

An Etymological study of the word "Mizo"

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Unlike the Nagas in Nagaland and the Khasis in Meghalaya, the Mizos now in Mizoram were known in early times to the British and others by various names such as "Kuki", "Chin" and "Lushai". This suggests that the term "Mizo" is a recent phenomenon. In recent times, the use of the name Mizo has become popular among the people themselves in order to develop a feeling of a separate identity and to represent their political ideology.

Mizos were first known as "Kuki" because they were the first batch to have arrived in Mizoram. They were found during the reign of Tipperah Raja, chachag who flourished about 1512 AD.¹ Kuki is said to be a Bengali word meaning "wild man" which they used to designate all hill people who cultivated their land by jhumming.² It is speculated that following the Bengali, the English picked up the word and applied it to all the tribes inhabiting the Lushai and the Chin Hills whose social and cultural affinities were more or less similar. Hutchinson says that in more recent years the term Kuki was applied to the tribes residing in the Lushai and the Chin Hills which had been annexed to the British India.⁸ Edgar, then Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, was the first to use officially the new term 'Lushai' in place of Kuki.

"Chin" is another term by which the Mizos were known in Burma. It is believed to be a corruption of the Chinese word *Jin* or *yen* meaning "man". Grierson says that "China" in Burmese denotes all hill tribes living in the bordering region between Burma and Assam.⁴ The meaning "bamboo basket" given to the word "Chin" by some authors thus interpreting the Chin people as "man with bamboo basket" appears to be far from truth mainly for two reasons. First, the word "Chin" when applied to mean "basket" is pronounced as *Khran* (Khrang). It is pronounced as *Khyan* (Chyin) or *Khyang* when applying to mean "clan" or "tribe" of the Chin. Secondly, it is not the Chin people alone who carry things in bamboo baskets; rather all the tribes of South-East Asia use similar baskets to carry their loads.

When the British intensified their intervention in Mizoram, they came into close contact with the people whom they called Lushai. The word "Luchye", a variant of Lushai, first occurs in a "Report of 1853" by Colonel Lister.⁵

Various derivations have been suggested for the word "Lushai".

R. B. McCabe thinks that it was a nickname given to Lushai (Mizo) by its neighbours on account of their customs of wearing a hair long and fastening it in a knot at the back of the head. Therefore he interprets it as *lu* - "head", *shai* - "cut" implying "head-hunter" and some others explain as *lu* - "head", *shei* - "long" which literally means "long-head".⁶

The origin of the word, however, lies elsewhere. It appears that the term "Lushai" is only an English transliteration of the word *Lusei*, one of the major tribes who at the time of the British intrusion, dominantly ruled the land under the title *Sailo*. Major J. Shakespear, then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, who was also an authority on the Mizos, admitted the wrong they committed. He says, "Lushai is our way of spelling the word ; the proper way to spell the word...is *Lushei* (*Lusei*)..."⁷

It was the custom of the Mizos to give the name of the tribe or clan after the name of their noted and popular chief or place to commemorate the event. As such it may not be far from truth to say that the word "Lusei" might have been originated after a person called *Luseia* or "Lusei" might be once the name of a place. T. Gougin rightly observes thus : "the words like *Kuki*, *Chin* and *Lushai* are foreign words for the express reason that these words are completely alien to the languages of the *Zomis* (Mizos)".⁸

It is very difficult to give a clear cut account on when the word "Mizo" was first used. It is a gradual process of evolution. It is claimed, however, that even when they were in Burma they had already acclaimed of being called *Mizo*. *Vanchhunga* who had an intensive investigations on the Mizos in Burma claims that the forefathers of the Mizos used to say *Keini Mizote chuan* meaning "we the Mizos".⁹ A. W. Davis says that the term *Mizo*, variently pronounced as "Mezo" or "Mizau" includes all inhabitants of the North Lushai Hills, except *Pawi*.¹⁰ In his report, McCabe, too, says that the Lushais whom they understood as such call themselves "Mizos" or "Mizau".¹¹ All this thus suggests that whether in Burma or in the land they occupied in at the time when the British came the people were heard using the word among themselves. But the origin is still obscure.

The word "Mizo" is commonly interpreted after bisecting it (*mi* - "man" or "people" and *Zo* - "a cold place or a high altitude") as "a people of a cold place" or "a highlander". If such inference could be considered as a correct way of explaining the word "Mizo", all the other tribes inhabiting the hill regions of the North-East India like the *Nagas*, *Khasis* and others should also be known as

Mizo. But they are not. Lewin¹² and Grierson¹³ hold a similar view that the people living in the country between Burma and then Assam and Bengal Provinces called themselves “zo” varieantly “yo” or ‘sho”. From these views, it is apparently clear that the terms “dzo”, “zo” and “zau” are only varieants of the original word “yo” or “yao”. Thus the word “Mizo”, variantly “Mi-dzo” or Mizao, is a combination of the two words “Miao” and “yao” together as “Mizo-Tzu” or “Miao-yoa” or “Miotzu” by which names the widespread hill tribes inhabiting Yunnan, Szechwan, Northern Laos, Northern Vietnam and Thailand are known to the Chinese. Therefore, it is likely that the word Mizo is derived from two words having the same meaning as Miao (mi) – “man” and Yao (zo)–“man” as we have *run in* which means (run-“house” and in-“house”) *in* (house).

From the points discussed above, it may be concluded that it is wrong to interpret the word Mizo as *mi* –“man” and *zo* – “highlander” thus people living in a high or cold place. Unlike the Lusei, Mizo is not a name of a tribe or a clan. It is rather a generic term by which all the tribes under the Mizos are known in Mizoram.

References

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4. G. A. Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.2.
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6. Foreign Dept. External Part A Dec. 1892, Progs. No. 43.
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9. Vanchhunga, *Lusei leh a vela Hnam Dangte*, Zoram Printing Press, Aizawl, 1955, p. 1.

