

Locating Identity within Mizo Folk Narratives

- Margaret L.Pachauu

Abstract: This article shall explore how identity has been inherently central to Mizo folk narratives and that most narratives have been located within this aspect. It shall examine select folklore narratives that have been rendered in the original Mizo. While denoting this, it shall also determine the continuing significance of folk narratives in the society. It shall in the process examine both folk and cultural dynamics that have emerged within post colonial Christian parameters and reflect upon how folk narrative still remains a significant marker in terms of locating identity within the Mizo perspective.

Keywords: Folklore, hybridity, myth, colonial dynamics

The article attempts to portray the significance of identity as located intrinsically within the parameters of the history of Mizo folkloristics. In order to render justice to the topic, it shall examine the fact that most of the folklore within the Mizo arena has been located within the backdrop of nature, the animal world order and the world of spirits and the supernatural. The pre colonial era, (prior to 1947) especially saw the emergence of Mizo folklore in terms of the creation of man, the creation of the universe and how various forms of natural and human life came into being. Such narratives which were especially related to the concept of identity are remarkably different from the narratives in the post missionary era, where Christianity has occupied a centrality and has thus, relocated beliefs and ethos that had once been associated with Mizo identity. It also seeks to advocate that the tribal dynamics have experienced a vast paradigm shift within the domains of a pre and post colonial perspective. This itself is unique in terms of the formation of identity because the culture itself is still predominantly tribal but it has continued to hold on to an inherently Westernised concept of identity. Thus, the concept of hybridity comes into sharp alignment in this perspective. It will attempt to denote the inherent difference in sensibility that existed in terms of the pre and post colonial elements. It will also assert that due to the advent of Christianity and the post colonial dynamics, especially after 1889, there has been an inherent loss of the status of myths within the Mizo community. Colonisation has brought with it a changing facet to the perspective of identity and the defining parameters of identity in the decades that follow after the advent of Christianity especially have been honed towards a redefinition of the Mizo identity. It has become a society where there has been an increasing focus upon the nuances of religion and subsequently, in the process there has been the consistent negation of the myths, folk and cultural lores. The

projection of identity itself is complex, the Mizos themselves have been regarded to be a race of Mongoloid stock and have come into existence from a large rock emerging out of the Chin-Lushai province known as Chhinlung (B.Lalthangliana, 31) that there is hardly any historical or anthropological claim to legitimacy on that perspective remains forgotten many a time. However it is out of these aspects that identities have been carved and out of these that many lores have been centred upon. In order to elucidate upon the aspect of the complexities of Mizo cultural identity, the paper shall dwell upon the concept of identity in terms of the pre as well as post colonial perspectives. In the pre colonial era which was prior to 1889, myths were significantly a part of the religious system and the status of a person or community depended very much upon the interrelationship between the resonant myth and the individual or culture. In as far as post colonial Mizo society and identity are concerned, Christianity has played a major role in terms of the formulation of the identity of the post colonial Mizo. The contrast in terms of identity in the pre and post colonial parameters have been vast because, the colonized Mizo domains were previously under a culture that was inherently non Christian and so subsequently had a different sensibility altogether, whether religious or secular. Identity in the pre colonial Mizo society was inherently non Christian and it was one that existed in affinity with the flora and the fauna around them.

Myths within the ambit of a pre colonial Mizo culture have had a significant role in terms of the aspect of creation, life as well as death and Mizo narratives have denoted these inherently. In the history of Mizo myth and folkloristics there has been coherent representation of these various parameters: for instance, the concept of creation has been portrayed in a manner that is very different from the creation of the post colonial era. Pre colonial era has inherently depicted the existence of a world that was bereft of human beings and even the universe. This is in sharp contrast to the post colonial era where the Christian God becomes sovereign and is solely responsible for the creation of the universe as well as the first man and woman. Even the creation of the heaven and the earth, the waters of the sea as well as all objects that were of the air and water and land, took place only with the emergence of the Christian God. This has been reflected in the *Bible* in the book of Genesis which is the first book in the Old Testament. The decades that followed 1889, saw a sharp new perspective emerging and this is especially reflected in the aspect of creation. All other concepts that are related to the aspect of creation consistently follow from this paradigm. The colonial Mizo began to gradually identify with the image of the Christian precepts of thinking and fashioned himself within such parameters. However, this was not to state that there were no other paradigms that had had its bearings upon the arena of identity in the pre colonial domains. The pre colonial Mizo context was one that was rich in terms of carving out its own niche with regards to identity. It saw the existence of a being, (or a god) that was referred to as 'khuazingnu' and the aspects of creation, including the creation of the earth and the addition of greenery around the earth were attributed to this being (Thanmawia, R L 29). Myth in this era also

depicts that as the earth was very dry this all majestic being called khuazingnu would occasionally open the windows of heaven in order to water the earth. This explained the concept of rainfall and much later on, the same god was credited with the creation of animals and humanity, especially in order to consume the vast produce of the earth. It was also significant to note that within this world order there was the existence of both men and animals who could communicate with one another and this especially depicted the centrality of the animal world order within the ambit of the human race. The earth was basically reflected as a land of abundance. However, even within the pre colonial era, with the passage of time there grew conflicts amongst the inhabitants of the earth and eventually this gave way to the creation of the chief. The concept of 'identity formation' within the pre colonial era was significantly inter linked with that of nature and animals as well as human beings. This was in sharp contrast to the post colonial Christian domains where the Christian parameters prevailed in terms of the identity formation, and it reflected upon an era where God deemed that man was supreme in terms of all creation. All the other aspects of creation were subservient to man even though man was created last of all. Woman was made to keep man company because it was realized that even as man had vegetation and the animals around him but there was an inherent sense of dissatisfaction around him. This world thus did away with the mythical world of creation in the pre colonial era, and it was no longer a world where man and animals could communicate with one another, at least verbally. It was only man that had access to the higher order of language. Also animals were hunted down for food or used as beasts of burden. The book of Leviticus in the *Bible* denotes passages where God legitimizes sanction upon the kind of animals that could be consumed for food and those that clearly could not be. Thus, in the formulation of identity the *Bible* became in coherent ways the legitimate parameter within the post Christian ethos. Significantly, because man and woman were to be consorts to each other, woman was created from man's rib by God. Thus, the pre colonial era, was demystified and there was a gradual rewriting of the identity politics even in terms of the folkloristic perspective. Adam and Eve thus became the first man and woman within the dynamics of the post colonial order and this is the aspect of creation that Mizos currently advocate to. There has been an emerging sense of hybridity however in various other ways in the identity perspective. Though Mizos advocate to the Christian parameters of creation, the myths have been kept alive in many ways and are told and retold within the dynamics of the folklore perspective.

Within the ambit of the pre colonial Mizo, it must be noted that the creature called 'khuazingnu' played a significant role. However when she created the universe there was no mud at all to moisten the earth. The world was filled with rocks and thus because of this, there was no greenery or vegetation around the universe. This is again in contrast to the post colonial perspectives of creation where God reigned supreme and accounted for everything within the universe. There was nothing that was left unaccounted for and man was not in want or need. Within

the domains of 'khuazingnu' there was also the existence of a huge sea which was known as 'tuihriam' and this sea was very cold in terms of temperature and it was said that even if a hand was dipped into it, the sea would slice it off. On the other shore of the sea there was a small amount of mud and it was said that in order to procure that mud the various animals would make an attempt every now and then but because of the coldness of the waters of the sea, they could not even manage to swim halfway across the sea (Thanmawia R.L.31). Thus they could not get the mud at all. However after sometime a porcupine swam all the way across the sea and managed to get a bit of the mud on its mouth, and even finally managed to get back ashore, all the while even as his friends cheered him on. The other animals began to wonder as to how they could multiply the small bit of mud. While they were still debating the earthworm suggested, "if you are ready to listen to me I know how we can multiply the mud". As they promised to do so, the earthworm said, "I shall consume the mud and shall throw out the same in the form of excreta and it will then multiply". The other creatures cried, "we do not believe you, perhaps it is only because you want to eat mud". The earthworm replied, "if it does not happen as I say then you may break me up in three parts." And because he was so daring the others decided to believe him. Thus the earthworm did as he had suggested and soon the mud grew to a large amount. All this mud was transferred across the various portions of the universe this myth is regarded to be how mud came to be spread across the earth. Once again this myth establishes the significance of the role that animals played in the creation of the universe, in sharp contrast to the post colonial ethos.

Again in sharp contrast to the Biblical parallels, in as far as the creation of the mountains and the rivers were concerned, it was discovered that even though the mud had been spread to increase a sufficient amount of vegetation on the earth, there were no other structures such as mountains and rivers. However, there was a place called Vanlaiphai that was situated in the midst of the heavens that contained a tall tree that was known as 'thingvantawng' or tree that reached the heavens. The inhabitants around the area wanted to destroy the tree but they were scared that the mud, precious as it was, would be destroyed too. One day they sent a small bird called Lailen to test whether the earth was dry or not, and the bird flew around and pecked the earth and because it was so light in weight, it failed to make a dent in the earth. The bird then flew back and reported that the earth was dry enough to stand around it, and that the tree could be destroyed. Now the inhabitants of the earth gathered together to destroy the tree and they began to hack away at the tree but they soon realized that the earth was not at all dry. The increasing dent that was made by their combined weight resulted in the breaking up of the earth into various dimensions and this in turn created the rivers, the lakes and the mountains.

Even with regards to the inception of the first earthquake that occurred in the universe, Mizo myth denotes that there was a tortoise who carried the earth upon its back and it was regarded that if the tortoise moved the earth would fall. Thus, if such a thing happened all the inhabitants of the

earth would be killed. In order to prevent such a calamity the guardian of the ends of the earth had requested the tortoise to not move away. However, there was a certain creature from the animal world order, who lied to the tortoise and declared "the inhabitants of the earth are all dead" and while saying this, he placed a heap of burning embers of charcoal upon the back of the tortoise. The tortoise was immediately forced to scamper away due to the heat. Thus the earth began to quake tremendously and immediately the inhabitants of the earth cried out "have mercy, we are not yet dead, we are still alive" (Thanmawia R.L.41). Eventually, when the truth was realized that the inhabitants of the earth were not all dead, the guardian of the ends of the earth requested the tortoise once more to stay still and to not wander away. The myth is one of the very few that are still kept alive today, because when an earthquake occurs, it is very common to still hear old folks crying out to mother nature, to bring the quaking earth to a halt by pleading that they are still very much alive and to not destroy the earth.

Pre colonial dynamics were also clear with regards to the creation of an after world. Death and life were very much a part of humanity and Mizo myths did not have the existence of huge giants/ ogres/ ogresses who lived up to eternity. Thus, death was a very significant occurrence and there were two places where the dead could go to after they gave up their human form on earth. These were places that were known as; 'mitthi khua' and 'pialral'. It was believed that whoever died would go to either one of these places. However the latter was actually only a place that warriors of great fame and their families could go to. There was a very significant difference between 'mitthi khua' and 'pialral' and there cannot be an amalgamation of the two. 'Pialral' is regarded to be a very pleasant place where every need is taken care of without the burden of physical toil and it is said that people vie to have a place there. However 'mitthi khua' is a place where ordinary mortals reside after death and it was regarded to be inferior and more lowly even as compared to earth (B. Lalthangliana 9). The dead who were designated a place in the same, had to labour and toil in abundance but the food and drink that they could consume there were significantly inferior to even what they could consume upon the earth. Thus, such people lived in dire poverty and due to this, they were very weak and emaciated. Within the parameters of this belief, there was a lake that was known as 'Rih dil'. This lake was regarded to be one of the more significant places where the dead would visit. In fact this lake was so crucial, that it was regarded that all the dead had to necessarily pass through. In this event there was a plant called 'mitthi pal' that was planted in honour of the dead. There was also a place that was known as 'hruai kawn' that was erected in honour of the spirit of the dead. Again in order to commemorate the area and its interaction with the dead there were places that were known as 'mitthi kawtkai' (passageways for the dead) and even as the dead were on their way to the 'rih dil', there was the creation of a place that was known as 'lung rah buk'. This was especially significant because this rock would create a lot of noise whenever someone stepped upon it.

After the dead stepped upon the same rock, they would leave for the abode of the spiritual world. Myth also denoted that the spirit of the dead would be very reluctant to leave the earth where they had dwelt for all time, on a permanent basis world. In order to aid them to bid adieu to the nostalgia of their past lives there was a mount that was known as 'hringlang tlang'. Once a person set foot upon this mount, they could decipher and perceive the world of the human beings that they had left behind. Upon observing this it was but natural for them to feel very sentimental about the same and they would weep in regret. However, there were two remedies to this: one was in the guise of a very beautiful flower that was known as 'hawilopar' and as soon as the dead who were to leave the earth were getting overtly sentimental, fortune would chance that they come across the flower and upon perception of the same, they would be enchanted by this flower. They would necessarily pluck the flower and adorn themselves with the same and in doing so they would never want to even give the earth a second glance. This ensured a permanent obliteration of the earth from their memories. The other remedy was with regard to a clear spring water that was located on top of a mountain and this water was very tempting and refreshing to perceive. No one that walked about the place could actually resist the water, and once they drank that water they would immediately forget their past and everything else about the earth. In fact, the obliteration would be so immense that they would long and yearn all the more for the abode of the dead and they would hasten towards the same. This water is known in Mizo as, 'lungloh tui'. This belief along with the other aspects are inherently different from the Christian beliefs because, there is the belief in an after life in terms of the latter, but only in the light of salvation and a heaven and hell parameter. All else is obliterated. There are references only to salvation and redemption. Thus, there are no believers amongst the Mizo society in terms of these myths at the present stage of time.

Hybridity has been emerging even within domains that are both sacral as well as secular. The myths have been kept alive for academic discourse and domains, but the practices have been negated and rendered redundant. There has not been vociferous protests with regards to the same. Predominantly because at least for the present time, Mizos have been a people where colonization has implanted and etched itself very firmly within the psyche of the people. Most, if not all, of the myths, that have been denoted in the paper, are still told and retold, in the original Mizo and perhaps at times in translation, but these exist for the sake of existence alone, as myths that suffice at best as tales to amuse and entertain or to create a sense of the mystical and exotic every now and then. Identity thus has been rewritten, and recreated for a small dimension of people in the far flung corner of an Indian tribal ethos; for in Mizoram, what began as myth, centuries ago, has actually come full circle by still existing as myth, for its own sake, in terms of situating the identity paradigm.

Works Cited :

- B.Lalthangliana .*India, Burma & Bangladesh-a Mizo Chanchin* . Aizawl: RTM Press, 2000.
- During, Simon. *Cultural Studies, A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Nuchhungi, *Serkawn Graded Readers: Mizo Thawnthu*. Aizawl: Mualchin, 2003.
- Ong ,Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Thanmawia, R.L. *Mizo Hnahthlak Thawnthu*: Aizawl: Gilzom Offset, 2009.
- Shakespear, J. *The Lushei Kuki Clans* .New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2008.
- Sangkima. *Essays on the History of the Mizos* . Guwahati :Spectrum Publications, 2004.
- Vanlalchhuanawma. *Christianity and Subaltern Culture*. ISPCK: Delhi, 2007
- Vanlallawma, C. *Hman lai hian mazm* 4th ed. Aizawl: Zamzo Publishing House, 2000.



Poems

Rajkamal Shiromani

The Lost Love

Love of a love
lost or dead in the world's eyes
is burning inside.
Flames heating the cold body
and compensating for oxygen.
No medicines, no care!

Is it not a miracle
that I'm still alive
with that single drop of nectar I had
from your juicy lips
and a bottle of the ash of burnt letters
kept in my SOS box marked + everywhere.

Dancing With Skeletons

Many a night in my dreams
I dance with skeletons all around.
Long or short, never flat or slim.
Skulls look alike
and so the bodies;
No distinction between men and women.

Sans flesh, sans colour,
The skeletons look so similar, so vibrant, so relaxed!
Why do I feel so tense, so ugly, so exhausted
in my best suit, shoes and perfume?
All so repulsive smelling so fowl
and my clothes so out of tune!

