



Understanding Mizo Names:

A Semiotic and Anthropological Approach

Dr. Lalrinchhani, Assistant Professor

Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University

Mizoram: Aizawl

Abstract: Mizo names can be distinctly differentiated from other tribal names of the North-East. They can be specifically classified into different groups depending on the historical and cultural influences of the time. In the olden days, men of high position in the society - like kings, elders, and hunters for example, by virtue of unwritten customary laws, have the liberty to name their children in manner that would reflect their status. Even in the absence of formal written rules, the Mizos made sure that they remain true to their respective status within their community and most often do not indulge themselves beyond that. The advent of the Christian missionaries marked an altogether different period for the Mizos. The missionaries made every effort to change the tribal ways and the practices of the people by a combination of Christian principles and Western education. These changes were reflected very clearly in the Mizo names that were coined after the practice of Christianity, a custom which is still observed even today. After the Mizos became Christians, almost all names are in reverence to God. Other significant changes in the history of the Mizos like the period of the Mizo Nationalist Movement, an armed-struggle for a separate nation, revived Mizo nationalism and this also influenced the Mizos to coin names that reflect their loyalty to the Mizo identity. Incorporating all these issues into one context, this paper will study Mizo names and the process of naming through a semiotic and anthropological approach, thereby revealing how an understanding of Mizo names can assist one in gaining knowledge and meaning of Mizo culture, language, and identity. It will also show how the history of the Mizos has evolved in time and how these historical, linguistic, and cultural changes have helped in shaping Mizo identity.

Key Words: Mizo names, tribal, culture, linguistic, anthropology, semiotic, Mizo identity

Every community and culture have their specific ways of naming. Despite their universality, there is a great deal of difference from one culture to another in how names are given. There are communities that determine names according to very explicit rules. While in some culture, names are determined by the events that occurred during the time of pregnancy of the mother or after the birth of the child, other cultures more enthusiast in the sense of ancestry, name their children from the totems and family tree of their parents, and in others the process of naming is considered divine and are therefore deeply connected to religion and so are presumed enchantingly through incantations or prayers.

Studies on names and naming have been conducted in different disciplines. Semioticians view names as a sign that links between words, concepts and things. Regarding the meaning of 'names', scholars proposed that 'names' can have both 'denotative and connotative meaning'. In the perspective of anthropologists, names mark personal identities and clearly reflect social and cultural meaning. Hope A. Olson in his book *The Power to Name: Locating the Limits of Subject Representation in Libraries* defined naming as an act of labelling and creating an identity, further adding that naming is;

... a means of structuring reality. It imposes a pattern on the world that is meaningful to the namer. Each of us names reality according to our own vision of the world built on past meaning in our own experience. Each of us creates our own structure of reality through naming. Naming is, therefore, not a random process even though it is varied. Naming is a means of interpersonal communication via language. (4)

Naming is consequently not just language, or a random process but a tool, a means of communication and a sign reflecting our conception of the world. A name can be considered as one of the most fundamental parts of a human being as it gives us a sense of identity and belonging to a given society and also a sense of individuality. Semiotics explains our conception of names and anthropology suggests social and cultural aspects of names and naming. Names are semiotically viewed as a type of signs. Peirce, the founder of modern semiotics, has given a definition of signs as follows:

"A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. (Pierce 228)

In a study conducted by researchers in the US, 270 million recorded baby names from 1937 to 2013 were examined. They found that boys were more likely than girls to receive names beginning with "hard" (voiced) phonemes, which vibrate the vocal cords, such as the A in Adam and the B in Brian. Names starting with "soft" (unvoiced) phonemes, such as the F in Fiona or the H in Heather, were more often assigned to girls than to boys. The sound-gender association was strongest in those who most highly endorsed the stereotype of men as tough and women as tender. (Whitbourne np) Likewise in the Mizo society we have "i" and "a" signifying male and female gender respectively. Interestingly, "i" is a closed vowel. The defining characteristic of a close vowel is that the tongue is positioned as close as possible to the roof of the mouth and thus it produces a soft sound. On the other hand, "a" is an open vowel that produces a sound in which the tongue is positioned as far as possible from the roof of the mouth. Whereas "i" produces a soft vowel sound, "a" requires a harder and more assertive pronunciation. This is rather fascinating in that the vowels signifying gender in the Mizo language seem to correspond to other languages and what they signify, the stereotype of men as tough and women as gentle.

Anthropologists too have for long discussed how names give us social identity; indicate ethnicity, and social status. Observation of several naming practices revealed that there are always some kinds of belief hidden behind the process of naming. Naming is not just a process of labelling or classification, but a kind of cultural process that needs its own system. Regardless of when, why, or how often naming happens, the giving and receiving of a name is an event of major importance. To say the least, the process of naming will always be important to people of any age as it will always be an identity marker in some way or the other. Likewise in the ancient Mizo society, the name given to an individual often reflects his or her social status.

The chiefs of Mizo villages often had names that reflect power and sovereignty. The village chief was usually called 'lal' equivalent to 'king' in English. He was at the top of the hierarchical order. Each village was ruled over by its own chief or lal. Being the sovereign head of the village the chief and his immediate clans could often be distinguished by their names. The term 'lal' was therefore included in almost all names of the chief's clan, like Lalsavunga, Lallula, Laltheri; all of them later became chiefs in their own territory. The chief of the village was the supreme administrative head whose word was law within his own territory. It is therefore not a surprise that the chief and his clans would have names that reflect their social status and power.

Village as the basic unit of communal living of the Lushai tribe existed even before the British extended their sovereignty over the Lushai Hill areas. Each village was under the complete control of a chief and most of these chiefs belonged to the Sailo clan. In fact, the Sailo's established themselves as the ruling clan much before the coming of the British to these areas. They often had separate names distinct from other rulers of their time. Till today the Sailo tribes are proud of their ancestry and hence would give Sailo names to their children like Saidingliani, Vanlalsailova, Saihlupuii, Saitluanga, Sailopari, and more that reflects the once great power of the Sailo tribe.

Hobbes, one of the semioticians who studied names, stated that "Names ... are signs of our conceptions ... they are not signs of the things themselves." (Noth 23) He explained, "a name is the voice of a man arbitrary, imposed for a mark to bring into his mind some conception concerning the thing on which it is imposed". (24) Before Christianity, a new born child who does not belong to the king's clan was given a name that would confirm his inferiority. There were specific names that were confined to the king and his immediate relations. Men of high position in the society like kings, elders, and hunters, by virtue of unwritten customary laws have the liberty to name their children in manner that would reflect their position. In the olden days, a man's social standing was defined by his lineage, the number of properties possessed in terms of the number of cattle, the quantity of rice harvested at the end of a year, the number of wild animals hunted (for a hunter) and so on. All important events and achievements in this regard were marked by the names given to their new-born. Judging by their names, one can safely say that there was a distinct form of social division in the pre-Christian Mizo society which was nevertheless not too rigid. The traditional social structure was on the basis of socio-political, economic and ceremonial consideration and therefore was flexible.

Other Mizo names relatively significant in tracing the history and culture of the Mizos, among many other could be names with the word 'kap' like Kapkima, Kapliana, Kaphranga, Kapzawna, and the like. These names signified fame and reputation in the field of hunting. 'Kap' and 'kim' which could be literally translated as 'shoot' and 'everything' respectively, carried with it a proud tone that suggested that the father or the grandfather of the child was a skilled hunter who had hunted down different kinds of wild animals. As such other names like Kapliana, Kaphranga were names common among men who were considered as great hunters during their time. With a slight change in the meaning of these names, all however signified their prominence as hunters. These names assured us of the history that hunting was a game held in high esteem among the Mizos.

In the pre-Christian Mizo society, each tribe fought relentlessly to gain supremacy over other tribes. As a result, the Mizo society witnessed endless inter-clan struggles. Since there was no regular army, all men in the village were expected to render their service in times of war and also against the attack of wild beasts. Men of valour were highly esteemed and the highest honour was awarded to great warriors. This honour was therefore often reflected in the names that they choose to give their children. This is evident in names like Raltawna, Ralkapthanga, Zakapa, Zakima, and the like. Raltawna can be translated as combating or attacking the enemy, while Ralkapthanga can mean one who shoots or kills the rivals. However, these types of names were later on more commonly used to commemorate another important event that happens in the life of the Mizos. This important episode which added up to the coining of distinctive names was when a number of young Mizo men were called by the British Government to participate in the Second World War. Names like Ralkapzauva/ Ralkapzauvi were coined after those men who participated in the war to honour their presence. A literal translation of the word 'ral' in English is enemy, 'kap' is 'shoot' while 'zau' means wide. Taking the meaning of these words into context, the name Ralkapzauva symbolized the history of the father or the grandfather of the child who had probably encountered not just one enemy force but had fought far and wide outside Mizoram. Distinctive names like Germanthanga, Japanchhawna, Ferenthanga were also coined after men who returned to Mizoram from the Second World War. These names simply suggested the presence of Mizo men in the war against Germany, Japan, and France during World War 2.

The Pre- Christian Mizo society was purely rural and the people were engaged in agricultural pursuits for their livelihood. The main pattern of agriculture followed was jhuming/shifting cultivation or what can simply be called "slash and burn" farming method. Besides agricultural cottage industries, hunting, fishing, and rearing animal formed a part of their economic life. The Mizos were always able to make themselves self-sufficient in food grains and other cereals from their agricultural product. Since they had no other means of livelihood one was considered rich and prosperous through the prospect of the amount of rice produced in a year. Those whose harvest was favourable proudly coined names like Zakhumi, Zalushtangi, Zalianthanga for the name of their new-born. The name Zakhumi can simply be translated as 'beyond hundred', where the word 'za' means hundred and 'khum' in this sense means 'beyond'. This expression conveyed the overwhelming amount of rice that the family produced the year that the child was born. The wealth of a man was thus measured through the amount of rice produced in a year. Therefore, when the yield of the family was good, they name their new-borns accordingly in order to celebrate their success. Likewise, articles like gongs, guns, beads and puan or loincloths were used as birth price. In those days, marriage price was never paid up in full at once at the wedding, because, hardly anyone had enough money to pay up. Usually, an instalment was paid on

the wedding day and the balance was paid later. As such “Thi” and “dar” symbolized rare possessions in the past Mizo society that could be traced through names like Darmani, Darhnuni, Darthangpuii, that signified the wealth of the family and the assets they proudly owned.

The introduction of Christianity was another epoch-making event in the life of the Mizos. A new transformed society was born along with a new identity. The imposition of the British regime in 1889 followed by the introduction of Christianity in 1894 put the whole Mizo society in an unprecedented socio-political imbalance. The missionaries who first came to the Mizos were J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge who arrived on 11 January, 1894. These missionaries patiently learnt the local language and, by the time they were well-versed they used Roman script to write the language and introduced Western education. It is important to take note of the fact that with the conversion to Christianity, the Mizos simultaneously adopt the Western culture. The impact of Christianity is thus felt not only in the religious realm but also in the socio-cultural as well as political life of the Mizos.

Along with conversion, a significant change was seen in the names of the Mizo Christians. ‘Lal’ which was exclusively used for the name of the chief to signify his power and sovereignty over his subjects was now used to refer to the ‘Almighty God’ in Heaven rendering it applicable to everyone. After the Mizos became Christians, they found a deeper meaning connected to the process of naming. They wanted the name they choose to have special significance to the child and as Christians they wanted to give their children a sense of purpose in God through their names.

Parents till today give names to their children that will express their character as they envision it from God. Names are also given to relate to the purpose that parents see God would have for the lives of their children. It is therefore not surprising to find ‘Lal’ in almost all Mizo names. Taking my name, for example, Lalrinchhani literally means ‘having faith in God’. Apart from Mizo names that have references to God, Biblical names like John, Mary, Esther, Ruth, Jakob, and more are currently among the more commonly adopted names from the Bible.

Before the British annexation, certain forms of slavery or ‘bawi’ in mizo, were practised in the Mizo society. On conditions of extreme poverty, there were those driven to seek refuge in the chief’s house. They were categorised as ‘Inpuichhung bawi’. Another category comprises of criminals like murderers, debtors, and thieves and so on, who took shelter in the chief’s house as a consequence of their ill deeds, and were called ‘Chemsen bawi’. On other occasions of inter-clan or inter-tribal warfare, there were those who left the losing side and joined the victors on condition that they and their descendents shall serve as bawis. They were categorized under ‘Tuklut bawi’. (Sanate 1594) In theory, slaves could purchase their freedom on the payment of Rs 40/- or one mithun, a price which was beyond the capacity of most people in those days. Names like Bawihluni, Bawichhunga, Bawiluti, were therefore coined to manifest the degrading position and unchanging status of being a slave in the Mizo society. Bawiship was inheritable. It implied a sense of surrender without choice; if a man becomes bawi, he and his descendants shall remain bawis. As such, the name Bawihluni signifies being a slave all her life.

The British administration, which depended largely upon the good will of the chiefs, was reluctant to call it a crude form of slavery and hesitated to interfere with the system. However, Peter Fraser who arrived in Aizawl in December 1908, found the Bawi system in Mizoram to be one among other apparent instances of slavery within the British Empire, which was against the constitution and should be abolished ‘root and branch’, according to him. Meanwhile sensing the seriousness and the urgency of the matter the special district committee of the Welsh Mission held a discussion on the issue and unanimously asserted that attempts should be made to convince the government to abolish the bawi system as soon as possible. The subject of ‘Semi-Slavery in Assam-India’ was debated in the House of Commons during the period between July 11 and August 3, 1914. This finally resulted in the emancipation of slaves in Mizoram but an unfortunate expulsion of Dr. Fraser and his friend H.W.G Cole from Mizoram. (Ralte 228) In 1927, the Government of Assam replaced the word ‘bawi’ by a new term ‘sunghai’ or ‘umpui’ meaning ‘relatives’ or ‘inmates.’ The term ‘bawi’ was thus no longer allowed to be used. (Sanate 1595) In commemoration of this significant historical event, names like Bawihchhuaka, Bawihbangi were coined which means ‘liberated or emancipated from being a slave.’

On the eve of India's independence, various ethnic communities in Northeast India made significant attempts to establish their own distinct historical narratives. The Mizos were one of the more proactive tribes that continuously

resisted their integration into the newly formed Indian nation-state. Eventually, they achieved the recognition of 'statehood.' Various factors of ethnicity and territorialism were used as basis of ethnic rage, and democratic struggle for self-rule and finally twenty-five years later after Indian Independence, Mizoram gained the status of a Union Territory from the Indian Government on the 21st of January, 1972, after a number of revolts and uprisings within the state. (Hermana 147) Women endured sexual violence, men faced brutal torture, and innocent children suffered from hunger and lived in constant fear. This historical experience will permanently alter the Mizos' perceptions of the Indian Government and the broader Indian population. Thus, names like Vaithatchianga were later coined which was raw in its expression of hatred, abhorrence and detestation of vai- a term now used synonymous to Indians outside the state. The name honours the heroism and valour of killing 'vai', which when studied in the context of the history of Mizoram tells the sentiment of Mizos during the fight for freedom.

This period of revolt against the Government of India is still very much alive in the minds and hearts of the Mizos and therefore the feeling of Mizo nationalism is often revived through the process of naming. Thus, Zoramthanga, Zohmangaiha, Zoramchhani, Zoramdina are all names with a strong sense of patriotism and adoration for Mizoram and they are names that are still frequently coined even today. These names also reflect the new feeling of freedom and independence that the Mizo people gained which provoked a strong wave of national romanticism, and this, among many other things, also called forth a strong agitation to bring back the feeling of Mizo nationalism and put them to use instead of imported, foreign colonial names.

A more recent development regarding the giving of names with 'Zo' can be understood in terms of a sense of affiliation to the Mizo society given by parents, either the husband or the wife who married outside of the Mizo community to their children. This can be done to give the child a sense of Mizo identity or belonging and on the other hand to instill a feeling of acceptance or approval in the larger Mizo community. Names with "Zo" are also common among the Bru and Chakma repatriates, which can be due to the same reasons aforementioned.

While some names may significantly reflect the culture that breeds them, others may just be imitations of names that are popular during the time irrespective of race, caste or gender. The impact of globalization today contributes to a number of factors that pose a challenge to Mizo identity and culture.

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. (Zama np)

Certainly, in modern Mizo society, there is a notable increase in the number of individuals whose names are influenced by the media. Media and literature have a significant impact on the selection of names, as they introduce the public to well-known figures and personalities from around the world. In fact, one can find individuals with names inspired by world-class athletes, singers, movie stars, politicians, and famous fictional characters not only in the streets of Aizawl but also in the most remote villages. Globalization becomes more of a reality every day, but this does not mean that the cultures of the world need morph into one huge conglomerate.

A modern person is born as a media baby in the ambience of the computer, television and internet. The media envelops the life and experience of modern people. They walk along with it, and wake up with it, learn with it, work with it, rest with it, get entertained by it, live for it and lay it. (Edapilly 20)

It is therefore evident that today some parents simply settle on names because it is the name of a celebrity, or it is convenient, without thinking much about the deeper meaning and connection that a name can have with culture or cultural identity and how it can affect their children. With globalization, acculturation is to be expected. "At the group level, acculturation entails the widespread adoption of the values, practices, forms of art, and technologies of another culture. These can range from the adoption of ideas, beliefs, and ideology to the large-scale inclusion of foods and styles of cuisines from other cultures". (Cole np) However, throughout history, name change or the adoption of western names soon leads to disconnection from other cultural ties, such as language, cuisine, and customs.

Names and naming constitute an important part of the work of the building of a nation. The sense of personal identity and uniqueness that a name gives us is at the heart of why names interest us and why they are important to us as individuals and to our society as a whole. Mizo names are indeed a cultural heritage. Let us preserve them, celebrate them, and continue to write history and carry on culture through naming.

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