Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Gender, Culture and Capital in Mizoram, India

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Social belief systems connected with the agency of women (or the lack thereof) have been retained to their disadvantage over centuries, without enough concern raised about persecution within traditional and transitional societies. The development of productive forces under burgeoning capitalism has only minimally acknowledged the impact had by women and their contributions to knowledge, economy, and society. Surprisingly, this transition towards capitalist development has rendered women even more susceptible to cultural marginalization and violence. This study intends to engage with this difficult reality in the context of certain social beliefs and cultural norms among specific indigenous populations in Mizoram, Northeast India.

Over the past 25 years, we have been engaged in the analysis and production of knowledge about witch hunts and cultural belief systems across transitioning and underserved societies in India and forging connections with structural transformations in Asia, Africa and early modern Europe. In 2020, Cambridge University Press published our book: 'Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation'.

Largely based on the conceptualisation of our study of 2020, we tried to explore social beliefs in witches and related ritual attacks on a large number of women, some men and, wherever possible, trans persons in the eight states of Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. This study is a contained analysis of witch hunts and social belief systems that allude to *ramhuai* and *khawhring* in the state of Mizoram.

Research support for immersive fieldwork and, crucially; the translation of local languages to English was provided by indigenous scholars Lalhlimpuii Pachuau and Hmingthanzuali. We are grateful for the tremendous help we received in conducting this study through identifying and engaging with contact persons for fieldwork while identifying villages in the Northeastern countryside to locate our research within.

We conducted 14 in-depth interviews with academics, social activists, women and men, shamans/healers/herbalists, village leaders, and common people in Mizoram. We are grateful to them for sharing their knowledge with us in a frank, empathetic and open manner. Our learnings find their source in several group and individual discussions and a series of candid interviews with academics, local women, and social activists.

Closer home - there are several individuals to thank. In his discussions, Prof. Muchkund Dubey conveyed to us his view that the production of knowledge can transform social and gender relations as it tends to give rise to justice movements. Prof. Nitya Nanda welcomed the idea of

this study and provided continued support for our work at the Council for Social Development, New Delhi. We would like to acknowledge the inputs made by Poornima M. of CSD.

In writing this study, we received unlimited support in sifting through complex ideas from Pallavi Govindnathan, who also designed our cover page. We want to appreciate and thank Anant Pandey, who, in addition to research inputs, helped shape the writing process. We wrote this study in friendship with three non-human beings: our cat and two dogs Gulgul, Kunnu and Jampa. We owe much gratitude to Silvia and Bahadur who plied us with coffee and tea and offered us their support. Asha Ramachandran willingly extended her help in the copy-editing process of this study, for which we thank her.

It is our hope that this study will help initiate dialogue, inquiry and much needed conversations on the damaging consequences of witch hunts on the agency of girls, women and sexual and gender minorities in Northeast India. In keeping with several difficult contexts elsewhere, we see this as a necessary step towards questioning and condemning the practice of witch persecution while upholding indigeneity for deep-rooted wisdom and knowledge systems. Significantly, we have noted the slow but steady chipping away at harmful and gender-unjust practices among youth and emerging feminist groups within the state. This makes us all the more confident that a steadily growing need for safe spaces (that are actively supportive of human rights and gender justice within culture and practices) is being both felt and gradually acted upon within Mizoram.

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The responsibility for opinions and interpretations expressed in this study rests solely with the two authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of RLS or CSD.

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WITCH HUNTS AND RITUAL ATTACKS: GENDER, CULTURE AND CAPITAL IN MIZORAM, INDIA

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in research on women's rights to dignity and equality in societies worldwide. Our study on **'Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Culture and Capital Across Northeast India'** critically engages with specific indigenous belief systems and the practices of witch hunts and ritual attacks - going beyond the dominant tradition of anthropological writings on related works.

After working with indigenous peoples' movements for more than 25 years, we embarked on this ambitious research project on the rights of women and marginalized men in indigenous societies from human rights and feminist perspectives. In our work, we attempted to engage with certain belief systems and ritual practices in matrilineal and patriarchal societies in Northeast India that are fertile grounds for discrimination and witch violence. We explore the directions of changes within these belief systems at the nexus of patriarchy, culture and capitalist trajectories. Our understanding of witch hunts represents the persecution, even killings, of women and some men who are understood to have acquired supernatural powers that they allegedly use to hurt their communities. These also include households and individuals that are perceived as possessing the evil eye. They are stigmatized, sometimes brutalized and often isolated for allegedly causing physical harm, making others sick and purportedly robbing persons of their resources.

It is to be noted that our line of inquiry is not intended to devalue the many ways and positive aspects of indigenous cultures - their communitarian way of life, their rich and varied knowledge systems, the nurturing of forests and the conservation of natural resources. What we have intended to examine are beliefs and practices that have a negative impact on the agency and autonomy of women and indigenous societies.

In line with our conceptual framework for earlier studies on Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, we have tried to explore social beliefs, patriarchal gender relations and ritual practices in the growing market economy of Mizoram in Northeast India, in this study. In our work, we engaged with specific Mizo beliefs rooted in superstition, alluding to witchcraft, good spirits, evil spirits and supernatural beings (Lalrinchhani, 2020;

Rohmingmawii, 2023; Behera, 2014). The practice of witchcraft in Mizoram among the Mizos has been regarded as a practice of the pre-colonial period, mostly told in folk narratives. With the spread of Christianity, there has been a gradual disappearance of magic and witchcraft in Mizoram, and the incidence of such practices has been regarded as the dark past (Rohmingmawii, 2023). In the folk narratives of the Mizos, there are accounts of the practice of dawi (magic/witchcraft/sorcery) and dawithiam (magicians/wizards/witches) in the present-day Mizo society, though such references are scarcely found in written accounts.

While we proceed to explore social beliefs and cultural practices (as well as economic concerns that give rise to witch violence and ritual attacks) - our writings acknowledge the efforts of women and allies in the Northeast of India working to co-create the space for human rights-based discourses, legal recourse to action against violence and questioning the impact of witch hunts and ritual attacks from a gender just lens.

Methodology

In the initial period of 10 weeks of our research, the two authors of this study were engaged in a systematic literature review that is considered unbiased and more gender inclusive with a feminist approach than the traditional anthropological narratives. In discussing with our research team of three younger scholars and women's rights activists, we tried to explore people's beliefs in witches, evil spirits (like *ramhuai*, khawhring) and the role of traditional healers. In the first phase of this research, we identified local research assistants who would be collaborating with us. This was followed by an additional review of the literature and newspaper reports about witch branding and evil eye in English and local language sources. A search by Google Scholar and a critical review of three Ph.D. theses produced on Mizo society and culture from the Department of English of Mizoram University was of immense help in finding relevant material, studies, papers and archival sources.

We decided to focus on the period from 1991 to 2022, keeping in view the emerging women's movement in India, feminist writings and the opening of the Indian economy with attention to the accumulation process in indigenous societies. Throughout the study, one of our concerns was whether this accumulation process has played a role in changing traditional beliefs and socio-cultural practices.

After the systematic literature review of the subject in March 2023, we conducted fieldwork among the Mizo people in the Aizawl area of Mizoram. We conducted 14 detailed interviews, as explained below.

Meetings with our two local researchers, Lalhlimpuii Pachuau and Hmingthanzuali – explaining in detail the purpose of our research objectives. Our discussions in the field centered on the following four points:

1. The belief system
2. Healers/priests in the community
3. Who do they heal? For what?
4. How can we end adverse ritual attacks on women?

S. No.	Participant Names	Occupation/Field
1.	Sangkhumi Bualchhuak (Padamshri Awardee)	She explained her work on Mizo Women's Association, she did not believe in any ritual that attacked any woman.
2.	Pachuau (Assam Regiment Retiree)	Practicing journalist, he discussed *ramhuai* (evil spirit), and how they go away with a ritual.
3.	Male local leader	90-years-old, who talked at great length about evil spirits.
4.	Another male local leader	He explained the historical existence of *ramhuai*.
5. & 6.	Meeting with 2 women lawyers	Discussed gender-based violence in Mizo society and rapes go unreported and unpunished.
7.	Prof. Sailo (Mizoram University)	Explained the existence of evil in Mizo society
8.	A woman. Former YMA President	She was once accused of being a witch
9.	A local healer	He explained the purpose of appeasing the evil spirits.
10.	A young man who was attacked by a *ramhuai*	He was attacked by a *ramhuai*. He showed the ritual of traditional practices how to appease a spirit and drive her away to the forest.
11.	A Ph.D. Scholar	Works on human-animal interactions and tiger and human relations.
12.	Meeting with a local woman	Explained how a woman's sexuality is controlled, any transgression of norms led by patriarchal society is said to be due to the evil spirit.
13.	Hmingthanga	An 85-year-old man, narrated stories of evil spirits
14.	Ms. Roseia	Narrated the Mizo belief in evil spirits and ghosts
	Total	**14 (6 Women and 8 Men)**

Research support both for the fieldwork and translation from the local language into English and vice versa, was provided by our two local researchers. We are grateful to them for varying kinds of field support, such as finding contact persons for our interviews and finding key persons, social activists and villagers under difficult physical conditions on a sensitive subject of culture and belief systems. Our learnings came from the fieldwork, a series of frank and candid discussions with farmers, academics, shamans/priests and social activists.

Qualitative research is characterised by voice-based discussions and an observation-based inductive approach to building knowledge. To understand the role of social beliefs and practices about ritual attacks and branding women as *ramhuai*, we engaged with our field research through individual interactive discussions within the community with thought leaders, Padamshree awardees, farmers and *ramhuai*-affected women and men. We were frank and candid in explaining the purpose of our study, i.e., to look at inter-related factors of transition from a forest-based indigenous economy to a social system of agricultural economy and a technologically oriented society with patriarchal state control resources and governance. This transition is marked by new inequalities caused by new production and consumption patterns, new forms of communication and emergent women's agency that are super-imposed over traditional beliefs and cultural practices, leading to an increase in social gender inequalities and patriarchal forces. Such structural changes caused by growing capitalist institutions, however incomplete and complex, have devastating effects on a significant percentage of women among rural and indigenous peoples.

In the countryside with local researchers

In our introduction with the interviewees, we further explained that our study intends to explore social beliefs and ritual practices as well as cultural and economic concerns that give rise to gender-based violence like witch hunts and *ramhuai*; yet at the same time create social and legal spaces for human rights-based discourses, questioning the practice of *ramhuai* and witch hunts. As a research outcome, we would like to see the social systems of Northeast India, where *ramhuai*, or witch hunts, will not be seen as a normal part of indigenous cultures.

To our surprise, our explanation of the purpose of our research was well-received with a polite silence and nodding of heads. We speak from the standpoint of those who are directly affected by traditional practices that are still gender unjust yet covered within the existing customs and social norms. Through our previous knowledge of the subject of witch hunts and learning from the feminist standpoint theory, we understand that a hierarchical gender social order provides a different perspective and worldview on inequality and marginality. These result in frequent, even contradictory answers about social beliefs and ritual practices related to marginalized voices, a lack of resource control and marginal representation of women in institutional structures of community governance and decision-making. As researchers, our challenge lies in presenting a holistic understanding of fragmented voices from the field and dismantling dualism and contradictions in field discussions.

Three Major Streams of Thought

We noted three major streams of thought on witch persecution and witch hunts. The first can be seen in anthropological studies on misfortune and the community role of witch accusations within the cultural context of indigenous and rural societies [see, for example, E. E. Evans-Prichard (1934/1976) and Mary Douglas (1970)]. They account for the development of the notion of witchcraft as a prominent occult praxis that occurs as part of conflict resolution systems in human existence. These notions are part of indigenous peoples' faith in supernatural powers, which were supposedly superior to those of humans. Old, single, unsupported women living in the margins of the community would be blamed for causing crop loss, bad weather conditions, natural disasters, diseases, deaths and so on. Accused of causing these detrimental events, violence against the accused, such as flogging, rape, burning alive, and otherwise murdering them, was seen as a socially acceptable tool for weeding out anti-social elements (witches) from the society.

The second stream of thought, as seen in post-modernist studies, is in the context of contact between indigenous societies and capitalist modernism, as seen in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff's (1999) depiction of witches' modernity's malcontents and Peter Geschiere's (2013) work on Africa's capitalist modernism. Silvia Federici's (2018) new book *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women* explains that capitalism and patriarchy together produce witches, who were confined to the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children. The capitalist society made women's bodies the fundamental platform of their exploitation and resistance. Women such as midwives, abortionists and herbalists with the knowledge of contraception were killed to consolidate patriarchal power and create generations of subjugated women with domestic labour class, a condition for capitalism. Older women were attacked because they could no longer provide children or sexual services and, therefore, were considered a drain on the creation of wealth in the social system. In many of the research sites, we noted that older women who could no longer provide children and sexual services to men were denounced as witches. They were seen as engaged in a demonic conspiracy and, therefore, thought to deserve a brutalized physical elimination.

The third stream is that, in agreement with an earlier study (Kelkar and Nathan 2020), this research combines a political economy approach with an analysis of culture and patriarchy. We relate cultural aspects of witch persecution and witch hunting to economic, social and political processes of change, as well as to the creation or strengthening of patriarchy within indigenous and rural societies. This is an attempt to explain what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the paradox of doxa", the historical structures of masculine order, with its associated social relations of privileges and injustice. The most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu, 2001: 1–4). There are, however, processes of dismantling the power structures, which bring in the transformation to the social-economic order. We often tend to ignore that the androcentric principle is necessary for an objective analysis of the social system.

In the creation of patriarchy, we saw a crucial role played by men's monopolization of productive resources, such as land and housing, and ritual knowledge, which is a socially highly valued knowledge. We have tried to understand the pathways through which witch persecution and witch hunting "either support or oppose the structural transformation from subsistence to accumulative economies" (Kelkar and Nathan 2020: 3). As explained in the preceding pages, we follow the standpoint of women persecuted or hunted as witches in indigenous and rural societies of India.

The definition of a witch is "one who causes harm to others by mystical means" (Needham, 1978, 26); later, in 2004, it was modified to "a person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or injury to other humans" (R. Hutton, 2004: 421). These definitions imply that there are people who use mystical or supernatural means to cause harm to others. Therefore, they suggest a justified belief in witchcraft that there are people who exist to cause harm to others through supernatural or mystical means. What is important to note is that such a social belief results in a discourse that creates a reality manifested in practices of witch persecution or witch hunting. Based on a recent study, we would like to define a witch as "a person who is perceived to cause harm by supernatural means" (Kelkar and Nathan 2020: 4). In reality, people may not actually possess such occult power to cause harm to others.

Background

Mizoram is one of the eight states of Northeast India, with a population of 1.097 million, according to the 2011 Census of India, and has a literacy rate of 91.33 percent. The Mizo people inhabit what used to be known

as the Lushei Hills. They were not subject to any kingdom until the coming of British rule. Among themselves, too, though village chiefs were basically from the Sailo clan, there was no supreme chieftainship or any supra-village authority. Villages existed as their own political units, carrying on swidden agriculture on the hillsides. When productivity in swidden fields fell after 5 years, the village shifted to another location. This shifting or migration meant that the Mizo did not accumulate much, so migration was easy.

Villages were located on the top of hills with defensive ditches with bamboo staves built around possible lines of attack. Critical to the defense of the village were the young men. After puberty, young men shifted from their parents' homes to the youth dormitory. They stayed there until marriage. The youth dormitory was important for young men to learn from their seniors and provided the force to defend the village. Besides defending the village, the youth were also important in raiding other villages. The objective of these raids was to secure captives and loot what there was. Since all these villages carried on swidden cultivation, one could presume that there was not much to be looted. The result seems to have been that raiding was not as important as it was among the Nagas, whose terraced cultivation systems provided regular surpluses, unlike swidden cultivation. But raiding was part of the economic system with its consequences for patriarchy and masculinity.

The Mizo raided each other's villages, both to take captives and loot whatever was available. This would increase the importance of warriors, particularly young warriors, and experienced leaders. In particular, it would increase the dependence of women on men as warriors, since the warriors were essential to the survival of the village. Since vegetable foods, including food grains from the swidden fields, were a large part of calories consumed, the dependence on men as hunters was not great. But the dependence on men warriors as defenders of the village could have given rise to the higher status of men as defenders of women and children, and that would become the base for men's domination of the political sphere.

A view of the Mizo countryside

Recognizing that the Mizo, like other indigenous peoples in Northeast India were societies organized around not just cultivation and hunting, but also raiding would provide a way to understand the growth of patriarchy in these societies. Of course, women, and even children, could have played a role in the defence of villages. But there can be no doubting the special and important role of men as warriors in the defence of the village.

Defence against raiding also requires a united community that follows rules and decisions taken by the leaders in warfare. It is likely that the transition from earlier domination by women to one by men took place with the growth of raiding. The paucity of ethnographic material makes verifying and detailing this line of analysis difficult. Ethnographic investigation among Mizo villages such as those on and across the Myanmar border as well as among related indigenous peoples, such as the Kuki-Zo across the India-Myanmar border, may help to resolve these issues of the formation of patriarchy.[1]

Further, the continuation of united village communities is reflected in the contemporary importance of the Young Mizo Association (YMA). The YMA even seems a continuation of the young warriors, who lived together in the --- house at the entrance to a village and were critical to the safety of the village. While the YMA now allows women to become leaders, just one woman has become a local YMA president. The YMA remains a strong patriarchal organization whose writ runs in the villages. They lay down the norms to be followed and implement them quite thoroughly. They decided on and implemented the parcelling of some collective lands into private plantations for the cultivation of tree crops, a positive step in increasing productivity. They also forced women with HIV/AIDS out of their village (Patricia Mukhim, personal communication). Thus, the important role of the patriarchal YMA would make it difficult for women to be assertive, whether in local affairs or in electoral politics.

Patriarchal Culture and Social Relations

The Mizo are patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal, domestic violence is a silent crime that many women suffer throughout their life. The neighbors refrain from interfering or helping the women; they consider it a “family matter”. “There are a number of incidents where a husband killed his wife but the neighbors refused to intervene or prevent it” (Local Records of NGO Working for Human Rights in Patnaik ed. 2008, pp. 385). In Mizo customary law, women did not own land or other property, except for the little that they could carry as dowry on marriage. Men were considered to be the breadwinners. Women carried out most of the labor in the swidden fields and did most of the work at home. They woke up earlier than men, started the process of cooking and then woke up men before they went to the swidden fields. There are writings that describe the gender-based division of labour in traditional Mizo society, men concentrated on defense and hunting, and women did all domestic work, food-centered productive and reproductive roles. Household work, i.e., looking after the household and children, drawing water, collecting firewood, pounding rice and cooking were the duties and responsibilities of women, while all the men and boys would go outside for hunting, raiding and clearing of forest for swidden fields, Women also did the tough work of cultivation, as men did, but they were kept out of any management roles of swidden fields (Lalrofeli, 2023: 77). This did not allow

1. For a global analysis of the connection between agricultural cultivation with regular surpluses and the rise of patriarchy see David Graeber and David Wengrow 2021.

Discussion on gender and social relations in Mizo society with local personalities

women any leisure. Despite doing most of the work at home or outside, "women do not have any substantial say practically in all the decision-making matters whether at home or outside" (Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande, 2009: 132).

Largely, the domestic space was the realm of women, and the public space was male. Their roles hardly ever split into each other's realm, and a woman was never allowed to enter zawlbuk (Boys/male dormitory in the village where all young men (fighting age) sleep together and are always ready for war or to protect the village from raids by other villagers and wild animals). The male head of the household controls the social-economic and religious affairs. Churches and political organizations had a negligible presence of women (Jangu, 2019).

If a boiling pot of *bai* (assorted vegetables that are cooked with either ash or vinegar, fermented pork fat or sodium bicarbonate) overflowed while a woman was busy tending to other household chores, the man who sat next to the fire would not touch the overflowing pot but instead called out to his wife, *'Nu-i, I bai chhuan a liam ania'* (Wife, your bai is overflowing). To tend to the overflowing pot was considered extremely unmanly.

Patriarchy is also reflected in the various sayings about women and men that denigrated women. What women said was ignored as being of no value. "Flesh of the crab is no meat; words of a woman are no words. Do not pay heed to what a woman says. Let a woman and a dog bark as they please." Wives were thought of as being entirely replaceable, as "worn out fencing and women can easily be replaced" (Mahapatra, 2008).

Women needed to be threatened or even beaten. "Unthreatened wife and unthreatened grass of the field are both unbearable." Women, drums and dogs were to be beaten – that is the way they were to be kept under control. Their knowledge was also belittled, "Wisdom of women does not reach beyond the village stream," meaning that women knew nothing about the outside world, ignoring the

A young Mizo explaining the rituals

fact that women did much work in the forest, both in cultivation and in gathering food and timber. These sayings seem to have generated an inferiority complex among women outside their homes, which makes them hesitant to participate in politics and governance (Jangu, 2019).

Mizo legend, however, attributes the cultivation of paddy or wet rice to a woman. Though women were not supposed to participate in hunting, the *Lasis* were the female deities of the forest. Hunters prayed to them for success. Female deities were also protectors of the forest (Hmingthanzuali and Rekha Pande, 2009). All of these legends point to the possibility of a time when women may have had a higher status in Mizo society than at the time when the British colonialists began to record their practices and beliefs.

In Mizo rituals, those carried out by men were generally related to blood – sacrifices for a good hunt or some other positive outcome. On the other hand, women's rites were related to herbs and plant materials. One can easily understand men's blood rites as following from their involvement in hunting and warfare, both largely forbidden to women, while women's rites followed from their involvement in agriculture and gathering. Along with this, men prayed to women deities for success in hunting.

Beliefs: Ramhuai and Khwahring

The Mizos are overwhelmingly Christian. But underneath Christianity, there is an underlying veneer of their pre-Christian beliefs, which include beliefs in evil spirits, called *ramhuai*, that are supposed to cause misfortune. It is believed that the spirits inhabited trees, hills, big stones, and water springs and mostly, sacrifice was made to evil spirits as there was the fear that they cause illness or death. When people fell ill, they used to attribute it to a *ramhuai* and would find out the sacrifices needed to appease that spirit, or *ramhuai*, and cure the sickness (Careyand Tuck, 1976: 197). This was particularly so in the case of times when there were many sick people in a village. As Shakespear, a colonial administrator in the Lushai Hills (as Mizoram was then called) pointed out, "..all tales about

[Ram] Huais either begin or end, 'There was much sickness in our village'…" (Shakespear, 1975: 67).

The *ramhuai* were believed to be of varying shapes, "some resembling humans, others grotesque and huge in stature above the ordinary humans. Some had curly hair and eyes set in a vertical line down the center of the brow… *ramhuais* had the faculty of taking on any shape; no constancy has ever been attached to their form. Besides, no one has ever really seen a *ramhuai* in its supernatural settings, at least that is the belief and, if anyone alleges, he has, his story is usually discounted and he himself considered not too nice to know" (McCall, Reprint 2015:69).

Chhuanliana is in his early 90s and has always lived in Aizawl, except for the few years he lived with his family in Sialsuk village. It was in the late 1960s/early 1970s in Bethlehem Veng area, an outskirt of Aizawl town, he saw balls of fire in the air in the forest just across his house. It was almost like a murmuration of birds in the sky. He thought it was quite unusual but when we asked him if he thought that was the work of *ramhuai*, he said he firmly believed it was not. He went on to say that back in the day, a lot of people considered such phenomenon as works of *ramhuai* and what he saw would also be categorized as tau (supernatural spirit) that moves around the forest as a ball of fire or torch. He believed it was a burning gas in the air rather than works of *ramhuai*. He credited his refusal to believe what he saw as a work of *ramhuai* because he was taught from an early age both at home and in Sunday school that Christians should not fear *ramhuai* of any sort because Jesus had conquered all the evil spirits.

He also narrated an incident that happened in the early 1930s when a *ramhuai* was thought to visit the house of a man who had recently passed away. All the young men, who had come together to comfort his young widow left the house one by one for they thought his spirit used to come and visit them at night. Chhuanliana's father, who was a teachers' training instructor in the then Lushai Hills wanted to prove them wrong. With his students, he spent the night near the house of the deceased man and waited up till midnight. At around the early hour of the morning, they found out that it was his widow who played tricks on everyone in the hope that all the young men would leave her house except one particular young man that she fancied.

He further narrated that before the majority of the Mizos were Christians, there were instances where women were accused of having khawhring (an evil spirit that enters the body of women) but he himself had not witnessed any such incident. He mentioned that some women were accused of having khawhring out of jealousy. Their fellow women mostly did this.

In another interview with Lalbiakthanga Pachuau, he said that Mizos do not deny the existence of *ramhuai* and other evil spirits. But he claimed that they do not have power over people who believe in Jesus. Since a very high percentage of the Mizo population has accepted Christianity, the fear of the evil spirit or *ramhuai* has been greatly removed. However, he talks about Mizo's belief in spirit that every human being has. The spirits of some people leave their bodies before they die, and he reiterated that this is not to be confused with *ramhuai*. Such spirits do not harm people, though some people may find them scary.

Some *ramhuais* were more venomous than others. Phung (another evil spirit) was very dark and large, a frequenter of village streets, who had the power of inculcating madness and causing fits, of making epileptics. Khawhring was responsible for causing sadness, for he could change and ruin the spirit of a person, who would then soon be known by all to be possessed of an evil eye. "Khawring was of a gluttonous disposition, consumed by a passion

for possessing the riches of others" (McCall, Reprint 2015, pp 69-70).

There are two types of traditional healers among the Mizo to deal with various illnesses. One is the healer, usually a man, who bases his diagnosis on reading a person's pulse. The other is the shaman, usually a woman, who goes into a trance and can get information about the sacrifice required to appease the *ramhuai*. The women shamans were thought to be more effective than men healers.

This belief in the existence of evil spirits that caused sickness was common among indigenous peoples in not just Northeast India but also Central India (see Kelkar and Nathan, 2020). Such beliefs also decreased in intensity as people learned to deal with health problems. For instance, in the 19th century, in what is now the state of Chhattisgarh, cholera was attributed to "cholera witches" (Macdonald, 2021). But as people learned to deal with cholera with oral rehydration and keeping water sources clean, the notion of cholera witches disappeared. When something cannot be explained, there can continue to be a belief in causation by evil spirits.

Along with learning how to deal with diseases, the new religion of Christianity, whether of the Pentecostal or Baptist varieties, taught the Mizo that the Holy Spirit or belief in Christianity would protect believers from all harm. This did not dispute the existence of evil spirits but only changed how they dealt with them. In the pre-Christian tradition, *ramhuai* was largely dealt with by appeasement; with Christianity, appeasement through sacrifices was replaced by protection through being a Christian believer.

In an important way, this replacement of appeasement by belief in Christianity does not challenge the belief in evil spirits and even persons who cause evil by using supernatural powers. This could enable the reappearance of explanation through evil-causing spirits, particularly in times of stress and crisis. Alternatively, even in daily matters, through a seemingly casual attribution of misfortune to the "evil eye", followed by the avoidance of persons who were thought to possess the evil eye. These casual, seemingly throw-away phrases reveal the continuing influence of pre-Christian belief systems, although moderated, on current behavior.

Authors and local researchers, after an interview with local personalities

The Mizos always lived in fear and were afraid of evil spirits, and their religious energies focused on those evil spirits through sacrifices, which they call inthawina - known as ceremonial cures. The Puithiams or Sadawt (priests) were invited to heal or treat the illness and undo black magic done on the victims by performing some kind of countermagic (Angom, 2020). Like the Mizos, the Bru community in Mizoram also has a strong belief in evil spirits. The southern Bru were fearful of the northern Bru, as northern Bru were more involved in the practice of black magic and witchcraft (Lalrinchhani, 2020).

Further, there was the belief that only certain tribes were experts in witchcraft/magic: Hmar (sub-tribes – Lalruanga, Hrangsaipuia, and Zangkaki) and Vaiphei. It was the belief that witchcraft/magic was taught to Lalruanga by a heavenly being called Vanhrika, and as per the oral tradition, it is mentioned that the magic is passed from one dawithiam (wizard/shaman/witch) to the other (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

The Practice of Witch Hunts

Shakespear writes that the Lushai are "firm believers in witchcraft" (1975: 108). He refers to several tragedies related to this belief and, one might add, the resulting persecution of those suspected of carrying out witchcraft. Among the Mizos, the practice of witchcraft is more commonly associated with men than women, though there is a reference to a women dawithiam named Zangkaki (LalparmawiiKhiangte, 2018) and the practice is performed in two ways, viz., chanting and by giving something to eat (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

It was also the belief that the person engaged in witchcraft could cause death or even cast a spell on a victim and make him/her suffer from chronic or wasting disease. To come out of such a magic spell, there was the belief in countermagic (dawisut) (Dokhuma, 1992 cited in Rohmingmawii, 2023). Further, the belief is that items such as bone, tiger's fang, lock of hair, or fur/feather are deposited in the stomach of the victimized person, due to which the person cannot be cured of the chronic disease and eventually would die. Another belief was that the liver of the dawithiam would cure a victim from a magic spell and would also offer protection from future attacks and with such belief, the liver of the dawithiam is extracted when he is killed (Lianthanga, 1999).

Strangers with displeasing appearances and unkempt hair are generally considered as dawithiam and such people are approached with fear. There are instances wherein such suspected strangers were killed (Lianthanga, 1999), and there are also other instances where people tried getting rid of the suspected persons from the community. Reasons for such reactions were that counter-magic was very expensive, and not many were able to perform it.

Before the colonial rule and the advent of Christianity, the practice of killing the suspects as dawithiam was prevalent among the Mizos. The chiefs pronounced the death penalty on the suspects, and, in general, the suspects were mostly the weaker sections like old men, old women and young boys (Lianthanga, 1999). While the richer and more powerful members of the society were hardly accused of witchcraft, it was mostly the weakest who were targeted, which is similar to the findings on witchcraft in Africa (Pritchard, 1976) and more broadly across India and Africa (Kelkar and Nathan, 2020). There are several cases where jealousy was the reason to accuse someone of being a dawithiam. Sometimes, such accusations were also made against the rivals to take revenge. Sometimes, the reason was also serious hostility and enmity.

In 1885, there was a case of mass killing reported in the village of Chawnthleng, wherein a person belonging to the Vaiphei clan was accused of being a dawithiam. He was tricked and killed by the order of the chief and later, the other Vaipheis of the village were targeted and

killed by the villagers. After killing them, the raw liver was eaten by the chasers (Lianthanga, 1999). Oral narratives highlight several such mass killings in Hmuizawl (Kalkhama's village), Lungleng (Dokapa's village), Thingsai (Lallianhleia's village), Khuangthing and Muallianpui (Lianthanga, 1999). Mostly, the minority clans of the village, viz. Hmars and Vaiphei were targeted and killed (Lianthanga, 1999; Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Rohmingmawii (2023) also highlights other cases of mass killings and how such instances of murder were stopped by colonial rule. During the early part of the colonial rule, such killing of a suspect had taken place in the villages of Thingsai, Khuangthing and Muallianpui, by breaking open the houses at midnight and killing people. Following this incident, there was a celebration in the villages for such execution. However, the accused were identified and imprisoned by the British government. Later, after the colonial rule, the first Superintendent of Lushai Hills District, Col.J.Shakespear did not allow such murder on the grounds of suspicion and gave the suspect a chance to take shelter in a distant village, which reduced the cases of such murder (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Usually, counter magic was performed by priests, particularly Sadawi, and only a few Sadawi were regarded as witch doctors, who were assumed to have the power to heal the sick through counter-magic. The treatment is mainly in the form of sacrifices of fowls and other domesticated animals. Counter-magicians are expected to be very powerful in order to counter the attack of dawithiam, which can even cause the death of the Sadawi and due to this reason, only a few Sadawis were available, and they were expensive too (Rohmingmawii, 2023).

Khawhring

Along with going into a trance and finding required sacrifices, some women were also said to be possessed or to become khawhring. This was said to be the result of jealousy, either of another woman who envied her beauty or by a man rejected by the woman. The charge was also made on women who were talented. The woman charged with khawhring was driven out of the village, never to be seen again. It would obviously be difficult, if not impossible, for a single woman to survive in the forest. She could only be taken in by some other village or die. There was no third option.

Only women could be khawhring. There was an idea that women should not stand out, whether for talent, wisdom, or beauty. While such women could be denounced as khawhring, this did not happen in the case of outstanding men. Rather, outstanding men as hunters and war leaders were honored. Men's talents were feted, but not those of women.

Khawhring is an unusual form of levelling. Many indigenous peoples with subsistence economies had forms of levelling through redistribution. Persecuting those who were supposed to have accumulated by illicit means was carried out in a number of ways. Among the Khasi, they were persecuted, even killed for supposedly worshipping thlen, the serpent that had to be fed human blood. Men were often the victims of thlen accusations.

Among the Mizo, however, it is women's acquisition of talent or beauty that leads to khawhring accusations and persecutions. Unlike among the Khasi, this persecution is not for acquiring wealth but for being more capable and talented. What this does is to convey the message that women should not try to stand out for their capabilities. This would also mean that they should not be assertive for fear of being said to have acquired their capabilities by being possessed by khawhring. Finally, what this means is that women's agency in building their capabilities is curtailed. While they are expected to be good household managers (women manage household resources,

including money), they should not be assertive in their ways, as they would run the danger of being denounced and expelled as khawhring, leading to death in some cases.

There was no such curtailment of men's capabilities, whether as hunters or war leaders. Accumulation and the resulting inequality were accepted. Particularly, the Sailo clan was accepted as being superior to the others and were village leaders.

Thus women, with the threat of khawhring and death by expulsion hanging over them, were actively discouraged from becoming outstanding. This seems to continue into the present. We were often told that women are reluctant to enter politics and take up leadership roles. Mizo women are there in all spheres of contemporary life, whether in professions or employment, even as butchers. But they are under-represented in politics. Though persecution as khawhring is not a practice anymore, the idea that women should not strive to be too capable may well continue to have an effect on current practice.

Conclusion: The Inner Realities of Folklore

Our field conversations enabled us to gain insight into the culture and worldview of Mizo women and men. The hegemonic forces of culture and belief have become ingrained in the contemporary narratives about women and men, bringing into existence the fear of *ramhuai* or *khwahring*, with a degree of disconnectedness to their urban existence. At the same time, however, we noted a belief in evil spirits shaping the Mizo ideas and values and, in turn, shaping social practices and institutions.

In our conversation with a man in his early 90s, he narrated incidents when he saw balls of fire in the air, almost like a murmuration of birds in the sky. He thought it was a work of supernatural spirits like *ramhuai*, but on our further questions, he added that back in the day, many people considered such phenomenon as the work of *ramhuai*, but he did not believe or think like the others. From an early age, he was taught at home and in Sunday Schools that Christians need not fear spirits of any sort; Jesus has conquered all evil spirits. He thought it was the burning of gas in the air. He talked about another form of *ramhuai* called Phung (a mischievous and ugly supernatural being, a female), usually employed to frighten children into obedience. He narrated that in the pre-Christianity days in Mizo society, there were many instances where women were accused of having *khwahring* (an evil spirit that is thought to enter the body of women), but he himself has not witnessed any of that sort. He explained two reasons for the decline in the belief in evil spirits: Sunday school teachings and the rapid urbanization of Mizo society, leading to living away from forests.

In another interview with a man in his 80s, he credited the Church with people losing their fear of *ramhuai*. But when we asked if he had encountered any supernatural being or the work of *ramhuai*, he narrated two incidents where he saw a bright light moving around in the neighbor's kitchen garden. He felt uneasy about this, and then, within a week, their family members died without much illness. He concluded by saying that Mizos do not deny the existence of *ramhuai* and other evil spirits. However, a very high percentage of the Mizos have accepted Christianity and feel protected by Jesus.

Our other question was about the position of women in Mizo society. During our discussion at a tea stall in Aizawl, four men told us almost in one voice, "Women have done very well in the Mizo society, but when it comes to making decisions, it is the duty of men to make wise decisions that will benefit everyone involved. It is okay for women to be in the discussion and make important decisions only when the family does not have able men. In the presence of able men, it is embarrassing for families to allow

The President of Young Mizo Association (YMA)

their daughters to have too much opinion." At another meeting with a prominent women leader, the President of Sairang branch of the Young Mizo Association, she said that to be in the leadership, women need to be hardworking and should not demand special treatment.

Language acts as a means of control in Mizo society. By means of jokes and subtle words, society tries to control its girls and women, dismissive of their ideas and abilities. In the preceding pages, we discussed degrading and humiliating statements by men about women in Mizo society. About the traditional practices and belief system, Mizos have found a new place in the Christian structure to locate their traditional beliefs and fear of *ramhuai*. Jesus is believed to be all-powerful and put all the evil spirits under his control.

In this study, we have pointed to the role of raiding as a component of the socio-economic systems of the Mizo and other indigenous peoples of Northeast India. Raiding necessarily involves defense against counterraiding or raiding by other villages. This makes women and children dependent on men as warriors and protectors in a way that does not occur with hunting. This would provide an important factor for the domination of men in village politics and organization and be a path for the overall domination of men, which is patriarchy.

The present socio-political situation in several parts of the Northeastern region of India shows that "the politics of identity has proven capable of being pervasive and divisive for indigenous cultures grappling with post-colonial and neo-colonial issues" (Fanai, 2021:98). However, there are feminist and social science discourses that critique their indigenous culture for carrying "the burden of identity", which assures development of an inclusive and gender-responsive identity and human rights-respecting cultures (Patricia Mukhim, 2023).

It is important to note that much has changed in the outlook of Mizo women and men in the past several decades. In academic institutions,

women have begun to pay attention to issues of feminism and gender relations in the Mizo patriarchal society and there is an increase in the number of women writers. “Resources in the form of folk tales and folk songs also show that women often tried to speak out against injustice” (Hmingthanzuali and Mary Vanlalthanpuii, 2023: 5).

Civil society organizations have been advocating for legal changes (i.e., an effective law) to punish the perpetrators of the *ramhuai* and khawhring spirits and to make the practices of shamans/healers illegal. However, any legal change alone may not end the violence against supposed witches. Two simultaneous policy measures are required to minimize and eventually end the practice of belief in witchcraft and the justification of violence related to such a belief. First is the introduction of decentralized healthcare facilities in rural and indigenous areas. Second, a policy change in the belief about the existence of witches, evil eye and witchcraft practices is also needed. Norms related to such a belief can change. They can change with political measures to promote indigenous and rural women’s engagement with elevated socio-political tasks and roles. Some mediating factors in this potential change can be accessed, as well as the use of technology, such as mobile phones, television and forces of gender-specific democratization brought about by the women’s movement that campaign against the notion of persons acquiring evil powers and organizing discussions by local, gender-responsive women’s groups on good examples of resistance against the witch belief and ritual attacks on women, who successfully fought against being branded/persecuted as a witch.

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