Globalization and the Mizo Story

Margaret Ch. Zama

Margaret Zama is a translator of repute and professor in English at Mizoram University, Aizawl. She has translated many works of fiction and short stories for Katha. She has introduced Heart of the Matter, a collection of stories in English translation from Northeast India, published by Katha.

Any study on the society and the culture of the Mizo, cannot be completed without the mention of the year 1894, which was a turning point in their history. It was the year that two English Baptist missionaries of the Arrington Aborigines Mission, J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge, founded their way in to the then Lushai Hills, now Mizoram, to begin their missionary work with “this bloodthirsty race.” They introduced literacy to the Mizo by giving them their alphabet. Lorrain puts it thus, “It therefore fell to our lot to reduce the language to writing in such a way that our system could be readily adopted by the people themselves. For this purpose we chose the simple Roman script...” (1973: V)

That this zealous effort on the part of the missionaries provoked a fast-forwarding of the socio-cultural history of the people in the region is no exaggeration. The initial fears of the white man soon vanished as they quickly established friendly ties with the locals. The conversion of a war-like animistic tribe from its pre-state and pre-literate culture into Christianity was surprisingly smooth though it was not without some initial resistance from its detractors. The resultant benefits of education and exposure to some degree to the Western culture for what it was worth, took only a few decades to be strongly entrenched into the Mizo psyche.

The years that span 1894 to present day Mizoram add up to a little more than a century, yet the gains as well as the price paid within this brief period by the Mizo, for becoming enlightened, are now emerging as a highly explosive topic of study and debate within the state. When this aspect is taken in conjunction with a study of the impact of globalization on the culture of Mizoram, a number of interesting issues come to the fore.

Globalization is controversial because the term has different meanings for different people. Broadly speaking, it is the expansion and intensification of connections and movements, of people, goods, capital, ideas and culture, between/among countries. This has given rise to growing interdependence between people of all nations. While this may be beneficial to world economic development, the flip side also shows it to be the cause for an increasing inequality within and between nations, threatening employment, living standards and thwarting social progress, especially for the less privileged nations as well as helping to dilute cultural identities. An attempt has been made here to examine whether any of this has posed a challenge to Mizo identity and culture.

The Mizo identity is indeed undergoing through an intense introspection. The nostalgia for a romanticized past, crowded by visions of a once brave and honourable people, who practised the code of “tlawmngaihna” in letter and spirit, is strongly nurtured, while the present day notion of a progressive and enlightened Christian society is being brought under a scanner by the people themselves, and is not faring too well under its close scrutiny.

Politically, the dream of Greater Mizoram was first demanded at the first International Mizo Summit called at the behest of MNF supremo Laldenga in 1965, at Kawnpui, Manipur. This top-level conference demanded for the integration of all Mizo-inhabited territories under one administrative unit. Thirty leaders of various Mizo tribes attended it from India, Burma and the erstwhile East Pakistan. This idea still persists in a somewhat milder form and is deliberately nursed by all political parties in the state more for political mileage, it would seem, than out of any genuine conviction of its fruition. Even attempts to merge the people of Zo descent or “Zo-hnathlak” under the common identity of “Mizo” appears to be an uphill task due to the long-standing linguistic as well as psychological divide between those hailing from Mizoram, Manipur and Myanmar respectively.

The perceived strength of the Mizo society of the past and present lies in it for being community-based since their history can be traced. While this tradition is still cherished and maintained, the demands to conform to rules arbitrarily framed by community leaders for the common good, has begun to clash more often in recent times with the culture of independent individualism that has taken roots into the society. This clash of interest has given rise to controversy at various levels. Even an apparently minor issue of selecting a name for oneself or one’s offspring, has become a contentious issue in some quarters. The addition of a “westernized” name causes the so-called guardians of Mizo culture to raise their hackles and they start questioning the cultural roots and identity of the individual concerned, and this, it may be noted, is within a community that is blatantly influenced by Western culture in dress, mannerism, music and ideas.
An interesting development that has taken place in recent times with the advent of the cable TV is that the Mizo, who would never have openly admitted to watching or liking Hindi movies before, is now loathe to miss an episode of the Hindi serial Kasauti Zindagi Kay of the Star Plus channel, conveniently dubbed in the Mizo language by the local channels. Condemnation of this has appeared frequently in local dailies and jokes circulated to poke fun at the fans, but to no avail. One local daily even carries out a translated update of the serial for its readers. The organizers of the recent Peace Fest 2006 held on 20 April 2006 to celebrate two decades of peace in the State had to backtrack on their plans to invite Manoj Bohra, the popular “Prem” of the Kasauti serial, as the students’ body, the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), threatened to take action. Their objection was that “Prem” and the serial itself, are a threat to Mizo culture and an unhealthy distraction for the student population.

More interesting perhaps is the mutation that continues to take place in the practices of the Church community in Mizoram. While religious revivals coming in waves, so to say, is not unique to the Mizo experience — the four major revival movements in Mizoram having taken place in 1906, 1913-14, 1919-23 and 1930-37 respectively (Kipgen 1997:219-242) — yet it is interesting to note how the television evangelization of the West, courtesy cable TV, has had its impact on this Christian state in recent years. The year 2002-03 saw the community gravitating en mass, regardless of denominations, to line up at church services and crusades, to be “slain in the spirit” or otherwise to receive “anointing of the spirit”, locally termed “khawithhuk”, similar to the manner of the Benny Hinn ministry. “Praise and Worship” sessions modeled after the Billy Graham ministry, is also fast gaining popularity and the music videos produced make brisk business especially amongst the Christian youth organizations.

Simultaneously, juxtaposing this is the determined efforts of certain sections to indigenize and acculturate religious practices today. The early efforts of the first Mizo Christians in doing so is seen in the case of the use of the traditional drum to accompany singing and dancing, banned earlier, but introduced during the 3rd Revival (Kipgen 1997:270). Not satisfied just with this and the translated hymns in western tunes that predominated, original compositions of devotional songs sung to popular traditional tunes called “Lengkhawm zai” came to the fore. Of late, attempts have been made by groups of people to introduce dance steps in church and religious meets, similar to the traditional “chheihlam.” Strong objections have been raised in some quarters who see it as unchristian for it harks back to the pre-Christian hedonistic days of festival celebration that were inevitably accompanied by “zu”, the traditional rice beer. On the other hand, such attempts may be interpreted as symptoms of the desire to return to one’s own roots even in forms of worship, which is common to many other cultures as well.

This emphasis on one’s tradition and culture also acquires another dimension besides the genuine fear of loss or dilution of one’s roots. It gives birth to the emergence of power-elites or groups with “vested interest in resurgence and revivalism... Interest in culture becomes often vicarious, gratuitous, a part of the search for the new dynamics of acquiring and sustaining political power and status.” It is true that overemphasis on ethnicity has also “encouraged cultural myopia and ethnocentrism” which soon leads to a drying up of resources (Mahapatra 1983:29).

In Mizo context, the clarion call by the YMA regarding the dress code, behaviour, disapproval of marriage outside the community, expressions of concern and fear over assimilation and hybrid-identities and so on, have not quite succeeded in stemming the flow of change and transformation. This has been facilitated by exposure to movement of peoples, inter-state travels, the internet and yes, the IT revolution too, which is beginning to have its impact on governance and higher education amongst other things.

Even traditional dance-forms and indigenous handloom designs have not escaped this transition. To cite an example, the popular “Cheraw” or bamboo-dance has mutated through the years to introduce more intricate steps, and the traditional “puanchei” and “kawrchei” enhanced and upgraded so to say, for the purpose of appearing as attractive and colourful, if not more so, than other cultural groups from other states. So sometimes, changes are caused by reasons as innocuous as the desire to “keep up with the Joneses.” Again, traditional ethnic handloom designs of the Mizo puan (wrap-around woven cloth) and shawls have undergone their share of changes and borrowings from outside their region, to respond to market demands.

The need for co-existence and space sharing are to be taken up with a more serious note by cultures of the northeast without compromising on traditional values or endangering territorial boundaries. After all, culture and tradition are alike in that they are both created by human beings and human experience. They are subject to change with the passing of time, though this could well be a subject for further debate.

Endnotes
1. An idealistic code that seeks to render all help possible to those in need, even to the extent of laying down one’s life, without expecting any returns. The Mizo believes that this is a tradition unique to them.
2. The Young Lushai (later Mizo) Association founded in 1935, now a powerful non-governmental organization that has firmly staked its claim as a representative of the true Mizo identity based on its unique code of “tlawmngainha.”

References