Heritage of Mizo Traditional Song and Music

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The origins of Mizo traditional music and song is unknown. This makes it difficult to chronicle, but song-chants in the form of couplets developed during their settlement at Thantlang in Myanmar between 13th and 14th century A.D. More progress is seen in the songs from the settlement at Lentlang in Myanmar, estimated between late 15th to 17th century A.D. The couplets evolve into triplets. Though the song-chants are simple in nature and convey no great philosophy, they are songs of individual experiences.

The Mizos are believed to have occupied present Mizoram from the 17th century. The pre-colonial period from the 18th to 19th century A.D. was an important era in the history of Mizo folk orature. In this period, the songs progressed in both form and content while the flow of language became more polished. Most of the songs are named after the composers.

Classification: The study of the Mizo folk songs based on an indigenous system of classification shows about one hundred types of folk songs. (Lalruanga: 32) This paper will only make a broad classification of ten, as follows:

1. Bawh hla: This is the chant raised by the victorious warrior when returning from a successful raid to show his superiority over the enemy, and to let his people know that a successful raid has taken place. No other members of the raiding party can chant bawh hla.

2. Hlado: This is the chant raised by the hunter after a successful hunt. The difference of hlado from bawh hla is that hlado can be chanted on the spot, on the way home, just prior to entering the village, or at the celebration that ensues. Anyone who has witnessed the success of the hunt can chant hlado at any time and place.

3. Thiam hla and Dawi hla (Invocation & Incantation): These two-verse forms are chanted by the Priests and sorcerers while performing various rituals and ceremonies.

4. Dar hla: These are tunes meant for musical instruments, so dar hla literally means gong song and has three musical notes.

5. Puipun hla: These are popular songs composed for festive occasions and are used for community song and dance. This category of song has several types such as chai hla, chawngchen zai, salu lam zai and tlanglam zai.

6. Lengzem zai: These are love songs that have no distinctive form but are generally named after the theme.

7. Songs named after tribes: Some of the Mizo songs are named after a particular sub-tribe such as Sailo zai, Saivate zai, and so on.
8. **Songs named after a village**: A few songs are named after a village such as Lumtui zai (songs of Lumtui village), Darlung zai, Dawn zai and Tlangkhaw zai etc.

9. **Songs named after modulation of the voice**: A few songs are named after modulation of the voice or sounds such as Kawrnu zai, Zai nem, Vai zawi zai and Puma zai. To illustrate, kawrnu is a cicada species whose sound is gentle and low. So the tune of Kawrnu zai would resemble the sound of the kawrnu.

10. **Songs named after individuals**: A great number of Mizo folk songs are named after individuals. Most are the original composers of the particular tune while some are named after a beautiful maiden or a hero.

**Musical Instruments:**
From times immemorial, the Mizo have been using different musical instruments. Even though we cannot date their exact origin, “the Mizo of Kabaw valley during late 10th to 13th century A.D. had developed their music as nearly as they have done today.” (B.Lalthangliana, *History*: 71) The early traditional Mizo musical instruments are simple and crude but they served their purpose. They can broadly be divided into three categories:

I. **Percussion Instruments:**

*Khuang*: Most of the musical instruments used at the time of festivals and dances are percussion instruments like the *khuang*, *dar*, *bengbung*, *seki* and *talhkuang*. The *khuang* or Mizo drum occupies a significant place in Mizo society. It is made from a hollowed out tree and wrapped on both sides with animal skin. The big sized one is *khuangpui* or big drum, the medium one is called *khuanglai* and the small sized called *khuangte*. If it is long in shape, it is called *kawlkhuang*. Lianhmingthanga believes that the Mizo had inherited the drum from the Chinese through cultural diffusion and this process might have been passed on through the Burmese with whom the Mizo had close cultural contact from the middle of the 9th century until the end of the Pagan period at the close of the 13th century A.D.

The use of *khuang* is found in one of the oldest Mizo myths called ‘Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi’ in which Thlanrawkpa, the Guardian of man and animals, hosted a grand feast for all living creatures. The *khuang* is the only traditional Mizo musical instrument that has continued to be popular in the 20th and 21st century. Traditionally it had no important role in religious functions but today the use of drum is indispensable at every church service.

*Dar* (gong) is another popular musical instrument that comes in various sizes made of brass, such as darkhuang, darbu and darmang. *Darkhuang* is the biggest of the gong instruments, is costly and a very treasured possession. The tale of Chawngvungi and Sawngkhara tells of how Chawngvungi’s parents demanded a famous gong that belonged to the groom’s family and which was reluctantly surrendered by them.

*Darbu* is a set of three brass-gongs of different sizes and is usually played by three experts, but some do so individually by tying one gong on either side of the body with a rope and holding the third...
by the left hand. The darbu produces three distinct, rhythmic notes and is mainly used for Khuallam and other traditional group dances.

There are many songs collectively called Dar hla (songs on gong) to be played by darbu. One of the famous Dar hla is connected to the legend of Liandova and his brother who were orphaned at a young age. One day, the village hunting party killed a gigantic python and having taken the choicest parts of its meat, they gave the entrails and stomach to the two boys. But unknown to the others, they became rich overnight because of the treasures that the python had swallowed which included a great number of necklaces and a beautiful set of darbu, which they hid away.

Darmang is the smallest type of gong. It has no effect without other gongs or instruments, but is used for timing traditional dances.

Bengbung is an indigenous instrument similar to the xylophone, the Vietnamese T'rung and the Thai Ratna Ek. It’s a series of flat wooden bars, producing three musical notes. Later more tubes and bars have been added to produce more musical notes. Bengbung was usually played by girls.

Talhkuang is almost the same as Bengbung but larger. It is made of three wooden pieces which are curved out with varying depths for producing different notes. It is played with a wooden hammer. Talhkuang used to be played at Lungdaow, the great platform at the village entrance, and when a chief erects memorial stones.

Seki is the horn of the domestic mithun which when beaten against each other is meant to lead or keep timing for other musical instruments like darbu etc. It was commonly used at group dances.

II. Wind Instruments: The Mizo has five varieties of wind instruments such as rawchhem, tumphit, mautawtawrawt, phenglawng and buchangkuang.

Rawchhem is similar to the Scottish Bagpipe. Nine small bamboo pipes or hollow reeds of different sizes and lengths are inserted to a dried gourd. One pipe serves as a mouthpiece while the rest produce different notes controlled by the player with his fingers.

Tumphit is made of three small bamboos of different size and length and are tied in a row with canes or strings. The upper ends are cut open at different lengths to produce different notes. Tumhit was considered indispensable for Rallulam and Chawng festival.

Tawtawrawt is a bamboo trumpet made of different sizes of bamboo tubes inserted and joined together according to size with the last tube being as small as the size of a forefinger from where the trumpet is blown. A dry gourd with the bottom cut off is joined to the bigger end of the bamboo tube. The whole length can be more than five feet.

Phenglawng is the Mizo flute made of bamboo which originally had three holes for three notes. It is probably of very early origin as it earns mention in an old Mizo folktale about a little monkey who would happily play on his phenglawng. This roused the envy
of Runginu, a female partridge who bluffed the monkey into taking a nap. As soon as he slept, Runginu seized the phenglawng but the monkey woke up and caught her tail. She flew off with the flute but without her tail. This, we are told, is why the partridge has a bobbed tail today.

_Buhchangkuang_ is a simple flute made of reed or paddy stalk and played by young girls.

### III. Stringed Instruments:

The Mizo has three varieties of stringed instruments such as _tringtrang_, _lemlawi_ and _tuium dar_.

_Tringtrang_ is Mizo guitar with one string. A piece of bamboo shaft is fixed to a hollow gourd to which is tied a string made of _thangtung_, the fibre of the Malay sago palm. The gourd is cut open and covered with the dry bladder of an animal. _Tringtrang_ _zai_ referred to folk songs named after the instrument, but its popularity was not widespread.

_Lemlawi_ was an indigenous instrument made of a small piece of bamboo with a string tied at both ends and played with the help of the hand and mouth. The sound produced is controlled by the mouth.

_Tuium dar_ is a simple instrument again made of bamboo with three strings which produce three different notes, the cane-like strings carved from the outer covering of the bamboo. The strings are raised by the insertion of two pieces of bamboo at both ends and is played like a guitar.

The Mizo society has often been called a singing tribe. B.Thanmawia states that “Music to the Mizo is as indispensable as air is to man and beasts” (12). They sing on all occasions, eg. during condolence of a bereaved family, songs appropriate for the occasion will be sung throughout the long wake at night and the next day. It is the same at a marriage party, and they will sing or hum tunes while at work, or even while walking.

An old tale tells of the Kawilam clan who celebrated _Chapchar Kut_ festival with such merriment that people forgot to work for nine months! It was only when a parrot dropped a straw in their midst did they realize that their granaries were empty and they had to migrate to other villages!

The traditional Mizo tunes are soft and gentle and can be sung for long periods without tiring the singers. Musical instruments are not always needed and enthusiastic singing can take place to the accompaniment of clapping hands.

### References


