



The Church, Christianity and Post-Colonial Critique: Christianity and Advent of Modernity in Mizoram through Visual Art

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Abstract

The British rule in Mizoram was roughly over five decades, and was never really seen as being carried on with an imperialist mind set, as opposed to colonial experiences elsewhere. Missionaries with a mission zeal entered what was then the Lushai Hills soon after the British took administrative control in the areas. Hence, colonial expansion is mostly experienced as the advent of Christianity among the Mizo people. The Government of Assam and Bengal planned a joint military expedition in 1871 which is known to the Mizos as the 'vailenvawi khatna'. It is interesting to learn that the Mizos associate the invasion with Vai as it was an encounter with army who were referred to as 'Sapin min awplai', or the time 'when white men/sahibs ruled over us'. 'Thim ataengah', translated as 'from dark to light' is also a popular phrase describing the transitory period during this time. The period with the introduction of Christianity is often acknowledged as a mediation to bring the Mizos out of darkness towards the light. This article not only traces the advent of Christianity through an analysis from existing visual arts, which are often called 'historical paintings'; but also new forms of institutional critique of the Church and the brand of Christianity through contemporary paintings.

Keywords: *Visual Art, Post-ethnic, Contemporary Painting, Historical Painting, Mizo Identity, Christianity, Modernity.*

Introduction

'Being Mizo'ⁱ, a book by Joy Pachuau underlines the politics of belonging and highlights the construction of identity in and around Mizoram. Her work is a compelling example of interdisciplinary dialogue between history and anthropology and has employed the self-ascribed notion of identity that are formed by the social organisation that revolves around traditional practices like death and its close engagement with Christianity. Such self-ascribed notions are seen as instruments of agency that defy the view of the 'other', which

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also create and maintain the sense of belonging and difference, and organizing the ‘ethnic self’. This Christian praxis in Church and society, according to Joy, is the prime factor of identity building that defines the present Mizo and I will be looking at the implications and the role of the Church through visual arts. This article traces a brief history of the entry of Christianity into Mizo society, drawing from ‘historical painting’ of Tlangrokhuma and later the institutional critique of the Church by Isaac Malsawmtluanga. This article does not attempt to provide chronological historical events but rather an anecdote that might help build a discourse on visual studies and its relation to the Mizo identity.

The Beginning

The British rule in Mizoram was roughly over five decades, and was never really seen as being carried on with an imperialist mind set. The British extending their control towards the plains of Brahmaputra saw the raids from the neighbouring hill tribes as being merely problematic and often carried out retaliatory measures to resolve the situation. However, as they did not see satisfactory results, the government of Assam and Bengal planned a joint military expedition in 1871 which is known to the Mizos as the ‘*vailen*’. It is interesting to learn that the Mizos associate the invasion with *Vaias* it was an encounter with army who were mainly Gurkhas and Sikhs serving for the British Army (Pachua:2014). The actual period of rule was referred to as ‘*Sapin min awplai*’, or the time ‘when white men/sahibs ruled over us’. Joy Pachua explains the significance of this phrase as *awpis* also a word used for a hen incubating her eggs, signifying the contributory role the *Sap* has in ‘hatching out’ the Mizos (Pachua: 2014). ‘*Thimataengah*’, translated as ‘from dark to light’ is also a popular phrase describing the transitory period during this time. The period with the introduction of Christianity is often acknowledged as a mediation to bring the Mizos out of ‘darkness towards the light.’

Popular narrative often gives an account of Bengkhuaia, the Chief of Sailam village as the main protagonist for the British to lead one of the most noted expeditions. However, R.G. Woodthorpe (Woodthorpe, 1973) who wrote an account of the expedition mentioned very little of Bengkhuaia; instead he spoke of one of the most menacing chiefs of the Lushai, Lalburha. Many attempts were in fact carried out to retaliate and subjugate the Mizos even before 1871 when a joint attack to the Chachar plains was carried out by different chiefs. The story is popular as it involves a tragic incident of a young girl, who many Mizos later identified as a point of departure for the entry of Christianity among the Mizos. Bengkhuaia’s men raided Alexandrapurⁱⁱ, a tea plantation where they eventually killed Mary Winchester’s father James Winchester along with many other people. James Winchester was a manager for the British tea plantation and Mary stayed with him for 12 years. When her father decided that it was time for her formal education in Britain, a farewell party was held at a tea plantation Alexandrapur, owned by Mr. George Sellar, a close friend of James Winchester. Since the people present were mostly civilians, the Mizo sides saw the raid a very successful one, killing many and capturing many including Mary Winchester. Being a little girl, and when they knew of the fact that she was an illegitimate daughter of a ‘Kuki’-their own hill people, they took great care of her giving and calling by her Mizo name ‘Zoluti’.

The compelling task by the British government to make a retaliation and recovery from these raids which was launched on 8 October 1871. The British side had sophisticated military equipment and the Mizo arms were no match for their artillery; they advanced into Sailam village to suppress and destroy villages, burning them down to ashes. The right column of the campaign reached Sailam village on 21 January 1872. Bengkhuaia and Tom Lewin made a treaty of agreement known to the Mizos as '*Sa ui tan*'. In the process the village was saved from burning down and it is said that Bengkhuaia was so boastful of his achievement to be able to have made peace with the British that he said, "*Van hnuaichinahnian 'Chuti'nkhati'n' ka tih hi 'Ni lovang' lo titheiawmtak ang maw!*" which translates as "*If I proclaim it to be; tell me who under heaven or earth can say it isn't so!*"ⁱⁱⁱ

Many Mizos often narrate this story as the most crucial point in history as many believed this was what brings into notification the Mizo hills to the British. Especially tracing the origin of Christianity can be possibly done without it. Popular narrative gives way to many of the visual representation of Mizo history as opposed to precise historical account. Mizos often referred Mizoram as '*Pathianzawnchhuah ram*' – 'A country sought out by God himself'. A small region in the north east, which was surrounded by all major religious influences- Buddhism towards the east and Hinduism in the west-could probably be easily assimilated culturally and spiritually by neighbouring larger races.



One of the few paintings depicting historical events is this painting by Tlangrokhuma, titled '*First Mizoram Expedition on 5th February, 1872 A.D*' (figure 1). A painting in oil on canvas, painted between August 1991 to July 1992 is a depiction of the *sauui tan*^{iv} between Chief Bengkhuaia and British Army officer Tom Lewin by the river Lau. One might admittedly fall prey to certain misinterpretations but one can't help but think that the artist must have had a certain assumption underlining this moment and deemed it to have been

divine intervention. This picture gives a very dramatic Christian imagery from the Bible where the sky opens up, and a ray of light falls on the Englishman. The people who came to see the event look like they were an angelic host of witnesses.

Taking into account the rarity of representation of historical events as subjects of Mizo art, it is important to note that this moment has been deemed important enough to commemorate by more than one artist. A painting by R. Lalthansanga depicts the attempt to rescue Mary Winchester and appears to portray a young girl who is not intimidated by her captors, but in fact seems hesitant to be rescued. This version of history seems to be in line with one of the many retellings of this momentous historical event which perhaps tries to shine a friendlier light on the Mizo actions and negate the severity of the retaliation that followed.

Intermediary

Talking about the culture of Mizos, one can see a clear-cut distinction between the pre-colonisation period and the post-colonisation period as colonisation brought about drastic changes within the social realm: the transformation was physical, spiritual and also cultural. Modern colonialism, like any other colonial interventions, came about to change the social order and thus create a new set of cultural system in the society. In Mizoram the introduction of Christianity transformed almost every sphere of life. It was the Protestant missionaries that first came into the Lushai Hills following the arrival of the British troops to the Northeast in the early 19th century. Almost every form of cultural rituals and sacrifices, dances and customs as well as beliefs were abolished and offered a new set of standards of living compatible with the Christian beliefs and ideologies.

It was Rev. William Williams who first came to Lushai Hills or Mizoram, not as a Christian Missionary but more of an explorer. It was soon after the military expedition of 1891 and after the first semblance of colonial order and authority had been imposed (Pachau, 2014, p-158). However, the political turmoil in the district did not permit him to stay for long and he soon left after a few weeks. J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge who were sent on mission by the Welsh Presbyterian Church with an established permanent mission station in 1898 were joined by missionaries supported by the Baptist Mission Society of London in 1903. The two organizations set up their respective zones of influence by following pre-existing administrative divisions.^v The Lakher Pioneer Mission followed suit in 1907 and started their work among the Maras located further south of the Lunglei region. The foreign missionary presence lasted about 70 years, with the last of the missionaries leaving the state in the seventies when political insurgency overtook the state.

From the painting (figure 2) by Tlangrokhuma titled '*Missionary leh Khuma*', we can see the first mode of introducing the Gospel to the Mizos- street preaching. The foreigner-the missionary is seen wearing a blue coat who is accompanied by one of the first Mizo converts, Khuma who is also seen wearing a black western coat with a haircut like the Europeans. Khuma and Khara are known to be the first Mizos to have allowed themselves to be baptized- thus the first two Mizo Christians.^{vi} Among many other elements, one of the most distinct

changes the Mizos reposition themselves after adopting Christianity was the way they dress themselves and cut their hair. European dress soon overtook the indigenous Mizo dresses, adopting to new realities which is also becoming an elite class marker which ‘expresses a novel sense of Modernity and sophistication’ (Pachau. Schendel.: 2015, p-5).



Fig. 2: Tlangrokhuma, “Missionary leh Khuma”, Oil on Canvas, 30”x32”, 1992.
(Image Source: Tlangrokhuma).

The response to the evangelical work of these missionaries falls nothing short of overwhelming. By the 1960’s it was a recognized fact that everyone who identified themselves as Mizo also considered themselves as Christians. The success of this attempt at Christianization cannot, however, be credited to missionary zeal alone. Though there were 3 main denominational agencies at work, the clearly demarcated zones for their mission expedited the efficacy of their work as there was hardly any question of competing for influence. It was this cooperation that brought about a homogenised Christian experience among the Mizo. It was not only the combined efforts of the different missionary agencies, but also the introduction of education and western medicine that added to the ease with which the new religion was able to easily pervade the minds of the people and garner their acceptance.

In this representational painting (fig.3) of a village by Tlangrokhuma titled ‘*Zoram Modern Village*’ painted in 1993, we can see; in its heights of subtlety- the transformation of a culture and a society which is shaping its praxis towards Christianity. Many of the Mizo

paintings can be analysed from a romanticist perspective; this particular example is no different as preliminary inspection of the painting does not suggest much about Christianity. This painting is an emotional one: two young girls eagerly awaits their parent's arrival from *jhum* field, the sun is low on the horizon, casting long shadows and creating beautiful patterns of light and shadow. The village is quiet and has little or no activity as most of the villagers have gone to the fields. The atmosphere is moody and the village feels empty.



Fig. 3: Tlangrokhuma, “Zoram Modern Village”, Oil on Canvas, 35”x48”, 1993.
(Image Source: Tlangrokhuma).

Although we do not see much of a transformation in the way a village is depicted except for a few houses that use imported materials like tin roofs and tiles, it is the presence of a church in the top left corner where we can see a glimpse of a transformative society that would soon change the way Mizo identify themselves. The Mizos readily accepted Christianity soon after its advent around a century ago. Mizoram is now a Christian majority state and almost every citizen belongs to one church denomination or another. This Church in the painting is the only building that can be easily recognised and identified—with a shape of a cross on top. Social institutions like the *Zawlbuk* and the *Lal In* (Chief's house) are absent and although one of the buildings might be a village's school (assuming the period to be after where educational schools are established), there is no evidence in recognisable forms and features that suggest it so. The Church is not as grand as it would soon be in modern times, in terms of size and form. But the way the artist has given importance is in its placement, giving it a focal point of interest where the eye rests: all the lines from the background and foreground; from the mountain lines in the background to the paths and shadows in the foreground all point towards the church.

Due to the wide scale acceptance of a foreign religion and a hitherto unknown God, the common perception among many is that there was a blanket acceptance of Christianity as brought forth by the missionaries. This is not an altogether ridiculous assumption given the relatively short time that it took to convert an entire tribal population. In fact, as has been expressed through various artistic medium of art and poetry, most even deem it to have been part of a Divine plan. Zaithanga's book titled '*From Head-hunting to Soul-hunting*' (Zaithanga: 1981) seems to have echoed the same sentiment. However, a closer look at the conversion experience among Mizos has shown it to be a novel reformatory process rather than a transformative one. The missionaries supported the domestication of Christian beliefs and appropriated many of the Mizo cultural practices into the brand of Christianity they were introducing. It was always upheld that the motive was never to destroy any cultural heritage but only to adjust some behaviours in line with the faith, thereby discarding only what was deemed as 'bad' customs and still keeping true to the authenticity of the Mizo way of life.

It is a common presumption that the infiltration of a new religious order breaks down and destroys important cultural elements and even dilutes them to point of being unrecognizable. This is where the Mizo conversion experience gains a subaltern status in that the proliferation of Christianity among a tribal group which previously identified themselves as a group based on the *Sakhua* or *Pathian* they worshipped were unified through a homogenous version of Christianity. The cohesive inculcation of Mizo practices within the confines of the faith, making concessions and appropriating practices instead of going against the grain of their beliefs can be credited to the thorough acceptance of the Christian faith. The advent of Christianity can thus be said to have re-identified Mizo culture, ushering a brand of Mizo Christianity instead of destroying the pre-existing belief systems and replacing them with a new one.

Post-Ethnic Representation

While the previous section deals with the strong influence of Christianity in the construction of identity within its practices, it is important to articulate the influence of such a strong religious identity as Christianity and how seldom its influence has taken a different turn. There is an almost tangible taboo when it comes to the representation of the Church and the Mizo brand of Christianity in any light that is not positive or self-perpetuating. A tribe that prides itself on having 100% Christian population has over the years projected this image to the 'outside' world and in most cases, this sentiment has been echoed and accepted.

Belting coined the term post-ethnic (Belting: 2009) to understand modernism as a time when there was a gap maintained between an ethnography museum and a metropolitan art gallery in the Euro American art world and postmodern as when this gap began to close; this marks the time when the non-western artist seized a new agency in performing his or her own ethnicity and thereby showing a new mode of cultural agency. Artists have begun to question the facade of homogeneity that has been put forward over the years and the era of blind acceptance seems to be coming to a close, opening a new chapter of individual thoughts expressed visually and poetically.

Critiquing the Church and its institution is nothing new in literature and songs, however we seldom see it in Visual arts. Isaac Malsawmtluanga's works are perhaps the first instances where we find a strong critique on the way Church functions in controlling the mindset of the people. Mizos are known to be influenced greatly by the Church, what is deemed appropriated by the Church is a way of living in the society. What is regarded as good is dictated by the Church and there is little or no space for individual thoughts and expressions. However, this notion of living a 'pious' and 'religious' way is a compelling example of conformity and shallowness. The hypocrisy that arises out of the Church which created a feeling of alienation and otherness is also very much present within the institution. One gains social status through his contribution in the church thus alienating those who do not, and church activities sort of became a matrimonial platform for men and women. One of the first criteria set for an ideal husband or wife would that be one who participated actively in the Church. '*Kohhranainhmang hi antha*'^{vii} is a popular remark which became a benchmark for such affair in engagement towards marriage. But as another remarks like '*Kawrahmang*'^{viii} suggests, it is often the engagement in Church to hide one's true self and try to project something they're not. Although this might just be another side of a coin and is not really the full picture, but it is the other side of the coin which is hardly exposed.



Fig. 4: Isaac Malsawmtluanga, "ctrl+c ctrl+shift ctrl+del", Acrylic on Canvas, 2015.
(Image Source: Isaac Malsawmtluanga).

Spirituality is highly coveted and admired in Mizo Christianity. Spiritual revivals and crusades receive great attention and attract large crowds. These spiritual revivals are called '*harhna*' or in a literal sense 'the awakening'. These spiritual revivals often received the whole population's attention and lasts for more than a year. The most recent one is called '*Kelkangharhna*' originating from a small village in Kelkang in the eastern part of Mizoram and its peak last for at least two years during 2014-2015. A report states that a Church service

was conducted for at least 850 days consecutively and more than 2,35,000 people from different parts of the state and outside have come to Kelkang to witness the spiritual revival.

In this painting by Isaac (figure 4), a group of people are portrayed as donkeys who are blindly following a one-way path. This painting was done as a response to the *Kelkang Harhna* which he saw as being a trend followed by the masses without any real conviction or thought. This appears to be a reflection of what he thought to be the Christian path that most Mizos followed, a depiction of mob behaviour where one is blindly led, and fails to see the ailing image of Christ headed in the other direction. This is a powerful statement, not against Christianity but the way these revivals are carried out and received by the masses- an almost elite status is given to the followers while non conformers are deemed to be outsiders who do not fall within the true Christian fold. This type of commentary is novel in the sense that it offers a dissenting opinion on such revivals- an opinion which one usually keeps to himself as even the bearing of such an opinion (even if unvoiced) is considered as being un-Christian and perhaps even an affront to the Holy Spirit.



Fig. 5: Isaac Malsawmtluanga, "Train of Thought", Acrylic on Canvas, 2016.
(Image Source: Isaac Malsawmtluanga).

This is not the only voice that Isaac has raised against the way Christianity is followed in Mizoram. 'Kamikaze Nun' (figure 6) seems to comment on the outwardly façade that religion puts on among Mizo Christians, and does so using Japanese symbols and terminology. While still easily identifiable with the social conditions in Mizoram, Isaac has achieved a certain level of finesse in presenting this while making no particular reference to Mizoram or Mizo culture. 'Train of Thought' (figure 5) looks into the idea of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, with the first humans being shown as pigs. The Christian iconography of the snake leading the swine to slaughter as it were is still very visible, and appears to be an introspection. A self portrait of sorts, it is interesting to note that he does not fall prey to the trap of representing his identity as that of a Mizo man (especially as the subject of spirituality and Christianity is considered to be a very Mizo theme), and at the same time, the Biblical icons are witnessed in a different light, and not as subjects of worship.

Conclusion

Though this is a feeble attempt at looking the construction of Identity that revolves around Christian praxis through Visual arts, we can conclude that there is a marked confrontation between anthropology and art history in that on one hand there is a need for anthropological documentation as prescribed by dominant narratives; while on the other hand, we also see the contestation of different art movements and how they have been incorporated. Moreover, we have also examined how individual artists have dealt with this through their own brand of contemporary art practice. This leads us to the post ethnic where instead of looking for a universal or hegemonic definition of art, allowance is made for the multiplicity and variation of art definitions which allows it to move beyond the tried and tested boundaries of popular, mass, ethnic, or in this case purely representational art. The criticality of this concept lies in the fact that it can exist in the space between the statist agenda and the true artistic expressions of individual practitioners when they are not restricted by the pre-defined concepts, and thus are able to transcend the local and able to critique it from a vantage point.



Fig. 6: Isaac Malsawmtluanga, “Kamikaze Nun”,
Acrylic on Canvas, 2016.
(Image Source: Isaac Malsawmtluanga).

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Endnote

ⁱPachauau, Joy L.K. (2014). Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in the Northeast India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱPresent day Assam.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation mine.

^{iv} Treaty or an agreement.

^vThe Baptists set up their headquarters in the South in Serkawn near Lunglei, while the Presbyterians did so in the north at Mission Veng.

Although they were regarded as such, they may actually have been merely the first to live on after their conversion (Pachauau and Schendel 2015:67).

^{vii}Translated as – “It is good to be active in the Church”.

^{viii}Translated as – “as a façade/as a mask”.