the boy each boy brought the firewood in the Zawlbuk with the knowledge of one witness. One of the Zawlbuk dwellers was monitored to check the boys whether they did accordingly. Such boys were known as 'thingnawifawm'. Besides one boy was engaged to supply Zawlbuk with drinking water. He should keep at least three bamboo containers ready for use and was also responsible in keeping the Zawlbuk clean, and should make fire at the Zawlbuk every evening. He was free however, from supplying firewood. The duty was done in rotation among the boys. These groups were fed by giving them share as a reward, in time of 'Chawngchen' and 'Khuangchawi' feasts held in the village. Woman was prohibited to enter the Zawlbuk and seeing a woman entering into it even in a dream was also taken as a bad omen to her.

Admission

To admit one as adult member of the Zawlbuk one had to undergo a queer test after claiming for the membership. The claim was verified by the Valupa or any of his assistants whom he

entrusted to do the job by pulling out the longest hair from his public region and that hair was to be long enough to circle round the established size of a bamboo pipe. If the boy was found qualified he would be classed as adult and the Valupa formally admitted him as member of the Zawlbuk by making announcement in the presence of the other members.

Function

As a social institution, Zawlbuk had three main functions. It was used as a sleeping place for the young unmarried men of the extended family. He had to stay here until he got married. After marriage, the young man left the Zawlbuk and returned to the home of his parents. It was a common practice that the married man could stay on in the Zawlbuk till a child was born. To cause no injury to an unborn child the parents should not engage in sexual intercourse after the fifth month of pregnancy. For this reason a married man might again take up temporary residence in the Zawlbuk. This was left open to an individual choice. Zawlbuk was also used as a recreational and training centre. It was the custom of the young men to courting girls when they had free time. It was done generally at night after evening meal. It was an usual practice of the dwellers to first visit the Zawlbuk before going for courting. Here, the new entrants were asked to do wrestling and other indigenous games as training. Sometimes, the experts in wrestling were engaged in such feats as a show for the trainees. Again, one was challenged by the other, in a manner as to who would be the champion in a particular game. Other various indigenous game were also played in the Zawlbuk. When the 'Chapchar Kut' festival was about to come they practised dances in the Zawlbuk. As it was used as a training place, the Zawlbuk was also used a place where insolvent villagers were disciplined. It was the second place of imparting discipline and good manners the first being the

home where parents instructed their children at meal time to be good citizen of the society. It has been customary among the Mizos to look for a house in the neighbourhoods where to stay over night. In such occasion the Zawlbuk served as an inn or guest house for male visitors. Besides, the Zawlbuk fromed an ideal place for emergency cases like the raid from another village etc. The young men slept in the Zawlbuk could therefore not without any delay. Here lies the need of the Zawlbuk in the village.

Abolition of Zawlbuk

Like other social customs, the Zawlbuk could not stand the force of changes which took place after the coming of the British resulting in its abolition. Four factors may be accounted for the abolition of the Zawlbuk in the Mizo society. The four forces were: in the first place, the introduction of the British administration contributed for the abolition of the Zawlbuk. The sole authority over the Zawlbuk in a village was the village chief. With the coming of the British the chief's authorities were reduced very much by making him dependent. He had to exercise powers only at the behest of the British. This directly affected the discipline in the Zawlbuk administration. The law and order in the Zawlbuk was apparently deteriorated. Though its existence was recognised but its place in the society was seriously undermined by the people. A small spark was enough to make a big fire on the Zawlbuk for its end for the fact that parents found it difficult to cope with it because sometimes the Zawlbuk inmates were too harsh in action towards an individual and supply of firewood to Zawlbuk was too burdensome for the parents whose involvements were often required when their wards were sick. In the sceond place, Christianity was a real hindrance to the proper function of the Zawlbuk. The practice of Christian virtues slowly eradicated the indigenious practices and customs. The importance

of the institution was inevitably neglected in the society. Its extinction was therefore inevitable when formal education was introduced among the Mizos. The informal education had to be replaced by formal education. Of the forces, this was the most forceful one because parents were prepared to send their children to school where the children would gain more. They felt that they could control their children better at home than what the Zawlbuk could provide.¹⁰ Lastly, the movement for the abolition was quickened by the people who took part in the war service. When the World War I broke out many Mizo young men were recruited to the war service. These people returned with a changed outlook. Representing almost every village, these War servicemen thus made remarkable contributions towards adopting a modern way of living. People therefore, began to feel that the best way to improve their future lot was to break away from their indigenous way of living.¹¹ Thus the idea of having continued it was dying out in course of time in the mind of the people themselves.

At the same time, a definite attempts were made by some of the British residents to continue the institution in Mizoram. The idea was spearheaded by N.E. Parry the Superintendent of the then Lushai Hills who championed the cause of the Mizo customary laws. When he assumed office in 1926 the Zawlbuk had a deserted look in almost every village and it was almost non-existence and in a few villages the institution had already been abandoned. Parry deeply moved by the role it had played in the Mizo society, therefore, issued a Standing Order to all the chiefs directing them to revive the Zawlbuk in Mizoram in the following words:

"I have noticed that in a few villages the Zawlbuk is no longer maintained. All chiefs are hereby informed that every Lushai Village must keep up a

Zawlbuk. Circle Interpreters will report to me any villages that have no Zawlbuk."¹²

He further ordered the chiefs who had already abandoned the Zawlbuk to rebuild it in the following words:

"Please order all circle Interpreters to report villages which have no Zawlbuks. The following villages, I know, have no Zawlbuk and should be ordered to build one before the 31st March 1926.

1. Paliana
2. Hrangchhuana¹³
3. Lalzidinga".

Meanwhile, in Southern Mizoram attempts were also made by the Christian Missionaries to revive the institution. Rev. F.J. Raperof the Baptist Mission took keen interest in reconstructing the Zawlbuk. He mobilised the youth to keep up the values which the society attained through it. Being a District Commissioner for Boy Scouts in Mizoram he provided material assistance to the Zawlbuk inmates. He helped them by giving them materials like petrolmax, carrom etc. with a view to innovating there minds for the Zawlbuk which was losing its credit.

In spite of these efforts, the view of the people on Zawlbuk could not be changed. When A.G. McCall succeeded Parry the same voice was insistently raised by the people. Conceding to their views McCall convened a Public Meeting on 1 January 1938 at Aizawl (Thakthing)¹⁴ to evolve a concrete policy on Zawlbuk in Mizoram. In this meeting McCall was fully convinced to revoke Parry's order in 10 days. From this historic decision the Zawlbuk fell into complete disuse and in course of time it became an institution of the past in the history of the Mizos in Mizoram.

Notes & References

1. N.E. Parry, **The Lakhers**, Firma KLM, Calcutta, 1976, Rept., p.28.
2. Edwin M. Loeb and Jan O.M. Broek, "Social Organization and the Long House in Southeast Asia" in **American Anthropologist**, Vol. 49, No.1, 1947, p.414.
3. **Ibid.**
4. **Ibid.**, p. 418.
5. G.M. Godden, "The Nagas and other Frontier Tribes of North East India", **Journal of Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland**, Vol. xxvii, 1897, p.47.
6. V.L. Siama, **Mizo History**, Lalrinliana & Sons, Aizawl, 1978, p.28.
7. Zatlunga, **Mizo Chanchin**, Khuma Printing Press, Aizawl, 1966, p.82.
8. It was the custom and right of the thingnawifawm (boys) to ask for their share from the river of the feasts. They demanded it by shaking the house of the giver. They were given only when the adults had finished. If there were not left-over, a fresh rice and meat were prepared for them.
9. Sangkima, **Society and Social Changes of the Mizos (1890-1947): A Historical Study** (Unpublished Thesis), p. 209.
10. A.G. McCall, **Lushai Chrysalis**, Lusac & Co., London, 1947; p p. 211.
11. N. Chatterji, **Zawlbuk as a Social Institution in the Mizo Society**, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1975, p.30.
12. Aizawl Record Room, Order No. 116D/26.1.1926.
13. **Ibid.**, Order No. 118/2.2.1926.
14. Zatlunga, **Op.cit.**, p. 84.