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Situating Mizo ethnicity through difference

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Abstract

Ethnicity is not exclusively generated by self-consciousness and the awareness that one remains distinctively the way they are. The "self"exists only in relation to the "other", and vice versa. The sense of difference or the knowledge of different "other" cohesively deepens the feeling of an ethnic group. General customs and beliefs, spatial existence and socio-politics functions as a substantial coalescent force; nonetheless the existence of "other" is essential in defining one's group and locating one's own place. The paper analyzes the concept of "otherness" by "Mizo"while considering the idea of Mizo"ethnicity" being reflected in tandem. With intent, "otherness" is employed in a more neutral sense recounting differences between two or more entities without constructing any "power" relationship nor the opposite being pejoratively marginalized. The "othering", or of the "alterity" of "epistemic other" has generally been based on the imaginary spatial, racial and cultural differences. The sense of intimacy experience by the "Mizo" cognate clans through their noesis of parallel existence engendered by the "others"has been dealt with.

Keywords: ethnicity, difference, other, otherness, alterity

The studies of earlier "Mizo" culture give us an idea about their contacts with the "other" community inhabiting their immediate environs, which they labeled as different and alien from their daily existence. The consciousness of ethnic and cultural similitude given by the differing cultures encountered and the parallel perception of closeness between the various groups—against the "others"—is observable. This consciousness had shaped the ideas about the group to which 'they' belonged and how 'they' want to be perceived by 'others'.

Psychological and sociological approaches have dealt with identity formation in their respective ways. While psychological approach specifically deals with individual identity formation, sociological approach inspects the formation of collective social identity. An individual's cognitive and moral connection with a larger community, category, practice, and institution, which may be rather imagined than experienced

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directly, can be broadly taken as collective identity.[1] "Ethnicity"[2] is such kind of collective identity where one has a sense of belonging to an ethnic group for some specific reasons.

The relevance of 'ethnicity' is often in a situation of relativities and "differences", and it is a process of identification, which however often culminates to concrete status.[3] Though ethnic groups may appear to be socially defined, they are differentiated both from *inside* and *outside* the group based on cultural criteria, so that the defining characteristics of a particular 'ethnicity' have usually depended upon the various purposes for which the group has been identified.[4] Moreover, both "ethnicity" and its components are relative to time and place and are dynamic and variable.[5] Ideas of similarity and "difference" are essential to the way in which one realizes a sense of identity and social belonging. Identities, therefore, have some aspect of exclusivity of the "others".

I

"Ethnicity", according to Fredrick Barth, can be said to exist when people claim a certain identity for themselves and are defined by "others" as having that identity.[6] Barth's focal point is not upon the cultural characteristics within ethnic groups but upon relationships of cultural differentiation, and explicitly upon contact between collectivities thus differentiated - 'us' and 'them.'[7] TH Eriksen considers that "ethnicity" refers to aspects of relations between groups, which regard themselves as, and are held by "others", as being culturally distinctive.[8] Ethnic groups, in line with Everett Hughes require ethnic relations, and ethnic relations involve at least two collective parties—the *outs* as well as the *ins*.[9] The consciousness of ethnic identity is thus, generally in the context of "other" ethnic groups.

The significance of "others" in the construction of an ethnic identity is demonstrated repeatedly by several scholars. In that case, a brief exposition of the concept is required. Articulating in general term, the "other" is anyone who is different from one's self. The existence of "others" is substantial in locating one's own existence in the world.[10]

The most prominent contemporary use of the notion "other" is perhaps, established by Edward Said. The "other" may be designated as a form of cultural projection of concepts. This projection constructs the identities of cultural subjects through a relationship of "power" in which the "other" is the subjugated element.[11] Moreover, in post-colonial theory, the "other" can refer to the colonized "others" who are marginalized by the imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre. The colonized subject is typified as "other" through "discourses" such as "primitivism" and "cannibalism", as a means of establishing the "binary" dissection of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the legitimacy and primacy of the colonizing culture and worldview.[12]

However, "otherness"in the context of earlier "Mizo" culture is impartial in sense, recounting relative "differences" between two or more entities without constructing "power" relationship nor the opposite being pejoratively marginalized. Beyond doubt, *ethnocentrism* markedly expressed, subsequently spawning—*prejudice* and *stereotype*—over the "others" and their culture. However, evidence for imposing their culture as universally and exclusively true is not decidedly marked.

II

As for appellation, specific words exist designating the "others" in Mizo language; such as, *Vai, Kâwl*, *Kawr*, *Sap,* and so forth. These words, in the early period were primarily applied for christening what they regarded as outsiders and foreigners to them. Evidently, the "others" called them "Kuki" or "Chin", and thus identified them as a separate ethnic group at the same time based on their cultural ties. *Vai, Kâwl*, *Kawr*, and *Sap* are specifically dealt with in the paper since they were the most significant "others" in generating "Mizo" identity formation.

TH Lewin (1874) in *Progressive Colloquial Exercises in the Lushai Dialect of the 'Dzo' or Kuki Language* puts the word *Vai* as 'foreign'.[13] JH Lorrain (1940) transcribes the implication of *Vai* as:

> a foreigner, foreigners (excluding Europeans, and latterly the better known neighbouring tribes as well); the foreign settlement or bazaar, or a place where the foreigners live.[14]

On studying the Chin ethnic group, Lehman (1963) mentions that the word *Vai*:

> is used for the Burmans and their culture, which is more widespread in the Northern Chin area than is *kawl*. *Vai,* but not *kâwl* is used in ritual formulas and in poetical language in Haka, and is undoubtedly an older and more fundamental way of referring to Burma.[15]

Semantic analysis of the word shows the contemporary usage of *Vai*as "non-Mizo Indians, particularly plains people, and foreigners in general."[16] It is intelligible however, that a semantic shift occurred as regards the word *Vai* in tandem with their migration and settlement, and the ethnic groups they encountered in the course of their expansion.

The *Vai* kings, mentioned in the folktales of *Mauruangi*[17] and *Tualvungi and Zawlpala*[18] seem most likely the *Vais* living east of their territory. The general conception with reference to the old usage of *Vai* in the earlier times pointed mostly to the inhabitants of the cultural and geographical space, whom they regarded as culturally different from theirs, occupying the plain areas. It was a connotation applied against any ethnic groups whom they considered as virtually unrelated to their daily existence. Moreover, in that matter, the *Vais* were mainly the ethnic Bamar (Burman proper), mostly occupying the eastern sphere of their settlement.

Kâwl, according to Lorrain includes "the Burmese, a Burman."[19] Lehman

opines that *Kâwl*, seemed to be used by the Haka, Lushai, Lakher, and related areas in referring the Burman as a person and to the country he/she inhabits.[20] The noticeable fact is that *Kâwl* was used explicitly to identify the Burmans proper and their culture.

While gradually making a westward migration, they encountered another group of people whom they considered as different to them; they dubbed the new ethnic group as *Kawr* or *Kawl* in dialect having retention of /r/ sound. TH Lewin incorporates '*Korh'* in his collected vocabularies, meaning "a Bengalee or a coat wearing person."[21] JH Lorain records *Kawr* and *Kawrmi* as "a Bengali, the Bengalis".[22]

We find the tradition of using *kawr*, *thlangkawr*, *kawrvai,* or *thlangkawrvai* in certain folksongs,[23] referring to the Bengalis or other ethnic communities living to their west, generally in the plain areas. The typical application of *Kawr* implied the plains people living to their west, whom they they regarded as outsiders, differing from their culture.

Sap, as Lorrain defines is/are "a sahib, a white-man, a government, or other official."[24] The contemporary application labels *Sap* as "a sahib; English; European; white-man."[25] Mention may be made that indigenous inhabitants of the then Lushai Hills coined the armed expeditions made by the British during 1871-2 and that of 1889-90 as *vailian*.[26] This simplifies that *Vai* was applied to any outsiders—including the Europeans—since the composition of the armed forces were mixtures of different ethnic communities.

It seems probable that after realizing the eminence of the British, they used *Sap* in referring to the white colonialists in specific, following the tradition within the militia. *Sap* was a corrupted word *sahib*, used especially among the 'native' inhabitants of colonial India when addressing or speaking of a European of some social or official status.[27]

The discussion explains that the general word for designating any foreigners was *Vai*. Inhabiting a higher elevation on hilly terrain, the "alterity" of communities dwelling in the plains was observed. The ethnic groups occupying east of their settings were usually labeled as *Kâwl* or sometimes as *Kâwlvai.* These ethnic groups called them "Chin" as well. Because of the westward migration and a wider settlement, the ethnic groups dwelling in the western part of their settlement were commonly identified as *Kawr* or *Kawrvai*. "Kuki" was the name applied to them by these ethnic groups at the same time.

III

James C. Scott argues that 'civilizational discourses' has represented about "barbarian", the "savage", and the "primitive" as basically meaning ungoverned, not-yet-incorporated. It does not admit the preference of people voluntarily going over to the 'barbarians', hence such statuses are debased.[28] It is for this reason that, according to Victor Lieberman, the colonialists apprehended

"the law of Southeast Asian inertia": unless acted upon by external forces, "native" societies remained at rest.[29]

The colonialists therefore labeled any ethnic groups as "uncivilized" through their doctrines of "civilizing mission" and "universalism", which did not subsist in parallel with their justified "civilization", accordingly imposing their cultural value and colonial practices to the groups they encountered. Geographical boundaries were prepared without any respect for the "natives", and natural geographic terrain and cultural limits that had long been in place were disregarded.

Maps and mapping/ "cartography" are dominant practices of "colonialism". Exploration and consolidation of the colonialists is often reinforced by the construction of maps as a means of textualizing the spatial reality of the "other", renaming spaces in a symbolic and literal act of mastery and control.[30] Subsequently, "Mizo" were distributed under different political authorities. With their imperialistic "discourse", the colonialists disparaged what was contrasting with the western concept of "nationalism" and nation-state. This was the reason why they wrongly attempted in searching a common *ethnonym* covering certain ethnic groups.

Utilizing their political "power" as a means of an instrument, combining with the colonial ethnographic discourse, they coerced new geo-political spaces to breed new identities, deviating from the earlier existence of ethnic consciousness in a roundabout way.For instance, AS Reid (1893) theorized that, "the Chins and Lushais are practically one race."[31] Carey and Tuck (1895) "reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins…are of one and the same stock."[32] With that knowledge, they however, executed the geographic partition of the entire area;[33] this evidently exposed their policy of *divide and rule*.

"Mizo" identity formation was reshaped by the colonialists' partition of their geographical space and imposing their political rule over their state of affairs. Besides, mass scale conversion to a new religion introduced to them was significant in reinforcing a sense of identity. Being common subjects of the British Empire, embracing the same religion, and a broadened communication within the territory fostered a newer identity. British administration in the Lushai Hills and the subsequent political autonomy attained by the territory under the Indian Union bolstered "Mizo" identity. The impact of this geo-political circumscription introduced a new "Mizo" identity in "othering" what they considered as differing ethnic groups.

IV

The mapping out of the Lushai Hills by the colonialists contained the dominant clan of Lusei, using Lusei or Duhlian dialect as the language of communication. J. Shakespeare (1912) has mentioned that even before the consolidation of the

British rule, the process of absorbing certain tribes into the Lusei tribe had been experienced that was discontinued by the British administration.[34] Lewin (1874), Shakespear (1912), and Lorrain (1940) recorded unvaryingly that the Lusei or Duhlian dialect served as a *lingua franca* in the then Lushai Hills.[35]

The first group of new modern elites that appeared during the colonial period mainly composed of Lusei or Duhlian speaking commoners. These members mostly received formal education in the schools established by the Christian missionaries and they were affiliated to the Church. Even though the composition contained diverse tribes, Christianity provided a substituting space for tribe specific *sakhua* that was intertwined with the concept of *hnam*.[36] Accordingly, one's identity as a tribe was no longer relevant and thus began creating a more coherent collective identity.[37]

History was subsequently reconstructed and a larger space for "Mizo" identity was proliferated. The cultural intimacy and commonality of the people, markedly "different" from "others"—especially the Indian *Vai*—was asserted through print media. The Young Mizo Association (YMA), in the collaboration with the Church initiated *Chanchinthadak* programme through which literatures written in Lusei language were sent to the Chin Hills attempting to break the language barrier by popularizing Lusei language.[38] On the formation of Mizo Union, the union considered it necessary to use "Mizo" as to integrate all the 'children of Chhinlung'.[39] The ethnic-Christian component of the MNF ideology was against the "other" whom they called as *vai*.

As a result, the semantic symbol of *vai* newly represented general plain Indians differing in phenotype, culture, language, and religion. Under the government of the Indian Union, and especially because of the propaganda of the MNF movement against the *vai* and the consequent psychological trauma, *vai* became the most prominent concept of "other" against which "Mizo" defined its identity. As formerly mentioned, the contemporary popular concept of *vai* usually means non-Mizo Indians, particularly plains people. It replaces *kawr*, the usage of which is almost limited to only poetry and songs.

Sap initially signifies a white colonizer who settled for the interim, then departed. Even their short intervention had left an immense impact on "Mizo" sense of building their identity against them. Their orientalist "discourse" on civilization has deposited "hegemony" of their cultural practices and values, thus persisting to perform as a standard of identity maker for which "Mizo" constantly define their existence.

The current usage of *kâwl* retains its primeval root and it still means "the Myanmarese; people living in Myanmar."[40] However, in "Mizo" speaking group, whether *kâwl* refers to the Burmans proper, or any citizens of

Myanmar including the "Chins"—which is often used synonymously with *'khawchhak mi'*, meaning 'people of the east'—is not certain since the usage of *kâwl* in popular parlance often overlaps in reference to the modern political state Myanmarese and the Burmans proper. Even if the impact of colonial "cartography" or geo-political division is experienced, corresponding to the etymological essence, the politically correct meaning of *kâwl* refers generally to the Burmans proper, occupying the plain areas.

Generalizing the concept of "others", it is acceptable to surmise that "Mizo" had a feeling of relatedness in "othering" certain ethnic groups whom they had encountered. The shared memories they retained, the close cultural practices they observed, the mutually intelligible language they verbalized, the hilly terrain they occupied, and the similar phenotypic appearances they possessed were all important in the "alterity" of the *vai*, *kâwl*, *kawr*, and *sap*; thus maintaining a sense of oneness to a certain degree.

The main point of the argument is thus: whatever word was applied to the "others" by the ethnic groups within "Mizo", they did not denote the tribes or clans within their cognate areas as *vai, kâwl, kawr,* or *sap*; instead, they identified themselves in clans, lineages, or villages. These terminologies contain a long history and it is employed as words against whom they regarded as not belonging with them—i.e. the "others".

Endnotes & Works Cited

[1]Polletta, Francesca and JM Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 27*, pp.283-305.

[2] The etymology of 'ethnicity' is the Greek term *ethnos*, which survives in modern French, *ethnie*, with the associated adjective *ethnique*. The French adjective exists in modern English as 'ethnic', with a suffix added to give 'ethnicity'. For details, see Tonkin, Elisabeth, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman, "History and Ethnicity" in Hutchinson, John and Anthony D. Smith (ed.), *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p.19.

Theories of 'ethnicity' differ as regards their view on the formation of ethnic identities. *Primordialism* holds that 'ethnicity' has existed at all times of human history and that modern ethnic groups have historical continuity into the distant past. *Constructivism* sees *Primordialists'* view as flawed, and rejects the notion of 'ethnicity' as a basic human condition. It holds that ethnic groups are only products of human social interaction, maintained only as far as they are valid social constructs in societies. *Modernism* correlates the emergence of ethnicity with movement towards nation state beginning in the early modern period. Proponents of this theory, argue that ethnicity and notions of ethnic pride, such as nationalism, are purely modern inventions. They hold that prior to this; ethnic homogeneity was not considered an ideal or necessary factor in the forging

of large-scale societies. *Instrumentalism* treats ethnicity primarily as an ad-hoc element of a political strategy, used as a resource for interest groups for achieving secondary goals such as, for instance, an increase in wealth, power or status.

[3] Tonkin, Elisabeth, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman, *op.cit.*, p.23.

[4] No ethnic group will contain the essential defining traits; however, all will exhibit different components to different degrees. See, Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London, 2009, pp.80-1.

[5]*ibid.*, p.81.

[6]Kottak, Conrad Phillip, *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, 10th Edition, McGraw Hill, New York, 2004, pp.367-8.

[7] Jenkins, Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations,* Second Edition, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, 2008, p.12.

[8] For further details, see Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Second Edition, Pluto Press, London, p.3.

[9] Jenkins, Richard, *op.cit.*, p.11.

[10]*ibid.*, p.169.

[11] Sedgwick, Peter, "Other" in Edgar, Andrew and Peter Sedgwick (ed.), *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London, 2008, p.235.

[12] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *op.cit.*, p.169-70.

[13]Lewin, TH, *Progressive Colloquial Exercises of the Lushai Dialect of the 'Dzo' or Kuki Language with Vocabularies and Popular Tales (Notated)*, Calcutta Central Press Company Limited, Calcutta, 1874, p.xvi.

[14] Lorrain, James Herbert, *Dictionary of the Lushai Language*, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Kolkata, 1940, p.539.

[15] Lehman, F.K., *The Structure of Chin Society*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1963, p.29.

[16]Vanlalngheta, J.T., *The BritAm Pocket Dictionary of 'Mizo'*, Hlawndo Publishing House, Aizawl, 2013, p.584.

[17] In the folktale, Mauruangi married a *vai* king. The material culture represented oriented more towards the plain Bamars than the plain Bengalis; for instance, the mention of *kawlhnam* (Bamar sword) and the practice of *puantah* or weaving related objects, the material of which is more related to the eastern culture. See, Thanmawia, RL, *Mizo Hnahthlak Thawnthu, Vol.3*, Din Din Heaven, Aizawl, 2012, pp.99-118.

[18] Phuntiha, a *vai* king is introduced in the folktale paying a profuse nuptial price for Tualvungi, the wife of Zawlpala on Zawlpala's demand for falsely avowing his spouse as his sister. When Phuntiha's couriers came into sight, meeting the terms of their conditions, Tualvungi sadly burst out that they splendidly came crossing the Tuichang river. Legend

has it that Tualvungi's burial ground where she went back to Zawlpala's domicile is in the region of the present Thenzawl town, situating to the west of Tuichang river. It seems plausible that the *vai* king referred to in the folktale approached from the east. See, Thanmawia, RL, *Mizo Hnahthlak Thawnthu, Vol.2*, Din Din Heaven, Aizawl, 2009, pp.63-73.

[19] Lorrain, James Herbert, *op.cit.*, p.233.

[20] Lehman, F.K., *op.cit.*, p.28.

[21]Lewin, TH, *op.cit.*,p.viii.

[22] Lorrain, James Herbert, *op.cit.*, p.240.

[23] For example, Hmuaki romanticized that even if her flesh decays, she yearned for her songs to overshadow the rulers of *Thlangkawr mi* or—perhaps—the Bengalis. See, Thanmawia RL, *Mizo Hla Hlui (Mizo Folk Songs)*, Din Din Heaven, Aizawl, 2012, p. 217.

[24] Lorrain, James Herbert, *op.cit.*, p.404.

[25] Vanlalngheta, J.T., *op.cit.*, p.440.

[26] See, Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*, Mizoram Publication Board, Aizawl, 2002, pp. 118 & 139. Also, see Siama, V.L., *Mizo History*, Lengchhawn Press, Aizawl, 1991, pp.92-102.

[27] htttp://www.merriam-webster.com. Accessed on November 12, 2015 at 3:50 pm. *Sahib* is derived from Hindi or Urdu, *sahib* meaning, 'master, lord'; which comes from Arabic *sahib*, originally 'friend, companion'; from *sahiba*, meaning, 'he accompanied.' Female form ('European lady') is *memsahib*. See, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=sahib. Accessed on: November 16, 2015 at 1:30 am.

[28] Scott considers that hill peoples can be understood as been escaping the dominations of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvee labour, epidemics, and warfare. Most of the areas in which they settle may be appropriately called shatter zones or zones of refuge. Virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies can be read as strategic positioning designed to keep the state at arm's length. See, Scott, James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2010, p.ix-xi.

[29] Lieberman, Victor, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.8.

[30] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen, *op.cit*., pp.31-2.

[31] Reid, A.S., *Chin-Lushai Land,* Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 2008, p.6.

[32] Carey, Bertram S. & Tuck, H.N., *The Chin Hills, Vol.1*., Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 2008, p.2.

[33] For more information, for example, see Go, KhupZa, *Zo Chronicles: A Documentary Study of History and Culture of the Kuki-Chin-Lushai Tribe*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2008, pp.59-60. Also, see Reid, Robert, *TheLushai Hills*, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1942, pp.59-61.

[34]Shakespear, J., *TheLushei-Kuki Clan*, Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 2008, p.40-2.

[35] For details, see Lewin, TH, *op.cit.*, p.3. Also, see Shakespear, J., *op..cit*., p.112. See, Lorrain, JH, *op.cit*.,p.v.

[36]What made the recognition of group categorization very confusing was definitely the arbitrary nature of one's *sakhua* that resulted in the ability of initiating one's own *hnam* by a man completing matrimonial rites, by the process known as *sakung* or *sakungphun*. One of the most important markers of one's ethnic identity was a relationship known as '*dawisakilpuitheih'*. It means that it was against the custom for a family having different *sakhua* to dine together for the animal's flesh used in the performance of their sacred rites, and that only who affiliated as sharing similar *hnam* and *sakhua* were accepted as one's own kin. See Dokhuma, James, *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung,* (2nd Edition), 'Mizoram Publication Board, Aizawl, 2008, p.32. Also, see Dokuma, James, *Tawng Un Hrilhfiahna*, R. Lalrawna, Aizawl, 2008, p.32.

[37]Pachuau, Joy, "The Creation of Mizo Identity: From Colonial to Post-Colonial Times". Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation submitted to Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, p.66.

[38]Vanlawma, R., *YMA History (1935-1995)*, CYMA, Aizawl, p.33.

[39]Vanlawma, R., *Ka Ram leh Kei*, Zoram Printing Press, Aizawl, p.80.

[40]Vanlalngheta, J.T., *op.cit*., p.249.