

'Tribal Ecumenism' in North East India: Ethnic Identity Formation of the Mizo

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Abstract- In the traditional Mizo context, tribalism in the form of centralized political and sociological force was almost absent, since life was mainly based within one single village. People were connected by their cultural practices, geographical proximity, their evolving *lingua franca* and their ethnic bond. During the rule of the British, especially after conversion to the Christian faith, people began to experience tribal consciousness as a sociological factor, including the sense of belonging to one community, one nation and one people, especially among the Lusei clans who were former citizens of Sailo chieftainship. However, in the absence of any political platform and common political agenda, a sense of tribal identity lacked a political harmony. On the eve of Indian independence, the Mizos began to be sensitized to the political stirrings characterized by political dreams and aspirations. After the signing of the Peace Accord between the Mizoram underground government and the Indian Union, tribalism became characterized by an economic turn and almost all aspects of tribal consciousness became economic in nature, and so it remains today.

Index Terms- Tribal, ethnic identity, Mizo, Christianity, tribal ecumenism, Mizo Insurgency.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the lives of each tribal community in Northeast India were characterized by a unique worldviews, distinct cultures and incomparable values. With the coming of Christianity into the region, the tribal groups experienced unity within their sub-tribe first, and then the whole tribal group. In this regard, Frederick S. Downs opines that Christianity brought together the different ethnic identities under the banner of one tribal group, which he called "tribal ecumenism", a phenomenon that marked the beginning of intra-tribal ecumenism.¹ Christianity contributed towards the preservation and formation of new tribal identities by providing written language, pioneering education, introducing new administrative setup and endorsing new relevant ideology.² Christianity helped the people to unify

by making one of the dialects as the basis for the written language of the whole tribe.

Downs also opines that the ecclesial structures helped the tribals to formulate the inter-communal ecumenism:

At the base level those structures were centred on the village and tribe in the form of organized congregations and groupings of congregations called associations, presbyteries and the like. But these structures based on a single language group for the most part were constituent of larger structures that brought together for fellowship and deliberation members of several different tribes or communities. Thus the PCNEI brought together Khasis, Jaintias, Mizos, Kukis from Manipur, several small Naga tribes from North Cachar, and some plains people from Cachar.³

Christianity and the church helped the different tribal groups to develop a sense of common tribal identity with a standard higher than their traditional chieftainship. The new found identity proved to become the fundamental principle of modern political movements, even though it was not the conscious intention of the western missionaries or the Mizo church leaders.⁴ However, attributing the new ethnic identity formation of the Mizos to Christianity alone would mean oversimplifying the case altogether. As Downs' "tribal ecumenism" has also been challenged by O.L. Snaitang who observed denominationalism in the region as a new form of tribalism that divided the region politically, ethnically, socially and religiously.⁵ While the tribals experienced ecumenism within a particular umbrella, there was a tendency developed among such groups to secede from the Indian Union in different time period of their own history.

Therefore, the development of the ethnic identity formation of the Mizo should consider the role of Christianity in the milieu of the socio-economic changes and political development of the region.

Religious Conversion in Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times edited by GA Oddie (Delhi: Manohar publications, 1991), 155- 174.

³ Frederick S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India. North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* Volume V, Part 5 (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 2003), 133.

⁴ Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, 209.

⁵ O.L. Snaitang, "Ecumenism and the Hills People's culture in Northeast India," *Journal of Tribal Studies* Vol. II, No. 1 (January –June 1998), 36-44.

¹ Frederick S. Downs, "Tribal Ecumenism in North East India: Further Reflections," *Journal of Tribal Studies* Vol. II, No 2 (July-December 1998), 29-52.

² Frederick S. Downs, "Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of Northeast India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Religion in South Asia*.

II. GENESIS OF THE EVOLVING IDENTITY

Identified as belonging to a marginal community called *Mizo*, or *Zo*, used by scholars outside Mizoram, and also *Zomia*, a term coined by Willem van Schendel,⁶ they have always been known as runaways, fugitives, abandoned communities. They have traditionally evaded state-making schemes such as “slavery, conscription, taxes, corvee labours, epidemics and warfare”.⁷ Therefore, the identity of the Mizos cannot solely be defined by their written documents, or any other visible written documents, so a proper writing of their history would also require employment of their oral traditions.

The earliest oral tradition of the Mizo began with a struggle to attain freedom against the oppressive rule that seemed to have lorded over them. A well known Mizo fable known as *Chhinlung chhuak* describes the different tribes as originating from one common point. It suggests the presence of a big cave, with a gate well guarded by a gatekeeper somewhere in the east. Almost all the different Mizo clans came out in pairs from that cave. The story goes that there came a time when one clan called Ralte came out, but they were so noisy that the gatekeeper assumed that many people had already gone out and he finally closed the gate of that cave⁸. Almost all the different clans⁹ share a parallel pattern of this narrative with slight contradictions and variations. The familial bond shared between the different groups of Mizo people often continues to be traced along the line of the *Chhinglung* tradition. Another myth coming up among the community is that the Mizos are one of the lost tribes of Israel¹⁰ that had little impact on the worldviews of the whole Mizo society.

The religious practices were drawn along the lines of their ancestors by reciting a simple ritual, ‘*Pi biakin lo chhang ang che, pu biakin lo chhang ang che*’, meaning, ‘Let my plea be answered by whoever my ancestor worshipped’.¹¹ C. Liantluanga dated the origin of religious practices of the Mizos to around 1500.¹² Liangkhaia, considered as the first historian among the Mizos, observed that each clan followed a particular and distinct

pattern of religious rituals.¹³ The tribal religious beliefs regulated tribal identity and tribal consciousness was also based on their religious worldviews. *Sakhua*, a term used in the present day as equivalent to religion once referred to the family or clan god, which might be unique to that clan.¹⁴ In the same way, Saiaithanga also observed that religion was drawn along the lines of clan identity. One clan shared one religious ritual and that in turn shaped their ethnic identity.¹⁵ Changing of one’s clan called *saphun* required changing of one’s religious rituals accordingly.

III. HISTORY OF TRIBALISM OF THE MIZOS

When the Mizo settled in Len Tlang region of present day Myanmar around 1460 AD, they lived together according to their own clans with little sense of a kindred bond.¹⁶ The early Mizo history was a story of exile from the major tribes of the region, but it was also a story of intra-tribal wars. Almost all the clans had their own stories of intra as well as inter-clan rivalries. However, the formation of the Lusei clan under a particular ethnic umbrella must be attributed to the Sailo chieftainships, who were in reality the descendants of a non-Lusei tribe.¹⁷

Intra-tribal war was also fought time to time among the upcoming Sailo chiefs. In 1760, Lallula, a Sailo chief massacred the Thlanrawn (Pawi) clan in the village of Zopui out of revenge for the Pawi aggression. In around 1789, the strong Sailo chiefs’ migration was commenced from the south towards the north following the Hrangkhawl, Biate, Thado and other kindred tribes. The northward migration of the Sailo chiefs was due to the pressure from the Zahau, Hualngo and Fanai clans until they eventually occupied the northern part of the present Mizoram.¹⁸ Meanwhile the Sailo chieftainship routed most other Lusei clans by 1857. Among the Lusei tribes, major wars were also fought among themselves like that of the War of North and South (1856-1859) and the War of East and West (1877-1880) in which different Sailo chiefs fought a heavy war between themselves with heavy losses.

⁶ Willem Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20/6 (2002), 647-668.

⁷ David C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2010), ix.

⁸ K. Zawla, *Mizo Pipute leh an Thlahtute Chanchin (Narratives of the Mizos and their Ancestors)* (Aizawl: Maranatha Printing Press, 1976), 12.

⁹ Liangkhaia considered the different tribes of Mizo as any tribes coming from the Chhinlung like Lusei, Ralte, Hmar, Pawi, Paite, Khiangte, Chawngthu, Chawhte, Ngente, Renthlei, Tlau, Pautu, Rawite, Zawngte, Vangchhia, Punte; See also Liangkhaia *Mizo History* 4th Edition (Aizawl: Mizo Academy of Letters, 1976).

¹⁰ Zaithanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Aizawl: S.T. Printing Press, 1992).

¹¹ V.L. Siana, *Mizo History* Second Edition (Aizawl: Lengchhawn Press, 2009), 10.

¹² C. Liantluanga, *Hmanlai Mizo Nun (Life of the Early Mizo)* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1999), 6.

¹³ Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin* Fourth Edition (Aizawl: Mizo Academy of Letters, 1976), 24.

¹⁴ Zairema, “The Mizos and their Religion,” in *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspectives* edited by K. Thanzauva (Jorhat: The Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 31-44.

¹⁵ Saiaithanga, *Mizo Sakhua* (Aizawl: R. Lalsawmliana, 1994) 2nd Edition, 16-17.

¹⁶ Each of the clan has their own particular villages or some kindred clan together in some villages: the Lusei Clan in Seipui and Khawkawk, the Kawlni clan in Suaipui and Saimhmun, the Chawngthu clan in Sanzawl and Bochung, the Hauhnan, Chuaungo and Chuauhang in Huanhnar valley, the Ngente, Parte and Punte in Chawnghawih and Siallam villages; K. Zawla, *Kan Pipute leh Thlahtute Chanchin*, op. cit, 12.

¹⁷ Joy L.K. Pachuau, *Being Mizo. Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115.

¹⁸ A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* Reprint (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 2003), 36.

IV. COMING OF THE WESTERN POWERS

On the eve of the coming of the western powers, the Sailo and Pawi (Lai) chiefs¹⁹ became dominant in the region. In spite of their rivalries, they also learnt from one another and there was also overlapping of culture between the two.²⁰ There was also another clan called Mara, but they had been often in the shadow of the Lai chieftainship and already shared a close familial bond.²¹ Most of the other sub-clans were either culturally assimilated or politically subdued by the Sailo chiefs to develop a macro identity. Joy L.K. Pachuau made the interesting remark that this identity constituted a “conscious transformation of a sense of belonging from a micro-locality to a macro-locality identified by a particular set of hills”.²²

The advent of the British power in the region provoked the tribals and invited recurring raids on the plain regions. As early as the 1840s, there were frequent raids on their neighbouring regions to compensate for the encroachment on their land, to show their supremacy and thirst for spoils. The British government retaliated by sending a military expedition as well as agents from time to time but these rarely delivered the expected results. Eventually, two successive expeditions were dispatched in 1888-1889 and 1889-1890. The second expedition usually known as the “Chin – Lushai Expedition of 1889-90” marked the most important stage of annexation of the Lushai hills. With the amalgamation of the Lakher region into the empire in 1931 the annexation of the region was completed.²³ The British rule witnessed the gradual loss of the different sub-ethnic identities in such a way that since that time the census has recorded the people as Lushai, Kuki, Pawi, Lakher and Hmar.²⁴ With such brands inscribed upon them, the different tribal groups pursued the requirements of such categories.²⁵

¹⁹ It is admitted that both sides proved themselves as equally strong with number of successes, however, it is most likely that the Lusei chiefs left Thantlang and Lentlang in the Chin Hills for the present Mizo hills due to the pressure from the Lai community; Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*, op. Cit, 32.

²⁰ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Response to Westernization in Mizoram* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 32.

²¹ Hlychho, a Mara clan is known as Hlawhchhing in the Lai area, Chozah is known as Chinzah in the Lai region as well. Inter-marriage between the Lai and the Lusei clan like Sailo was also a recurring phenomenon in the history of the region. Sailo was known among the Maras as Shyhlo as well; See also V. Lalchhawna, *Autonomy Movement in Mizoram* (Aizawl: V. Lalchhawna, 2014), 10.

²² Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, 128.

²³ Animesh Ray, *Mizoram: Dynamics of Change* (Calcutta: Pearl Publishers, 1982), 34.

²⁴ SK. Chaube, *Hill Politics in Northeast India* Third Edition (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012), 170.

²⁵ When the Superintendent called and registered them for a census, they simply used their sub tribes identity like Zathang, Chinzah, Hlawhchhing, etc instead of Pawi or Lai, among the Maras almost half of the tribes preferred to use the term ‘Kalia’ for their common umbrella instead of ‘Mara’ when

With the appearance of Western Christian missions in the Hills since 1891, the Mizos embraced different Protestant sects, mainly the Presbyterian and the Baptist traditions that often stressed individualistic Christian faith through conversion, revival and charismatic experiences. Like anywhere in the world, education was an important tool of mission in the Mizo hills. Initially, the expansion of education far outshined the expansion of the Gospel. For instance, in the census of 1901, there were already 761 literates while there were only 45 native Christians.²⁶ The modern western education also created an elite group among them that grew up to be an influential counterpart to the traditional chieftainship. S.K. Chaube opines that the British administration and western education most benefitted the Lusei of the northern and central parts of the region who in turn sprung up as the most advanced group in different fields.²⁷ The introduction of western medicine, education and the Gospel was perceived to have liberated the people from the fear and bondage associated with their former religious worldviews. Christianity, being an egalitarian faith by tradition, changed their basic identity and put them under a unified umbrella of religious identity.²⁸ Lalsangkima Pachuau observed that the Pathian (God) of a distant heaven who vaguely figured in their primal religion came to occupy the central place in Christianity. The implication of this change in divine role and personhood was seen in the changed Mizo worldview and social relations.²⁹

V. RECONSIDERATION OF TRIBAL IDENTITY

As the British government vassalized the Mizo chieftainship, they ruled the region through the chiefs with gradual changes introduced by them. N.E. Perry, Superintendent of the Lushai hills (1926-28), affirmed the necessity of Mizo chieftainship for financial reasons and its indigenous set up. The chief was almost given free rein in the day-to-day administration on simple cases.³⁰ But the power of the chief was gradually restricted and constrained in grave cases like murder and rape³¹, issues of immigration, hereditary matters and confiscation of the property of villagers.

The concept of tribalism during the colonial period can briefly be summarized as a tension between the Sailo clan and

modern political developments were intruding into their lives for the first time.

²⁶ Lalhmuaka, *Zoram Zirna Lam Chhinchhiahna (The Records of Zoram Education)* (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1981), 3.

²⁷ Chaube, *Hill Politics in Northeast India*, 170-171.

²⁸ Zolawma, *Tribal Ecclesiology* (Delhi: Christian World Imprint, 2016), 33.

²⁹ Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Mizo “Sakhua” in Transition Change and Continuity from Primal Religion to Christianity” *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No I (January, 2006), 41- 57.

³⁰ N.E. Perry, *Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* Reprint (Aizawl: Firma KLM Private Limited on behalf of Tribal Research Institute, 1976), 3.

³¹ Perry, *Monograph on Lushai Custom.*, 1.

the commoners, in some cases also as a reaction to the suppressive rule of the British Superintendent".³² There was also a grand shift in the self understanding among the different sub-clan groups as they began to come closer under the umbrella of one generic term called Mizo. B. Lalthangliana observed that among the Hmar sub-tribe, less than one third of the group continued to identify themselves as Hmar in the 1961 census. Less one fourth of the Lai who considered themselves as Lai in 1901 considered themselves as Lai in the 1961 census. Other clan groups like Lusei, Paite and Ralte considered themselves simply as "Mizo" by 1961, rejecting their own sub-ethnic identity.³³ The intra-tribal tension of the past almost disappeared in the face of more oppressive and stronger powers wielded by the colonial, national and religious authorities.

The main cause of tension between the chief and the commoners was the provocation of the rise of the elite class, mainly through conversion and education. It was the church that laid the foundation of education. More or less along the same lines, Animesh Ray has opined that the flow of modern cash and the exposure of the people to land beyond the hills through their participation in the different wars were responsible for the emergence of a new class in the society they eventually struggled for recognition of their status and privilege. Thus, they came into conflict with the ruling class.³⁴ The new intelligentsia were emancipated through salaried jobs, trade and commerce, but they wanted freedom from the chiefs and also the customary requirements.³⁵ With a settled and peaceful life free from frequent tribal warfare, the Mizo chiefs were no longer the leaders of the people; instead, they became the local representatives of the alien government.³⁶

Anthony McCall created the district chief's Durbar in 1941 in which chiefs of different circles were supposed to send representatives on the basis of election.³⁷ The Superintendent A. R. Macdonald made a plan to form a conference that was supposed to be represented by both the chiefs and the commoners with one representative each. The first election of each Circle was held on 16th January 1946, the occasion also witnessed the termination of the powers of disobedient chiefs and also the installation of new chiefs in their place. The representatives of Aizawl circle passed two controversial resolutions at that time. One of the important resolutions was that cases of expulsion of villagers by chiefs were serious and needed serious reconsideration. At the same meeting, the members of the committee asked a deceptively complex question to the Superintendent Macdonald, "Who is the owner of the land?" and

unexpectedly he replied, "The land belongs to the people."³⁸ The unanticipated answer from the Superintendent boosted the morale and determination of the commoners to champion their rights and dignity. The chief wanted to maintain the status quo and the commoners wanted maximum freedom from the chiefs and hence they were growing in opposition to each other.³⁹

The so-called Mizo Union, the first political party in the state, was formed in Mizoram in 1946⁴⁰ to voice the resentment of the masses against the chiefs.⁴¹ It was originally named by R. Vanlawma, the founding member and also the first General Secretary, as "Mizo Common Peoples Union." It was later renamed as "The Mizo Commoners Union" and finally the "The Mizo Union." The interest of many of the members was fuelled by the wish to undermine the status and privilege of the chiefs.⁴² The MU was formed with the objective of gaining the upper hand by the common people against the chiefs. However, the opposition to the chiefs was regarded by the British as opposition to the British rule.⁴³

When the first Assembly was called on 24th-26th September 1946, the most important resolution was to end the *Ramhual* taxation.⁴⁴ However, it was resolved that it should be done on a voluntary basis and no one could be compelled to comply. However, the then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, MacDonald, insisted that the President and the General Secretary give their signature over a letter that nullified the said resolutions.⁴⁵ The tension between the Chiefs and the Mizo Union reappeared many times through the interference of the British Superintendent who supported the traditional chieftainship and who vassalized the chiefs as their faithful agents. Against all the odds, the position of the chiefs continued unchanged even after the end of the British rule in 1947, till the enactment of the Assam Lushai Hills District Act in 1954. The then Chief Minister of Assam put up the "*Acquisition of Chief's Rights Bill*"⁴⁶ that ended chieftainship.

With the spread of Christianity also appeared the new hierarchical set up of the church with the priests (ordained ministers) and the laity. In 1910, the Lushai Presbytery was held and the first ordination was done in 1913 in which Pastor

³⁸ Chaltuakhuma, *History of Mizoram* (Aizawl: Chaltuakhuma and Sons, 1987), 86.

³⁹ Ray, *Mizoram*, 39.

⁴⁰ R. Vanlawma, *Ka ram leh Kei. (Political History of Modern Mizoram)* Third Edition (Aizawl: M.C. Rinthanga, 1989), 130.

⁴¹ Ray, *Mizoram*, 40.

⁴² Vanlawma, *Ka Ram leh Kei ...*, 133.

⁴³ Ray, *Mizoram*, 40-41.

⁴⁴ Annual rice tax given by each family of the village to their own respective chiefs.

⁴⁵ Vanlawma, *Ka Ram leh Kei*, 149.

⁴⁶ Under this Act, the rights and privileges of all the existing 259 chiefs in the region covered by the Mizo District (excluding the Pawi-Lakher region) were acquired by the Government of Assam and handed over to the Mizo District Council on 1st April 1958. In the Pawi-Lakher region, the rights and interest of the 50 chiefs were handed over to the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council on 15th April 1956; Ray, *Mizoram ...*, 41.

³² Ngurbiaka, "Emergence of Mizo District Council and Pawi-Lakher Regional Council," in *A Modern History of Mizoram* edited by Sangkima (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2004), 140-147.

³³ B. Lalthangliana, "Mizo Identity," *Seminar & Important Papers* (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute Art & Culture Department, Government of Mizoram, 2008), 15 - 23.

³⁴ Ray, *Mizoram*, 39.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 66.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

³⁷ McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, 246-252.

Chuahkhama was given his ordination. However, among the commoners, the so-called modern democratic ideals were also growing along the lines of Christian values and morals. The missionaries influenced the life of the tribals by implanting new concepts and new standard of living. The whole fabric of social, cultural and political spheres was moulded and shaped by missionaries.⁴⁷ However, since 1904, through different revival stirrings the Mizo church has been periodically revitalized. Many of these revival stirrings took the form of indigenous cultural phenomena.⁴⁸ According to Vanlalchhuanawma, revival was “a tribal social protest against absolute colonization of western theological system, denominationalism, and ecclesial symbols.”⁴⁹ Christianity, through revivals, helped the Mizo to develop their own ethnic identity along the line of their cultural elements.

VI. THE MNF INSURGENCY MOVEMENT

When the Mizo Hills was merged into mainline India, many Mizos from both the leaders and the masses considered that such a merger was both temporal and alterable. The different government officials who trespassed upon the Mizo moral standards sowed the seeds of hostility. To worsen the situation, when the people predicted the periodic famine, the Assam Government dismissed the impending danger as simply tribal superstition and did not heed their apprehension.⁵⁰ First as a relief project, the Mizo National Famine Front was started on 22nd October 1961.⁵¹ It soon gained the confidence of the people and later became the symbol of Mizo national identity⁵² and the revolutionary movement was defined with national terms. Tribalism during the insurgency movement can best be described as a tension between the Mizos and the *Vai*, mainline Indians (the term very often implies Hindus, and also worshippers of idols).

The relatively modern Mizo ethnic national consciousness was rooted in a belief that the distinctive Mizo culture, language

and religious beliefs⁵³ had been masterminded by God in His original plan. It is also opined that the perspective of the politicians Laldenga and Zoramthanga was rooted in the Christian theory of Liberation.⁵⁴ Recognising their common familial descent, the Mizo District and the Manipur Hills on 18th January 1965 adopted a number of resolutions, out of which they expressed their desire to come under one administration.⁵⁵ The insurgency movement was spearheaded by the Lusei and any other clans subdued by the Sailo before the British appearance into the region. However, the MNF was also given moral support by almost every other non-Lusei clan in the region, including the Maras and the Lai in southern Mizoram. The Kuki and other Mizo clans in Manipur formed a separate army unit called the Joshua battalion.⁵⁶

VII. BOMBING OF AIZAWL AND PERIOD OF INSURGENCY

On the fateful day of 1st March 1966, the Mizo National Front declared independence from the Indian Government. The memorandum submitted to the Indian Government highlighted a number of causes responsible for their desire to secede from the Indian Union, one of such was to avoid religious assimilation and “Hindu indoctrination”, claiming that Hindu encroachment was likely to culminate in suppression of Christianity which would be equal with assimilation of their interests and ethnic identity. They also assumed that the Indian government tried to “wipe out Christianity”. They blamed the non-tribal high ranking officials as being responsible for introducing sexual immorality in the region.⁵⁷ The MNF also brought up the issue of the Central Government conducting Public examinations on Sundays and official dignitaries occasionally visiting Mizoram on Sundays. At the same time, restrictions on free entry of missionaries into the district were seen as a challenge to the full liberty of Christianity.⁵⁸

The Indian Army retaliated by aerial bombardment of different towns and villages in the then Lushai Hills District in March 1966. When the Armies recaptured towns and villages, the countermeasures that they gave were along the lines of their identity as Mizos. At the same time, most of the ultimatums issued by the Mizo insurgents bore an anti-Indian, specifically

⁴⁷ Ibid, 65.

⁴⁸ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*, 80.

⁴⁹ Vanlalchhuanawma, “Quo Vadis Theological education? A Critique of the Theological education from the Perspective of Revival,” in *Mizoram Journal of Theology* Vol. II No 1 (Jan-June 2011), 3-9.

⁵⁰ Sajal Nag, *Pied Piper in Northeast India: Bamboo Flows, Rat-Famine and the Politics of Philanthropy (1881-2007)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), 21.

⁵¹ The impact of famine on the reputation of the Indian government was a decisive one as it was repeatedly compared with the British administration, which was considered benevolent and sympathizing with the plight of the people. They often mentioned that they were better off during the British rule as their distress were addressed automatically; Sajal Nag, “Bamboo, Rats and Famines: Famine Relief and Perceptions of British Paternalism in the Mizo Hills (India)”, *Environment and History* Issue 5 Vol 2 (June 1999), 245-52.

⁵² Chawngsailova, *Ethnic National Movement in the role of the MNF* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 2007), 53.

⁵³ Zoramthanga, *Mizo Hnam Movement History (A History of Mizo Nationalism Movement)* (Aizawl: Zoramthanga, 2016), 5.

⁵⁴ K. Vanlalmawia, *Laldenga, Zoramthanga and the Concept of Freedom* Unpublished Thesis submitted to North Eastern Hills University, 1991): 63.

⁵⁵ Kawnpui Mizo Convention (16th- 18th January 1965); Cited by Zamawia, *Zofate Zinkawngah Zalenna mei a Mit Tur a ni lo (The Light of Freedom should not be extinguished in the Mizo struggle)* (Aizawl: Lengchhawn Press, 2007), 968.

⁵⁶ C. Zama, *Joshua Battalion* (Aizawl: JP Offsets, 2014).

⁵⁷ “MNF Declaration of Independence”; Cited by Zamawia, *Zofate Zinkawng*, 968.

⁵⁸ J.V. Hluna, “Mizo Problem Leading to Insurgency”, in Proceedings of North East India History Association, Sixth Session, 1985, p. 445.

anti-Hindu, sentiment.⁵⁹ The Indian armies resorted to all types of aggression and harassment like rape, killing, torture, burning of houses and sending many suspects to jails in Assam. Following the aerial bombing of the Mizos, the Khasi MLA from Meghalaya such as Hoover H. Hynniewta spoke out in the Assam Assembly the same year. Mr. Hynniewta raised a very controversial question, "Do you think the Mizos are Indian?" He was referring to the excessive violence and inhumane treatment inflicted upon these fellow Indian citizens.⁶⁰ It was the same question that has echoed in the ears of many Mizos till the present time.

It is no surprise that every Mizo looked upon the *vai* people with suspicion and fear.⁶¹ In such a juncture, the involvement of the church leaders in committee bodies such as the Aizawl Citizens' Committee and the Christian Peace Committee was significant. The first pamphlet of the Aizawl Citizens' Committee declared that murder is a serious crime unacceptable to God, and this was distributed to different pockets in the region. Relying on the Defence of India Act, they gave awareness to the people about the authority and jurisdiction of armies and civil-military relationship. It was the church who first responded to the cry and dread of the people.⁶² The Committee also closely kept an eye on the people imprisoned on cases of suspicion and they also intervened on their behalf, risking their own lives.⁶³

Meanwhile, besides engaging in violent and guerrilla warfare, the underground Mizo Government also tried to reform Mizo society by imposing 'Christian values'. Therefore, the sale of liquor (or 'Zu') was strictly prohibited. They also forbade intermarriage between Mizos and non-Mizos, especially with 'vai'. They also disapproved of the purchase of goods and other commodities from non-Mizo traders within the district as long as possible.⁶⁴ In a very simple sense, when Christian tradition was offended, it was often considered to be an offence to their Mizo tribal culture.

In 1969, the Indian army resorted to grouping villages in the name of Protected and Progressive Villages (PPV), aiming to starve the underground militia and stop the supply of food and any form of assistance to them.⁶⁵ These upheavals marked the beginning of deeper untold misery for the Mizos.

⁵⁹ N William Singh, "Quit Mizoram Notices," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 49, Issue No 25 (21st June 2014), 23-34

⁶⁰ J.V. Hluna, *Zawlkhawpui Senmawi Chan Ni (A Day Aizawl turned into Blazing Fire)* (Aizawl: Zoram Ni Organizing Committee, 2008), 46-47.

⁶¹ Lalngurauva, *Mizoram Buai leh Kohhran (Insurgency and the Church)* (Aizawl: Lalngurauva, 2008), 18.

⁶² Ibid. 18.

⁶³ Ibid. 133.

⁶⁴ Tlangchhuaka. *Mizoram Politics* (in Mizo), A booklet issued by the MNF Headquarters (year and date not mentioned).

⁶⁵ C. Lalnunthara, "Grouping of Villages in Mizoram-Its Social and economic Impact" *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 6, Issue No 30 (25th July 1981).

VIII. EXILE TO BANGLADESH AND ARAKAN

Gradually, the MNF Government was compelled to take refuge in the hill ranges that lay within what was then East Pakistan (1969-1971), Arakan (1972-1974) and Rangamati, Bangladesh (1974-1986). In the words of Schendel "State boundaries cannot contain the story: territories bled into one another, insurgents were mobile across several national domains, and state agents were burdened by their spatial confinement within state borders."⁶⁶ In spite of such hardships, they could manage to survive and keep the flame of nationalism alive because of the assistance that they received from the Zo ethnic families like the Pang, Bawm, Miria and others who lent a helping hand to them. The bond that they shared was especially stimulated by their faith, since many of them were also Christians.

Their presence in Bangladesh among the people was reinforcement to the minority Christian population. And some of the best Mizo Christian hymns were composed while they were in exile in Bangladesh and those hymns were subsequently incorporated into the Mizo hymn books. An official agreement with the Association of Baptist, Dacca was signed that pertains to work among the tribals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It resolved that no European or Bengalis were allowed to visit those places, whereas the Mizo insurgents could freely roam. It was agreed that the missionary personnel would be from the MNF while the financial needs and the different assets would be given by the Association.⁶⁷ Reminiscent of the 'Makabian revolt', the whole organization and morale was therefore characterized by Christian values. For instance, Zoramthanga, one prominent leader who was to become the Chief Minister of Mizoram, mentioned that during 1972-74 in Arakan, it was religious revival that boosted the morale of the volunteers and which enflamed their nationalistic enthusiasm when they were extremely low in their nationalist spirit.⁶⁸

IX. REAPPEARANCE OF TRIBALISM: SUB CLAN IDENTITY

The sense of tribalism after the signing of the Peace Accord in 1986 was drawn along the lines of the government administrative boundaries, especially the Autonomous District Council. The sense of tribalism based on sub-tribal identity had been quietly evolving since the beginning of political consciousness in the Mizo Hills District. However, it attained an important political agenda only after the Peace Accord.

On the 23rd April 1953, when the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was inaugurated at Lunglei by Ch. Saprawnga, the then Parliamentary Secretary of Assam which was later upgraded to

⁶⁶ Willem Van Schendel, "A War within a War: Mizo Rebels and the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle," *Modern Asian Studies* (10th October 2015), 1-43.

⁶⁷ Chawnglianthuama, *Zoram Buai Karah Harhna Ropui (Revival in the Midst of Revival)* (Aizawl: H. Lalchawimawia, 2011), 89.

⁶⁸ Zoramthanga, *Mizo Hnam Movement History (A History of Mizo Nationalism Movement)* (Aizawl: Zoramthanga, 2016), 114.

Autonomous District Council in 1986.⁶⁹ The Pawi (and also the Lakher) reluctance to come under the Lusei hegemony was considered as the main factor responsible for the secession.⁷⁰ On 2nd April 1972, the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was divided into three autonomous regions such as the Pawi region, the Lakher region and the Chakma region.⁷¹ The creation of the third District Council amazed many Mizo leaders, including Ch. Saprawnga, who considered the Chakma as purely outsiders, comparable with the *vais*.⁷² The overall assessment of the role and contribution of the Autonomous District Council in Northeast India, according to Robert Tuolor was tragic and “it has only strengthened identity politics”⁷³ in which the Mizoram state would not be exempted.

The points of disagreement between the Mizoram government and the tribal political sentiment lay in the subject of giving autonomous councils or the case of upgrading of the District Council to a Sixth Schedule status. Mizoram also faced the challenge of demands for autonomy by various tribal groups like Paite and Bru. Those tribal groups enjoying separate autonomous councils comprising of Lai, Mara and Chakma still desire for higher autonomy by demanding direct funding, and, if possible, Union Territory status.⁷⁴ This is partly the resistance to the process of “Mizoisation” by smaller cognate tribes such as Paite, Hmar, Lai and Mara people in particular. Mizo identity is perceived to be Lusei-centric and acceptance of Mizo identity is equivalent to accepting Lusei language and culture.⁷⁵

Those tribal groups that received Autonomous District Councils maintained their unique tribal identities, and predominantly retained Christianity as their foundation. In the case of the Chakmas, Christianity is seen as religion of the Mizos and the District Council played a very significant role in checking the infiltration of Christian mission work into the region. Among the Lai, the District Council acted as the promoter of Lai culture and Lai identity.⁷⁶ Among the Hmar community, Lal Dena classified the community into two

groups:⁷⁷ those that are assimilated in the mainstream Mizo society and others that mainly dwell together in the north-west part of the state. Practically, this fluid ‘situational identity’ is found among all the other tribes of the Mizos, however, from time to time, these other tribes have opposed the Mizo nomenclature as a mean to political leverage or political pressure to fight for their own benefits. The exceptions to this ‘situational identity’ are found among the Chakmas and the Brus whose distinctiveness is accentuated by both ethnicity and religion.

X. CONCLUSION

There has been a grand shift in the identity formation of the Mizos, especially their self understanding from the past to the present. Today, the identity of the Mizos as Indian is something that has been comparatively accepted in the past hundred or fifty years. However, when it is put to the test through their lives and experiences in mainline India as Mizo or northeast people, oftentimes it failed and confused the people and they often began to coil themselves inside the protective wall of their minority community. The role and implication of Christianity, on the other hand, in the ethnic identity formation of the people is so well rooted that it remained almost unchallenged. The identity of the Mizos as Christians is something that simply worked for mutual enrichment and reinforcement as the Christian faith have almost been fully indigenized. Even cases where Christianity failed as a moral guardian, it has always been the ideological foundation of the Mizo society. The so called sub-tribal consciousness also often made its appearance among the people as a new form of tribalism as centre-periphery polarities when economic development seems to benefit only the mainline Mizo society. Above all, the ethnic identity of the Mizos is following the Christian faith as its ideological foundation in the different chapters of history.

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⁶⁹ Ngurbiaka, “Emergence of Mizo District Council,” op. cit, 140-147.

⁷⁰ Z. Hengmanga, *Ka Vahvaihpu Ram leh Hnam (My Toil with the Nation)* (Lawngtlai: Pawi District Council, 1988), 13.

⁷¹ HC. Thanhranga, “Working and Functioning of the Lakher Autonomous Regional Council in Mizoram”, in *A Modern History of Mizoram* edited by Sangkima (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2004), 148-170.

⁷² Ch. Saprawnga, *Ka Zin Kawng (My Personal Journey)* 2nd Edition (Aizawl: Lalkungi, 2007), 177.

⁷³ Robert Tuolor, “Autonomous District Councils and Tribal Development in North East India: A Critical Analysis” *International Journal of Advancements in Research & Technology* Vol. 2, Issue 7 (July-2013), 408-418.

⁷⁴ Roluahpuia, “Political Turmoil in Mizoram,” *Economics and Political Weekly*, Vol. 50 Issue 31 (1st August 2015): 1-5.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 1-5.

⁷⁶ Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, 155.

⁷⁷ Lal Dena (2002): “Unresolved Issues of the Hmars,” *Indigenous World Journal of Indigenous People*, 303-305. Cited by Roluahpuia, “Political Turmoil in Mizoram,” 1-5.

