

**‘Khawhar in’ as a Space in/for Mourning and Collective Grieving:  
Spatial dynamics of mortuary practices among the Zo hnahtlak**

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**Abstract**

*The present discourse endeavors to explicate the construct of a spatial framework designed to facilitate the process of mourning, with a particular focus on comprehending the intricate dynamics inherent in the phenomenon of ‘collective encountering of death’ within the sociocultural milieu of the Zo hnahtlak. I develop the concept of a ‘space’ in/for mourning to encompass the establishment of a tangible or symbolic setting wherein individuals are able to engage in the cognitive and emotional processing of their bereavement, ultimately seeking comfort and solace. The spatial configuration being discussed includes various forms, such as a physical enclosure in a mortuary establishment and a digital space for virtual commemorations. The provision of this space acknowledges the importance of facilitating open mourning processes, allowing individuals to engage in introspection, recollection, and emotional healing. This study examines the spatial dynamics of mortuary practices among the Zo hnahtlak.*

**Keywords:** Death, Zo hnahtlak, ‘Khawhar in’, ‘Khawhar hla’, Collective Grieving, Spatial dynamics

**The idea of a ‘spatial dynamics’ in rites of passage**

The ‘Zo hnahtlak’s rites of passage are centred around the communal experience of death. The emotions and collective response to death among the Mizo people present an intriguing topic for analysis. The Zo/Mizo community has a unique approach to Death that differs from many other cultural customs. This approach is characterised by collective remembrance, shared mourning, and communal engagement with Death through the use of the *Tlawmngaihna* code. The physical manifestation of

grief in individuals is considered a fundamental element. The collective experience of mourning creates a temporary environment where rituals and customs unite the community, promoting a sense of togetherness. Within the context of Zo/Mizo culture, it is widely held that the soul possesses the ability to depart from the corporeal vessel at any given location. However, it is important to note that the physical embodiment of an individual is solely detached from its immediate social group and cherished acquaintances upon its return to the ancestral abode. This particular setting serves as a gathering point for individuals to engage collectively in mourning practises and openly manifest their sentiments of sorrow and bereavement. Death is often seen as an important transition, where the physical body undergoes a spiritual journey towards a non-earthly realm called '*pialral*' and '*van ram*'.

The Church's increased prominence in Mizoram can be traced back to a succession of spiritual revivals that occurred from 1906 onwards. These revivals resulted in heightened proselytizing endeavors in the area. Religious institutions have historically broadened their influence to encompass multiple aspects of human existence, including the concept of mortality. In Mizo culture, the death of an individual is publicly acknowledged and communicated to the community through the use of hymns. This practice involves the ongoing singing of hymns in the '*Khawhar in*' (home of the bereaved) for a minimum period of three consecutive days and nights. Consequently, a significant number of community members are attracted to the *Khawhar*, the location where the collective mourning/grieving ceremony is being held. The collection of hymns created and composed by Mizo Christians between 1919 and 1930 is referred to as '*Khawhar zai*' (singing songs of mourning). The *Khawhar zai* repertoire is significant in influencing the sociocultural dynamics of collective mourning and the shared experience of death among the Zo community. The songs called '*Khawhar hla*' (songs for the dead/mourning) and the practice of singing them collectively, known as *Khawhar zai*, have received considerable attention in popular culture (Chakraborty, 2023). Collective singing functions as a means to alleviate the effects of loss and grief by enabling a communal outlet for expressing hope and celebration. This is accomplished through collective singing during funeral ceremonies and the sharing of personal experiences of grief among members of the religious community. '*Khawhar zai*' is a cultural practise observed in the Mizo community, which allows individuals to collectively express emotions related to mourning. This

practice enables participants to develop and demonstrate the skills needed to express their emotions in a way that is consistent with the collective response to grief. This analysis delves into the experiences of the Mizo community in relation to death, with a specific focus on investigating the influence of ritual singing of the '*Khawhar zai*' in the '*Khawhar in*' (home in bereavement). The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of the "space in/for mourning," transitioning from an individualised realm of mourning and grief to a more collective one.

### **Proselytization and Proselytized People**

Proselytization occurs within a dynamic and complex cultural environment, where various layers of interaction shape and reshape the living space. The colonial encounter in the Lushai Hills involved efforts to civilize and transform the indigenous tribes, who were previously known as "head-hunters," into more civilized individuals referred to as "soul hunters" (Chakraborty, 2016). The *Zo hnaathlak* and Christianity intersected during a sequence of spiritual revivals that occurred in 1906, 1913, 1918, 1930, 1935, 1948, 1984, 1988, and 1990. These revivals further assimilated the Zo community into the framework of Christianity, emphasising the concept of unity with Christ. These revivals were characterised by spontaneous dancing and singing, as well as episodes of fits. Women played a prominent role in expressing uninhibited dance as a means of invoking the divine during these revivals. The incorporation of Zo practices into the Judeo-Christian tradition, along with the assimilation of Victorian influences, is commonly referred to as the 'Localization of the Gospel' (Chakraborty, 2008). Despite being proselytised, the myth of the passage to the '*Mitthi Khua*' (village of the dead), which symbolises death and the afterlife, persists in Mizo songs and poems (Chakraborty, 2023).

### **Death and Mourning: Changing spatial dynamics**

The placement of the noticeboard outside the residence temporarily known as the '*Khawhar in*, is observed to coincide with its positioning in close proximity to the coffin. In accordance with established social norms and practices, it is customary for the family and friends of the deceased to be organised and positioned in a specific sequence during funeral proceedings. This prescribed order is typically determined by the relationship of individuals to the deceased and their level of closeness. Furthermore, it is

customary for these individuals to be visually documented through the medium of photography, wherein they are arranged in rows, both seated and standing, in close proximity to the coffin. The inclusion of these photographs in memorial and death anniversary videos, which are frequently broadcasted on television, has emerged as a crucial component of the farewell ritual. The photographs and videos are utilised to attain revalidations of the collective ethnonational *Tlawmngaihna* code, as well as to digitally commemorate and memorialise through their exhibition on social media platforms.

The act of engaging in photography sessions, much like the presence of music and songs such as '*Khawhar hla*', can be understood as transitory components within the context of the ritualistic environment. The act of offering plastic flowers to the grieving family signifies a transformation of the intangible concept of mourning into a tangible and enduring material manifestation. Plastic flowers, in their peculiar manner, possess a longevity that surpasses the cumulative experience of mortality within a transitory environment designated for the purpose of grieving. Following the aforementioned event, the collective assemblage gradually disperses and diminishes its congregational presence in the subsequent days. However, it is noteworthy that few of individuals exhibits a tendency to revisit the residence, engaging in the practice of *Khawhar zai* singing and providing solace to the grieving family (Chakraborty, 2023).

The temporal transience of the '*Khawhar in*' is evident in its extension beyond the present moment. In the event of an individual's demise occurring subsequent to the prescribed morning hour, the interment ritual is deferred until the following day. In this particular scenario, it is noteworthy that the physical presence of the deceased individual will persist within the confines of the domestic setting, even during the nocturnal hours. This extended period of vigil, known as '*Ruang thlak zan*', entails the collective engagement of individuals in the solemn observance of the deceased. More specifically, this is called '*mitthi lu men*' with the YMA engaged in the performance of *Tlawmngaihna* code through their collective singings of '*khawhar hla*', in the space in mourning/ bereavement (*Personal Interview/phone conversation*: Pu Kitea). The young people gather in the space of the 'home' (*Khawhar in*) and engage in the nuances of collective mourning and heal those in grief, and unlike at the 'home' in its stage of *Mitthi in* (house with the deadbody), which rarely lasts more than three hours, the collective mourning through singing continues throughout the night until sunrise. The

spatial dynamics of the bereaved 'home' undergo significant transformations within brief timeframes, specifically from sunset to sunrise. Following the interment of the deceased individual, the mortuary customs serve as indicators of the ongoing transformations within the spatial dynamics of the grieving household. On the evening after the burial, at around 7 p.m., the locality's young people join the close relatives to begin the few nights of '*Khawhar lenpui*'. The singing sessions, which are orchestrated by the YMA, have the objective of providing solace and support to individuals who are experiencing bereavement and grief. These sessions serve as a means of consolation in the absence of the corporeal presence (referred to as '*ruang*') within the domestic sphere. At this point, the home is no longer a '*mitthi in*' but becomes the '*Khawhar in*', house of bereavement. Therefore, the remainder of the practices are more concerned with expressing solidarity and empathy with the bereaved family than with reintegrating the dead person into the community. The day after the burial is called '*thlan nghah ni*'. The older people gather in the home and cater the needs of the bereaved family members.

Throughout the diurnal cycle, particularly in the afternoon, individuals from the community would engage in the act of visiting, demonstrating their deference, and partaking in communal singing within the domestic space. The participants in this social setting typically consist of elderly members of the community. The ambiance is characterised by a laid-back atmosphere, wherein certain individuals may engage in stationary movements such as standing and dancing while vocalising, as depicted in the vignette. By the late evening, typically around 6 or 7 p.m., the older individuals disperse, creating space for the younger members of the community to once again engage in the night vigil. The Young Music Association (YMA) assumes responsibility for the provision of benches, music equipment, and financial resources to support the provision of refreshments. In contemporary society, there exists a prevailing social norm that places an expectation upon individuals who fall within the age range of 18 to 40 and remain unmarried. This expectation entails their regular attendance during evening hours, with the purpose of providing assistance whenever deemed necessary. In the context of this social gathering, the drummers assume the role of initiating and guiding the vocalisation, while also allowing for moments dedicated to oratory and dissemination of information. Additionally, a designated interval will be allocated to

facilitate the replenishment of sustenance. During the final song, individuals within the social group tend to assume an upright position, signifying their collective act of standing. Subsequently, following this musical interlude, the congregation proceeds to disperse, thereby concluding their shared experience (Chakraborty, 2023). The temporal duration of the community's mourning process typically spans from a minimum of three days to a maximum of one week. The temporal extent of the aforementioned event was contingent upon the prevailing norms and customs within the specific geographic area or Young Men's Association (YMA), and was frequently influenced by the socioeconomic status, social standing, and level of recognition within the community during the period of mourning. The communal act of engaging in nightly singing serves as a means of providing solace and consolation to those who are experiencing grief and loss. This also highlights a deliberate effort to allocate resources towards the development of young individuals in the realm of vocal expression and engagement in Zo mourning rituals.

### **The codes/norms in the Space in/for Mourning**

In contemporary times, the social standards of *'Tlawmngai'*, *'Huaisen'*-*'Pasaltha'* have been associated with notions of 'Social Welfare' led by the Church and its agencies, namely the YMA (Young Mizo Association), the KTP (Khristian Thalai Pawl) and the youth organisations. The desire to create and *'belong'* to *aldeal Zo Christian State* has been powerfully portrayed and, at times, has led to the voyeuristic intervention of the church and its agencies in the private and public arena (Downs, 1983; Chakraborty, 2008; 2009). The conformity demanded by the *Nexus of Patriarchy* often results in a clash of interest between 'archaic traditionalism/Christian ethics' and 'the culture of individualism/globalised society'. Alongside these multifold concerns is the hybridisation of the code of *'Tlawmngaihna'* in urban spaces. The concept of *Tlawmngaihna*, which pre-dates Christianity, is today found in its hybridised form. *'Tlawmngaihna'* today has been reduced to community services such as *'Hnatlang'* (community service), *'Thlan lai'* (grave digging) organised by the YMA or KTP. Non-participation in such a public display of *'Tlawmngaihna'* is countered by social mockery and, in severe cases, by ostracisation. However, the dynamics of Zo/Mizo economics and justice being 'based on the psychology of compensation' rather than on social justice: make every act in the Mizo society is compensatable in economic terms,

i.e. fine is the only remedy for any crime/misconduct (Stevenson 1943;1986; Lehman, 1978). Non-participation in the public exhibition of *Tlawmngaihna* can be remedied by paying a fine of rupees forty. The '*Tlawmngaihna*' code also doubles as a weapon to control the 'outsiders' spatial domain, mostly the '*Vai*' (Chakraborty, 2012).

### **The Space of the '*Khawhar in*': Between Here and There**

The collective remembering of the dead marks a collective encountering of Death among the *Zo hnaathlak*. The understanding of life while on earth,' i.e., the lifeworld, and life after Death,' i.e., the life either in heaven (*Pialral*) or hell (*Meidil*), defined the blueprints for the imagery of the realms of 'politics' and that of 'ecclesiastics' inherited from the pre-proselytised times and the proselytized times among the Zo/Mizo Christians. The idea that 'this world is not my home' looms large and furthers the yearning for 'rejoice' and 'encounter' and 'being one with the creator-*Lal Isuah* (Jesus Christ).' The pre-Christian cosmology intertwines itself with 'believers' (*Piangthar*; lit., the 're-born') and Christian cosmology (Chakraborty, 2016).

In the pre-colonial past, the Zo people, during the celebrations of festivals such as the *Mim Kut* and *Kangral*, sangsongs of mourning such as *Khawhar Zai*, *Thuthmun Zai* and other songs that suited their mood during these festivals of remembrance of ancestors. Such days were spent in participatory intoxication through endless rounds of Zu (rice beer) drinking and singing with relatives (Ray, 1983; Samuelson, 1991). The event of Death, as mentioned, was followed by community singing to console the bereaved family. It is interesting to note that if, for some unforeseen reason, the time to bury was deferred. A night vigil kept for death due to natural causes or sickness the community collectively engaged in '*ruang mengpui*' (stay vigil with the dead). However, if the death was accidental or a suicide, it was buried on the day itself, even after sunset. Though followed by music acts such as beating the *Khuang* (traditional drum), the event of Death would not involve singing songs of mourning. These bereavement songs were not sung until the dead body was disposed off and the house was empty and signified emptiness temporally (*Khawhar, Lu sun*).

The practice of temporarily housing deceased individuals is observed in the '*Khawhar in*' cultural context. In this particular scenario, the concept of "*Khawhar in*" serves as the designated location, commonly referred to as the "home" or "house," where the deceased individual's physical remains and spiritual essence traverse in order

to navigate their journey towards the realm known as the '*pialral*.' The deceased individual's body is ceremoniously displayed in an open casket, adorned with traditional Mizo cloths (*puan*) and accompanied by floral arrangements (*pangpar*). This practice serves as a symbolic representation of the transition from life to death, as the body remains in this state overnight and during the burial process, acting as a liminal space during its journey to the 'other world'. The expressions of weeping, wailing, and singing that occur in response to a deceased individual's body serve as symbolic representations of the transient nature of sorrow within the ephemeral realm of communal grieving and mourning. The vocalisation of hymn-book verses by the '*hla hriltu*' (the individual responsible for reciting songs and leading the singing) and their subsequent amplification through a microphone, accompanied by the reverberation created by the collective participation in the '*Khawhar hla*', serves as a significant indicator of the ceremonial realm associated with mortality.

The involvement of individuals belonging to the YMA (Youth Mizo Association) in actively engaging in collective mourning from an early stage of life allows them to acquire a deep understanding of the intricate social dynamics, implicit norms, and roles involved in expressing and partaking in the manifestation of *Tlawmngaihna* within the realm of grief in the '*Khawhar in*'. The act of showcasing and adhering to *Tlawmngaihna* codes within the context of '*Khawhar in*' is widely regarded as a form of '*chawimawina*' or honouring, which holds significance on various societal levels. The '*chawimawina*' represents a sociocultural phenomenon that encompasses various actors and social groups. These include the deceased individual, their grieving family, the performer and exhibitor of the code, the Young Men's Association (YMA), and the KTP (Khristain Thalai Pawl) specific to the Veng (locality), and the kinship ties and practices, as well as the immediate family and relatives. The spatial dynamics of the '*Khawhar in*' subtly contribute to the development of a *Tlawmngaihna* code that gradually transforms into a national code, symbolising the ethno-national aspirations of the *Zo hnaathlak* community.

The ephemeral aspects of the spatial dynamics within the context of mourning in the '*Khawhar in*' are evident in the congregation that takes place outside the residence of the grieving family, where individuals engage in dialogue and partake in the consumption of tea while engaging in casual and informal conversations. At one level, the observed space in transit and transition can be interpreted as a manifestation of the

permissive nature of informal grieving practices within the collective. The rapid dispersal of individuals engaged in the mourning process within the '*Khawhar in*' and its immediate neighbourhood further exemplifies the dynamic and adaptable characteristics of this particular space that constantly becomes and unbecomes. The dynamic nature of the 'space in/for mourning' is characterised by its constant transformation and the factors that influence it, such as the level of participation from individuals in the collective grieving process. Additionally, the popularity of the deceased individual or the social, economic, and political status of the bereaved family also play a role in shaping this space. In this scenario, it can be observed that the congregation exhibits a spatial expansion that traverses the length of the street, both vertically and horizontally, thereby transcending the physical boundaries of the designated place of worship and permeating into the adjacent courtyards. The decision to sit outside the home can be attributed to pragmatic considerations such as the logistical requirements imposed by the home's size and the desire to engage in uninterrupted conversations, as opposed to the theoretical propositions put forth in alternative scenarios regarding the intention to safeguard the home from malevolent supernatural entities. The establishment of an informal assembly of males in a location external to the domestic sphere signifies the demarcation of the ritualistic spatial boundary known as the '*Khawhar in*'. The temporary nature of this ritual space serves as a potent mechanism for reinforcing ethnonational aspirations. This is achieved through the prominent display of *Tlawmngaihna*, a cultural symbol, and the collective act of singing within the confines of the *Khawhar*, a designated space.

The aforementioned observation presents a thought-provoking juxtaposition to the notion of the private residence as a potential public domain. In this context, the typically public realm of the road assumes a contrasting role as a private and intimate space, wherein passage is contingent upon acknowledging the presence of a recent death and the associated mourning process. The social gathering taking place within the bereavement house that is the 'space in/for mourning' undergoes a transformative process, resulting in an experiential shift towards a state of contentment and joy for all individuals assembled within the designated space known as the '*Khawhar in*'. The experience of participating in communal expressions of joy and joining in the collective celebration of heavenly realms and the anticipated utopian society known as the

Kingdom in heaven (referred to as *Khawpui*, which denotes a sizable urban or rural settlement) evokes profound sentiments of tranquilly, contentment, optimism, and revitalization. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that a significant number of composers and singers of the '*Khawhar hla*' in previous times had consciously situated their artistic expressions within the confines of a '*Khawpui*' (a term denoting a sizable village). The depicted urban space can be considered exceptionally remarkable within the given historical context. However, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of a '*Khawpui*' has evolved significantly in contemporary times, expanding its magnitude to an even more astonishing extent.

### **Transmutations and amplifications in contemporary times**

Similar to other forms of congregational singing, '*Khawhar zai*' can be understood as a communal and participatory musical practice. As elucidated in the preceding section, the phenomenon under examination pertains to a collective assemblage of individuals who congregate in response to the existential quandary of mortality. On a surface level analysis, it can be observed that the collective singing of the songs has the potential to foster a sense of empathy among the singers towards the sorrow experienced by the grieving family. In light of the discourse, it is plausible to consider an alternative proposition wherein the act of engaging in '*Khawhar zai*' vocal performances serve as a mechanism to obscure the inherent divergences and nuances of emotional encounters within the given social group (Heath, 2016). According to few of the individuals interviewed, the act of engaging in collective singing, specifically '*Khawhar zai*', has the potential to elicit recollections not only of the departed individuals but also of previous experiences involving the loss of loved ones and familial ties. However, most people gathered at home, and indeed, those participating in the majority of the singing have a less direct connection to the deceased. Although many assert that their presence helps to comfort the mourners, it is crucial to examine the fundamental nature of their own participation and the different sense of nostalgia that the singing can evoke for these peripheral members. It is argued here that the most prevalent sensation for them is the memory and longing for their relatives who have died in the past.

### **Digitalisation, Commercialisation and Merchandise**

‘Death’ and *Tlawmngaihna* sentiments that were strong in traditional life are undergoing a visible change, especially in urban centres. For instance, even though people, especially the youths, participate in ‘*Mitthi ralna*’ (condolence), ‘*Khawhar tleivar*’ (night vigil at the bereaved family’s house) and other ceremonies associated with ‘Death’. These practices associated with *Tlawmngaihna* are no longer done individually or privately; instead, the whole emotion is given a public twist, emphasising visibility. The vigilante community-based bodies such as the YMA help the bereaved families in crisis times in an exhibitionist mode. Vanramchhuangi critically comments that ‘Death’ has been commercialised. The materialities associated with practices of Death, condolence, bereavement, coffin making, designing, floral arrangements, to the amplification of the songs of the dead in the house of bereavement, including the community services such as serving tea, and biscuits and cakes/pastries, and the YMA cups to serve the tea (*thingpui*) and has become attractive, yet ‘ugly business’ in the Zo/Mizo society (Lalruatfela Nu, 2006).

The sociocultural practices surrounding death within the *Zo hnahtlak* community have intersected with the contemporary phenomena of virtualization and digitalization. The utilisation of video recordings and the circulation of CDs serve as a means to document and disseminate the various events that encompass the phenomenon of death and its associated rituals. The utilisation of technology and computer-assisted mapping of the ‘*Khawhar in*’ in the form of ‘*Zualko*’ (dissemination of information relating to a death) represents a noteworthy development within the contemporary era of the Pandemic. The analysis of collective mourning and the communal encounter with mortality, as expressed through the ritualised tradition of singing ‘*Khawhar hla*’, gains additional significance when technology is employed, resulting in its visualisation on the Google Maps, and social media platforms. The utilisation of the quintessential ‘YMA flag’ and the ‘Black flag’ as symbols representing a ‘home in mourning’ (Lu sun in/ *Khawhar in*) is enhanced by the dissemination of photographs depicting the ‘*Khawhar in*’ prominently displayed or highlighted with distinct colour codes. The GPS aided digital mapping provides the spatial dynamics of travel from the closest motorable road to the intricate topography, characterised by a series of stairs ascending or descending the hills. Additionally, the temporal aspect of reaching the desired location,

specifically the 'house in a state of mourning', is quantitatively determined through automated calculations on the Google Maps platform. The resulting data is then disseminated through various digital communication channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or popular social networks like Facebook.

The inclusion of these specific details in written form serves to strengthen the individual's sense of belonging and recognition within the larger social group. The expression of condolences, known as *Thusawi*, serves as a significant sociocultural practice within the Zo Christian community. It serves to commemorate the life and contributions of an individual, while also reinforcing the deeply ingrained values and beliefs associated with *Tlawmngaihna*, which encompasses acts of compassion and empathy. The act of sharing and circulating condolences, both in physical and digital realms, serves to cultivate a collective sense of evangelical hope, wherein the prospect of reuniting with the departed loved one is embraced. This phenomenon provides solace and consolation to the bereaved family, offering them a source of comfort during their time of mourning. The observation of technological and digital advancements in the mediation process also provides valuable insights into the ongoing transformations occurring within the spatial dimensions of mourning practices among the *Zo hnahthlak*.

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