Chapter 3: FAITH, FOOD, AND FAMINE: TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH TIME

The history of Mizo society is marked by a series of transformations that reshaped its sociocultural, religious, and political landscapes. This chapter explores the critical periods of transition, beginning with the shift from indigenous spiritual practices to Christianity, a transformation that redefined the Mizo worldview and communal identity. The advent of colonial influences introduced not only new crops and culinary habits but also an altered perception of traditional customs, creating a blend of adaptation and resistance. The chapter further examines the challenges posed by scarcity and conflict, particularly during periods of famine, which compelled the community to innovate and endure in the face of adversity. Even the beginnings of political accounts in Mizoram can be traced back to a period of food crisis. During these challenging times, the community developed diverse strategies to tackle the situation, turning to wild plants as an alternative food source, commonly referred to as "famine food." From the sacred traditions of Mizo *Sakhua* (indigenous religion) to the colonial imprints on daily sustenance and the politics of hunger and survival, this chapter describes the dynamic interplay of continuity and change that has shaped Mizo society. By examining these transitions, it displays the evolving relationship between food and identity, highlighting how the Mizos go through the crossroads of tradition and modernity to form an identity that is both resilient and adaptive.

3.1 From Indigenous Religion to Christianity

As per Census 2011, 87.16% of the Mizoram population identify as Christian. It is the second state in India to have a Christian majority after Nagaland. However, the Mizos were introduced to Christianity only after 1891, when missionaries arrived in the hills. Before the arrival of these missionaries, they practised their indigenous religion, a belief system rooted in their cultural traditions. The Mizos believed in a variety of spirits (benevolent and malevolent) and one supreme being called *Pathian*, a term now used to refer to the Christian God. They believed that *Pathian* was the creator of everything and lived somewhere above the earth (Saiaithanga, 1994). They practised animal sacrifices and offerings to appease these spirits, to deliver them from illness and to secure good and bountiful harvests where food items played an important role. These practices have their symbolic representation which becomes meaningful when practised in action. Their belief system was connected with certain taboos and superstitions. When someone died, an animal was sacrificed for a meal on the day of the burial, a practice

known as *thlaichhiah* (Lorrain, 1940/2008). It was believed that the spirit of the sacrificed animal would accompany the deceased's spirit to the other world (or *mithikhua*) (ibid.). In all of their sacrifices, funerals, as well as festivals, killing of animals and feasting were practised. The most powerful sacrifice was that of a mithun (or gayal) and lesser sacrifices required pigs, chickens or wild birds, etc (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016, p. 78).

3.1.1 Mizo *Sakhua*

Defining an indigenous religion precisely is challenging due to the numerous existing definitions, and the Mizo pre-Christian religion, with its various interpretations, is equally difficult to articulate accurately in English. Each clan[7] has its own *Sakhua*, a special spirit that presides over the clan's destinies (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 61). *Sakhua* is a conjuncture of two sacrificial incantations directed towards *sa* and *khua*. *Sa* means meat and *khua* means village, literally. Khiangte (2008) wrote that *Sa* denotes animal life, symbolised by the sacrifice of *vawkpa sûtnghak* (boar), while *khua* signifies nature or weather, for which the domesticated *sial* (mithun) was sacrificed. This practice was considered sacred, and only the clan priest known as *Sadawt* was authorised to perform the rituals and sacrificial rites. Each clan had its own *Sadawt* to conduct rituals specific to that clan, and as part of the offering, the *Sadawt* received the thigh of the pig (Saiaithanga, 1994, p. 12). Every clan also had its own unique chant, distinct from others. Shakespear (1912/2008) noted that among the Lushei clans, the *Puithiam* (priest) was responsible for performing the sacrificial ritual, which involved killing a pig outside the house, then cooking and eating it inside. The legs and ribs were set aside for three days, placed above the rafters, and considered as *serh* (sacred) - if touched by an outsider, the household would face repercussions, unless a new pig was promptly sacrificed. The skull was then hung from the central house post. This ritual typically occurs every four years, unless the *Puithiam* advised more frequent performances due to illness (p. 70). The fact that the animal was not only killed but also cooked and consumed, as well as the parts considered sacred highlights the crucial role and significance of food in this ritual.

[7] In his book "Mizos of North-east India" (2008), Laltluangliana Khiangte describes a 'clan' as a group of blood-related individuals who speak the same dialect within a larger tribe and trace their lineage back to the same distant ancestors (2008, p. 18).

Liangkhaia (2022) posited that the two objects of worship, *sa* and *khua*, merged and came to be known as *Sakhua* (p. 54). The merging of these terms into *Sakhua* likely represents the fundamental principles or basis of the Mizo (Khiangte, 2008, p. 18). J.H. Lorrain, a pioneering missionary, defines *Sakhua* in his *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* as "(i) an object of worship, a god, (ii) ancient ancestors who are worshipped by the Lushais, (iii) the spirit who presides over the house or household, (iv) religion, religious rites and ceremonies" (1940/2008, p. 401). In summary, *Sakhua* encompasses elements of worship, ancestral reverence, household spirituality, or religious practice among the clans. If someone wishes to join the *Sakhua* of a different clan, they can do so by performing a specific ceremony, after which they must cut all ties with their original clan. Women and children would adopt the *Sakhua* of their husbands and fathers, respectively (Khiangte, 2008, p. 18).

In modern Mizoram, the term *Sakhua* has adopted the "Euronormative sense" of the word "religion," as described by Jackson (2023). But the traditional Mizo *Sakhua* is not exactly equivalent to religion (Lalthangliana, 2014), rather, it refers to the "group guardian spirit" that ensures the well-being of the people (Jackson, 2023, p. 116). Mizo writers and scholars such as Lalsawma and Lalsangkima Pachuau argue that the term *Sakhua* should not be translated as "religion," as it refers specifically to a particular ritual involving the spirits of the jungle and does not encompass the entirety of the religious practices (Lalrinthanga, 2020, p. 4). To illustrate how the "Euronormative sense" of "religion" was largely irrelevant within Mizo indigenous contexts, Jackson wrote the following:

> The historical Lushai Hills was a world suffused with spiritual power. Here, the mundane and the magical, the religious and the irreligious, were impossible to separate. A tiger might be a tiger or it might be a shape-shifting tiger-man. A human death might have been accidental or it might have been fated by the overseeing spirit Khuavang. Where missionaries parsed the world in terms of 'superstition' and 'reason', the magic and the mundane comingled for uplanders. Humans, animals, specific sites, forest guardians, and 'other-than-human' forces (benevolent and predatory) all had potentialities that people could use or avoid, for good or ill. Humans who neglected their duties and reciprocal relations with this teeming world risked sickness and death – their own or their community's. (Jackson, 2023, p. 116)

Jackson (2023) contended that the term 'religion,' rooted in a Eurocentric perspective, was initially used to compare or contrast various beliefs with Christianity. As a result, early

missionaries and colonial officers labelled the Mizo people as having 'no religion' or as practising 'animism' or 'devil worship' (McCall, 1949/2015; Shakespear, 1912/2008) This characterisation, according to Jackson, served as a rationale for their colonisation and the subsequent missionary efforts to convert them.

3.1.2 The Concept of Afterlife

The Mizos in earlier times held a belief in the existence of an afterlife for the soul, with two final abodes for the deceased: *Mitthikhua* and *Pialral.* In his book, *The Lushei Kuki Clans* (1912/2008), Shakespear provided the earliest written account of the Mizo belief in life after death (Lalrinthanga, 2020, p. 7). He wrote that the Lushais believe in a spiritual world that lies beyond death called *Mitthikhua*, the village of the dead. Beyond *Mithikhua* flows the *Pial* River, and on the other side lies *Pialral*, a place of bliss or paradise. *Pialral* was considered the most pleasant place for the departed soul as they could obtain ready-made food and drink effortlessly without any labour. According to the belief, entry to *Pialral* was not granted through virtuous living on earth, but rather through the proper performance of sacrifices, the killing of specific animals and men, and success in romantic pursuits (Shakespear, 1912/2008). *Mitthikhua*, on the other hand, was a common place for the soul who could not enter *Pialral* as they did not achieve the requirements to be performed during their lifetime. The afterlife in *Mitthikhua* was supposed to be full of misery, colourless, and poverty as they still had to work hard for food.

Since food occupies a significant place in the traditional Mizo religion, their worldview and even afterlife can be said to be shaped around food. Their major aim was to complete all the necessary feasts and ritual sacrifices during their lifetime so that they could attain the bliss of paradise in *Pialral*. However, those who can get to *Pialral* are: firstly, a successful hunter who killed certain animals or those who have enough wealth to perform a series of sacrificial offerings and grand feasts to attain the most prestigious *Thangchhuah* status (as described in Chapter 2). *Thangchhuah* not only give a ticket to *Pialral* after death, but it also grants certain privileges and a high status during a lifetime. It had a close linkage with the traditional Mizo religion and was an integral part of their belief system (Malsawmdawngliana, 2015). Secondly, infants who passed away prematurely, referred to as *Hlamzuih*, would enter *Pialral*. Thirdly, young men who had sexual intercourse with at least three virgin girls from the village could also enter *Pialral*. However, this was considered challenging because there was a belief that if the girls remained virgins until their death, they would be assured entry into *Pialral*. These

categories of people were also believed to be exempted from the pellets of Pawla[8] on their way to the afterlife (Shakespear, 1912/2008). Like in the living world, they believed that social distinction based on status and achievements continued after death. The privileged remain privileged, bringing with them whatever they sacrificed and achieved during their lifetime into the afterlife, where they enjoy a life of ease, with access to all the food and drinks they desire. Meanwhile, the poor remained poor and had to toil for their food even after death, lacking access to abundant food. This belief system illustrates how food is intertwined with social hierarchy, influencing not only daily life but also spiritual beliefs and the understanding of the afterlife. The ability to provide and harvest a certain number of foods becomes a symbol of success, while the lack thereof is seen as a sign of enduring hardship. It also emphasises the idea that one's status in life has lasting consequences, even beyond death.

3.1.3 Conversion to Christianity

The British government's expansion into the region in the 1880s and the subsequent formation of colonial administration in the Lushai Hills paved the way for the introduction of Christianity. The arrival of Christian missionaries in the region brought about a major shift in the religious, cultural, and social landscape. The first Christian missionary to arrive in Mizoram was Rev. William Williams from the Welsh Calvinistic Church, who came for an investigative visit between 15 March to 11 April 1891 (Lalrinthanga, 2020). Later, on 11 January 1894, two Christian missionaries commissioned by the Arthington Aborigines Mission, namely J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge, arrived in the Lushai Hills (Mizoram). This marked the introduction of "writing, education, and print media along with the world religion" in the region (Jackson, 2023, p. 57). Consequently, 15 March is observed as "*Chanchin Tha Thlen Ni*" (Gospel Arrival Day) in Mizoram by the Presbyterian Church, and 11 January is celebrated as "Missionary Day," a public holiday in the state. The date of 11 January 1894 holds immense significance in the historical narrative of the region, serving as a pivotal marker that divides Mizo history into distinct periods. The era before this date is characterised by historians as "pre-literate", "pre-

[8] According to the myth, Pawla was the first person to have lived and died. After his death, he was believed to be the keeper of the road and entrance square on the path to the afterlife. He was armed with a powerful pellet bow, which he used to strike down anyone who happened to pass by. Only *Thangchhuah*, *hlamzuih*, and non-virgin men were spared by Pawla's pellet. (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 62).

Christian", and "pre-British" periods, highlighting the impact of this date in shaping the historical identity of the region (ibid). Thus, in this study, I adopted the terms 'pre-Christian', 'pre-British', and 'pre-colonial' synonymously to denote the early period, acknowledging the complex and conjunctive nature of this era. While recognising the distinct connotations of each term, I utilised them interchangeably to convey the temporal and cultural context preceding the advent of Christianity, British colonialism, and Western influence in the region.

The initial encounters between the Christian missionaries and the Mizos were met with scepticism and curiosity. This cautious response was largely due to the Mizos' recent negative experiences with British officials and soldiers, which had left them wary of foreigners (Rohmingmawii, 2013). But over time, the teachings of Christianity began to resonate with the Mizos, and many of them embraced the new religion. Nearly fifty years later, the majority of the Mizos declared themselves followers of Christianity, which became integral to their identity (Pachuau, 2014). By the 1951 census, 80.31% of the population are Christians (Khiangte, 2008). According to Pachuau (2014), by the 1960s, it was widely acknowledged that being Mizo was synonymous with being Christian, despite the presence of non-Mizo, non-Christian individuals in the state. This acknowledgement underscores the transformative impact of Christianity on the cultural and social structure of the Mizo community, as the adoption of Christian practices and values became deeply intertwined with their sense of identity and self-perception. In her article, Angom (2020) argued that the Christian identity embraced by the Mizos may stem from a societal framework that historically accepts flexibility in group association and identifies parallels between traditional norms and new religious beliefs. This recognition of familiar concepts facilitates affiliation with Christianity, which has become integral to modern Mizo identity and society.

Conversion to Christianity was perceived as a transfer of one's *Sakhua* to *Kristian Sakhua* (Christian religion), wherein individuals abandoned their connections to their clan's *Sakhua* and adopted a new religious *Mizo Kristian* (or Mizo Christian) identity. In this process, the traditional rituals and sacrificial ceremonies performed by the clan's *Sadawt* (priest) were replaced by the Christian practice of conversion, where individuals who accepted Jesus Christ receive baptism from missionaries or church leaders. *Kristian Sakhua* became a uniquely universal and adaptable religion, not limited to any specific clan or village (Jackson, 2023). Moreover, the traditional Mizo belief of an afterlife, which included the existence of *Mithikhua* and *Pialral*, was replaced by the Christian concept of hell and heaven. In the Christian view, anyone who accepts Jesus Christ as their saviour and follows his teachings during their lifetime

can enter heaven, in contrast to the traditional belief where entry to *Pialral* was based on specific rituals and achievements. The Christian concept of *Pialral* that everyone, regardless of their social or economic status, will enjoy the same heavenly rewards provides a compelling reason for the Mizos to convert to Christianity. The promise of equal spiritual fulfilment and liberation from earthly injustices is a strong motivating factor for conversion among those who have faced significant socio-economic hardships.

Several Mizo scholars and writers have mentioned that following the introduction of Christianity, many traditional beliefs and practices, such as the death rituals, sacrifices and festivals, have disappeared and Christian festivals have substituted the native festivals (Liangkhaia, 2022; Sangkima, 1992; Khiangte, 2008; Lalrinthanga, 2020). However, it is important to note that the arrival of Christianity did not immediately result in the disappearance of their traditional practices, including feasting. The transition from pagan cultural practices to the adoption of Christian norms unfolded gradually rather than through a sudden and decisive transformation. Contrary to the expectations of the Christian missionaries, certain established traditional customs persisted and were not readily relinquished, such as the practice of feasting – a topic discussed in Chapter 6. This highlights how existing traditions blended with Christian beliefs during the process of cultural change.

The Church plays an important role in life-cycle rituals such as marriages and funerals. It also influences the state, social administration, and family life (Pachuau, 2015). In post-Christian Mizo society, it has become a dominant institution. In her article, Sitlhou (2018) argued how the church has taken on the roles that were once held by traditional institutions in society. This transition has led to the removal of customs and practices associated with traditional institutions such as the priesthood and the belief systems of early religions. Sitlhou emphasised the continuity of the ritual practices, highlighting how the notion of the 'sacred' endures across different belief systems. Within this framework, traditional rituals are superseded by Christian prayers as a way of expressing religious devotion and respect (2018, p. 10).

Christianity brought about a significant shift in the religious landscape of Mizoram, gradually replacing indigenous practices that had been followed for generations. According to the assertions made by Pachuau and van Schendel (2016), Christianity served as the foundational element for a novel group identity among the Mizos, and it was through Christian practices and concepts that new solidarities were forged. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of individuals who either do not adopt Christianity, who opt to adhere to traditional

religious practices or who have married a non-Christian spouse. Consequently, the application of Christianity as a marker of Mizo identity is not universally applicable in the present time. Despite the identification or differentiation of individuals as non-Christian Mizos, a cohesive Mizo identity endures, allowing for communal dining and feasting. Notably, there exists a paucity of knowledge regarding the categorisation of Christian Mizo food and non-Christian Mizo food. Furthermore, even in cases where individuals have married non-Christian non-Mizos or have relocated outside the state, preservation of Mizo identity is manifested through their culinary preferences and tastes. A 65-year-old respondent, Pi Rimawii, who married a Hindu man and settled in Tezpur, Assam, mentioned that after over 40 years of marriage, she continues to prepare chicken porridge in the traditional Mizo style as her father did. Additionally, she cultivates a Mizo variety of sticky rice, sourced from Mizoram, in their paddy field and still makes Mizo Chhangban (sticky rice bread) for her family (personal communication, March 10, 2023). Her narration demonstrates how culinary practices serve as a means of preserving and expressing cultural identity, even when living outside one's native region or integrating into different cultural and religious communities.

3.2 *Chi*: A Sacred Commodity

Chi means salt, and for the early Mizos, salt was something that was not very easily sourced in the past. The regional salt supply was marked by extreme scarcity, stemming from the rarity of local sources and the arduous process of evaporation from *Chikhur* (salt spring). Due to the limited local sources, people were compelled to undertake long journeys to the plains to acquire and trade for rubber and other goods from the neighbouring plains communities (Tribal Research Institute, 2008; Jackson, 2023). However, their efforts were challenged by the physical demands of transporting goods on foot through the rugged terrain, carrying heavy loads on their heads and shoulders, resulting in limited quantities being brought back. So, they had to ration the small amounts they obtained, using them frugally to make them last as long as possible (Malsawmdawngliana & Lalsangpuii, 2024, p. 117). As a result, salt became a highly valued and expensive commodity, prized for rarity and difficulty to obtain. Mizo villagers often stopped British soldiers during their marches, offering to trade food items in exchange for salt rather than money (Jackson, 2015). Due to its scarcity, it was used only on special occasions and was rarely given to children (Sangkima, 1992, p. 49). The elders used to say "*Chi heh chu awr puar na*" (meaning eating too much salt causes goitre), in order to minimize salt consumption. But this happens to be just the opposite since iodised salt can help prevent goitre, not cause it. Salt scarcity not only shaped dietary practices but also had broader

economic and social implications, influencing trade relationships and even local power dynamics. Salt was also used as a treatment for burns and was known to have health benefits when consumed in small amounts (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 178), either with or without warm water. This practice continues to be a common home remedy for certain ailments even today.

Besides their teachings and ideologies, the missionaries used salt to win the favour of the local people. As previously noted, the locals initially greeted their arrival with a blend of scepticism and curiosity, making it nearly impossible for the missionaries to find labour workers. The missionaries presented their problem to the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills district, who then devised a solution by regulating the sale of salt in the markets and permitting the missionaries to pay their workers with salt (Rohmingmawii, 2013, p. 194). In his letter to home, as cited in Jackson (2023, p. 154), J.H. Lorrain noted that they were overwhelmed people, old and young, who brought "wood, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, beans, sugarcane, fowls, eggs, etc., in exchange for salt." Knowing its value, missionaries used salt as a form of wage for the labourers they hired to construct buildings (Pachuau & van Schendel, 2016, p.179), further strengthening their position in the community. According to Jackson's observations, salt played a crucial role in helping the missionaries rise from "nobodies to somebodies" (Jackson, 2023, p. 155).

Figure 3.1 Traditional salt container "Chibur" displayed at the Mizoram State Museum (Photos taken by the Scholar)

In Mizo cuisine, salt is a precious condiment and the key ingredient of *bai*, a traditional Mizo dish. *Bai* is a vegetable stew cooked in a typical Mizo style, which is explored in detail in Chapter 4. It is the addition of salt or *chingal* (filtrated ash water used in the absence of salt) in Mizo *bai* that signifies its true identity apart from other ingredients. Without salt, the dish fails

to embody the fundamental qualities that define *bai*, illustrating how a single element can be essential to the identity of a culinary tradition.

The importance of salt and *bai* in Mizo society is evident in the fact that the common greeting, *Chibai*, is derived from these two food items (Yorke, 2020). This greeting is particularly noteworthy, as the word *Chibai* itself literally translates to a combination of *chi* and *bai*, reflecting their central role in Mizo culture and their widespread presence across Mizoram. In addition to the verbal greeting, the act of greeting someone with a handshake is also referred to as *Chibai* or *Chibai bûk* in Mizo. Lorrain's *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* describes *Chibai* as a term used for "salutation, greeting, or farewell, similar to expressions like Salaam, Hail, Good morning, Good day, Good afternoon, or Good evening, depending on the time of day." Additionally, *Chibai bûk* is defined as the act of saluting, paying respects, bowing down, shaking hands, or worshipping (Lorrain, 1940/2008, p. 88).

Bawitlung (2022) noted that salt held such historical value that it permeated into the Mizo language, and was often used to demonstrate hospitality towards guests. The phrase "*Chi ngatin ka bai sak ang che aw* (Let me specially cook for you with salt)" was commonly expressed to guests during meal preparation (Bawitlung, 2022, p.86). This highlights the generosity and special favour made by the host to honour their guests. This practice, frequently recounted in local stories, is commonly believed to be the origin of the term *Chibai* (ibid), symbolising a deep-rooted tradition of welcoming and honouring guests.

Meanwhile, in a separate line of thinking, Jackson presented an interestingly different view of the origin of the term *Chibai* as a greeting in his book "The Mizo Discovery of the British Raj" (2023). He argued that the arrival of missionaries significantly influenced the evolution of the term *Chibai* by transforming it from a specialised term used in the context of health and spiritual communication into a widely recognised personal greeting. Initially, *Chibai* was part of the vocabulary and chants of a *Puithiam* (a healer/priest) and had little public life, often overlooked by early English dictionaries of the Mizo language (Jackson, 2023, p. 165). Major McCall, the British official in the then Lushai Hills has written:

> The word Chibai is one of the first words any visitor to Lushai will hear as it is not the customary greeting to all. But in ancient days it was this word which preceded the Priest's song when he was commencing to make approach to the spirit whose clemency he was seeking on behalf of the afflicted. (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 74)

With the presence of the missionaries, *Chibai* began to be recorded in their writings, acquiring new connotations associated with "worship," specifically in the context of worshipping God, or as expressed in Mizo, *Pathian chibai bûk*, which denotes an act of devotion. By the early 20th century, the word *Chibai* became a common greeting among the Mizo people, particularly in interactions with colonial officials and the educated class. The development of vernacular print culture and missionary activities further entrenched its status as a versatile greeting, paralleling the evolution of "hello" in English, and by the 1930s, it was commonly used in letters and public signage (Jackson, 2023). Nevertheless, the historical significance of *Chibai* relating either to food or to worship has declined in contemporary Mizo society, where its depth of meaning often goes unrecognised, limited to greetings with handshakes and expressions of good wishes. However, it is essential to revive its cultural importance, both in culinary and religious contexts, as it remains a vital symbol of Mizo cultural identity and tradition.

3.3 Colonial Encounters and Culinary Changes

The British did not intervene with the Mizos for many years following their annexation of Cachar in 1832, despite recorded mentions to the inhabitants of the Lushai Hills shortly after the acquisition of Chittagong in 1760. Later on, the British administrators grew concerned about the recurring raids on the plains by the 1840s (Lalthlengliana, 2013, p. 92). Some scholars suggest that the Mizos conducted raids primarily for the purpose of collecting heads to display their strength and victory, which led to them being labelled as "head hunters" (ibid). Others believe these raids were driven by a desire for wealth and the acquisition of slaves (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016). Before colonial rule, the Lusei clans, particularly the Sailo chiefs, expanded their power and influence, leading to a shift in the political and military landscape. To maintain their position, the chiefs needed more control over labour to fund lavish feasts (which were crucial to their power) and defend themselves. This led to raids in the hills, expanding it to the plains to capture slaves for labour, which enraged the British (ibid).

However, the primary motivation seemed to be the British encroachment on territories claimed by Lusei chiefs, particularly the expansion of tea plantations in Sylhet and Cachar. The forests along the border of Cachar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts were teeming with elephants and served as hunting grounds for the chiefs. They often embarked on hunting expeditions in these areas, which provided them with food and valuable forest resources (Vanlalhruaia, 2013, p. 75). However, their elephant hunting sport was threatened due to the expansion of British tea plantations along the foothills and in the plains of Cachar. This led the Lusei chiefs to launch

a series of raids on the plantation sites. In response, the British launched the Lushai Expedition of 1871-1872, burning Mizo villages, and destroying food stores, crops, and livestock, thereby exacerbating food scarcity in the region. In addition, the 1882 famine sparked a surge in raids for labour and food as well, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The British responded with another expedition on the hills called the Lushai Expedition of 1889-1890, leading the British to launch a counterattack and annexe the entire Lushai hills in 1891.

The period when the British invaded and colonised the Mizos, from 1871 to 1947, is referred to as *Vailen* or *Vailenlai* (*vai* upsurge). *Vai* is a term used by the Mizo people to refer to non-Mizo Indians, distinguishing them from the hill people (known as *tlang mi*) of Northeast India. The exact origin of the term is uncertain, but many believe it comes from the Hindi word *bhai*, meaning "brother," which was used to call each other (Hluna and Tochhawng, 2012, as cited in Pachuau, 2014, p. 85). This term was likely adopted when the mainland Indians came into contact with the Mizos during the colonial time. Chuaungo (2016) wrote, "Due to the absence of the pronunciation of 'bh' in the Mizo vocabulary, it was simplified by using a 'v' sound" (p. 189-190). Interestingly, despite the colonisers not being *Vai*, the invasion is associated with the *Vai*, likely acknowledging the role of ordinary soldiers, mainly Gurkhas and Sikhs (Pachuau, 2014), and the Mizo people referred to this period under British rule as "*Vailenlai*," even though they called the British colonial officers "*Sap*." The term *Sap* referred to non-Indians, particularly white foreigners, which is believed to have derived from the Hindi word "*saheb*," meaning "master" or "sir" (Jackson, 2023, p.2). Additionally, going back to the time of migration, during their stay in the Kabaw valley, the Mizos called their Burmese neighbours as "*kawl*."

As a result, many food items introduced to the Mizos or brought to Mizoram were named based on their origins. As Jackson (2023) mentioned, British-imported plants were commonly given the prefix "*sap*," such as "*sap thei* (passion fruit), *sap bete* (garden pea), *sap bawkbawn* (tomato), and *sap pardi* (celery)" (p.63). The prefix "*vai*" was used to denote such food introduced by the *vai*, including *vaiumkhal* (almond) and *vaimim* (corn). Some items, like *alu* (potato), dhania (coriander), beans, carrots, dal (lentil), and chana (peas), retained their original names given by the foreigners. The prefix "*kawl*" was applied to sweet potatoes (*kawl bahra*), and guavas (*kawl thei*) from Burma (ibid).

3.3.1 Introduction of New Crops and Food Habits

The British officials wanted to make farming more market-oriented mainly to increase revenue generation (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016; Dawar, 2019). They started promoting the cultivation of new crops like potatoes and fruits and introduced wet rice cultivation (as discussed in Chapter 2) and rubber. Potato was introduced by a British administrator, Major R. W. G. Cole, around 1907-1908 (Liangkhaia, 2022, p. 185). According to Liangkhaia, Mizos initially referred to potatoes as '*sap bâl*' (English yam). Over time, they adopted the Indian term '*alu*' (aloo), a name that continues to be used today. In Mizoram, potatoes thrived, leading authorities to introduce a significant incentive to boost production: exemption from forced labour for select households (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016). Despite this, some people resisted the new crop, arguing that potato farming disrupted their usual routines, although they recognised its potential long-term benefits.

In 1908, rubber cultivation was introduced to the Mizo people during Major Cole's period. Believing it would benefit the state, they encouraged the planting of rubber trees and even sent some Mizos to the rubber plantation at Tezpur to learn more about it (Liangkhaia, 2022, p. 185). The next year, rubber tree seedlings were distributed across the Lushai Hills, with many planted in government plantations near Aizawl and others prepared for further planting (Jackson, 2023, 63). However, according to Liangkhaia, the widespread promotion of rubber planting was later found to be unsuitable for the region, and their efforts ultimately proved futile. In 1908, orange trees from the Khasi Hills were brought in on district orders, with plans to import five times more. In 1913, a variety of plants including "custard apples, guavas, papayas, figs, mulberries, loquats, cucumbers, grapes, mangoes, plums, evergreens, and pear trees" were transported from Calcutta along the Tlawng River by boat (Jackson, 2023, p. 63-64). Liangkhaia noted that to support the cultivation of mustard, oranges, and pineapples, they established Chite Farm at Chite, from which they distributed a large number of seeds throughout Mizoram (2022, p. 185-186). Among the Mizo chiefs, Khamliana was one of the first to cultivate '*vai* plants' like oranges, jackfruit, pineapples, rubber trees, and guavas (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2016, p. 175).

The first two Mizo newspapers namely *Mizo Chanchin Laisuih* (1898) and *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Bu* (1902), both introduced by Captain J. Shakespear, played a vital role in promoting and educating the public about these new crops. The newspapers featured articles highlighting the benefits, providing essential information, and offering instructions on how to cultivate and

plant these new food sources. By doing so, they helped increase adoption rates among local farmers, contributing to improved food security and economic growth. The newspapers' coverage also facilitated a broader understanding of modern agricultural practices, paving the way for future innovations in the local food system. Furthermore, the publications served as a crucial link between the British administration and the local population, fostering greater awareness and cooperation.

Over time, the introduction of these new crops significantly impacted the food culture of the Mizos, as the people readily adopted and absorbed the new foods into their traditional cuisine. The new crops became an integral part of the Mizo dietary habits, and they creatively adapted them to suit their tastes and preferences. As a result, the traditional food culture underwent a notable transformation, blending indigenous and foreign elements to create a distinctive culinary identity. The willingness of the people to accept and make these new foods their own is evidence of their resilience, adaptability, and culinary ingenuity.

Another significant instance in Mizo cuisine was the arrival of the famous *feren antam* (French mustard). During the First World War, 2,100 Mizo labourers went to France to work for the British soldiers between 1917 and 1918. Of these, 2,029 returned, while 71 either died there or on the journey (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 292). Pachuau and van Schendel (2016) argued that this experience was a pivotal moment for the Mizo people, as it marked their first significant engagement with the wider world and sparked an interest in life beyond their hilltop. However, this incident also marks significance in Mizo culinary history, as it introduced a distinct mustard variety to Mizoram, enabling a "Mizo-French fusion cuisine" (Jackson, 2023, p. 65). McCall wrote:

> In their first camp at Monchy-au-Bois, twelve miles south and west of Arras, they were within the sound of the guns. Spirits were low, apprehensions high. But with down came a thrill, for the Lushais found themselves in camp just near a wide mustard field – mustard which is the joy of every Lushai, mustard, of which they had no taste since they left their homes. The excitement was intense, and war took on a more rosy hue! (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 291)

The returnees from France came back with the mustard seeds, sharing and popularising them among the people. This particular variety of mustard has remained a beloved ingredient in Mizo cooking, enjoyed by people of all ages, and continues to be a favourite among the many mustard varieties consumed by the Mizos to this day.

Apart from these crops, British officials and Christian missionaries introduced bread and cake baking to the Mizos mainly for their own use, but over time, the practice became part of Mizo culture. They also relied on imported tinned food items like meat and dairy, as they found it difficult to adjust to the local cuisine. Native cooks were taught how to prepare these foods, learning European-style cooking. Among these native cooks who worked for missionaries, Pi Hmingliani became well-known among the Mizo community for her culinary expertise. According to her daughter Pi Ramtei, Pi Hmingliani learned to prepare new types of food and adopted various cooking methods from the missionaries. Even after the missionaries left, they continued to send her baking supplies and she eventually opened her own bakery named "Hmingliani Bakery." Notably, she baked the first wedding cake in 1957, a testament to her pioneering spirit and culinary talent (Pi Ramtei, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Her culinary legacy has been passed down to her children and grandchildren, who have become well-known food entrepreneurs in Mizoram to this day.

The introduction of jaggery from sugarcane, which the Mizo called *Kurtai*, was another colonial influence on Mizo cuisine. Before this, Mizos only had honey, which was rare and considered a luxury (McCall, 1949/2015, p. 186). According to Lalrofeli (2019), jaggery quickly became a symbol of higher social status, and with the later introduction of crystallised sugar, villagers, though not able to afford it regularly, began producing jaggery themselves. By the 1930s, certain families at Lungleng village were making and selling jaggery (p. 104). Tea drinking also became common in the Lushai hills, with black tea (*thingpui sen*) typically served without sugar due to its scarcity. As jaggery became more available, it was often enjoyed with tea, creating a unique Mizo food tradition rooted in colonial influences.

3.3.2 Transformation of Food Practices

With the introduction of new food items, a new cooking method also emerged. The primary impact of colonialism on Mizo food culture can be seen in changes to cooking techniques. This included alterations in ingredients, boiling methods, and overall preparation processes. Missionaries played a significant role in this transformation by conducting cooking classes at mission schools, where they emphasized cleanliness and hygiene (Jackson, 2023). Although these classes often focused on Western cooking styles, the Mizos had to adapt these new "raw" foods into a "cooked" form using their own methods. This led to a significant shift from traditional cooking methods to a hybrid culture which Lalrofeli (2019) termed as the "Indo-European-Mizo food preparation" (p. 104).

The advent of colonial rule significantly impacted Mizo cuisine, as the increased accessibility of salt, oil, and sugar led to a departure from conventional food preparation methods. Notably, frying, which was previously unknown in Mizo cooking, became a common practice, whereas boiling was the sole culinary technique employed in pre-colonial times (Shakespear, 1912/2008; McCall, 1949/2015). The scarcity of cooking oil in the hills may have made frying less common, but it marked the arrival of a previously unknown cooking method. Additionally, the use of oil in food preparation changed with the introduction of Indian spices and curry (Lalrofeli, 2019). While Mizos did use oil before British rule, the way oil was incorporated into cooking saw a significant shift. Animal fat, especially pig fat, was used as oil in pre-colonial times, primarily for dressing hair, rather than for cooking (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 2). But they have incorporated oil and frying into their cuisine, where *hmuihmer* (or fried food) became a part and parcel of the Mizo food platter.

Regarding the patterns of eating, Mizo dining patterns underwent significant changes after colonial influence. People began using tables, chairs, and stools, and individual bowls and plates replaced shared dishes (Lalrofeli, 2019). However, their eating habits do not change immediately. In rural areas, many villages continued the tradition of sharing meals from a common plate well into the 1950s, and several elders could recall their experience of using a *chaw thlengpui* (large wooden plate) during their childhood. In an interview, one of the respondents described how their dining practices gradually evolved with the increased supply of utensils in his childhood village. He explained that although they began using steel spoons and bowls, the tradition of eating from a *chaw thlengpui* persisted for a significant time. He also highlighted improvements in hygiene. In earlier times, their large wooden plate was rarely washed; they would simply beat it to remove food remnants and then set it aside for the next meal. Over time, however, they adopted the habit of washing the plate thoroughly before reuse. Despite continuing to share the plate, their practices became more hygienic. He further noted that it was not until the late 1960s that his family began using individual plates for dining (Dr. H. Lallungmuana, personal communication, July 19, 2022). Influenced by the cultural practices of colonial rulers, and missionaries, and their exposure to the outside world, certain elite families also started using spoons and forks instead of eating with their hands. However, despite the influence of modernisation and westernisation, the traditional practice of eating with one's hands remains common among the majority of the Mizos, much like in other Indian communities.

3.4 Politics of Hunger and Conflict

Famines are common and have occurred in every part of the world. They are deadly and can have long-term consequences not only for individuals but for communities and nations. Some of the most infamous famines in the world were the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s in Ireland, during which a third of Ireland's population died and another third migrated, and the Chinese famine between 1958 to 1962, in which an estimated 30 million people died (Minnis, 2021). Mizoram too have experienced severe famines in the past. The traditional Mizo village was largely self-sufficient in agricultural and food production, though infrequent food shortages occurred in certain villages due to frequent raids and hunting trips being conducted at unsuitable times. In addition to occasional food scarcity, they experienced severe famines due to the dying of bamboo known as *Mautam* and *Ṭhingtam* approximately every fifty years. The recorded cycles on the death of bamboo were: *Mautam* – 1861, 1911, 1959, 2007 and *Thingtam* – 1881, 1929, 1977. The famines that struck the region had far-reaching consequences, leading to not only widespread destruction and devastation but also significant political upheaval, ultimately paving the way for colonial rule and the birth of Mizoram as a state.

As mentioned earlier, Mizoram is naturally blessed with abundant bamboo forests covering more than 50% of the forest areas. Two of the common varieties of bamboo available in the Mizo hills are *Mautak* (Melocanna baccifera) and *rawṭhing* (Bambusa tulda), These varieties follow a natural cycle, flowering, producing fruit, and subsequently die every 50 and 30 years, respectively. Although the natural cycle of bamboo may not seem significant, it becomes a catastrophic event when combined with other factors. The bamboo fruits attract massive swarms of small beetles, called *Thangnang* in Mizo, and an explosion of rat populations (Sangkima, 1992). The rats, fed by the bamboo fruit, become fertile and multiply rapidly, leading to a devastating infestation. These rodents then ravage paddy fields, consuming everything in their path, and leaving nothing behind. This results in widespread crop destruction, severe food shortages, and ultimately, famine (*ṭam* in Mizo).

The first recorded *Mautam* occurred in 1861 (Sangkima, 1992), where widespread starvation claimed numerous lives and those who managed to survive became thin and lean, their bodies severely weakened by hunger (Nag, 2001). The second famine recorded by the British was *Ṭhingtam* in 1881 (Sangkima, 1992). About 15,000 people were estimated to have perished in this famine (Nag, 2001). Nag (ibid) mentioned that during this famine, the chiefs traded "their ivory, jewellery, and other valuables for food," even exchanging their guns and weapons for

supplies (p. 1030). Many lives were lost due to plague and disease, and their agricultural land became unproductive. Even the rubber trade, which had previously provided a source of livelihood, was failing. They lacked the resources to buy essential items like salt and tobacco, leaving them in a state of extreme poverty (Chatterjee, 1985, as cited in Nag, 2001). The Mizos strength was broken by the disastrous famines, enabling foreign powers to subjugate them finally. As Nag wrote, after 50 years of resistance, the 1881 famine weakened the Mizos, and subsequent food shortages allowed the British to easily establish dominance over the Mizo hills by 1890.

British officers, particularly Robert B. McCabe, exploited the famine as a strategy during the conflict. By deliberately manipulating famine conditions, he weaponized hunger to exert control over the Mizo population. Following the British invasion in 1892, their crops completely failed due to drought and deliberate disruption of planting cycles caused by state violence. McCabe viewed the people's hunger as an opportunity, he imported rice but offered it only in exchange for hard labour (Jackson, 2023, p. 36). The colonial approach not only worsened the existing food crisis but also deepened the humanitarian toll by turning hunger into a tool for subjugation. Their approach underscores how, in conflict zones, food shortages can be manipulated for power, intensifying both physical and psychological oppression.

The *Mautam* famine of 1911 led to another severe crisis, prompting missionaries to provide relief aid. Both colonial and missionary agents worked to import rice and arrange loans. In their desperation, Christian converts in the Mission Veng church adopted the *Buhfai ṭham* (handful of rice) fundraising method from neighbouring Khasi Hills, where Khasi-Jaintia and Garo churches had used this approach. Women contributed small amounts of rice, which the church then sold to build a new chapel (Jackson, 2023, p. 149). This practice is still followed by the church in contemporary times. Each family sets aside a handful of rice (equivalent to one cup of rice) whenever they cook a meal. The collected rice is then gathered by the church women's committee and sold to generate income to support Christian ministry work. Even today, the practice of *Buhfai ṭham* is deeply rooted in faith and regarded as the Lord's share, reflecting a sense of gratitude and devotion. One respondent expressed this sentiment, saying, "Whenever I cook rice, I believe that I am preparing a meal for the Lord as well" (Pi Sangpuii, personal communication, January 12, 2022) For some, this act of offering goes beyond tradition and embodies a spirit of generosity, as another respondent shared, "Since we receive so many blessings from God, I wanted to give more, so rather than just a handful, I always give a full cup of rice" (Pi Kungi, personal communication, January 12, 2022). This practice is often

instilled from an early age, as one individual recalled, “My mother taught us, even as children, to set aside a handful of rice every time we cooked. I see *Buhfai ṭham* as a simple yet meaningful act of Christian service that anyone can carry out” (Pi Mamuani, personal communication, January 12, 2022). Together, these reflections highlight the role of *Buhfai ṭham* as a symbolic and tangible way to practice faith in daily life, making it a cornerstone of spiritual and cultural identity. What began as a form of relief aid during times of famine has now evolved into a vital practice of mission work, faithfully carried out by almost every household to this day.

The British Government also provided aid by distributing bags of rice during the famine. Despite their efforts, the government’s relief amounting to Rs. 5,85,000 was insufficient to alleviate the widespread hunger (Sangkima, 1992, p. 50). Although the government had built granaries in some villages, they were insufficient to feed the entire Mizo population, many of whom travelled on foot from remote villages to collect rice. Rice was imported by boat from neighbouring states and distributed as loans. After the famine, these loans had to be repaid, and many who were unable to do so were forced into labour, known as *kuli*. One major task involved digging a large water tank in Aizawl, with people from various villages working on it. The labour was so gruelling that it became infamous as one of the greatest burdens placed on the Mizos (Rokhum, 1988). During this famine, widespread poverty, disease, and forced labour led many people to flee Mizoram, seeking refuge in neighbouring states like Assam and Manipur to escape the harsh conditions. Others turned to Christianity, hoping for healing and relief, resulting in a significant rise in the Christian population.

The Mautam famine of 1959 sparked one of the most violent insurgencies in Mizo history known as *Rambuai* (lit. troubled land). The famine transformed the political landscape of Mizoram, as the Indian government’s failure to provide a sufficient and timely response sparked the beginning of a political revolt in the region (Sitlhou, 2020). Before the famine, the Mizo people, highly in tune with the ecological rhythm, understood that the rare blooming of bamboo since 1957 indicated the onset of a famine (Rokhuma, 1988). However, the Indian government dismissed their warnings of impending famine, death, and destruction as mere superstition. In response, Mizo leader Pu Laldenga transformed his Mizo National Famine Front into the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961 and took up arms against the Indian State. The conflict between the MNF and the Indian army lasted over two decades, eventually leading to the Peace Accord of 1986 and the formation of the state of Mizoram in 1987.

Between 1966 and 1969, the Mizo insurgency faced its most intense clashes with Indian security forces. Due to the difficult terrain and dense forests, the Indian government implemented a scheme of "grouping" of villages in 1967, which Mizo called *Khawkhawm*, to weaken the MNF by cutting off their access to civilian support for food and shelter. Out of the 764 villages in Mizoram (then Mizo Hills District of Assam), 516 were relocated and amalgamated into 110 grouping centres as part of the scheme, but 138 villages were excluded from this operation (Nunthara, 1981, p. 1237). The village groupings were marked by strict control and lack of freedom, resembling prison-like camps with watchtowers, barbed-wire fences, and limited access points. Security forces monitored the residents, who were given identity cards and passes for restricted movement (Roluahpuia, 2023). The Indian army arrested and tortured any civilian whom they thought to be supplying food to the MNF volunteers. Women were molested, abused, and raped regardless of their age. The Indian army publicly displays violence with the intent to hurt and scare the people not to dare to support the MNF. Roluahpuia wrote: "The pattern of violence and the impunity with which it was done suggested that it was intended to dehumanize and humiliate" (ibid., p. 130).

Nunthara (1981) observed that the grouping of villages had a significant impact on both social and economic life, disrupting daily routines and hindering the ability to grow food. Economically, the forced relocation of people concentrated agricultural workers in the grouping centres. As land in these centres became scarce, the already brief jhum cultivation cycle was further shortened, resulting in sharp declines in agricultural production, food shortages, and widespread hunger. Socially, the disruption of jhum cultivation also undermined social harmony, leading to the rise of new social problems such as violent crime, gambling, and alcoholism—issues that were relatively unknown in the region before. Pi Rimawii described the challenges faced by their family as they were forced to relocate, she explained how her village, Tengtawng (now called Sailutar), was grouped with other villages to the Darlawn grouping centre, leaving their lands and jhums unattended, their houses were burned by the "*vai sipai*" (Indian army). Her father would occasionally return to the old land to gather food, but due to strict security and the need for permits, these trips were infrequent, and the food he collected was insufficient. She said, "As a young girl, I do not remember all the hardships, but I can recall my father carrying food from the old village on foot. Life was hard; we missed our home and jhum fields while adjusting to the grouping centre from scratch" (Pi Rimawii, personal communication, March 10, 2023). This paints a picture of severe food scarcity and the emotional hardship of being displaced. The family struggled to settle in the

new area without resources, reflecting the broader difficulties of relocation and the loss of traditional livelihoods tied to the land.

3.4.1 Famine Food

During various famines and food shortages in Mizoram, people had to scavenge for food from various sources. These diverse food sources helped sustain the local population and improve their food security. Foods that are consumed during food shortages or famines are referred to as "famine food," "alternate food," or "survival food." Minnis (2021) argued that the term "famine food" is misleading, as food shortages are not limited to famines. In any scarcity, people may consume foods they normally avoid or in unusual ways or amounts for their survival (p. 4). However, due to its common usage, "famine food" is often used to describe foods eaten during any kind of food shortage. As Minnis noted, famine foods are "ecologically resilient resources" because they remain less impacted during disasters when standard food supplies are unavailable (p 41). Famine food often includes parts of plants that are usually discarded, such as bulbs, stalks, leaves, and roots. In normal times, these parts might be thrown away, but during a famine, they are utilised in various ways and eaten to survive. Minnis referred to these repurposed crops as "reimagined crops." Mizos also eat stalks of pumpkin leaves, squash, mustard, etc., which they normally throw away. Dr. H Lallungmuana recalled how scarce food was during the Mautam famine. In 1960, he and a friend travelled from Biate to Vanzau village to collect rice and stayed at his relative's house. He said, "Not only was it a time of famine but also the dry season, making food even harder to come by." For dinner, they were given a bowl of boiled mustard stalks with no leaves, just the water to sip, along with cold leftover rice and a few stinky beans. Recalling this with a smile, he added, "It was hard to swallow, but it was all they had, and we ate until we were full" (H. Lallungmuana, personal communication, July 19, 2022).

People dug up and consumed roots from the jungle and gathered wild edible plants, including flowers and insects. The wild sago palm is one of the famine foods that helped prevent starvation for many impoverished people (Savidge, n.d., as cited in Dawar, 2019, p. 76). Corns are an important famine food that is eaten in place of rice. They are also grounded and added to other food to extend or augment the quantity and give the feeling of satiety. *Bahra* (wild yam) is considered the ultimate last-resort food. Harvesting this wild yam involved digging deep into rocky soil, requiring significant strength and patience. Because it was used only in rare emergencies, it served as a crucial backup food source (ibid). The difficulty of harvesting

wild yams has led to the term "*Bahra laih ang*" (like digging yam) being used metaphorically to describe something difficult and laborious to obtain. For example, they used to say, "*Duh loh te nena Khuangchawi ai chuan duhber te nen a bahra khur laih ka thlang zawk*" which translates, "I'd rather dig a yam pit with someone I love than host the grandest Khuangchawi feast with someone I do not love," highlighting both the difficulty of digging a yam and the value of meaningful companionship. In dire situations, people have also eaten insects like crickets, beetles, spiders, taro hornworms, bee larvae, tadpoles, and rats. Among these, *zu pawl*, the white-bellied variety of jungle rats found in jhum fields after harvest, is regarded as a special treat (Shakespear, 1912/2008, p. 36). While it was particularly valued during famines, it remains a delicacy today, especially among men. Edible insects and rats are considered repulsive as food by the British and many other communities, yet they are, in fact, healthy and nutritious. Among various tribal communities, particularly in Northeast India, they are traditional foods and highly valued delicacies.

According to Montana (2006), invention arises not just from "luxury and power," but also from "necessity and poverty" (p. 17). He believes that the true fascination of culinary history lies in seeing how humanity, through creativity and determination, has turned the struggles of hunger and lack of food into opportunities for enjoyment, transforming basic survival food into treasured delicacies (ibid). For the Mizo people, famine foods have gradually become an integral part of their traditional cuisine, evolving into cherished delicacies and symbols of their identity even long after the crisis has ended. This adaptation reflects their resilience and ability to incorporate scarcity-driven foods into their cultural heritage.

3.4.2 Scarcity and Survival

Counihan (1999) argued that hunger, much like poverty, disproportionately affects individuals in marginalised and disadvantaged social groups within stratified societies. For instance, women often experience hunger and famine more acutely than men due to their socioeconomic and political subordination in many parts of the world. She noted that food scarcity both reflects and intensifies social inequalities. Like any other nation, control over food supplies has historically been wielded as a weapon by those in power in Mizoram too, especially by individuals responsible for distributing government aid. During famine relief efforts, aid tends to prioritize those in positions of power, and in times of economic crisis, the wealthy often exploit the situation, acquiring land and resources from the poor, who are forced to sacrifice everything in their fight for survival.

In Mizo society, as seen during periods of food scarcity and hunger like *Vailenlai* (British period), *Rambuai* (insurgency), and *Khawkhawm* (village grouping), the once-cherished social harmony has gradually eroded, reflecting the impact of inequality in times of crisis. While many stories and accounts emphasise the resilience of Mizo society during these crises, illustrating how people shared their food and helped those in need, the negative impacts on the community remain undeniable. These episodes of food shortages disrupted the communal bonds and deepened social divisions as access to resources became increasingly unequal, reflecting Counihan's observations on the relationship between hunger and social stratification. As Nunthara (1981) emphasised, the real tragedy with lasting impacts of village grouping was the weakening of village solidarity and erosion of social values traditionally rooted in tribal communities. It altered the mindset of the Mizo people, fostering self-centeredness as they fought for food and survival. As people from different areas were forced into close quarters, various forms of division and prejudice emerged, and the once hospitable Mizos became distrustful of one another. Furthermore, due to necessity, people were compelled to leave their villages in search of jobs. As a result, Nunthara (1981) noted that between 1961 and 1971, the population grew from 14,257 to over 30,000 in the capital city, Aizawl. While many people returned to their villages after the crisis, others stayed behind, leaving several villages to be permanently abandoned. Although village life in Mizoram eventually resumed, it was fundamentally changed by the impact of insurgency. The traditional social harmony and togetherness were replaced by a new and different way of life due to the combination of historical struggles, modernity, and economic and cultural changes.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presents how closely connected food is with faith, culture, and survival among the Mizo people, particularly during periods of major social and historical transformation. From the pre-Christian indigenous belief system of Mizo *Sakhua* to the eventual embrace of Christianity, food has served as both a spiritual and cultural marker. The transition from offering traditional rituals to incorporating Christian acts of service, such as the *Buhfai ṭham*, as well as the concept of *Chibai*, highlights the continuity of food as a medium to express devotion and community solidarity.

The colonial era brought sweeping changes to the Mizo food system. The introduction of new crops and ingredients not only diversified diets but also reshaped traditional culinary practices, reflecting the complex interaction between external influence and local adaptation. For

example, the widespread use of dal and potato, which are now staples of Mizo food, only became prevalent after their introduction during colonial rule. Over time, the art of drinking tea also became a cornerstone of Mizo's social connection, with *kurtai* (jaggery) and *thingpui sen hâng* (unsweetened black tea) becoming staples offered to guests. Additionally, food has been used as a tool in political struggles and insurgencies where control over food supplies has been wielded as a weapon, impacting food security and cultural practices during times of conflict and famine. The colonial incorporation, coupled with natural disasters like famines, reshaped the relationship between food and survival. Famine foods, born of necessity, became symbols of resilience, while collective experiences of scarcity fostered an enduring ethic of sharing and charity.

Food was also central to the politics of hunger and conflict, serving both as a tool of survival during times of scarcity and as a medium of identity preservation. Practices like foraging for famine foods or offering rice to the church were responses to the fragility of human existence, transforming scarcity into an opportunity for spiritual and communal growth. Ultimately, food emerges not merely as sustenance but as a sacred and social element, bridging the physical and the spiritual, the personal and the collective. It is through the lens of food that the resilience, faith, and adaptability of the Mizos come into sharper focus, offering a unique perspective on how societies endured times of struggle and transition while holding onto their cultural and spiritual principles. The following chapters will further explore the traditional Mizo food items, preservation methods, and preparation techniques while continuing to analyse how foodways are interconnected with culture and identity.

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