

stretcher in a procession. From the uplifted stretcher, the *Khuangchawi* family would throw out precious ornaments and valued possessions like silver coins, brass pots (*darbel*), brass-gongs (*darkhuang*), gun (*silai*) and even *mithun* (*sial*). In place of the real *mithun*, a length of rope would be tossed and the one who got the rope would later claim the *mithun* from the *Khuangchawipa*.

The *Khuangchawipa* would be truly majestic on this particular day. The grandeur of the feast served in the evening would be enhanced by the *thingdim* (*Khuallam*) dance.

Since *Khuangchawi* required a large stock of brewed liquor, firewood and also fine weather, October was favoured for this festival. October is, thus, still known as the month of *Khuangchawi* (*Khuangchawi thla*) in the Mizo calendar.

## Narratives in Mizo Traditional Dances

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Mizoram is the twenty-third state of India and is a mountainous region, bordered by Bangladesh in the west, Myanmar in the east and south and Assam and Manipur in the north. The majority of the Mizos are Christians and are an inherently vibrant, sociable and closely knit society. Song and dance are integral to the Mizos, both in times of sorrow and in celebration. The fact that Mizo traditional dances have undergone various stages of fusion and transformation remains a debatable aspect of research till today. This critique shall focus only upon six of the predominantly major dances of Mizoram

namely, *Khuallam*, *Chawnglaizawn*, *Chai*, *Sarlamkai* / *Solakia*, *Cheraw* and *Chheih*.<sup>1</sup> Dance is referred to as *Lam* in Mizo. These dances have been chosen because they have been retained as symbols of traditional as well as popular culture dynamics till today. It must be mentioned though that there are many dances, apart from those reflected here, that remain a part of Mizo culture.

### 1. *Khuallam*:

*Khuallam* literally means dance of the guests and is a dance that is performed in the ceremony called



*Khuangchaw*.<sup>2</sup> This dance is one of the oldest dances of the Mizos. Some Mizos refer to this dance as *thingdim*. Initially women did not participate in this dance and it was only much later that it became a dance which incorporated them. There are various steps in this dance, and these include *Kaltluang*, *Kalthelh*, *Arpui Chawmthai*, *Vasir Len*, *Vakawl Len*, *Ar Khaw Thim Dai* to name but a few. In order to claim a distinguished place in society and to attain entry into paradise or *Pialral*, one had to attain the coveted title of *Thangchhuahpa*.<sup>3</sup> There were two ways of attaining this title. One was by performing various ceremonies which included offering several community feasts accompanied with dancing. The ceremonies performed in this tradition are known as *khuangchawi*. Guests invited from the other villages at the *khuangchawi* ceremony enter the arena by dancing the *khuallam*. This dance is performed in large numbers, to the accompaniment of a set of gongs known as the *darbu* and no song is sung at the time of the dance.

## 2. *Chawnglaizawn*:

*Chawnglaizawn* is a popular folk dance that originally belonged to one of the Mizo communities known as *Pawi*. One of the more remarkable features of the dance is that it is performed on two diametrically opposite but special occasions. In the first instance, the dance is performed by a husband in mourning for his wife. In the second instance, the dance is performed at the time of festivals, to celebrate the trophies that are won by successful hunters. On such occasions, it is performed in groups of large numbers. Young men and women standing in rows dance to the beat of drums, while waving colorful traditional shawls. Only the drum is used as a musical accompaniment in this dance.

## 3. *Chai*:

*Chai* is a popular dance which is performed on the occasion of *Chapchar Kut*,<sup>4</sup> one of the most important festivals of the Mizos. This dance was originally performed only at the time of this festival. There are various songs that are associated with *chai*, and these are *Pi Hmuaki Zai*, *Lalvunga Zai*, *Neihlaia Zai*, *Lera Zai* to name but a few. *Zai* means song in Mizo. In this dance, men and women stand alternately in a circle with the woman holding on to the waist of the man and the man to the woman's shoulder. In the middle are the musicians who play upon the drums and horns of the *mithun*. *Chai* is popularly regarded to have four versions. The dancers sing as they perform. Only a few musical instruments are used for this dance.

## 4. *Sarlamkai / Solakia*:

This dance originates from the *Pawi* and *Mara* communities who are located in the southernmost part of Mizoram. The dance is popularly known as *Sarlamkai* by the *Pawi* and *Solakia* by the *Mara* and *Rallulam* by the rest of the Mizo community. In the old days, when the different tribes were constantly at war with each other, a ceremony to deride the head taken of the slain enemy was usually held by the victor. It was during such a ceremony that the dance was performed. The dance is a warrior dance and was performed in order to celebrate a victory at war. Songs are not sung during the dance and only gongs or cymbals or drums are used, in order to render rhythmic beats to the dance. Men and women have both participated in this dance since its inception. They stand in alternate positions and dance in a circle, wearing colourful clothes while the leader is dressed as a warrior. The gongs lead the dance and they determine the steps that are related to the dance.

## 5. *Cheraw*:

*Cheraw* is a very old traditional dance of the Mizos and is believed to have existed prior to the advent of Christianity in 1894. The dance is usually performed on the occasion of *Buhza Aih*, which is the celebration of a bumper harvest of an individual family. Apart from this, legend denotes that it was performed to ensure a safe passage for the soul of a mother who died in childbirth. Thus, the dance is generally performed with care, precision and elegance. It is not a community dance. It remains a dance that is performed by a few select girls with exceptional skills in dancing. *Cheraw* today remains the most popular and colourful of all Mizo dances. Men squat upon the ground, facing each other, even as they tap long pairs of horizontal and cross bamboo staves, that open and close in rhythmic beats. Girls in colorful costumes of *puanchei*,<sup>5</sup> *kawrchei*,<sup>6</sup> *vakiria*,<sup>7</sup> and *thihna*<sup>8</sup> dance in and out between the bamboo staves. This dance is now performed in almost all Mizo festive occasions.

## 6. *Chheih*:

The unique style of *chheih* originated after the year 1900, on the lines of the song known as *Puma Zai*. It is a dance that embodies the spirit of joy and exhilaration and is performed to the beat of the song called *chheih hla*. People squat in a circle on the floor and sing to the beat of a drum or bamboo tube while a pair of dancers stand in the middle, recite the song and dance along to the music. The lyrics are spontaneous. They recall



the heroic deeds and escapades of heroes of a bygone era, and they also praise the guests in their midst. An expert dancer performs the dance on his own, while chanting verses, with various movements of the body. As the tempo rises, the excitement increases, and the audience squatting upon the floor leave their seats to join him. Today the *chheih* dance is performed on various occasions, towards the evening when the day's work is over.

Dance remains central and intrinsic to the life of the Mizo community, not merely in terms of artistic parameters but also as a reflection of an entire panorama of the ethos and sensibility of the Mizos, in its myriad dimensions.

### References

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Specifications made on the basis of statistics denoted by the Government of Mizoram.
- <sup>2</sup> The name of a feast given by chiefs and other well to do Lushais.
- <sup>3</sup> The title given to a man who has distinguished himself by killing a certain number of different animals while hunting, or by giving a number of feasts. The possession of this title is required to ensure entry into '*Pialral*' or paradise.
- <sup>4</sup> The name of the spring festival which is held between the cutting and the burning of the jhooms.
- <sup>5</sup> Traditional Mizo cloth, decorated with colourful stripes, worn by men and women.
- <sup>6</sup> Traditional Mizo upper garment ornamented with broad coloured bands on the back and front.
- <sup>7</sup> Mizo headgear decorated with parrot's feathers, beetle wings and seeds etc and worn on festive occasions by women.
- <sup>8</sup> Amber necklace.

