Chapter 2: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE MIZO SOCIETY

To truly appreciate the flavours, traditions, and significance of Mizo food, one must first explore the historical background of Mizoram and understand the intricate connections between food and its cultural heritage. Doing so can unravel the gateway to a more enriching exploration as history plays a meaningful role in studying the Mizo foodways. It is important to acknowledge that several factors such as geography, religion, culture, colonialism, and political changes have not only influenced their foodways but these factors are also been influenced by food. To understand the food culture, it is essential to briefly consider the general topography. Mizo traditional cuisine is a testament to the rich natural resources of the region, featuring diverse locally available ingredients such as vegetables, leaves, stems, edible wild plants and roots. This abundance is closely tied to the geographical features and favourable environmental conditions of the region. Understanding the geography along with the cultural practices provides crucial context for the Mizo identity, particularly in relation to their dietary practices and the origins of their food sources. This chapter sets the background of the thesis by offering a comprehensive exploration of the historical and cultural context of Mizoram, offering a brief overview of Mizo culture and society through the lens of food.

2.1 Mizoram: Land of the Mizos

The Mizos are an ethnic group who predominantly inhabit Mizoram, the southernmost state of northeast India. The term Mizo means "people of the hill" or "hill people," where '*Mi'* stands for people and '*Zo'* means hill or highland (Lalrinthanga, 2020). Hence, Mizo means highlander, or people living in the hills (Singh, 1995, p. 7). According to several historical theories and myths, the ancestors of the Mizos were believed to have migrated from southern China to Burma, then from Burma to their present settlement in northeast India. After spending an extended period in the Kabaw Valley in Burma, certain clans migrated across the Ṭiau River around the 1400s, which forms the border between India and Burma. Over time, by the 1700s, most of the Mizos had established themselves in the region now known as Mizoram, surrounding areas, and beyond (Liangkhaia, 2022; Zawla, 2011). The colonial writers have referred to the inhabitants of a large area comprising the then Lushai Hills (Mizoram), the Jampui Hills of Tripura, the Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar), and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh by the term 'Zo' as well as Chin-Lushai-Kuki (Lewin, 1869; Shakespear, 1912/2008; Reid, 1889). The Zo ethnic group, collectively known as the *Zo hnahthlak*, did not

consist of a single tribe; rather, they constituted various tribes and clans, and at one point in time, even spoke different languages. But today, more or less within the state of Mizoram, they constitute themselves as Mizos and they speak the 'Mizo' language (formerly called *Duhlian* or *Lushai*), which has evolved as a lingua franca among the people of the region (Pachuau, 2014). While the term 'tribe' itself has become an arguable category at present, it has become a symbol of identity for most of the tribals themselves (Shimreiywung, 2009), which, at this point, is used from the viewpoint of the "ethnic community," and "not with reference to caste, or the state, or acculturation" (Ratnagar, 2003). There are several tribes under the Mizo umbrella such as Lusei, Hmar, Mara (Lakher), Lai (Pawi), Ralte, Paihte, Fanai, and more, which further have their sub-tribes, also referred to as clans and sub-clans. The most prominent and widespread subgroup within the Mizo tribe is the Lusei, whom the colonial forces first encountered, leading to the designation of the region as "Lushai Hills," reflecting the British pronunciation of *Lusei*. The Mizos are recognised as having Mongolian ancestry and, linguistically, as members of the Tibeto-Burman family (Pachuau, 2014). They have a distinctive cultural identity and ethnicity from the broader Indian context, sharing closer affinities with other nations in Southeast Asia in various aspects such as historical narratives, cultural practices, physical features, and culinary traditions.

Mizoram was recognised as the Lushai Hills and became part of British India in 1890, forming the Lushai Hills District as the "largest district of Assam" under British administration in 1898 (Nunthara, 1996). A Superintendent was stationed in Aizawl, assisted by several native chieftains to manage administrative duties. After independence, the chieftainship system was abolished, and an Autonomous Mizo District Council was established on April 25, 1952 (Mahapatra and Zote, 2008). In 1954, an Act of Parliament renamed the territory from Lushai Hills to Mizo District, and this change was enacted in September 1954. In 1972, the district acquired the status of a Union Territory with a legislature and was renamed Mizoram. Finally, Mizoram was incorporated into the Indian Union as its 23rd state on February 20, 1987 (celebrated as State Day every year). There are eleven districts: Aizawl, Lunglei, Siaha, Champhai, Kolasib, Serchhip, Lawngtlai, Mamit, Saitual, Hnahthial and Khawzawl.[2] Mizoram shares boundaries with Assam to the north, Tripura to the west, and Manipur to the northeast.

[2] Saitual, Hnahthial and Khawzawl are the three new districts created by the Government of Mizoram on 3rd June 2019.

It also shares an international border stretching across 722 kilometres with the neighbouring countries by the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh to the west and the Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar) to the east and the south. Several people belonging to the *Zo hnahthlak* are dispersed throughout the hills of neighbouring states and countries.

2.1.1 Geography and Climatic Condition

Mizoram literally translates to "land of the Mizos" (*ram* meaning land) or "land of the hill people," reflecting the geographical landscape and cultural essence of the region. The state is located between 21º58' to 24º35' north latitude and 92º15' to 93º29' east longitude. It covers an area of approximately 21,081 square kilometres and the population was 10,97,206 according to the 2011 Census (Mizoram Statistical Abstract, 2021). The population is spread out sparsely, with most settlements situated on hilltops, in elevated environments. It is a 'Tribal Area' as per Article 244 and the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India, and the indigenous people are identified as Scheduled Tribes. Aizawl is the capital of Mizoram and is the biggest and most populous city in the state with a population of 4,00,309 which is 36.5% of the state population (Directorate of Census Operations, Mizoram, 2014).

The Tropic of Cancer passes through Mizoram. Despite its tropical location, the state has a pleasant climate, perhaps due to its hilly range and a substantial amount of rainfall influenced by the south-west monsoon (Tiwari, 2006). The state experiences mild summers with temperatures ranging from 20 to 30 degrees Celsius. However, there has been a noticeable increase in summer temperatures surpassing 32 degrees Celsius in recent years, potentially attributed to climate change due to global warming. Winters in Mizoram are also relatively mild, with temperatures typically ranging from 7 to 22 degrees Celsius. With an average rainfall of about 250 centimetres per annum, the climate pattern of Mizoram is humid-tropical characterised by short winters and long summers (ibid). However, the amount of rainfall has also been irregular. Tiwari (2006) suggests that the region's climatic conditions significantly influence various human activities, including tourism, agriculture, and water supply. Climate change can disturb the ecological balance of the environment, thereby affecting living organisms.

Furthermore, Mizoram experiences heavy monsoon rains from May to September, leading to significant challenges such as landslides and floods during this period. The state is also frequently impacted by strong cyclonic winds from Bangladesh, which damage crops and homes annually. These weather-related issues negatively impact crop yields, contributing to

the need for food imports. Additionally, the heavy rains and resulting landslides disrupt the daily movement of goods between neighbouring states via the Silchar road in Assam. Since road transportation is the primary means of importing and exporting market goods, this disruption during the monsoon season often leads to price increases and shortages of essential items such as rice, vegetables, cooking oil, and cooking gas. On the contrary, monsoon is the time when seasonal wild plants are available in plenty such as bamboo shoots and *baibing* (Alocasia fornicate), as well as freshwater snails and crabs, which are local favourites.

2.1.2 Forest cover (Flora and Fauna)

Mizoram is rich in a diverse range of flora and fauna, with numerous types of tropical trees and plants flourishing in the region. Forests are a major source of livelihood in Mizoram, dominating the natural resources and land coverage. The soil properties and climatic conditions in Mizoram are naturally favourable to the healthy growth of various plant species, both edible and medicinal. The vegetation can be broadly categorised as "tropical evergreen, semi-evergreen, sub-tropical broad-leaved forests, and wet temperature forests" (Roy & Joshi, 2002, as cited in Pachuau, 2014, p. 9). The forests of Mizoram and its culture are intrinsically linked, with the rich natural resources significantly shaping the culinary traditions and lifestyle of the Mizo people. Malsawmdawngliana and Lalsangpuii (2024) wrote that the Mizos relied completely on their environment for survival, with their lives being closely intertwined with the forest. The pre-Christian Mizos believed that spirits, known as *huai*, inhabited mountains, forests, trees, and rivers. They suggested that this belief might have been their way of protecting and conserving their surroundings in earlier times.

The state boasts high forest diversity and is part of the Indo-Burma Global Biodiversity Hotspot (Sati and Vangchhia, 2017). Forest cover constitutes approximately 86% of Mizoram's area, accounting for 2.43% of India's total forest and tree cover (Sati, 2023, p. 45). The forests provide with essential resources, including firewood, building materials, food, medicine, animal feed, and other vital necessities (Vanlalhruaia, 2013). The jungles were abundant with wild fruits, edible roots, and herbs, which were gathered for household use. Additionally, the forests naturally harboured a large number of jungle rubber trees, which the Mizos tapped for rubber during the late pre-colonial era, exchanging it for essential goods in nearby plain areas (ibid).

Mizoram is naturally blessed with abundant bamboo forests, housing numerous beneficial bamboo species. As Pachuau (2014) puts it, diverse varieties of bamboo are the "trademark of

the state." The state is reported to have 35 bamboo species across 9 genera (Department of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, Mizoram, 2023, p. 45). Like other states in Northeast India and Southeast Asia, bamboo has various uses in Mizoram. It is utilised for building houses and creating handicrafts, paper, vinegar, domestic items, and agricultural tools. Bamboo shoots, highly nutritious and abundantly available during their season, are among the staple foods in Mizoram. Bamboo, a fast-growing and renewable resource, also meets the demand for timber and is largely used in the state (Sati, 2023). Although *jhumming* (slash-and-burn cultivation) has traditionally been and still remains the primary agricultural practice, leading to a reduction in forest cover, the rapid growth of bamboo ensures that a green canopy persists across the region, albeit without dense vegetation (Pachuau, 2014). Despite this, the forest cover has significantly diminished because of widespread deforestation and land degradation for infrastructure development. Consequently, the state has experienced a severe depletion of wildlife, birds, fish, and diverse vegetation. This loss has resulted in the substantial reduction of previously abundant food sources derived from the flora and fauna of the region, thereby impacting the ability of the Mizo community to sustain itself with local food resources. Furthermore, the cyclical bamboo flowering, occurring every 50 years, has led to a recurring ecological crisis, resulting in temporary food scarcity and famine in the region. These events have significantly influenced the state's political history, which will be discussed in subsequent chapter.

The forests of Mizoram are home to a variety of wild animals, including tigers, leopards, clouded leopards, bears, elephants, red serow, goral, sambar deer, barking deer, wild boars, hillock gibbons, common langurs, rhesus macaques, leaf monkeys, etc. (Lalrofeli, 2019). According to the State Fauna Series published by the Zoological Survey of India in 2007, the region hosts approximately 1,468 species across 891 genera and 295 families, with insects comprising 37% of the total at 520 species, followed by birds, which account for approximately 370 different species and subspecies found throughout the state (Zoological Survey of India, 2007, p. 6). The Mizos had a strong preference for eating animal meat, although they consumed it infrequently. Apart from wild animals, they also domesticated animals including pigs, cows, buffalo, mithun, horses, goats, sheep, dogs, cats, poultry, ducks, rabbits, etc. Additionally, in pre-Christian tradition, animal sacrifices for religious purposes were a common practice in Mizo society. The purpose of raising these animals was twofold: to ensure a supply of meat during times when hunting was not possible, and to have readily available animals for religious sacrifices (Nag, 1993).

2.1.3 Rivers and Lakes

Mizoram is known for its numerous rivers, streams, and lakes. Most of the rivers (locally known as *lui*) originate within the state and flow through it. These rivers are fed by small streams flowing through steep gorges, which mostly rely on seasonal rains. These streams, running in a criss-cross pattern across the country, serve as tributaries to the larger river systems both within Mizoram and beyond. Thus, the majority of the rivers ultimately flow northwards into the Barak River, which is a tributary of the Brahmaputra River, situated in the Cachar Plain of Assam (Sati and Vangchhia, 2017). The longest river in Mizoram is the Tlawng Lui or Tlawng River which originated from Lunglei District in the south. It crosses five districts in Mizoram—Lunglei, Aizawl, Serchhip, Mamit, and Kolasib. Throughout its course, it receives numerous lateral tributaries and flows in a northern direction into the Barak River in Assam, locally known as Katakhal or Dhaleswari River (Lalramchullova et al, 2021). The Chhimtuipui River, also called the Kaladan River, is the largest river in Mizoram. Originating from the Chin State of Myanmar and flowing through the Siaha and Lawngtlai districts in Mizoram. The river then re-enters Myanmar, meeting the Bay of Bengal at the renowned seaport of Akyab (or Sittwe). As a transboundary river, the Chhimtuipui river holds a strategic position for trade between India and Myanmar (Sati and Vangchhia, 2017, p. 21).

Lakes, known as *Dil* in Mizo, are scattered throughout the state. The most significant and popular among them are Palak dil, Ṭamdil, Rih dil, Rengdil and Rungdil. The largest lake Palak Lake, is located in the Siaha District of southern Mizoram. According to legend, the lake was formed by an earthquake or flood, and local myth holds that a submerged village still lies intact beneath its waters. Ṭamdil Lake, situated in the Saitual district, is named after the mustard plant (*ṭam* meaning mustard) and has a fascinating legend. It is said that a giant mustard plant once stood at this site. When the mustard was cut down, fountains of water erupted, forming a pool that eventually came to be known as Ṭamdil, meaning "Lake of Mustard Plant." Although Rih Dil or Rih Lake is located in Myanmar near the India-Myanmar border, it holds deep historical and cultural significance for the Mizos. It is believed that departed spirits pass through this place on their way to *Mithikhua*, the final resting place. As a result, it is regarded as a pilgrimage site.

These rivers and lakes are integral to the ecology, culture, and economy, providing water resources for agriculture, supporting biodiversity, and offering scenic beauty that attracts tourists. Apart from this, they are important sources of seafood, which are integral to the Mizo

diet as varieties of fresh, dried, and fermented seafood are often included in daily meals and traditional dishes. The areas around rivers and lakes support a variety of wild plants and vegetables that are foraged and used in Mizo cuisine. These include edible ferns, bamboo shoots, and other greens that thrive in a moist environment.

Riverside farming along the rivers in Mizoram also makes an essential contribution to the food supply of the region. The narrow strips of arable land along the riverbanks, also known as river valley fills or floodplains, are highly fertile and support various types of farming such as *nûl huan*, or riverside farms. *Nûl* refers to a garden or cultivated plot of land typically located near a river, where the mists reliably provide water for the crops, allowing for cultivation during the dry season (Lorrain, 1940/2008, p. 345). Although there are certain challenges caused by floods during the monsoon season that damage crops, *nûl* farming is vital for the livelihoods of many local farmers in Mizoram. It contributes to the region's food security while also supporting the local economy, highlighting the economic importance of rivers in Mizoram. Furthermore, several traditional Mizo dishes incorporate ingredients sourced from and around river environments, which reflects the importance of rivers in daily life and culinary practices.

2.1.4 Farming Practices

Agriculture has been the primary occupation since earlier times in Mizoram and continues to be the main occupation for the rural population, significantly contributing to the local economy. The traditional Mizo farming method, known locally as *lo* (farm) or *lo neih* (to have a farm plot), was referred to as *jhuming* by the British colonial authorities (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016, p. 171). It is a labour-intensive ancient agricultural method still widely used in many humid tropical regions. It is also referred to as *jhum* cultivation, slash-and-burn cultivation, rotational bush-fallow agriculture, or swidden cultivation (Dawar, 2019, p.16). Since agriculture was the main occupation of the early Mizos, all their activities centred around *jhum* cultivation. This system of agriculture has been intimately tied to their daily lives since time immemorial, with their entire existence revolving around it.

In *jhum* cultivation, the forest area allotted for farming is cleared by cutting down trees, bamboo and plants which are then left to dry. Clearing the forest usually took place from late January till early March. The interval following the cutting, during which the trees were left to dry, is referred to in Mizo as *Chapchar Âwllen.* During this period, the well-known *Chapchar Kut* festival, which signifies the culmination of this agricultural stage is celebrated (Zosangpuii, 2019, p.50). This festival is further discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter. Once

the slashed forest completely dries, the area is burned around late March and early April before rainfall (ibid). This slash-and-burn process is a challenging task typically handled by capable men, mostly in groups as they help one another. Dr. H. Lallungmuana, a 78-year-old retired lecturer, narrates an event from 1963 in Biate village: "The men were burning the jhum fields, but the fire spread in the wrong direction. Although the land had been cultivated years before, the uncut areas caught fire more intensely than the sections where trees had been cut and dried." He continues, "The fire was so fierce that it actually roared. About 30 men were trapped in a circle of fire with no way to escape. They were so frightened that even those men who rarely prayed were praying desperately, with tears streaming down their faces," he laughs as he recalls. "It was a strange situation. Just when they thought they were going to die, something miraculous happened. Perhaps the wind suddenly blew the fire in the opposite direction, allowing them to escape. When they safely returned home, each family performed the *thla hual*[3] ritual to thank God for His protection. Some even slaughtered pigs, while others offered chickens" (personal communication, July 19, 2022). This account underscores just how dangerous and life-threatening the process of slash-and-burn can be.

Traditionally, after the area is burned, women sow the seeds. The partially burned trees are then cleared, collected, and re-burned in a process known as *Mangkhawh* (ibid, p. 58). Following this, another batch of seeds is sown. The nutrients in the ashes naturally fertilize the soil, leading to a successful harvest. After harvest, the used land is left fallow for several years to allow the soil to regain fertility, and farming shifts to a new area. This process is repeated in a different location, with the farmers returning to the previously used land only after 15 to 20 years. However, with population growth and a reduction in arable land, the fallow period has now been reduced to only two to three years. This has overdone agriculture on sloped lands, increasing environmental degradation, leading to significant soil erosion and reduced soil fertility (Sati & Vangchhia, 2017, p. 53). Shifting cultivation has been a contentious issue in modern times, sparking significant debate among foresters, ecologists, economists, policymakers, and scholars. Although Scott (2009) suggested that the Mizo people might have intentionally chosen jhum cultivation to maintain their independence and self-sufficiency, allowing them to resist government control and assert their autonomy through regular shifts

[3] *Thla hual* is a traditional ritual to protect the soul of a man, discussed in Section 2.3.4 of this chapter.

from one area to another, Malsawmdawngliana and Lalsangpuii (2024) argued that this type of cultivation represents a "deliberate political decision" that goes beyond a simple farming method.

When the British annexed the area, this traditional agricultural method faced criticism as they perceived it to be "primitive" (Parry, 1932, p. 75), "wasteful and extravagant" (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 31). Dawar (2019) noted that forest officials prioritised implementing systematic forest conservation measures in the hills. He also highlighted an obscure commercial motive behind condemning *jhum* cultivation by mentioning the Superintendent of Lushai Hills' statement that the Forest Department suffers significant losses as large trees, which could be used for trade, are burned and killed, claiming that stopping jhum cultivation would benefit the Forest Department (ibid). Therefore, the colonial officials introduced wet rice cultivation (WRC) in the valleys of certain regions. In 1898, colonial officials, led by Lt. Col. John Shakespear, promoted wet rice cultivation in valley areas of Champhai and Thenzawl village (McCall, 1949/2015), later extending to North Vanlaiphai, South Vanlaiphai, and Tuisenhnar village by 1925 (Dawar, 2019). They modelled this practice after the Naga Hills' "Permanent Khet Cultivation," bringing Naga instructors to teach the Mizos. Since the Mizos were unfamiliar with this method, Nepalis were settled in these areas, and agricultural loans were provided to encourage the adoption and purchase of bullocks. The chiefs were instructed to promote this method, and agricultural instructors were trained (ibid.). Over time, some Mizos in the valley areas adopted wet rice cultivation. Terrace cultivation was also introduced, modelled after practices in the Naga Hills. Despite efforts, including taking Lushai Chiefs to study terraced fields and appointing Naga demonstrators, the Mizos showed little interest, leading to unsatisfactory results in terrace cultivation (ibid.). However, despite the introduction of WRC and terrace farming, the Mizos have continued their traditional practice of shifting cultivation till today.

The crops cultivated by the Mizos can be divided into two primary categories based on their growing seasons: "*fur rawl*" (Kharif crops) are those planted during the rainy summer months (June to October), while "*ṭhal rawl*" (Rabi crops) are cultivated during the winter season (November to May) (Vanlalhruaia, 2013, p. 71). Summer crops typically include rice, millet,

maize, and vegetables[4], which are cultivated in the jhum land, whereas winter crops primarily consist of peas, beans, and other legumes, often grown at *Leipui* (subsidiary jhum) or *Nûl* (riverside farm). Despite being an agrarian society, agricultural productivity in this state is relatively low due to underdeveloped infrastructure and a lack of modern technology. As a result, a significant portion of agricultural products are imported from outside the state.

Additionally, the Mizos also practice hunting and trapping animals and birds, fishing, and foraging for wild edible plants and roots in the forest as a means of survival, during scarcity and famine, or when their agricultural crops are not yet ready for harvest. Over time, these practices have become an integral part of their diet and have blended seamlessly into their foodways, contributing to their culinary traditions that reflect their resourcefulness and connection to the natural environment.

2.2 Daily Routine and Gender Roles in Traditional Society

There have been debates and proposals regarding separate time zones for the Northeast region in India. But has not been successful to date. Due to its geographical location, Mizoram, like the rest of the Northeast region, has an early sunrise and sunset compared to other parts of India. The sun rises as early as 4:00 a.m. and sets as late as 6:00 p.m. in summer. In contrast, during winter, it rises around 6:00 a.m. and sets around 4:00 p.m. However, the traditional Mizo society has its own indigenous standard time based on their natural environment. Without the availability of standardised clocks and watches, they depend heavily on traditional ecological knowledge where seasons play an important role. They typically measured time in years and months by following the cycles of the moon, sun, and agricultural seasons. When counting time according to crop cycles, a year was often marked by the harvesting of crops, particularly rice (Rosanga, 2021). The Mizos also learned to identify specific time intervals through their domesticated animals. For example, when the domestic rooster crowed at the break of dawn, it signalled that the women needed to wake up and begin preparing food. Similarly, when the rooster crowed at night, around 9 to 10 p.m., it indicated that it was time to go home or go to bed. This distinct day-night pattern influences their daily lives and the local dining habits, with three meals typically consumed daily to accommodate the shorter daylight

[4] A list of vegetables cultivated and wild edible plants consumed by the Mizos can be found in Appendix I of the thesis.

hours: one in the morning shortly after sunrise (*tûkṭhuan*), another at midday (*chaw chhûn*), and the early dinner in the evening just after dusk (*zanriah*).

In traditional daily lives, women are the first to rise at dawn, while the men continue to sleep. The first one to wake up starts up the fire in the hearth, called *tapchhak* in Mizo, and boils water for cooking and tea, preparing everything for those who will wake later. She then goes down to the spring/water point to fetch water before sunrise. Upon her return with a basket full of water filled in bamboo tubes, she begins husking the rice using a large wooden mortar and pestle. McCall (1949/2015) describes the early morning scene, saying, "Even before dawn the Lushai village reverberates with the squawking of the fowls, the dull thudding of the pestles, as the women rhythmically pound the rice in the wooden, hand-fashioned mortars" (p, 172). After cleaning enough rice for the day, she prepares *tûkṭhuan* (the morning meal). By the time the meal is ready, the husband wakes up, and the family enjoys their breakfast together (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 16).

When preparing *tûkṭhuan*, a woman typically cooks enough rice to serve both the morning and noon meals. The rice for lunch is wrapped in plantain leaves to be taken to the jhum fields, with some rice left for those staying at home. As a result, the rice for lunch is eaten cold. For a farmer who works daily on the jhum, lunch is essential, either hot or cold. The Mizos refer to their packed lunch as "*chaw fûn*," which they carry with them while working in their jhum lands or travelling. At lunchtime, they spread the rice they brought from home on plantain leaves laid out on the floor of their jhum hut. To eat along with rice, they cook *chawhmeh* (any dish eaten with rice) using whatever ingredients they can gather, fresh from the farm. During lunch break in the jhum, people take a well-deserved rest from their hard work and enjoy this time. Neighbours and friends often call each other over from nearby jhum areas, bring their own *chaw fûn*, and cook *chawhmeh* together in one of the jhum huts. They then gather to share and savour the meal together, a hearty midday meal known as *chaw chhun*. Accordingly, the Mizo term for forenoon, *chawhma*, literally translates to 'before food,' with *chaw* meaning 'food' and *hma* meaning 'before.' Similarly, the term for afternoon, *chawhnu*, translates to 'after food,' with *hnu* meaning 'after'. The linguistic structure of their terms for parts of the day reflects the centrality of food in their daily lives.

At noon, those who stayed home had a simple lunch of rice and herbs (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 17). After formal education was introduced in the region and children began attending school, students initially did not bring packed lunches (tiffins) from home. Instead, they would

return home during the lunch break to eat a meal of leftover rice from the morning, known as *chawṭhing.* After lunch, women resume domestic work until evening, when they fetch water from the spring and attend to various tasks such as feeding pigs, securing the chickens in their baskets, and preparing dinner around 3 to 4 p.m. Those working in the jhum fields return home around 5 p.m., and after settling in, the family gathers for their evening meal at around 6 p.m. This evening meal is slightly more elaborate than the morning and midday meals with added ingredients like meat, dried fish, or vegetables (ibid).

Due to changing occupations and evolving lifestyles, the traditional three-meal-a-day routine has shifted to a new pattern, with two main meals: a late breakfast and an early dinner. In urban and non-agricultural communities, the midday meal has been replaced with a light lunch, often accompanied by tea. Many now start their day with tea and biscuits before cooking. They have a large meal between 8 and 9 a.m., followed by a light lunch around noon. Some also enjoy afternoon tea around 3 to 4 p.m. before cooking again, with dinner typically served between 6 and 7 p.m. While the Mizos may have given up many of their traditional practices and religious beliefs, they continue their traditional cuisine, which features dishes made from roots, shoots, and leaves, accompanied by meat and rice.

2.2.1 Patterns of Eating

Like other societies, the Mizos maintained their own dining practices, which were simple and modest. In a traditional Mizo household, the whole family sits on the floor or low stools, sharing a large wooden plate called *Thlengpui* made from *Thlanvawng* wood (beechwood). The size of the family plate varied according to the size of the family. This communal dining practice is more or less similar to the Indian "*thali*" system but with a unique twist - everyone eats from the same plate using their bare hands, without utensils. On a large wooden plate (*thlengpui*), the cooked rice from the *chaw bêl* (rice pot), is served in a circular shape, while the centre holds a wooden bowl called *khuhhriang*, filled with *chawhmeh* of vegetables or meats. *Mau fian* (bamboo spoons) are used to sip the shared soup from the same wooden bowl. Seated in a circle, everyone enjoys the meal, eating whatever is placed in front of them, fostering a sense of community and togetherness. As Lalrofeli (2019) pointed out, the practice of eating and sharing from a single large plate is common among all families, making it difficult to distinguish between the rich and the poor based on their dining habits. Additionally, since they shared the same occupation, their meals were generally similar, except for the chief and skilled hunters who had extra smoked meat stored for long-term preservation in their homes.

In traditional Mizo families, the eldest male would take the first bite before anyone else began eating. During the meal, as the head of the family, the father would assign tasks to each member and share advice, wisdom and cautionary words to his children (Hminga, 1987, p. 28). This time was seen as a valuable opportunity to teach important life lessons and responsibilities, especially since it was the only time when the whole family was together. Interrupting a family meal was considered impolite, so people made it a point to stay away from each other's homes during that time. Mizos referred to mealtime as "*hmelchhiat lai*," which translates to "the ugly moment," which can be regarded as a reflection of how much they valued privacy during meals. However, in rare instances, if someone unknowingly interrupts a family meal, to make them feel at ease and comfortable, the family would say, "*hmelchhiat lai tawnfuh chu damrei na*," which translates to "meeting the ugly moment leads to a longer life," and they would quickly invite them to join their meal. Additionally, the younger family members were expected to eat quickly, as lingering over food was viewed as poor manners (Prof. Rualkhuma Colney, personal communication, July 7, 2022).

Figure 2.1 Some traditional utensils displayed at the Mizoram State Museum (Photos taken by the scholar)

2.2.2 Traditional Gender Division of Labour

As Counihan (1999) observed, "feeding and eating hold significant meaning in every culture and are closely connected with gender relations." In Mizo society, although women do not

engage in the physically demanding tasks of cutting down trees, clearing forests, or preparing the jhum fields, they end up more exhausted than men (Zawla, 2011, p. 154). This is because they bear the entire responsibility of managing household duties, cooking, feeding the family, and taking care of domestic animals like pigs, without any assistance from the men. Additionally, the women fetch firewood from the forest and water from the village waterpoint, handle most of the weeding and harvesting, and make all the clothing for the household. They use cotton grown in the jhum, which they gather, clean, spin, and weave into durable fabric (Shakespear, 1912/2008).

The men build the house and clear the jhum fields, assisting with weeding and harvesting as well. They periodically travel to the nearest market, which can take several days, to buy salt and the few necessities that they cannot produce themselves (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 16). Hunting was a prominent aspect of early Mizo people, deeply embedded in their culture. Men were passionate about hunting and seized every opportunity to engage in it. In traditional Mizo society, the highest ambitions for the men were to become successful hunters or accomplished farmers (Malsawmdawngliana, 2015), earning respect and admiration from their community. As Lalzidinga and Muthulakshmi (2020) noted, their hunting skills were crucial not just for obtaining food but also "to protect themselves from wild animals" (p.92). Malsawmdawngliana (2015) explained that wild animals would sometimes threaten their crops, making it essential for men to protect their jhum fields and coexist with the animals in the forest. As a result, hunting became important to the Mizo people—it was more than just a sport; it was a necessary part of their way of life (p.132). According to Sangkima (1992), the early Mizos hunted for two main purposes. Firstly, for religious purposes, i.e., to achieve the esteemed status of *Ram Lama Thangchhuah* which required the killing of specific animals. Secondly, they needed meat for sustenance. They especially enjoyed hunting elephants, often travelling great distances and camping for extended periods to do so, as elephant meat was considered a special delicacy (p. 44).

In traditional households, men rarely take on cooking responsibilities unless extremely necessary. This cultural norm is humorously illustrated by a common saying: even if a father is sitting idle next to the hearth, watching as the food overflows, he will simply remark, "*Nu-i, i bai chhuan a liam*" meaning "My wife, your dish is overflowing," rather than taking the initiative to tend to it himself. This phrase highlights a deep-seated cultural assumption that cooking is primarily a woman's domain, and men will only step in when there is no other option. Interestingly, in a reversal of domestic roles, men assume a leading role in cooking for

community feasts, while women are not significantly involved in the main cooking tasks (this is explored in Chapter 4). This dichotomy underscores a broader social pattern, where men tend to assert their presence and authority in public spaces, while women's influence and control are more pronounced within private, household spheres.

Furthermore, the gendered division of space can be observed from a traditional maxim which says: *Tuikhurah mipa an lal a, pûmah hmeichhia an lal ngai e*, meaning "Men are sovereign at the waterpoint, and women at a village smithy hut" (Khiangte, 2008, p.86). This shows that there is a gender-based division of spaces: the waterpoint is a place solely for women, while the village smithy hut is a male domain. However, when a man comes to the waterpoint needing to draw water due to exceptional circumstances, they are accorded priority and respect by the women present who would allow him to draw water first. Similarly, if a woman needs to visit the smithy hut, they are given the same courtesy, highlighting a mutual understanding and accommodation in these gender-segregated spaces. This also highlights the role that each member or gender played in the community.

Lalrofeli (2019) argues that "the gender-based division of labour in Mizo society has hindered the development of its culinary system, claiming that women, overwhelmed with work from dawn to dusk, did not have the time or motivation to explore or innovate in cooking." She suggests that food preparation became a burdensome task for women, lacking creativity or experimentation and that the Mizos were not curious enough to develop new recipes or dishes. However, this perspective overlooks the richness and uniqueness of Mizo cuisine, which stands as a significant cultural identity and is highly valued by the people. The argument also underestimates women's contributions to Mizo cuisine. While daily cooking may have been shaped by practical responsibilities, this does not imply a lack of innovation or creativity. Mizo women have preserved and passed down a valued culinary tradition that continues to thrive, showing that the cuisine is far from stagnant or underdeveloped which is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

2.3 Traditional Culture

Without the cultural dimensions of food, it is incomprehensible to make sense of one's food habits, and when and how they eat certain food. Similarly, if we exclude identity, we overlook the important connection between food practices and sociocultural and personal values. Hence, we are missing crucial knowledge about how food shapes individual and cultural identities. Understanding the dynamic relations between food, culture, and identity in Mizoram requires

a foundational understanding of certain customs that have been, and in some cases still are, fundamental to the Mizo way of life and sense of identity.

Like every other culture, food and eating are integral to Mizo's daily lives, the very essence of culture and history that shapes their lifestyles and social connections. In Mizo culture, food is regarded with reverence, and there is a strong belief that mistreating or neglecting it is both sacred and inauspicious. This view forms an integral part of the cultural ethos, as it is held that improperly handling or showing disregard for food is not only a violation of a blessing but may also invite adverse consequences, particularly in the context of agricultural prosperity. The conviction is that mistreatment of food, including the neglect of leftover portions, could potentially lead to unfavourable outcomes and hinder agricultural success (Dokhuma, 2021). Consequently, even remnants of food are handled with care and respect, reinforcing the cultural significance attributed to the proper treatment of sustenance within Mizo society. This section discusses the different traditional Mizo culture and their connection to food and food practices which have been there over generations. While some have been discontinued, some are still practiced till today.

2.3.1 *Tlawmngaihna*: The Mizo Ethical Code

The concept of *Tlawmngaihna*, derived from the Mizo language, is strongly rooted in Mizo culture. It embodies the idea of selflessness, altruism, and an unwavering sense of duty towards others. Several writers and scholars have noted that the term *tlawmngaihna* is untranslatable and does not have an equivalent word in English. According to Lalthangliana (2014), while other societies may have a concept similar to *tlawmngaihna*, they seem not to have a precise word to capture its essence. Instead, they may explain it in ways that vary depending on the context and situation. In contrast, the Mizo people have a distinct and expressive word, *tlawmngaihna*, which makes their concept unique and explicitly recognised. Khiangte (2008) wrote that it is the "ethical code" that means "to be hospitable, kind, unselfish, courageous, industrious and helpful to others in all respect…the core of their philosophy of life" (p. 22). *Tlawmngaihna* is a Mizo code of ethics that closely refers to the classical sociological concept of altruism, and what Comte defined as altruistic principles and selfless actions. Roluahpuia (2023) asserted that "its closest meanings are altruism, chivalry, and selfless sacrifice" (p. 22). It is about showing kindness, generosity, and hospitality to others without expecting anything in return. It is a moral obligation to help those in need, be it strangers, regardless of their social status and relationships. In the context of the community, individual interests and needs

become secondary where one puts others above oneself, a "perfectly Comtean definition" one must say (Campbell, 2006, p. 362). Individuals who embody these principles are recognised as *Tlawmngai*, a title the Mizos aspired to achieve. As a result, those who are considered as *Tlawmngai* are admired and respected within their community, earning a reputation as exemplary members of society.

From a young age, children are instilled with the value of *tlawmngaihna* by being taught to be obedient, show respect to elders and guests, and be kind to one another. During meals, children learn to wait for the eldest family member to start eating before they begin. It is considered impolite for younger ones to eat before the elders, so they wait patiently until the eldest person takes their first bite, only then can the rest of the family members start eating. In the third stanza of the renowned song "*Aia upa te zahthiam*" (To show respect to elders), composed by Liandala in 1959 (Akashvani Aizawl, 2019), it states:

> Ruaitheh a chaw kil ho te hian, (At times of feast gathering,)
> Bar hmasatu anni ngai lo; (Do not be the first to eat;)
> Upaber in a bar hma chuan, (Until the eldest takes the bite,)
> Naupangin an bar khalh ngai lo. (The younger ones must wait.)

Sangkima (1992) believed that the reason the Mizos were able to easily let go of old values and practices and adapt to a new religion was because their strong attachment to the moral code of *tlawmngaihna* served as an ideal for them. This quality allowed the Mizos to adjust smoothly to any changes in their way of life. According to Sangkima, this adaptability was particularly evident when the Mizos accepted Christianity, as the concept of *tlawmngaihna* naturally aligned with Christian teachings on self-sacrifice. The merging of *tlawmngaihna* with Christian values facilitated their acceptance of other changes as well (1992, p. 154).

2.3.1.1 Tlawmngaihna and Hospitality

Khiangte (2008) explains that Mizo hospitality, which is "closely connected with the concept of *tlawmngaihna*", is commonly practised by most people. He describes how any Mizo would welcome a *mikhual* (traveller) into their home, offering food and lodging for a night or two without expecting anything in return. This hospitality includes both dinner and breakfast and even *chawfûn*, "a packet of boiled rice meal" for the traveller to carry on their journey, especially in times when modern transportation was not available (p. 23). In the hills, it was common for travellers to receive free food and lodging for a night. There is a well-known saying that goes, "*mikhual an hnar ngailo*," which means never turn away a guest.

Malsawmdawngliana and Lalsangpuii (2024) argued that while some individuals might opt out of extending this hospitality, which could be seen as impolite, those who follow the principles of *tlawmngaihna* would never deny a stranger food and shelter. The extent and regularity with which someone offers such accommodation to strangers often indicate their "possession of *tlawmngaihna*" (p. 345).

Moreover, children are taught from a young age the importance of *tlawmngaihna*, or generosity, towards guests. This means setting aside the best portions of meat or any food items for visitors rather than allowing family members to consume them. By offering the finest food for guests, they show respect and honour, demonstrating a deep-seated value of hospitality. Major A.G. McCall, who served as superintendent of the Lushai Hills from 1931 to 1943, observed this hospitality during his time in the region and recorded the following account of his journey in the Lushai Hills (Mizoram):

> A cleanly turned out chief with varying supporters may seek to halt us on our way with an invitation to accept some Lushai rice beer or fruit or tea, perhaps even an offering of eggs neatly packed in cotton in a bamboo container, or sometimes a fowl as a token of welcome in keeping with age-long traditional hospitality. (McCall, p. 21)

During fieldwork, respondents often shared tea with me and, on occasion, even invited me to join them for a meal. This gesture vividly reflects the ingrained practice of hospitality within Mizo culture. Pi[5] Mafaki, a 62-year-old woman, explains that within Mizo tradition, it has long been customary to ensure that any guest visiting our home is offered at least a cup of tea before they leave, an expression of warmth and generosity. Furthermore, in Mizo culture, serving country chicken to guests is a revered tradition, symbolising favour and hospitality. As Pi Mafaki mentioned, invitations from relatives and friends often come with a warm promise of serving country chicken, especially *Arpui tui lai* (an egg-laying hen). An egg-laying hen is particularly significant because it represents a future source of food and economic benefit (eggs), thus offering it suggests a sacrifice by the host. This act goes beyond just feeding a

[5] *Pi* or *Ka pi* is a respectable term in the Mizo dialect which means Madam, Mrs. or Smt. It also refers to a grandmother, an elder woman, and a married woman. Similarly, *Pu* or *Ka pu* is a term of respect for a man, like mister (Mr.) or Sir, also used to refer to a grandfather or a married man.

guest, it reflects the cultural values and is a powerful gesture of hospitality, symbolising that the host values the guest over even their future resources.

2.3.1.2 Tlawmngaihna and Sharing Food

In the spirit of *tlawmngaihna*, food is not just a source of sustenance, but a catalyst for connection and community through sharing. The act of sharing food symbolises a basic yet important element of societal interaction. This principle is distinctly evident within the Mizo community, where sharing of food is commonly practised. This practice is not merely a cultural tradition but a fundamental aspect of their society, reinforcing their communal identity and values. It is hard to imagine a meaningful social experience that does not involve sharing food, whether a casual cup of tea with a friend, a family meal, or an elaborate community feast. The Mizos practice "*chawhmeh in suah*," which means to give some portion of the dish to others, and "*thlai in thar tem*" meaning to share some portion of the first harvest with others. Among the many practices of sharing, these two are highlighted here because they showcase the communitarian ethos that deepens relationships and strengthens the community. To illustrate the concept of "*Chawhmeh in suah*," consider when a cook prepares a special dish for their family. They usually do not cook just for themselves; instead, they consider others and make a bit more than their family will need. This way, they can share a bowl with nearby neighbours and friends. If they know that a particular dish is a favourite of their relatives, neighbours, or friends, they intentionally prepare it with those people in mind, so they can give it to them. This tradition remains vibrant even today. For instance, within my own neighbourhood, one of my aunts, who excels at making *saisu bai*—a Mizo dish I particularly enjoy—frequently sends a portion to our family whenever she cooks it. Such practices of sharing cooked dishes reflect deep-rooted communal values and were particularly prominent during the pandemic, when neighbours often exchanged meals, fostering solidarity during challenging times.

In the case of "*Thlai thar tem*," people often share their first harvest with neighbours and relatives rather than keeping it all for themselves. This is especially true during the dry season when few people cultivate vegetables in additional fields or *Leipui*. Those who plant extra fields during the dry season typically share part of their harvest, usually enough for a single meal. In an interview, Pu Lianzama recalls his childhood, recounting that when his mother harvested crops, she would bring home as much as she could carry and share a portion with neighbours. Since their street was long, they would share with as many households as they could reach. He noted that the extent of sharing often depended on proximity; they did not feel

obligated to share with those who lived farther away. Quoting a Bible verse, he remarked, "As the saying goes, 'Better a neighbour nearby than a relative far away' (Proverbs 27:10, NIV), adding that neighbours were naturally prioritised even before Christian ideology began to influence Mizo society" (personal communication, August 20, 2022). He explained that they shared not only vegetables, but also cereals and root crops, depending on the household's capacity and generosity. However, food sharing was not a strict obligation; rather, it was seen as a gesture of kindness and community spirit, known as *Tlawmngaihna*. Furthermore, they primarily share with those who do not produce enough or are in need. There is no obligation to share with those who have more, as it holds little value in such cases. Pu Lianzama also mentioned that if everyone has fields and harvests the same quality and quantity of crops, sharing would not be meaningful (ibid.). However, during the dry season, when crops are scarce, those with extra fields who harvest and share their crops make a significant and appreciated gesture, bringing joy to others.

The famous Mizo maxim, *sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*, which literally means "one who shares with others will survive but one who eats alone will die," conveys a moral principle about food and culture. This proverb reflects a broader philosophical perspective on communal sharing and generosity, highlighting how food practices can embody and reinforce the ethical values of *tlawmngaihna*. It underscores the belief that food is not solely a means of physical nourishment but also a reflection of moral values and social interconnectedness, shaping individual and community identities. Thus, as a close-knit society, Mizo society exemplifies a communitarian ethos that is rooted in the practice of sharing food.

On the other hand, food sharing in Mizo culture is a complex phenomenon, embedded with social nuances and moral implications. When an individual offers food to another, it is often initially declined, not only as a gesture of politeness, but also to avoid being perceived as a burden or to spare the giver from feeling obligated. This paradoxical behaviour reflects a deep-seated cultural ethos of *tlawmngaihna*, which prioritises collective well-being over individual needs. While sharing food is considered a virtuous act—demonstrating generosity and community spirit—accepting it can sometimes evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment, particularly among men. This is rooted in the Mizo cultural belief that community members are responsible for one another's well-being, especially concerning food. A lack of food is not viewed solely as an individual hardship but as a collective shortcoming. As a result, individuals may decline food offers to avoid placing a perceived burden on others or implying that the community has failed in its duty of care.

As one of the respondents Prof. Rualkhuma Colney said, a man's reputation is at stake if his neighbour goes hungry or lacks food, highlighting the cultural obligation to prioritise communal welfare over personal interests. He also stated that in modern society, where animals are raised for food and not for sacrifice and sold by weight, it is customary to share meat with family and neighbours rather than keeping it all for oneself. When someone slaughters a pig, they typically offer some portions to their neighbours as a gift, but the neighbours often decline to accept it freely because they value reciprocity and mutual support, embodying the spirit of *tlawmngaihna* (personal communication, July 7, 2022). This intricate dynamic shows the significance of food sharing in Mizo culture, where refusal to accept food can be a manifestation of respect, humility, and consideration for the well-being of others. This phenomenon illustrates the tension between individual agency and collective values, highlighting the complex relationship between the sharing practices and *tlawmngaihna* in shaping the Mizo identity.

2.3.1.3 Tlawmngaihna and YMA

The Young Mizo Association (YMA), an influential non-profit NGO, is built on the principles of *tlawmngaihna*. Established on June 15, 1935, by Christian missionaries and some Mizo church leaders, YMA is a voluntary organisation that plays a significant role in Mizo society. It functions in almost every part of Mizoram and other areas with a Mizo population. Membership is open to everyone, regardless of tribe, clan, gender, status, religion, or any other distinctions. YMA is involved in a wide range of activities, including education, health, disaster relief, cultural preservation, etc., where members engage in voluntary work, sacrificing their time and energy for the benefit of the community. The leaders and committee members of the YMA are also responsible for guiding and motivating the youth to embrace and practice *tlawmngaihna* in their lives. Through community service, cultural and social events, and cultural awareness and preservation initiatives, they exemplify the selfless and valued principles of *tlawmngaihna*.

YMA and Death Rituals in Contemporary Mizo Society

The Young Mizo Association (YMA) embodies the spirit of *tlawmngaihna* by supporting bereaved families in Mizo society. To illustrate, when someone passes away, local YMA members gather to console and assist the family. They transform the house into a communal space by rearranging furniture and setting up wooden benches from the YMA's property house,

which is available in every locality. Meanwhile, others build the coffin, demonstrating the community's collective effort to comfort and care for one another in times of need.

In Mizo tradition, if someone passes away before 9 a.m., the funeral is typically conducted on the same day, around 1 or 2 p.m. However, if the death occurs after 9 a.m., a ritual known as "*Mitthi lumen*" is observed, during which members of the YMA hold a vigil through the night, with the funeral taking place the following day. During such events, young men and women stay up all night singing worship and funeral songs, providing comfort to the grieving family. While some YMA members sing and keep vigil inside the house, others prepare tea and traditional food, "*sawhchiar*" (a thick rice porridge with chicken or pork), to keep everyone awake and energised. Tea is served multiple times throughout the night, with all the necessary utensils and equipment provided by the YMA and prepared in the neighbours' houses, ensuring that the bereaved family does not have to provide anything. Another group of volunteers assists with serving the refreshments. Notably, the tradition of preparing and serving food and tea varies by locality. Typically, men are responsible for preparation, while women handle the serving, although in some areas, men also serve the food. After the refreshments are served and eaten, the women gather the used utensils, wash them, and then return to the singing. The vigil typically ends at dawn with a prayer. Afterwards, the women sweep and clean the house, while the men prepare the space for the funeral ceremony.

On the morning following the overnight vigil, young men who did not participate in the vigil rise early to take the task of digging the grave for a burial, known as "*thlan laih*," under the guidance of older men. This is another vital part of the Mizo funeral traditions, and the immediate family members of the deceased do not participate in this work. Women also do not participate in the grave digging but provide tea, food and water to the men involved in the task. In some localities, however, both food and drinks are provided by the men, with women having no involvement in this task.

After the funeral process is done, in Mizo tradition, each household in the locality is expected to support the family by donating a cup of rice, called *Mitthi buhfai*, and firewood, *Mitthi thing*, typically collected by young women going door-to-door. If a household cannot spare a cup of rice, they are expected to contribute a small amount of cash instead. However, customs vary across localities, with some collecting both rice and money, while others, like Dawrpui locality in Aizawl, collect a cash amount of 40 rupees by the name of "*Mitthi thing*" (firewood) (Christopher, personal communication, November 6, 2023). The specific donations and

practices differ from one locality to another. These death rituals and practices reflect the deep sense of community and support within Mizo society, perfect examples to explain the treasured concept of *tlawmngaihna*, as the YMA takes on the responsibility of providing for the family in their time of grief. It not only eases the burden on the bereaved but also strengthens communal bonds by ensuring that the family can focus on mourning rather than logistical concerns.

2.3.2 Chieftainship and Taxes

In the traditional Mizo village, a *Lal* (chief) governed all internal village matters and owned the village land (*ram)* and everything within it. He was responsible for making all decisions and handled a range of duties including administration, judicial matters, maintenance of the bachelor's dormitory (*Zawlbuk*), war affairs, land issues, approval of religious and festival events, financing the public feast, and the allocation of jhum lands, which were also managed by the chief (Rokhum, 2013, p. 31). The village chief was supported by a council of elders called *Lal Upa(s)*. As the leader, the chief cares for his people and supports them in times of trouble. In return, if he faces difficulties, they help him as well. The chief was entitled to *Chhiah* (tax), and every household in the village was required to pay various dues to him. Dokhuma (2021) mentions that according to some elderly stories, the origin of the tax system in a Mizo village dates back to the beginning of the chieftainship system. Initially, chiefs owned and cultivated their own land, just like everyone else. However, as their responsibilities grew, including constant vigilance and protection of the village, they had little time for farming. To support their leaders, the people voluntarily offered a portion of their hunted animals and harvested crops. Over time, this practice evolved into a customary tradition, eventually becoming the tax system. These different dues were paid to the chiefs in each village until the British annexation of the Lushai Hills. Following annexation, the chiefs' authority was dismantled as the British asserted ownership and control over all land, granting themselves the power to allocate it as they saw fit. The chiefs also lost their taxation and judicial powers. As Pachuau and van Schendel (2016) mentioned, any chief who contested British rule faced punitive measures, such as the restriction of salt sales in their villages, a crucial commodity at the time which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Fathang **(Paddy due)**

Fathang is a due paid in rice after every harvest. The amount or quantity to be paid was not fixed and typically varied according to the chief's demands. Sangkima (1992) noted that,

initially, the payment was set at six tins of unwinnowed paddy (each tin holding about 12 kilos). This amount was later reduced to three tins. The Chief then used these supplies to help those in need during times of food scarcity. According to Lalnunpuii and Zote (2021), *fathang* signifies the social, economic, and moral aspects of the tax system. Socially, it symbolizes unity under one banner, reflecting the people's sincerity and loyalty to the chief. Economically, the taxes paid by the people help stabilise their financial conditions. Morally, *fathang* promotes noble values by discouraging selfish hoarding and encouraging shared resources, fostering a sense of friendship, fraternity, equality, compassion, and humility.

***Sachhiah* (Meat due)**

A portion of any animal killed by a villager, known as *sachhiah* (where *sa* means meat), was traditionally given to the chief, specifically the left foreleg, according to Sangkima (1992, p. 45). However, Rokhum (2013, p. 32) notes that the chief's share was the right front leg. In contrast, N.E. Parry, Superintendent of the Lushai Hills from 1924 to 1928, stated that the due consisted of the animal's left foreleg, referred to as a "*Dâr*" in Lushai (Parry, 1928/2009, p. 13). Dokhuma (2021) wrote that they gave the left foreleg because the left side was considered a blessing. By offering the left side, they believed it would bring good fortune and increase their chances of hunting more animals (Dokhuma, 2021). The chief is entitled only to the customary part of the animal and cannot choose otherwise. The due is always paid to the chief of the hunter's village, even if the animal was killed in the land of a different chief. No *sachhiah* is required for animals found dead or killed by other wild animals. If a chief wrongly claims the *sachhiah* for an animal killed in another chief's land, instead of directing the hunter to pay his own chief, he is liable to a fine of Rs. 40, payable to the rightful chief (Parry, 1928/2009).

***Chichhiah* (Salt due)**

Chichhiah was a tax on *chi* (salt). *Chikhur* (salt spring) was found on the lands of some chiefs only, which were collected for both personal use and sale (Parry, 1928/2009). Anyone extracting salt from the salt spring was required to pay a salt tax of one-tenth of their harvest to the chief (Rokhum, 2013). In addition to this, the chief could take as much salt as he desired. The villagers were not permitted to extract salt from the land without the chief's approval (Parry, 1928/2009).

***Khuaichhiah* (Honey due)**

Khuaichhiah was a tax on *khawizu* (honey). The chief owned all the wild honey on his land, and anyone who gathered honey was required to first present their harvest to him. The chief would then claim his dues and give back the remaining to the ones who collected it (Rokhum, 2013). Even if the chief did not join the gathering party, he was still considered part of it and received his share. However, if the chief personally went and led the group, he would receive both his share as a member of the party and an additional share of the chief's due (Dokhuma, 2021).

***Sechhiah* (Mithun due)**

When a villager sold their domesticated mithun to someone from another village, they were required to give a young pig to the chief as a form of tax, because the mithun was regarded as a valuable property of the village (Rokhum, 2013).

Besides taxes paid to the chief, they also had to pay tribute to the village blacksmith, known as *Thingdeng* in Mizo. As the village blacksmith played a vital role in the community, responsible for crafting and repairing essential agricultural tools for all households, as well as fabricating weapons like daggers and spears, he received a yearly contribution of a basket of rice from every household as compensation for his services. This is known as *thirdeng chhiah* (blacksmith tax). Furthermore, he was also entitled to a portion of any animal hunted, specifically the spine or three ribs, known as *thingdeng sa* (Parry, 1928/2009).

The following are other dues or tribute payable to individuals other than the chief and the blacksmith when an animal is killed:

Sabawp

During a hunting expedition, if a wounded animal escapes, a group of people may pursue it. The first two individuals to reach and retrieve the animal, whether it is dead or alive, are each entitled to a hind leg, *bawp* in Mizo. The person who touches the animal first has the priority claim. Additionally, if a man shoots the animal using a gun borrowed from someone else in the village, the owner of the gun is compensated for their contribution and is given the right foreleg as their share. The senior most member got the innards, known as "*a pumpui su*" and the remaining meat would be distributed among the group of men who went out for hunting.

When an individual hunts and kills a small animal, the meat is shared with close relatives and neighbours, providing just enough for a single meal. This practice is known as "*malsawm ruai*,"

meaning a “feast of blessings” (H. Lallungmuana, personal communication, July 19, 2022). The “feast of blessings” highlights the act of sharing as both a social and spiritual practice, reinforcing unity within the community.

Ṭhian sa beng, Pu-sa and Ṭhian vawk talh

The term *Ṭhian* means friend and *beng* means ear. The friend of the person who shot the animal receives the ears along with a piece of flesh next to them. This practice applies not only to wild animals but also to domestic animals, particularly pigs. Slaughtering a pig (*vawk talh*) was usually for private matters and the *Ṭhian sa beng* was given as a mark of lifelong friendship. The father-in-law was also given one side of the foreleg (*dâr*), known as *Pu-sa*. The *Pu-sa* is considered crucial and cannot be disregarded. While other relationships can be dissolved, the connection with the *Puzawn* (father-in-law) cannot be broken. Ending ties with a father-in-law is viewed as *thianglo*, meaning it is unlawful or taboo (H. Lallungmuana, personal communication, July 19, 2022). Apart from the friend’s and father-in-law’s share, the other parts of the pig were distributed among relatives, both paternal and maternal side. The father, brothers and uncles share the head and the ham, while the sisters share the hindlegs and the shoulder. The mother’s brothers and the wife’s brothers also share the *Pu-sa* as well as the thigh or the back ribs (Stevenson, 1943, p. 133). However, the practice of distributing meat based on specific parts is believed to have become less strict and has gradually faded in modern times. Today, slaughtering pigs is more about economic profit, with the meat being sold by weight. Nevertheless, the practices of *Ṭhian sa beng* and *Pu-sa* can still occasionally be observed today, especially when pigs are slaughtered for private events. These traditional customs of distributing meat among the hunters, as well as sharing meat with friends, family, and neighbours, emphasise communal sharing and the importance of strengthening bonds within the community.

There is also a practice known as *Ṭhian vawk talh*, where a pig is killed in honour of a friend, and the two shoulders are given to them. In return, the friend is expected to reciprocate by doing the same with one of their own pigs (Lorrain, p, 460). In the Mizo community, the practice of *Ṭhian vawk talh* exemplifies the spirit of reciprocal gift-giving, as described by Mauss. When a pig is slaughtered in honour of a friend, the gift of its two shoulders is not merely a voluntary gesture, but a socially binding obligation. The recipient is expected to reciprocate with a similar gift, maintaining a cycle of exchange that strengthens social bonds.

This custom, along with the distribution of meat among hunters, family, and neighbours as described above, illustrates Mauss's concept of total services. According to Mauss (1925/2012), "total services" refers to a system where gifts and sharing are not just voluntary, but strictly compulsory, ensuring social harmony and avoiding conflict. By participating in these practices, individuals demonstrate their commitment to communal sharing and mutual support, highlighting the interconnectedness of the community.

Sabe buh

Sabe buh is the portion reserved for village boys during the *Chawng* and *Khuangchawi* feasts of the Mizos (Lorrain, 1940/2008, p. 397). This share consists of leftover rice and meat from the main feast, which is boiled again into a porridge and served to the boys in the evening. If there are no leftovers, fresh rice and meat are prepared for them. The boys also have a custom called "*sabe buh ngên*," meaning "to ask for meat," where they ask or demand their share of the feast. To do this, the boys shake the house of the feast giver while chanting the following rhyme: "*Sabe buh ka duh ka duh; a al deuhvin, al deuhvin; a sa tel deuh, sa tel deuh*," (ibid) which means "I want my share of meat, a salty one, a meaty one." This highlights the high value placed on salt and meat, which were rarely given to children. Feasts, therefore, became special occasions for them to enjoy porridge with salt and meat.

2.3.3 Food in Feasts and Festivals

Agriculture being the main occupation of the Mizos, their festivals, known as *Kût*, were intimately connected to their farming practice. They observed three major *Kût* (festival)—*Chapchar Kût*, *Mim Kût*, and *Pawl Kût*—annually at distinct times and seasons. All three festivals were closely linked to the economic, social, political, and religious practices in various ways. They were economically connected to the agricultural calendar, upon which their livelihood depended. Socially, everyone in the community looked forward to and enjoyed these events. The village chief was in charge of organising the festivities and deciding on the festival dates, while religious ceremonies during the celebrations were performed by the designated local priest known as *Sadâwt*. Each *Kût* was celebrated with a sense of joy and excitement, featuring traditional activities such as dancing, singing, rice beer drinking and an abundant supply of meat. In all these festivals, a public feast (*ruai*) was prepared for the whole community by killing certain animals. Apart from public feasting, food played an important role in these festivals in one way or the other.

Chapchar Kût

In March or at the beginning of spring, *Chapchar Kût* was celebrated after they finished clearing the forest in preparation for the cultivation of crops or *jhum*. It is considered the most important and grandest festival of the Mizos, and a time for merry-making and enjoyment for all (Khiangte, 2008, p. 26). It normally lasts three to seven days, during which drinking, feasting and dancing continue. When *Chapchar Kut* was drawing close, *zu* (rice beer) was fermented in every house. *Zu* was a staple and widely available at the Mizo festivals. This beverage is commonly found across Southeast Asia, particularly in the hilly regions stretching from Nepal to Vietnam. Even though *zu* was in abundance during the celebration, it was considered shameful to get drunk, therefore, youths avoided getting drunk to avoid *tlangchil*, a traditional practice to discipline heavy drinking. As Parry (1932) had written that Lushais in particular were "gentlemanly drinkers" (p. 90), drinking was not considered a problem for the community.

In preparation for the festival, some men would venture out to hunt and trap animals, which would serve as the main source of meat for the celebrations (Lalthangliana, 2014, p. 378). Formerly, a day was secured by the chief and the elders for the sacrificial ceremony of a hen in the jhums. The second animal sacrifice before the commencement of the festival was a pig to please the spirits to bring success to hunters and cultivators, which was conducted by the *Sadawt* (priest). This is called *Kawngpui siam* which signifies paving the way for rich harvest and success in hunting. On the first day of the festival, the Lusei clans killed pigs, and fowl, and offered *zu*, and the next day was done by the Ralte clan, followed by another clan. On the evening of the third day, a *chhawnghnawt* was performed. The children would gather at the village entrance where they pay and enjoy themselves on *Lungdawh* platform, a sacred space where stone monuments were erected. There they would feast on the rice, eggs and meat and stuff each other's mouths with the leftovers. This cramming and stuffing of food into each other's mouths is called *Chhawnghnawh* (Liangkhaia, 2022). On the fourth day, known as *zupui ni*, which was a day of drinking *zu*, the whole community gathered and started dancing together known as *Chai* (Zawla, 2011, p. 62). *Chai* is a typical singing and dancing style with *khuang* (drums) accompanied by the blowing of *seki* (mithun horns). Music and dance were integral to this celebration, where the success of the festival was measured by the ability of the young people to continue their energetic singing and dancing.

Mim Kût

A festival held in tribute to the dead, *Mim Kût* derived its name from a cereal crop called *mim* (maize). It is also known as *Ṭahna Kût* which means "feast of weeping." This festival is held in autumn around the end of August or the beginning of September, following the harvest of maize (Lalthangliana, 2014, p. 380). On this occasion, the traditional ritual of sharing zu (rice beer) and communal singing served as a cathartic expression of grief, as participants nostalgically remembered their departed loved ones. Fresh vegetables, maize, *chhangban* (a Mizo bread made from sticky rice), and other foods were offered to the deceased. A special *chhangban* was also prepared for their children, who found joy in these offerings while the adults mourned and remembered the dead (Zawla, 2011, p. 64). Food played a central and symbolic role in this festival, serving as a powerful medium through which the living connected with the deceased. The mourning period typically lasted three days. On the third day, the food that had been offered was shared and consumed, marking the conclusion of the offerings to the dead. However, this act of sharing not only marks the end of the festival but also serves as a communal practice that reinforces social cohesion among the living. Zawla (2011) noted that according to traditional beliefs, the spirit of the deceased was guided to its final resting place after three days of mourning. Because of this tradition, the month of August is named *Thi Ṭin Thla*, symbolising the departure of the deceased to their final resting place (ibid). It is also observed as *Thla serh*, meaning the sacred month, during which weddings and any form of celebrations were avoided.

Pawl Kût

Pawl Kût, or the harvest festival, was celebrated subsequent to the rice harvest in December or the beginning of January. The word *Pawl* means 'straw' or the stalks of grains after threshing. *Pawl Kût* was held after the harvest as a sort of harvest festival or thanksgiving. This festival was enjoyed by the community, especially by children and women. *Pawl Kût* was the festival where even the poorest members of the village were afforded the opportunity to eat meat, in which eggs were considered a compulsory item of the celebration (Sangkima, 1992). This festival includes a cultural tradition called *Chhawnghnawt*, where women and children gather on the entrance of a village called *Lungdawh*, bringing their finest food. Lorrain (1940/2008) noted that a distinctive aspect of the tradition of *Chhawnghnawt* meal is its playful and communal nature, where children and young adults joyfully feed each other boiled rice, hard-boiled eggs, and meat, creating a lively and cheerful atmosphere as they stuff each other's

mouths with food (p. 76). Notably, young men and women also join and take part in the *Chhawnghnawt*, making it a collective and inclusive communal activity. Children and youths prepared *zulâwm* (rice beer), but they did not drink, they gave it to the elders in exchange for other food items. This ritual acts as a social gathering and merry-making, fostering a sense of unity and bonding among the participants and illustrating the significance of food-sharing practices within the cultural context. This festival lasted for one day.

In Mizo society, feasts constitute one of the most significant features of any occasion, especially in their festivals, since time immemorial. The three main traditional festivals, along with significant events such as marriage and death ceremonies, and the performance of sacrifices and rituals, always culminated in the communal act of providing food and drinks to all members of their respective communities. Public feasting was a way of bringing people together from the rich to the poorest, as it was shared by everyone. They were the occasions where everybody could eat what some could not afford in their daily meal. According to Halstead, as cited in Mainland and Batey (2018), the communal sharing of food, particularly meat, constitutes a significant component of feasting in ancient societies, given the infrequent consumption of meat, which is typically reserved for special occasions (p. 788). Festivals were much anticipated by people since they offered an opportunity for everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, to indulge in meat consumption. Many families who could not regularly afford meat look forward to this festival as an opportunity to enjoy meat in abundance. Everyone made sure to consume a lot of meat and enjoy the festivities on these occasions. Feasting and sharing food were not only symbols of social solidarity but also a process of redistribution of wealth among the community, which is exercised as a feast of merit such as *Khuangchawi*.

Khuangchawi

Apart from these three major festivals, the early Mizos were known to practice a feast of merit known as *Khuangchawi*. It was the grandest community feast organised by a single individual or family. The event was so highly esteemed that the month in which it takes place—October—was named *Khuangchawi Thla* in the Mizo dialect (*thla* means "month"). October is considered the most favourable time of the year, known as *Favâng âwllên*, a period when farmers take a break from their daily agricultural work and enjoy the pleasant autumn weather (Lalthangliana, 2014). *Khuangchawi* was the ultimate stage to obtain the *Thangchhuah* title, the most desired and prestigious honour among the Mizos. According to K. Zawla, as cited in

Malsawmdawngliana (2015, p. 132), the term *Thangchhuah* can be understood by breaking it down into its two components: *Thang*, meaning fame, and *Chhuah*, meaning accomplished. He suggests that the combined term *Thangchhuah* can be interpreted as *Thangkim* meaning "all famous" (p. 133). The terms *Khuangchawi* and *Thangchhuah* are closely interconnected and cannot be viewed separately. To achieve the status of *Thangchhuah*, one must first perform the *Khuangchawi* ceremony. In other words, those who successfully carry out the *Khuangchawi* ceremony are granted the title of *Thangchhuah*.

In early Mizo culture, there were two ways to earn the *Thangchhuah* title: through remarkable hunting called *Ram Lama Thangchhuah* or through exceptional feasting accomplishments called *In Lama Thangchhuah*, in which "*ram lam*" means the forest side and "*in lam*" means the domestic side. To attain fame through hunting, one must successfully kill specific animals and host a series of feasts, known as "*Ai*," for each animal. Alternatively, one could attain the title by hosting a challenging series of feasts.

For *Ram Lama Thangchhuah*, one has to be an excellent hunter because he is required to kill a certain set of animals, including the barking deer, sambar deer, elephant, wild mithun, wild boar, and bear. In addition to these, it is also commendable for the hunter to kill a feared snake called *rulngan* (king cobra), *vahluk* bird (flying lemur), and *muvanlai*, an eagle that flies at great heights (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 63). To attain *Thangchhauh* on the forest side was a formidable task even for a *Pasaltha*, a skilled hunter. However, being a skilled and successful hunter was not enough; he also needed to be wealthy enough to perform a ceremony called *ai* after every animal killed. *Ai* is a feast or ceremony performed by the *Puithiam* (priest) on behalf of the hunter. It is believed to grant hunters spiritual power over the men or animals they have killed and to ensure possession of these spirits in the afterlife (ibid). This belief holds that the spirits of the hunter's victims will then accompany them on their journey to *Pialral* (paradise), serving as a form of spiritual entourage. The *ai* ceremony for wild animals typically involves sacrificing either mithuns, goats, or pigs with rice beer (Zawla, 2011). *Sakhi* (barking deer) is considered a blessed animal, worthy of a special *ai* ceremony. The rice beer prepared for the occasion is unusually sweet and reserved only for those who have performed *ai* for *sakhi*, making it a distinctive privilege for those who have earned it (ibid). Shakespear documented the journey of *Thangchhuahpa* to *Pialral*, based on the account shared by a Lusei informant as follows:

> "After death the dead man holds the horns of the sambhur while sitting on its head, the rulngan will wind itself round him and the horns, the muvanlai will try to seize the rulngan, but the Thangchhuah can drive them off. That is why they always fly screaming so high in the sky. The vahluk shade him by flying above him and also hide him from Pupawla, and thus the Thangchhuah is carried to Pial-ral". (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 63)

In lama Thangchhuah refers to the completion of all the required feasts and sacrifices that a man must carry out in his home. This form of Thangchhuah involves five to six stages, depending on the clan, and it typically takes several years to complete due to the significant expense involved in providing the necessary animals and a large amount of *zu* (rice beer). *Sakung* (establishing religion), *Chawng* (sacrifice to glorify god), *Sedawichhun* (Mithun sacrifice), *Mithirawplam* (honouring ancestors), *Khuangchawi* sacrifice, and *Zawhzazo* (completion of all religious rites). Preparing for each stage typically took one to three months, with the events themself lasting at least three to four days. In all of these stages, a huge number of animals were sacrificed for their rituals and feasts.[6] A major feature was the grand feast provided for the entire village, which required a substantial amount of meat and alcohol, making it a significant challenge to gather all the necessary supplies.

Before the *Khuangchawi* could take place, several preparations were essential. One key step was inviting the young men and women of the village to help the man who would perform the *Chawng* by husking large quantities of rice. This rice would later be used to make *zu* (rice beer). In return, the host would prepare a feast, including the slaughter of a pig. After the preparations for brewing *zu* were complete, the date for the first *Chawng* sacrifice was scheduled (Parry, 1928/2009). During the rice husking, they would use four or five large mortars and pestles, known as *sum* and *suk*. Three or four people would take turns handling the *suk* (pestles) throughout the husking process. An interesting aspect of this tradition, as noted by a respondent, is that the young people involved in this laborious task would often use the

[6] The complete stages and procedures of the Khuangchawi feast are thoroughly detailed by N.E. Parry in his book "A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies," pp. 94-108. Due to constraints on length, I have not included all of these details in this discussion.

opportunity to court, dance, and enjoy themselves while preparing the rice beer (Vincent, personal communication, August 4, 2023).

In the final *Khuangchawi* feast, two male mithun, one female mithun, and a male pig or boar were slaughtered, in which both the male mithun and boar were sacrificed to worship their *Sakhua*, while the female mithun was to be completely distributed among everyone in the village (Liangkhaia, 2022, p. 53). Those who performed this sacrificial feast were required to erect at least one y-shaped wooden post known as *Seluphan* (Malsawmdawngliana, 2015, p. 150). The term is derived from two words: *selu*, meaning the head of the mithun, and *phan*, meaning wooden post (ibid). The head of the mithun would be mounted on top of the post, symbolising wealth and power. Every Mizo man desired to have a long row of these *Seluphan* posts in front of their home. The number of animals sacrificed, particularly mithuns, was highly significant to the Mizo ancestors, as the mithun was a valuable and prized possession. While the animals were ultimately used for sacrifice or food, the mithun skull's placement on the *Seluphan* gave distinction to an individual. Parry (1928/2009) stated that *Khuangchawi* is the most significant feast a Lushai can perform. Due to its high cost, it was typically only carried out by chiefs and a few wealthy individuals, as most Lushais cannot afford to do so.

After completion of the series of feasts or after killing all the required species of animals, a man can rightly be called *Thangchhuahpa* and he was labelled as *Zawhzawzo,* which means "one who had completed everything" (Malsawmdawngliana, 2015, p. 136). After that, he could open a window in his house, entitled to wear a special striped shawl and a headgear to wear king crow's feathers (Parry, 1928/2009, p. 94). It was the highest achievement a man could reach during his lifetime and was considered the topmost position on the social ladder (Rokhum, 2013). The rewards for achieving the Thangchhuah title, as recorded by Parry (1928/2009), Zawla (2011), Sangkima (1992), Malsawmdawngliana (2015) and others were:

a) To enter *Pialral* (paradise) in the afterlife
b) To avoid the pellets of Pawla on their way to *Pialral*
c) To make *Vanlung* (dividing walls) and open windows in his house
d) To set up *Bahzar* (a veranda) outside his house
e) To wear a specially designed striped cloth of fame called *Thangchhuah puan*
f) To wear a special turban called *Thangchhuah diar* with king crow's feathers on it
g) To earn respect and privileges during their lifetime.

At the heart of Mizo culture is the spirit of sharing, which is vividly displayed during the *Khuangchawi* festival. Well-to-do families openly share their wealth by organising communal feasts and distributing valuable items to the public, embodying the values of generosity and community (Khiangte, 2008, p. 89). A family's wealth was measured by the amount of rice they harvested and the number of livestock they owned. They believed that this achievement would ensure their entry into *Pialral* (paradise) after death, and it could enable them to achieve higher social status and privileges during their lifetime. As discussed earlier, the primary idea of their religious belief was the pursuit of a blissful afterlife, to feed on ready-husked rice forever, where they no longer had to toil for food. This served as a guiding principle for their earthly life.

2.3.4 Some Common Rituals Involving Food

The superstitions and religious customs of the pre-Christian Mizo society significantly limited their worldview and made their lives difficult. They constantly feared offending the spirits that were believed to protect the animals and forests, which resulted in frequent sacrificial rituals where food played a central role as an offering to the divine or supernatural forces. The prominence of food in these practices underscores its symbolic value, reflecting a deep connection between sustenance, survival, and spirituality in the Mizo tradition. The following are some significant rituals where food takes centre stage.

Kawngpui siam

This ritual was performed to increase the chances of a successful hunt. It was conducted both before a major hunting expedition began and as an annual ritual typically around April (Shakespear, 1912/2008). Lorrain (1940/2008) describes this as "to offer an annual sacrifice to ensure prosperity for the whole village, especially in the hunting and trapping of wild animals" (p. 238). The term *Kawngpui siam* literally means "making a large path," and it signifies paving the way for success in hunting. The sacrifice was offered by the priest and his friends by killing a pig to please the spirits of the forest.

Fa no dawi

This was an annual sacrifice for good harvest, usually conducted in the house of the village chief, where the chief prepares rice beer in his home. *Puithiam* (priest) and two *Upa* (elders) then went out to the outskirt of the village, along the path leading to the jhum, where they perform a cock sacrifice. The wings of the cock were placed on the sides of the road, and the

sacrificed portions of the animal were laid in the middle of the road. On the following day, everyone had to stay at home and not go out of the village except to fetch water. This practice, performed in July, is believed to promote a bountiful harvest (Shakespear, 1912/2008). *Fa no dawi* was not a sacrifice to the spirits, but rather to ask blessings from the blesser.

After the Mizos accepted Christianity, *Kawngpui siam* and *Fa no dawi* were no longer practised. Lallungmuana said, "The one who gives blessing is God, and they believe that praying to God and sacrificing ourselves to Him is enough; therefore, the sacrifice of *fa no dawi* and other sacrifices to please the spirits were no longer conducted" (personal communication, July 19, 2022). In contemporary practice, individuals pray to God for good harvests and offer expressions of gratitude when they are blessed with one. They dedicate the first and best portions of their harvest to God by bringing them to the church, as written in the Holy Bible, "Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God" (Exodus 34:26, NIV). The church then sells these offerings to its members, sometimes through an auction, depending on the church, and uses the money for its needs. This practice is known as "*thlai thar thawhlawm*," meaning the offering of fresh harvests. They not only bring crops but also items like homemade cakes, bread, milk, fruits, and other foods prepared or produced by themselves that they view as blessings from God.

Thla hual

According to Lorrain's Dictionary (1940/2008), the term *thla hual* refers to the act of binding a person's *thla* (soul) to a specific clan, family, or even to the person himself through a special sacrifice. This ritual is performed either to secure the connection of the *thla* with the clan or to prevent the person's soul from wandering away, which was believed to occur under certain circumstances. Additionally, the sacrifice is also intended to calm and settle a person's mind (p. 475). When someone is struggling with challenges or overcome with fear, it can have a negative impact on their daily life, causing them to become excessively cautious and anxious. To find peace and liberation from their fears, troubles, and burdens, their relatives, mostly their father-in-law or grandfathers, would traditionally perform this ritual to help alleviate their suffering and bring calmness into their lives (Zawla, 2011). In the *thla hual* ritual, the most common sacrifice is a fowl, but a pig, or sometimes a dog is also used, and the close family members would prepare a small feast with the animal (ibid). Even after converting to Christianity, the *thla hual* ritual is not seen as conflicting with their religion. One of the respondents explained that, in Christian terms, it is performed as a prayer for the person and a

way to give thanks to God, almost like a celebration for someone who has overcome trouble or fear. For example, if someone narrowly escaped a deadly accident, the family might say, "Our son was in an accident but came out unharmed, so it is necessary to secure his soul." Relatives would then gather, saying, "I will contribute my chicken or goat, let us thank God and feast together." This is how *thla hual* is practised today (H. Lallungmuana, personal communication, July 19, 2022).

Rem âr

Rem âr, also called *âr zâng tuak*, refers to "a fowl sacrificed at a wedding" (Lorrain, 1940/2008, p. 383). *Rem* means to be at peace or to be settled, and *âr* means fowl. Dokhuma (2021) mentioned that *rem âr* was not compulsory for every wedding or was not a practice specific to a particular clan. It was primarily performed by those who were religious or those inclined toward superstition. In every Mizo wedding, the bride must bring *Lawi âr* (fowls) to the groom's house. One fowl from the bride's side and one fowl from the groom's side were sacrificed by the *Sadawt* (clan's priest) on the wedding night. The chickens sacrificed were prepared and eaten in the morning meal by the family. *Rem âr* sacrifice was made for two main reasons: to bless the newlyweds with children and a healthy, lifelong marriage, and to ensure the couple remains united, perfectly matched and finds harmony even in disagreements. (Dokhuma, 2021, p. 246-247).

In earlier times, at Mizo weddings, the *Lawi âr* (chickens) often went missing, as they were stolen by thieves during the night. Over time, this evolved into a tradition where people would deliberately steal the chickens brought by the bride. As the years passed, this became a source of enjoyment for the youth. Close friends or cousins of the bride or groom would sometimes plan in advance to steal the chickens, cook them at one of their houses, and enjoy the meal together as part of the wedding festivities. This practice continues in Mizo society even today.

Sa-ui tan

The sacrificial ceremony, known as "*sa-ui tan*," was performed to ratify peace after a war by offering a sacrifice (Lorrain, 1940/2008). Since villages often engaged in conflict with each other, the chiefs of the warring villages would make a peace treaty by killing a dog, symbolising the end of conflicts (McCall, 1949/2015). The name *sa-ui tan* plainly means "to kill a dog," reflecting this ritual. It is also known as "*remna sa-ui tan*" in which "*remna*" means peace. The concept of using a sacrifice to signify a peace treaty continues to be symbolic, even after the

abolition of chieftainship and the widespread conversion to Christianity. Some preachers have drawn parallels between this traditional practice and Christian beliefs, comparing it to the sacrifice of Jesus, which is seen as bringing peace between heaven and earth. This comparison and merging of ideas highlight how traditional concepts are integrated into new religious frameworks and the effort to make Christianity more relatable to local populations. On the contrary, it could also obscure the original cultural significance of the ritual.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of Mizo society through the lens of food. It reveals how deeply food is connected with every aspect of life by exploring the complex relationship between the natural environment, daily life, and cultural traditions that define the Mizos as a community. Apart from these, major historical incidents such as colonialism, conversion to Christianity, famine, and insurgency also have a significant influence on the Mizo foodways, which will be further explored in the next chapter. Each experience contributed to the development of distinct food and cooking techniques.

Daily routines and gender roles, such as the division of labour and patterns of eating, reflect a society centred on food production and sharing. The Mizo ethical code of *Tlawmngaihna***,** emphasising hospitality and selflessness, is most evident in practices involving food—whether sharing meals, hosting guests, or organising feasts and festivals. Rituals around food further highlight its spiritual and cultural importance, while traditional governance systems like chieftainship and taxes often revolved around food items such as meat, and agricultural produce.

In essence, food is not merely sustenance in Mizo society but an important symbol of cultural identity and social cohesion. Traditional Mizo culture emphasises communal feasting, sharing, and the ceremonial importance of food, reflecting broader societal values such as *Tlawmngaihna* (altruism) and community bonding. As a communitarian society, the Mizos prepare meals to serve the entire family, emphasising the collective nature of their dining practices. Their food is inherently meant for sharing, reflecting a cultural norm where meals are prepared not solely for individual consumption but for commensality. Understanding these historical and cultural frameworks is essential for appreciating the deep connections between the actual food items consumed, cultural identity, and community dynamics, which will be discussed in other chapters.

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