

Fractured Inheritance: Negotiating Memories of the Mizo Insurgency in India's North Eastern Borderlands

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In 1966, following a severe food shortage of famine proportions, Mizoram in India's North East declared independence from the Indian State. The Indian Government's response included carpet bombings, prolonged curfews, forced labour, and beatings. People were in constant fear of being labelled 'rebels' by the Indian Government, or 'betrayers' by the Insurgents. Censorship was rampant and oppressive. People fell back on oral practices to communicate their stories, news and expressions. This has also meant blank spaces in Mizo memory of this period. Recently, a generation of Mizo researchers and scholars who have grown up with new media technologies, or their development, has sought to illuminate these gaps. The internet, with its vast potential for expression has become a site for exploration, narration and recollection. This article reflects on how a post-insurgency, techno-savvy generation negotiates these splinters in their community's narrative and the public memory they have inherited thirty years after the Peace Accord.

Paul Thompson has described how individuals' stories of their lives and experiences offer a wealth of raw material for the history of a period, providing a firsthand account of the times and changes.¹ At the heart of oral history is democratic inclusiveness, the experience of those people whose views are otherwise invisible. The combination of memory, place, and emotion in personal accounts becomes a way to politically engage with the past in more immediate ways. Technological progress has allowed these experiences to be captured for the future in a variety of ways. But, if these living memories are not tapped, if memories are too raw, too fragmented and their recollection too traumatic, they risk being lost to us permanently. Other ways of addressing the silences in a people's or a community's history become necessary.

Silences are transmitted to subsequent generations that eventually inherit the memory in the shape of fragments to be made sense of. Karl Mannheim investigated the idea of generations as comprised of individuals of a similar age, bound by similar values and views shaped by similar formative experiences in

¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice Of The Past – Oral History*, 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82-117.

childhood and as young adults.² In this sense, trauma undoubtedly forms the values and views of individuals that experience it directly or from the margins, and the individuals to whom they transmit its memory. Within this ‘actual generation’ that receives these memories are what Mannheim would call ‘generational units’ who have taken the memories, gaps and all, and, using the social and technological tools available to them, pieced them together for future clarity.

Postcolonial India’s North East has seen much trauma in the brutal suppressions of struggles for self-determination. Punitive and arbitrary mechanisms, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) were imposed, first in Manipur, and later on in almost all areas declared ‘disturbed’ by the Indian government. In the 1950s, even as the sub-continent recovered from the convulsions caused by the Partition of 1947, the counterinsurgency strategies adopted to address the various resistance movements in the North Eastern region of India meant that civil society was left the most vulnerable, and also the most affected. The Indian State’s reaction to the 1966 Mizo uprising is perhaps the starkest case of this. Mizos are a people who inhabit Mizoram, an area in India’s North Eastern borderlands, flanked by Myanmar to the East and North East, and by Bangladesh to the West and South West.

Background and Method

My exploration of the period in Mizo history called *Rambuai* began on a subjective tangent, as part of an attempt to understand the trans-generational impact of conflict on women. This effort was informed by my admittedly complex relationship with my Mizo mother who, with my ‘non-Mizo’ father, had raised me as a third culture child outside Mizoram. A fascination with Mizo womanhood(s) vis-à-vis *Rambuai* had evolved out of heard accounts of how women relatives navigated a terrain scorched by terror.

The accounts were rambling anecdotes, and my own mother’s accounts were mere vignettes that were loose and disordered. Any query or request I made in order to search deeper for clarity, however, was met with evasion or a change in subject. A request to record the stories on a dictaphone or other small recording device was often met with reluctance.³ Those who agreed tended to go into what I have come to call ‘performance mode,’ embellishing some parts of their initial telling while editing out others. Journalist and anthropologist Linda Chhakchhuak’s observation when I shared this with her in September 2005

² Karl Mannheim, *Essays on The Sociology Of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 267-320.

³ Since my work was not conducted in fulfillment of the requirements for an academic degree, I was in the field as an Independent Scholar.

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likened talking about *Rambuai* to picking a wound that had still not healed. Most people were not prepared to address it directly yet, hence spoke obliquely; she suggested eschewing with recorders for pen and paper within reading distance of the interviewees' sight.⁴

Adopting this method has meant maintaining two kinds of field diaries – one notebook for spot entries at the time of interviews, and another one for my observations and impressions on the field during the interview which I enter into an electronic diary that I maintain on my computer, at the end of the day. Switching to spot notes has generated a higher comfort level during the interview process and better relationships at the community level. This is not to claim that this method would necessarily be superior to any other. Although it worked better for me in my context, other researchers have used recorders with exemplary success, most notably novelist and poet Malsawmi Jacob, whose recent novel *Zorami* is an allegory of the Mizo experience based on tape-recorded interviews.⁵

Apart from interviews, my diary entries have also included a few informal conversations and discussions around *Rambuai* that I have been either part of or privy to as an observer. As a result, this research has been extensive, spanning several years and themes rather than an intensive one that might focus on one or two key issues for a shorter period. What had begun in around 2004 as an enquiry into the intergenerational transmission of trauma among Mizo women has over the years evolved into a kind of oral history compilation on the everyday negotiations of the period by ordinary folk. It is also my primary source for this paper. Most of the interviews and conversations were in the Mizo language and the interviews included in this article are translations of those. I also identify the interviewees and others only by the names that the interviewees indicated they would prefer.

***Rambuai* and Mizo Trauma**

The Mizo insurgency movement started as an emergency response to the famine of 1959 that resulted from what the Mizos know as *Mautam*, bamboo flowering. Every fifty years, Mizoram's immense bamboo forests flower, yielding a profusion of seeds. These seeds are a favourite of rats, which multiply rapidly to feast on the abundance. At the end of the flowering season, when there are no longer enough seeds to feed the rats, they then swarm anything edible, especially food stores and crops, resulting in severe food shortage and famine. Mizo

⁴ Linda Chhakchhuak, conversation with author, 15 Sept. 2005.

⁵ The novel personifies Mizoram as the protagonist, *Zorampari*; it tells a story of conflict, love, trauma and the quest for inner healing set against the backdrop of the Mizo insurgency. Malsawmi Jacob, *Zorami: A Redemption Song*, (Bangalore: Morph Books/Primalogue, 2015)

representatives, aware that this was about to happen, had informed the Indian government. The government's inept and apathetic response left the Mizos feeling abandoned and betrayed. Innumerable lives were lost to hunger and starvation. A voluntary group, the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF), was organised to respond to this crisis. They later dropped the term 'famine' to become the Mizo National Front (MNF) and, under this name, spearhead the insurgency movement. In 1966, they declared independence from India and launched a stunning surprise raid, taking brief control of the then tiny district headquarter of Aizawl, their armoury and treasury. This began the twenty-year period, which Mizos refer to as *Rambuai*, meaning 'troubled land.' The Indian Government's atrocious and heavy handed response included carpet bombings, a unique example of a government turning its air force against its own territory; and the infamous 'regrouping' or forced 'villagization', an equivalent of the British Government's anti-guerrilla operations during the Malayan revolt against their colonisers in the 1950s.⁶

The Indian State remained in denial of the strafing operations for years. They claimed that it was food supplies, not bombs that had been dropped. When the Mizo National Front declared independence, they were not naive or unaware of the possibility of armed response. They were aware that they would be met with antagonism. What could not have been foreseen was the scale of the retaliation, beginning with the Indian Government sending in their air force to bomb the territory – what in current parlance could be called an operation of 'shock and awe.' The honour codes that Mizos probably adhered to during raids and retaliations were not manifest in the Indian government's reaction.

Meanwhile, regrouping of villagers in Mizoram went on in four phases, lasting almost fifteen years. The primary purpose of regrouping is to cut off insurgents from the general community, where they draw their support and supplies in the form of food and other related provisions from. Termed as *khawkhawm* in Mizo, regrouping consisted of the forcible, and mostly violent, relocation of entire populations and villages into larger units, usually at a site that the armed forces could easily monitor. Ostensibly to 'protect' the population from being 'exploited' by the insurgents, *khawkhawm* in reality evokes intense terror, dislocation and trauma. At the end of fifteen years, over 200,000 people had been shifted, and the total number of villages was reduced from 764 villages to 248, including 138 ungrouped villages. About 120 villages were burnt down and destroyed. Aizawl District was worst affected, with about 95 percent of its population being moved.⁷

⁶ Khawkhawm has also been equated with strategic hamletting operations in Vietnam.

⁷ Nandini Sundar, "Interning Insurgent Populations: The Buried Histories of Indian Democracy," *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Aug.6, 2011): 47–57.

Almost eighty-two percent of Mizoram's total population was evacuated and relocated in the groupings.⁸ The Grouping Centres in the first phase were called Protective Progressive Villages (PPV) and have been likened to labour camps or open prisons. Curfew was imposed from dusk to dawn to check any movement in the night. While Mizos traditionally built their villages in specific formations on hilltops that provided a vantage point, the PPVs were unlike any such formation, delinking the Mizos from their heritage and the narratives associated therewith. This fractured the longstanding relationship they had with their land, the familiarity of their village community, and the customs, traditions and practices that bound them. Displaced from their *jhum* (a term used for the shifting pattern of cultivation) fields and their food source, this agrarian community was once more reduced to near starvation.

Amidst this devastation, the Indian Army offered to reward anyone who would report the names of people sympathetic to the Movement. A 'guarantee' of 'anonymity' was provided to those who would identify sympathisers of the Movement, termed 'dissidents'. The 'dissidents' were then rapidly 'removed'. The MNF's response was to swiftly and brutally dispose of anyone they perceived as traitors to the cause, or informers and *kawktu*.⁹ Neither the Indian Army nor the MNF wasted time over finer matters of the veracity of these allegations. Retribution was instant and stood as examples of what would happen to rebels or betrayers. Adding to their distrust and resentment of the Indian Army, people now lived in suspicion of fellow civilians, of random 'identification' by their own people, while the 'informants' lived with a secret sense of shame, guilt and fear. It was a time of deep distrust in a close-knit society whose core loyalty was to the community, the impact of which we still see today. An example of this is Dini, who was in her early forties when she shared this story:

I don't remember my father. He was dead by the time my brother was born. My brother never even saw him. There was always my brother, my mother and I; and an uncle, a close friend of my parents, especially my father. He took care of us after my father died. I have no idea what happened. I only know he was killed during *Rambuai*. It wasn't unusual for people to lose their lives those days; my mother wasn't the only widow around. We were lucky though, my uncle was there for us; his wife too. He took good care of us like his own family. One day recently, I met an older acquaintance from another neighbourhood at church and he told me how my father died. I rushed home after church and charged my mother who confirmed that my father wasn't hit by some stray bullet or killed in some

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The word *kawktu* translates to a person who points or is pointing.

accident. It was the uncle who had killed him. I could not speak with him after. I stopped talking to my mother for a very long time too. Even now, when anyone mentions my father, it is difficult not to be angry with her. I feel betrayed that she let this man buy his way out of guilt so easily. Of course, it was a complicated time and she had no one else to help her at that time, but she wouldn't have needed the support if he had not killed her husband in the first place. How can I look at him and pretend that what he did was alright just because he was there for us?¹⁰

As the imposition of curfews continued, Mizo life tried to recover a semblance of the normal, haunted by an insidious undercurrent of fear. This was to continue for twenty years, with neither the Indian Government nor the MNF willing to agree on terms. During these years, especially when the Movement rose in intensity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, censorship was rampant. The written word was forcefully restricted. As a result, writers themselves, rather than court trouble, practiced a kind of self-censorship, refraining from or destroying any writing themselves.¹¹ All India Radio, the only easily-accessible electronic media to the masses, is state-owned.¹² The result of this is a paucity of written accounts of a period when Mizos perhaps had more to say than any other time. The censorship was from both sides. The MNF were quick to show their displeasure if a story reflected independent thought, for instance, when journalist Robert Lalchhuana wrote an opinion piece in 1981 on the MNF aspiration for a 'Greater Mizoram':

I wrote about how difficult achieving that sort of dream would be, thinking of the boundary – we're not talking only of Cachar, (and) Manipur in India but Burma, Bangladesh and then it becomes an international issue. To think at that time, we did not even have a State, I just wrote my opinion that it would be tough. After my comment appeared in my newspaper, the MNF picked me up from my office and broke my legs and arms.¹³

Censorship limited the people from writing and mapping the conflict as they experienced it. In the period that followed the Peace Accord, Mizo

¹⁰ Dini, conversation with author, 6 July 2006.

¹¹ Sanat K.Chakraborty, *Media in Conflict Situation – A Northeast India Perspective* (Shillong: Grassroots Options, 2000), 48.

¹² All India Radio was in fact introduced in Aizawl in 1966 with the aim of integrating Mizos into the Indian Nation State.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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experience of this history was hijacked in the Indian Army's triumphalist narrative of a victor-and-vanquished binary. The Indian Army, who had the advantage of written records, rendered this history into one of victory and defeat, leaving out all nuances of the Mizo story for whom the Accord wasn't about defeat or surrender, so much as a complex agreement for peace to prevail. In doing so, the military once more probably violated honour codes; this reconstruction of their narrative could be seen as a betrayal to the accord, to goodwill, and to their trauma. It negates the Mizo experience, reducing them to a 'defeated enemy' rather than co-signatories to terms of truce.

It did not help that on signing the Peace Accord and coming 'over-ground' (as opposed to the underground, guerrilla camps of insurgents) the MNF adopted an official 'Forgive and Forget' policy. Eagerly embraced by the Indian State, this policy made remembering or mourning challenging for the people who had been caught in between, experiencing the worst of violence and injustice. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has referred to this kind of historical silencing at four levels whereby, "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance). These moments are conceptual tools, second-level abstractions of processes that feed on each other."¹⁴

On coming over-ground, the MNF transitioned into a political party and the current Chief Minister of the Union Territory of Mizoram vacated his seat as agreed in the Accord. People ceremonially lined the streets for hours, dressed in their Sunday best to welcome their sons home. There were cheers and tears as emaciated MNF cadres arrived by the truckload, bringing home their dead. Photographs of the moment have seared that event into Mizo memory forever. It is relived every Spring in a parade that commemorates Mizo public memories, as part of an annual festival of the Mizos called *Chapchar Kut*. The festival traditionally used to be part of the agricultural cycle; in present times, it has become an annual event that the Mizoram state government holds for the public. The MNF have ruled for only two terms, non-consecutively, in the last thirty years. They have not won enough seats in the electoral ballot to form a government since 1998.

The experience of insurgency would forever alter Mizo vocabulary, with new words, never relevant before, entering their language. Words such as curfew, refugee, and regrouping became part of everyday conversation. A term that took on hostile implications was *vai*, previously meant to denote a plainsperson or a non-tribal, characterised by language and ethnicity. While *vai* still meant non-

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 26.

tribal or plainsperson, that meaning took on a negative hue; the more self-conscious non-tribals perceived derogation in the term, and it was banned from use in the media, and official correspondence. The word, however, is still used in general parlance to imply an ‘Other’, the connotations of which appear to be slowly declining in hostility. What lies beneath, though, could be far more complex. As a mother narrating her memories in an oral history project on the Indian Partition and its aftermath put it, ‘old resentments die hard’.¹⁵

Memory and Mizo Oral Narratives

Halbwachs’ idea of ‘collective memory’ excluded the realm of traditions, transmissions and transferences from consideration. Jan Assmann retained this distinction, by instead breaking up the concept into ‘communicative’ and ‘cultural memory’ as two ways of remembering, firmly including the cultural sphere.¹⁶ As Assmann conceived of it, cultural memory is exteriorised in symbolic forms and objects that are ‘stable and situation transcendent’, such as monuments, museums, and archives. Cultural memory requires institutions to preserve them, and is thus institutional. Communicative memory, on the other hand is not supported by institutions or cultivated by specialists. It is not formalised in material form. It lives on in our communication and everyday interactions. It is acquired by participants alongside language and social skills.

While Mizo literature dates back to only about a century, Mizo ‘orature’¹⁷ dates back to as far as their collective memory takes them, all the way to their genesis at *Chhinlung* (a mythical place, it could also refer to a time),¹⁸ as their origin myth recalls. Mizo oral culture preceded literate forms and has survived into contemporary times, where the written word seems to permeate so many forms of communication. At a time of harsh censorship, the oral took over and a body of creative work emerged, especially in the form of songs, defined by grief and suffering. Mizos are a people who in all they do, think, or believe, like to

¹⁵ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side Of Silence* (Viking: New Delhi, 1998), 33.

¹⁶ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and cultural memory” in *Media and Cultural Memory / Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung*, ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 109-118

¹⁷ Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s term to denote a body of oral narratives, especially of Africa – including songs, stories, sayings, idioms, poems, knowledge, and more. It is opposed to Literature – a body of written narratives. *Globalectics: Theory and The Politics of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 63-86.

¹⁸ *Chhinlung* literally means stone or rock cover. In the Mizo origin myth, all the different Zo tribes emerged from a cave, and when the last of them, the Ralte tribe, came out, they were so noisy that the Gods feared that there were too many humans on earth. The Gods covered the cave with a rock to prevent more humans from emerging.

celebrate and commemorate, or simply mark their experience in song.¹⁹ This includes transmitting their grief, loss and trauma in song. It was only with the coming of the written technology about a century ago that songs and stories began to be rendered into writing.

One of the most enduring examples of narrating trauma into healing is that of Laltheri, the daughter of a Mizo chieftain of the Sailo clan of chiefs, who in the mid-nineteenth-century fell in love with a *hnamchawm* ('commoner') named Chalthanga. Even pregnant with her lover's child, Laltheri could not convince her family to allow them to marry. On her brothers' orders, some male subjects hunted her lover down, lured him into sharing *zu* (rice beer) with them, and slew him from behind. In enraged grief and protest, Laltheri tore off the beads she wore around her neck, and her head dress, which showed her to be the chief's daughter. She disrobed herself of all her finery, and walked about bare naked. Her mother could not persuade her to clothe herself or to eat. Laltheri's expression of rage, pain and protest in lyric and song would not be silenced, surviving to this day.

*Nemte puan chu ka chawi lo vang, ka nu,
Ka di Thangdanga²⁰ zalna mah, chhimhlei tual daiah*

(I shall not clothe myself gently, mother
My beloved Thangdanga sleeps, out beneath the cold earth.)

In those days, it was practice that after a raid, victors would carry back the heads of those defeated as trophies. The heads would then be fixed atop poles or trees outside the victors' homes. In her anguish, Laltheri spared no thought for her family's propriety, she lashed out at them for having her lover killed, comparing this deed to the scalping of an enemy.

*Ka chun leh zua suihlung in mawl lua e,
Kan sumtualah Thangdang thlunglu hawite'n in tar le*

(My family and kin, you unwise of heart
That you would hang my love Thangdang's head out on our yard.)

Mizo society of the day was extremely patriarchal. It remains so. Patrilineal parentage is the stronghold of identity. Children denied by their fathers

¹⁹ B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Hun Hlui Hlate* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1998), 358.

²⁰ *Thangdanga* is Laltheri's term of endearment for Chalthanga, drawn from Chal'thanga'. Names that carry the suffix '-a' indicate the masculine gender, while the suffix '-i' indicates the feminine gender. Generally, the suffixes are left out only while addressing a person directly, however, Laltheri uses poetic license to drop the suffix here.

or denied the legitimacy of their patrilineal parentage were considered orphans and kinless. Laltheri, acutely aware of this says:

*Sawngka lerah pa lo hraileng ka awi,
Ka lungdi e, Thangdang riang ngei e*

(A fatherless babe I cradle
My beloved, Thangdang, desolate slain.)

Laltheri did resolve her grief; she found love once more, and ruled justly and wisely over a large territory where she became Chieftain. Mizo cultural history is replete with such oratures of pain, grief and trauma narrated into healing. Yet, in the years of insurgency in Mizoram, and even after, that kind of resolution has been hard to come by.

During times when the mere act of writing could be considered rebellion, oral forms became indispensable; songs became their medium of expression and were transmitted orally through performances and repetitions, having never been recorded for posterity. These songs became a vehicle to express their collective sorrow, rage, and pain; they offer poignant glimpses into how desperately people longed for their old homes, which had either been burnt down or left desolate when Mizos were made to abandon their villages and fields in regrouping operations. Laltheri's story and others like it resonate with Mizos today because they not only reflect the essence and spirit of their unique narrative of survival, but also are reminders of their own more recent larger struggles.

Any expression of resistance or disagreement with the regrouping could result in brutality, and at worst, death. The Additional District Magistrate in Mizoram during the *Rambuai* years recorded a personal account from an unnamed Indian Army officer who was engaged in executing the regrouping policy:

I had to order my soldiers to enter every house and force people out. Every man, woman and child who could walk came out with as much of his or her belongings and food as they could. But they would not set fire to their homes. Ultimately I lit a torch myself and set fire to one of the houses [...] My soldiers also started torching other buildings and whole place was soon ablaze. There was absolute confusion everywhere. Women were wailing and shouting and cursing. Children were frightened and cried. Young boys and girls held hands and looked at their burning village with a stupefied expression on their faces. But the grown-up men were silent; not a whimper or a whisper from them. Pigs were running about, mithuns [large bovines] were bellowing, dogs were barking and fowls setting

up a racket with their fluttering and crackling. One little girl ran into her burning house and soon darted out holding a kitten in her hands.²¹

There are songs that talk about the razing and burning of villages that left the inhabitants bewildered and distressed, but the frozen stupefaction, the absolute absence of ‘a whimper or a whisper’ extended beyond the event. Their ability to speak silenced, their stories no longer had the power to contain them. Many still struggle with the trauma of this. Kimi, whose father was part of the MNF, was born a year before the June 1986 signing of the Peace Accord. Her mother’s family had been relocated in one of the early grouping operations. What she knows of *Rambuai* is from the conversations that she grew up hearing at home: “My mother would tell us a little of the kind of life they were forced to live under grouping, the labour, the violence and insecurity... Raping of women by the Indian Army soldiers was rampant. They would force the men to watch it happen – She said the suffering was beyond description...It was unspeakable.”²²

As they tried to make sense of their new settlements and find some semblance of equilibrium and normalcy in a new landscape, Mizos also had to contend with the constant curfews. In all this, they clung to relationships and practices taken for granted in the old life in any way they could. Customarily, Mizo men courted women in their homes in the evenings after the day’s work and dinner were done. Curfews challenged this practice. Young men however persisted in it, running the risk of meeting patrolling *jawans* (soldiers) during curfew hours. If they happened upon a patrol, they would pretend to make an important announcement, usually shouting out gibberish to ensure the community was not unduly alarmed.²³ The patrolling *jawans*, who had no knowledge of the local language, would let the young men go their way.²⁴ In many ways, this subversion was as much political as it was about survival at a time when everything threatened to wipe out a way of life that bound Mizos. There is a popular song that expresses life in curfew times:

²¹ V S Jafa, “Grouping of Villages 1968-1970” (paper presented at a conference for the Zo Research Foundation in collaboration with the Department of Information and Public Relations, Aizawl, Mizoram, September 2010).

²² Kimi, conversation with author, 10 March 2014.

²³ All events, especially deaths in the community were announced this way; the practice of town or village criers calling out important announcements existed in all parts of Mizoram, and the Army, for its own purposes, let this system be.

²⁴ Cherrie L. Chhange, “Loneliness in the Midst of Curfews - The Mizo Insurgency Movement and Terror Lore,” *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, ed. by Tilotoma Misra (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2011), 237-244.

*Tlaikhua a lo ngui, zantlai bawhar dungthulin,
Riahrun ka bel, curfew karah hian
Lengzawng hian ngai ve maw, hmana kan Zoram nun?
Kei zawng ka ngai, ka dawn sei ngam lo*

Night falls, weary like roosters at the end of day
I turn homeward, amidst this curfew
Do those around also pine for Zoram's old ways?
For me, this longing forbids deep thought.

The longing that is spoken of here stands for an entire experience, that of the anguish of senseless physical displacement accompanied by the ruptures in the psyche from the loss of family and friends, separation, death, destruction of homes, forced abandonment of villages, and being forcibly thrust into a new landscape and life. The curfew is symbolic of all that has been lost, and that can never again be recovered, because it has also fundamentally changed them. The pining can no longer be quenched. Hence the longing resists deep reflection.

Mizos have always been a religious people, even prior to conversion. Their spirituality, in many ways, may have aided their conversion when Welsh and English missionaries arrived at their doorsteps to share the gospel. Religion and spirituality have always offered them respite, some kind of meaning, in the midst of turmoil. It is no surprise then that many songs have a distinctly religious bent, with biblical allusions of hope for redemption and deliverance, if not in this life, then in the afterlife: gold paved streets, a new dwelling of joy, a heavenly home are recurrent motifs. Conversations around the rumoured news of the insurgency reaching foreign countries and help from their governments also introduced the idea of 'foreign realms' as a metaphor for hope and help at hand.²⁵

'Streets paved with gold' is an allusion to Revelations 21:21 in the Bible, where it is those who have 'fought the good fight' and endured the forces of darkness will walk the golden streets of heaven. In this case, the good fight was the oppression they faced, and the dark forces, the Indian Army and government. One of the aims of the insurgency movement was in fact, the establishment of a 'Christian state', unlike the 'Hindu Indian state' that had betrayed the Mizos and let them down in their time of distress. To the Mizo mind, Christian missionaries had been godsent to release them from a religion of inequality and a life of darkness. As part of their mission work, these missionaries set up schools, hospitals, educating them, and even giving them their alphabet.²⁶ Moreover,

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Before the missionaries introduced the Roman script, the Government had opened schools with the Bengali script as a medium of instruction. The script was difficult for Mizos, while the Roman

missionaries were also known to question the treatment meted out to tribals by the British government and found much disfavour themselves. Therefore, though there was an active resistance movement against British colonising rule,²⁷ the Mizo imagination generally does not see white missionaries as a colonising force, but with fond nostalgia, as people who sacrificed much to bring them enlightenment. When the brutal repression of insurgency by the Indian government transpired, there were rumours that news of the insurgency had reached the United Nations, and that help would soon be at hand to free Mizos from oppression. It may well have been true that news of the insurgency had reached the United Nations, but the rest were rumours built upon the belief that as before, deliverance would arrive. Clinging to such hope, however unrealistic the possibility, was all the people could do to survive each day. In fact, when the Indian Air Force jetfighters arrived overhead, randomly dropping their bombs on unspecified targets, hitting government offices and units as well, for a fleeting while, people actually believed the jets had been sent to help them.

Ideas of the ‘aftermathic’²⁸ in critical discourse seem fitting in the discussion of memories. From the rubble of collective as well as personal trauma rise narratives that are continually haunted by that experience. In the aftermathic, these memories are neither linear, nor – as in Freud’s unconscious – ever quite possible to resolve. They continually inhabit present narrative, and the future can only be imagined through the prism of that trauma. In other words, memories of trauma undergone permeate every experience, fundamentally altering the vocabulary of an individual’s or community’s narrative.

This seems particularly relevant in parts of India’s North East, where struggles for self-determination are a part of their contemporary or recent histories. In parts of the world where violence has fractured everyday life, trauma can render individuals speech-less; steal the capability of their words to make sense of the world around them or their memories. This renders *the word* itself insufficient, resulting in a fractured narrative that requires something else, some kind of metaphor, to fill in those gaps. This is particularly true of memories of trauma that are passed on trans-generationally, where because these gaps often render the memories almost incoherent, they must be filled with some metaphor

Script proved much more adaptable to the *Duhlian* dialect which became the *lingua franca* of Mizos.

²⁷ There had been an active resistance against the missionaries and their work by the ‘ruling elite’ for a while, but within a short period, almost all Mizos embraced the Christian faith.

²⁸ David Punter uses the term in what he calls the Anti-Canon Theory to discuss the turn of the twentieth century *fin de siècle* Gothic to link up the ruined body with ruined word – narratives haunted by that ruination and on a constant quest for wholeness. “Anti Canon Theory,” in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Patricia Waugh (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2006), 523.

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for the memory so as to make any sense to its inheritor. Speaking of her father's memories, Kimi said:

My father talked about what life in the jungles was like. The narrow escapes, the experience of having to be constantly watchful and vigilant and yet lose friends... Many times, his stories were disjointed. A researcher visited him, and he shared his experiences with her. He tried to answer all her questions... She was gentle, respectful and listened carefully, but that night he couldn't sleep... My mother told me he curled up in foetus position and cried like a baby all night. For a long time after, he didn't sleep well.²⁹

Our personal narratives are nurtured by memory.³⁰ When it is absent or contains gaps, these narratives become fragmented. The working out of memories and their narratives requires the consideration of a crucial realm – that of the imagination. How does a community that survived such trauma imagine the future? What are the mechanisms that create space for such imagination to flourish and grow? While the social sciences often relegate imagination to a way of understanding how we construct – or are constructed by – the world, the narrative imagination can be a way of sharing the world. It involves a struggle to find the means to do this, and then grappling with language to interpret and perform within that shared imagination.³¹

Despite a remarkably high rate of literacy,³² Mizo culture is still essentially oral. The Mizo practice of narrative imagination is quite obvious from the orature that emerged during the years of insurgency. Broadly speaking, Mizo oral culture has two forms – *thawnthu* and *chanchin*. *Chanchin* could be translated to mean 'information', and refers to news and factual narratives. *Thawnthu*, on the other hand, points towards folklore, legends, stories and myths.³³ Both forms found vibrant practice during those years. While censorship in the twenty years of insurgency curbed the written word and most literate forms, it failed to repress orality. The lack of written records does not necessarily indicate a dearth of articulations, or information passed on. Both forms found active expression, though much more so the imaginative register of *thawnthu*.

²⁹ Kimi, 10 March 2014.

³⁰ John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 81.

³¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 77.

³² The Census of India, 2011 records literacy in Mizoram at 91.6 percent.

³³ C. Lalozami, *History of Media in Mizoram: A Historical and Cultural Approach*. (Ph.D. diss., University of Hyderabad, 2012), 2.

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Negotiating the Present

Unlike information that is stored digitally, which can be accessed arbitrarily and pulled out unaltered, what is stored in the human memory is in a process of constant recollection and reconstruction. The concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ was introduced to describe the ways in which technologies of mass culture enable individuals to experience as their own memories events that they themselves had not lived through. Defined as ‘memories that circulate publicly, that are not organically based, but that are nonetheless experienced by one’s own body...by means of a wide range of cultural technologies’, the argument is that prosthetic memories, especially those afforded by mass media, particularly cinema, ‘become part of one’s personal archive of experience.’³⁴

In a Mizoram that is increasingly urban, partly as a result of being uprooted from agrarian community life by regrouping operations, old ways of building and experiencing community are no longer practical. During the twenty years, many fled Mizoram to find education and livelihood elsewhere, some as far as Europe, America and Australia.³⁵ With the community spread so wide, it has become necessary to adapt to new forms of connecting and being in community. For Mizos, the internet, with its vast potential for sharing and expression has become a space for communicating at a community level.

The internet’s capacity to accommodate all forms of media cultures has proven ideal for this purpose. The possibility of instant response and immediate presence, albeit virtual, is one that has captured the Mizo imagination. The popular media of social networks and blogs provide tools to share *chanchin* and *thawnthu*, and platforms for discussing and sharing experiences. As Mizos circulate their individual narratives and personal memories, they make sense of the collective experience, which in turn becomes part of individuals’ archives of experience. It is in this space that Mizo memory of *Rambuai* is grappled with, narrated, explored and shared by a generation that lived largely on the margins of it, yet who are so connected to it. The academic research project for this period in Mizo history finds keen participation here.

Blogging and the social networks Facebook and Whatsapp are especially popular. The provision for the creation of groups facilitates group discussions, allowing any user to be part of several simultaneous discussions. Groups such as Mizo Bloggers, Special Report, Mizoram News, and Mizo Writers Collective create space for varying opinions to find expression. This, in many ways, is not

³⁴Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*” in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, eds. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage, 1995), 175-189.

³⁵ More recently globalization, as much as this history, has prompted relocation and a wider engagement with the world outside, resulting in cultural and linguistic mobility.

very different from the experience of gathering at a neighbour's home and conducting a lively discussion on matters both public and personal. Community life is primary – it is the 'who' that has mattered more to Mizos than 'how' or 'where'; neither space nor medium matter as much as community participation. Indeed, that online forums afford each individual to be 'heard' can make the process of sharing and transmitting much more democratic and egalitarian than it is in in-person gatherings. Rema, who is quite active on the internet, sums it up like this:

Some years ago, an article on India's high-handedness with its north eastern borderlands highlighting the Mizo Insurgency appeared in one of the newspapers. I think it was *Hindustan Times*, I forget. I read it online because I was interested in reactions. Comments and discussions from some quarters contained the inevitable outrage that we would rebel against the Indian nation, and that we deserved to be thrashed and taught a lesson. There were a few others who were sympathetic and angry that their own country could do that to citizens. Many of my Mizo friends responded, there were some unpleasant words used. I and two others got these friends together into a closed Whatsapp group. Many other Mizo friends from all over joined us. We talked about the piece, and the comments. It turned into a discussion of *Rambuai* and some friends even had funny stories about it. We knew each other even though some of us had never really met because some of us live outside Mizoram, some in Madras, some in Delhi, some in Shillong, some in London, some in Maryland; but on Facebook or Whatsapp, we can meet and talk together in one place. It was nice to talk about the article in a Facebook Mizo community because we understand each other. We like to joke and laugh, even about serious things. Not everyone can understand that.³⁶

Groups such as Mizoram Breaking News on Facebook not only encourage citizen journalism, but also record events in public memory as they happen. The same can be said for the public blog (Mi)sual.com. While groups such as Special Report and Mizoram News could be posited to emphasize *chanchin*, Mizo Bloggers, Mizo Writers Collective and others to emphasize *thawnthu*, and groups such as Mizoram Breaking News to be a hybrid of the two, in actuality, users find expression as easily in one register as the other on the same forum, segueing from one to the other with ease.

³⁶ Rema, conversation with author, 3Aug.2011

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Insurgency narratives found online draw a range of responses and debate. Online news articles and features from Mainland Indian newspapers and channels allow for the debate to include Mizos and non-Mizos on the common platform of their ‘comments’ section.³⁷ Comments and response sections on news sites and forums can often be spaces to reflect on and deliberate the provocative and incendiary, as thoughts and issues surrounding the Mizo Insurgency Movement are discussed and contested on both sides. From the generation that experienced the insurgency period first-hand to second generation inheritors of this memory, discussions and stories continue from – and in – all parts of the world. In a way, the internet assists in what has been called a ‘quasi-universalisation’ of remembrance, where memories can be exchanged with others of different times and places and the familiar and distant can change hands.³⁸

Community building in the virtual world becomes similar to community building in the actual world. Arguably, social media finds popularity because of its adaptability to Mizo oral forms. The internet then, is not a really a prosthetic device, nor a site for the creation of prosthetic memory. It is a site for the sharing and passing on of memory. The internet becomes a site for reconstruction.

War was not new to Mizo experience or memory: Mizos have been a warring people with a history of raids and retaliations. Memories of these have been passed down in the form of song and story. But the memory of this period remains unresolved. This throws up interesting questions about literacy and orality during this period, as well as conflicting cultural codes of conduct and honour. Both the methods employed by the Indian government and the sheer magnitude of their destruction would have been difficult to reconcile in psyches already wounded by the devastation of Mautam and the government’s neglect.

Alongside assertions of Indian citizenship, most online narratives about this period struggle with a need for closure, and a demand for an apology from the Indian Government. On the forty-fifth anniversary of the bombing, residents of Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram organized a silent procession through the city. Some posters they carried read ‘Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they did to us’ and ‘No India, No Cry’; rallyists demanded a public apology from the Centre (Indian State) “for attacking its own citizens with combat aircrafts as if the Mizos were its enemies”.³⁹ This apology would not so much be much for India’s having ‘protected’ its ‘territorial sovereignty’ as it probably would be for

³⁷ For example, see comments sections on http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-02-19/news/37179679_1_mna-chhinga-veng-air-force, <http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/folk-theorem/entry/indian-state-kept-many-citizens-in-concentration-camps-in-mizoram>, and <http://www.quora.com/India/What-do-people-of-Mizoram-think-about-rest-of-India>.

³⁸ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 63.

³⁹ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Silent-rally-echoes-Mizo-pain-of-66-IAF-attacks/articleshow/7636603.cms>

first neglecting the people of Mizoram in their time of distress, for using brutal methods to repress the resultant discontent and insurgency, and finally for rendering a one-sided account of this history, in effect ‘stealing’ the Mizos’ narrative. John V Hluna, author of *The Mizo Uprising: Assam Assembly Debates on the Mizo Movement, 1966-1971*, said, “We never wanted anything big from the Centre. All we wanted is the Prime Minister saying sorry in Parliament for all that it did in Mizoram in 1966.”⁴⁰

The government’s narrative is a public memory that has become a personal wound transmitted through to the generation that came after. Much of what is happening today on the internet has been initiated by a generation, or more specifically ‘generational unit’, that grew up with, or into new media and internet technology. They are the generation that was born in the insurgency years, into *Rambuai*, who knew a Mizoram in conflict for most of the younger years of their lives. This is a generation that wants to end the passing on of old wounds, that wants to speak about the insurgency in a new way. They want to remember so they can forgive, so they can heal. This is a generation that is reclaiming their narratives, who are reimagining their future – collective and personal – with courage. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the next generation’s memories will be informed by, and a product of, the debates that the internet affords them.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

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