Towards a Vernacular Literary and Media History of Mizoram

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Performing Identity: Ethnicity and Ethno-nationalism in the South-east Asian Borderland Region of North-east India

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Historical analysis and description of language, literature and media relating to the North Eastern Region of India tends to proceed in an anthropological and evolutionary logic causing a disjuncture between those mainland languages possessing pre-print literary traditions and the languages lacking such a lineage in other parts of the country. This study attempts to locate the literary media history of contemporary Mizoram—a federal unit of India sharing international boundaries with Burma and Bangladesh within a non-hierarchical logic. The study employs the term Lusei and Mizo in the colonial and postcolonial context as an official administrative category.

The Mizo language is considered as a language having a short history. The literary canon is in the making and its literary practices are still being institutionalized. The print media is struggling to become commercialized and the audio-visual media has a weak presence. While these are obvious facts, we argue that the writing of the history needs to take into account some primary Mizo cultural forms .

We have identified two primary cultural forms that are irreducible to orality or literacy, but appear as largely oral or written forms: Thawnthu and Chanchin. These two forms interpenetrate language, literature and technological media. While the term ‘Thawnthu’ is interchangeably used for folktales, ‘Chanchin’ is used for newspaper or historical or any realist narrative genre or genres. Thawnthu, generally deals with the possible world and the Chanchin deals with the actual world but in our study we find that they do not restrict themselves either to the possible or the actual world. This paper demonstrates the characteristics of these forms through an analysis of a genealogy of language in the form of a ‘thawnthu’ and a critical engagement with the first amateur history written by a Lusei native, Liangkhaia known as ‘Mizo Chanchin’ or ‘Mizo History.’ In our analysis, we

emphasize the plasticity of ‘thawnthu’ and the seeming inflexibility of the ‘chanchin.’ However, we are aware both these forms are not necessarily mutually exclusive and they complement each other.

Presently, there is a lack of autonomization of the field into literary, journalistic and performative/expressive traditions. In fact, the Mizo language is still in the process of being standardized and the history of literature is about the weaving of this incomplete story. It is incomplete from a ‘chanchin’ perspective or from a prosification of the language. Perhaps, from a ‘thawnthu’ perspective, there is nothing called a literary deficit and the history of the ‘thawnthu’ is inscribed in the everyday literary and media practice of the contemporary Mizos. One of the manifestations of ‘thawnthu’ is the prominence of music and songs in Mizo personal and public life. ‘Thawnthu’ in this case mentioned above is described as performative rather than literal or documentary. We argue that though there is a lack of literary history from a ‘chanchin’ perspective, it is possible to recuperate a literary media historiography from a ‘thawnthu’ perspective.

As the conventional narrative bestows history and culture to the colonial and the missionary and the post-colonial project, there is a need to historicize its moment of birth, so as to produce an entry into the making of the historical and the literary. It is in this context that this intervention problematizes the media literary historiography of contemporary Mizoram in terms of: 1. an engagement with media/literary history as cultural history and not as political history. 2. locating the resources outside the disciplinary domain of history and literature in order to imagine the Mizo historical and the literary. 3. treating the creative tension between two seemingly competing cultural forms, ‘Thawnthu’ and ‘Chanchin’ as an important moment in shaping the contemporary literary and the historical.

On Media and Literary Historiography:

Media, literature and history are discursive domains located in colonial and postcolonial modernity. Contemporary media literary history of Mizoram has to reproduce itself against the asymmetrical, hegemonic, derivative history of the empire, church and the postcolonial nation state.[1] This intervention seeks to mobilize resources for mapping the literary and the historical that are supposedly embedded outside the received inheritance.

Media history has been practiced as political history and political history has been another name for writing the post-colonial history of the mainland nation state. As post-colonial scholars have pointed out, historical narratives of the nation state has often been hegemonic and considered as 'not so enabling histories' for the fragments.

Generally, the political history of Mizoram is written from the point of view of becoming subjects of the colonial state, subjects of the church and of the post-colonial Indian state. This intervention looks at the possibility of writing the cultural history of the Mizos that is not completely absorbed within the confines of empire, protestant church and the post-colonial India state.

In the official and the Christian narratives of the region, there is clearly an effort to argue that there is a lack of history and culture prior to the arrival of the colonial state and the missionaries. This enquiry focuses on the seemingly not so contrived history of producing this historical and cultural deficit. Besides, this intervention posits a positive engagement with cultural artifacts that may be perceived as colonially less mediated like the oral performative traditions.

The history of mainland India is written without any rigorous literary or cultural survey of the northeast border regions as these regions constitute uneasy relationship with the

[1] Postcolonial scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakraborty and others have had complex engagements with the understanding of nation as a hegemonic and derivative category. Ashish Nandy had flagged off an interesting debate on the illegitimacy of the nation project. Aloysius demonstrated the sociological thinness of the making of the nation.

political history of the nation state.[2] As cultural historians have observed, the political geography of mainland India was superimposed on a Hindu sacral geography; there is obviously a tension between Mizoram which is predominantly Christian and the rest of mainland India which has a predominantly Hindu exterior. For instance, the excesses of the Indian army in containing the Mizo insurgent forces in the 1960's-1970's made the Mizos think that the Indian state was a Hindu state.[3] This memory is part of the folklore of contemporary Mizoram.[4]

The cultural resources that shape the history of the Mizos may be located in a certain reading of colonial Lushai Hills District and the missionaries' association with the region. This intervention poses the challenge to literarise and historicises the Mizo precolonial past. In some sense, seemingly non-state communities[5] produce histories and literatures as well and this is an important focus of this paper. One needs to mine the cultural resources of the Luseis for making available a distinctive sense of the past and a cultural form to write the history. These resources were considered by the colonial officials and the missionaries as an obstacle for realizing their spiritual and human self.

Resources outside the disciplinary domains of history and literature to imagine the Lusei - historical and the literary

Conventional literature and modern historical practice give prominence for a theory of language that corresponds to a referential world. The colonial philological exercise was based on such a philosophy of language. In the pre-Christian culture of the Luseis, there was a universe of entities which did not have correspondence to the referential world (and some entities had partial correspondence as in their possibility of being

[2] Literary historians of modern Indian languages have inaugurated an exciting array of scholarship that deals with the discursive formations associated with colonialism and the encounter of colonialism with pre-print literary traditions. But they have rarely discussed the literary and the historical in the context of scriptless languages acquiring script during colonialism. See Blackburn, Vasuda Dalmia and Stuart Blackburn

[3] See R. Lalmuanpuii's 'Insurgency-Its role and impact on Women'

[4] See Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte's *Loneliness in the Midst of Curfews: The Mizo Insurgency Movement and Terror Lore* in Tillotama Misra's The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India.

[5] For a interesting account of non-state communities, see James Scott's *The Art of not being Governed-An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia.*

available as apparitions) but nevertheless exercised power and meaning over the real world. The codification programme that was followed in the writing of grammars and dictionary failed to inherit those entities and the experience of those entities which did not appear in the real world. We believe that it is this world that is encoded in the oral performative practices of the region. Perhaps, for the Luseis, spatio-temporal manifestation was only one property that was attributed to entities.

Cultural resources of formerly non-state communities have to be examined with reference to entities that may lack spatio-temporal existences. In the pre-colonial setting, the Lusei economy was based on jhum cultivation and hunting. In this kind of society, there was a need to deploy different spatial and temporal strategies in order to produce a mobile mode of existence. The notion of space had to be fluid and the colonial records show that *place names* even during the early colonial period were very far and few. Places took names after the living chiefs. It was a period where places did not have merely referential connotation. It was inhabited by spirits of gods, demons, nature, human beings and animals, both alive and dead.[6] In a Kantian[7] sense, 'what is' apparently does not seem a dominant mode of relating to the world and the invisible world of unfathomable spirits and celestial beings were alive and vibrant for the people of the hills.

Time related practices relating to the reproduction of material and symbolic life revolved around astral and living entities. For most sedentary cultures, labour and work becomes an important principle around which society is organized. Prior to the coming of the British, the Lusei society was not monetized and a need to necessarily produce surplus in order to trade was not felt. Also, practice of swidden agriculture allowed only for a sustenance economy. Many early colonial ethnographic accounts found the absence of a distinct phenomena and experience of labour among Lusei men. For almost more than one third of the year, Lusei men were found to be without any active occupation.

[6] In the school text book on Mizo ancestral culture, 13 different spirits are enumerated. The text was published in 1991. It's possible that there must have existed enormous number of these spirits in their past life.
[7] Kant seems to suggest 'what is' refers to the world as it exists and 'what we can make of it' refers to the non-immutability and the pliability of the world.

Even when they worked on their Jhum, they did not experience the hardships associated with the practice of agriculture as the labourer in mainland India experienced.[8] In fact, when the British later demanded free labour as a form of tribute, there was active resistance from the Lushai Chiefs. So, work may not have been the principle around which time was always organized. Perhaps labour was not seen to be an essential Lusei attribute around which one's time had to be organized.

The Luseis invested the stars with gendered identities and they were used for instrumental, astronomical and astrological purposes. It appears that they needed distinct conception of time to engage with the practical, a theoretical and mythical world. For instance, the sun and the moon provided temporal indices for practices relating to agricultural, hunting and navigation. A regular day was differentiated into functional, social and ritual activities. The routine activities of the day included women fetching water from water spots, young men collecting wood for fuel, women cooking from morning and weaving whenever they were free from cooking, and time for lovers to court.

The cries of animals and birds indicated different sense of time. These cries were used as clocks to guide the hills people into the various differentiated activities of the day. For instance, the Luseis had identified six different crowing of the cock and they were meant to alert them to the expected duties and responsibilities that they were supposed to carry out. Male lovers had to leave the homes of the female counterparts at a particular crowing of the cock and get back to their dormitory known as the Zawlbuk.

Luseis had a time to work, a time to rest and a time to court, they had surely developed different temporal practices allowing them to engage with the objective world and the affective world. In the writing of the formal history of the hills people, only a dominant form of temporal practice is taken into account. Apparently, the temporal practice relating to the objective world was not prioritized over those notions of time that were associated with the affective and the ritual world. Ritual time was also time for

[8] Lewin states that the Lusei rarely looked emaciated like the agricultural labourer from mainland India.

experiencing a non-physical plane of being, and the entire village at times used to get intoxicated to experience an altered state of being.[9] This altered state of being was needed in order to be in communion with various spirits and such a shamanistic attitude invoked certain life possibilities: for the Luseis, sleeping and waking were not the only two states of consciousness that they aspired to experience.

The content for contemporary Mizo literature is increasingly derived from these pre-colonial descriptions of the actual world and the possible world. For instance, 'Chawngmawii,' the name of a female star is used as an icon for describing beautiful women in many Mizo songs and tales. Similarly, 'Hawilopar' is the name of a mythical flower that one encounters after death and the first historical novel that was written by a native Lushei was named after it.

This revisiting of the world of 'thawnthu' for literary production and criticism may be seen as an effort to energize the 'chanchin' form. The process has been slow because the Church has established norms that do not allow for unregulated traffic between the promiscuous 'thawnthu' and the austere 'chanchin.'

Two Competing Forms that influence Media and Literature

In writing the history of the Luseis, one has to take into account both those entities which appear within a spatio-temporal context and those entities which lack an objective reference. We have identified two forms, one relating exclusively to the spatio temporal context and the other form inclusive of entities lacking a spatio temporal reference. As previously mentioned, the two forms are 'Chanchin' and 'Thawnthu.' As of now, we argue that the histories of the Mizos have been written from a Chanchin theoretical frame and not from a Thawnthu frame of reference.

[9] On the contrary, there is an interesting text supposedly written in mid 20th Century which discusses the Luseis' understanding of the stars. The book was written by Liangkhaia, one of the earliest educated Mizos. The book was interestingly titled 'Arsi Chanchin (Mizote hriat dan)' or Mizos' knowledge of stars. Perhaps it is the first written astronomical treatise and it accords the Mizos with an ability to produce objective knowledge.

‘Thawnthu’ is a form of narration that offers only an illumination rather than designation of the world. It is possible that some ‘thawnthu’ may designate the world as well but that is not its primary task. In this expressive form, we suspect that ‘thawnthu’ illuminates as well as designates the world. In other words, language offers only a partial view of the world. By the time the colonial officials and the missionaries start producing their philological work, they have assumed that the Lushai language has a disposition to designate the world. Even on occasions where ‘thawnthu’ designates the world, it is only a partial composition of the work of the narrative. Perhaps, the real is pitifully inadequate to represent the world.

The distinction between thawnthu and chanchin is a pliable distinction between the performative and the literal, conversation and prose, and affect and cognition. Though the telling is central to the performative tradition of Thawnthu and the plot is central to the chanchin literal form, the thawnthu does not dispense with the actual event or even its suggested temporality. It is true that the thawnthu represents an enchanted world, of spirits, demons, natural and human characters, dead and the living. Unlike the chanchin which allows for a strict demarcation between the real and the magical, the historical and the mythical, the thawnthu is an open ended form of narration allowing for both the cryptic and a referential reading of itself. The chanchin is based on a referential world of representation.

We argue that the current method of writing the literary and cultural history of the region stems from an elaboration of the chanchin form rather than the thawnthu form. Though the colonial state flagged off the chanchin form, the journey of the form has not been very enthusiastically received by the contemporary literary elites in Mizoram. It is equally true that thawnthu has lost an organic connection among the people. This may be because the form has not been revitalized by subjecting it to contemporary reality. The lack of this reception is perceived as a failure to incorporate the thawnthu form into the literary and popular media production.

On examination of the philological and literary practices in the erstwhile Lushai region, we are of the view that a more 'locale specific' and a deeply inclusive tradition informed their pre-colonial/pre-Christian interconnected practice relating to language, religion and society. This deeply embedded implicit understanding of language and utterances gave way to a more scientific and theological idea of language. It seems to have moved from an ecological practice of language to a broadly Christian humanistic conception. Thawnthu is a product of an ecological understanding of language and chanchin is emblematic of the Christian humanistic conception of language. The genealogies of the Lushai language gleaned from colonial ethnographic accounts seem to give the impression that language was accessible both to human beings and animals as well. Language was not solely considered to be rational or innately human enterprise.

The Lushai language was scriptless and the need for a script arose to redeem the 'evil worshippers'. In the process of literisation (committing the dialect to writing) and literarisation (language aspiring to become literary or seeking an elaborate code) of the Lushai language, the Lushai language which was supposedly pre-reflective and myth inspired, became a more reflective language, from a language of 'affect' it became a language of 'will' and instrumental control. For instance, the oneric chants of the traditional priest called the 'puithiam' which may have reflected the pre-conscious of the Luseis, is all but forgotten.[10] Chants display purposes contrary to mere will or instrumental control.

A related point about the standardization of Lushai language is that the colonizers did not merely provide a script to an otherwise scriptless Lusei language, but the idea that the erstwhile Lushai region had twelve dialects and that the Lushai dialect was distinct from the rest of the dialects seem to be a colonial invention itself. In some sense, prior to colonialism, people inhabiting these dialects moved seamlessly from one to the other. For instance, war songs across the various dialects were generally sung in the Hmar

[10] We have few references regarding the Puithiam's practice in colonial ethnographic accounts. Lorrain and Lloyd provide scanty description of the Puithiam's practice. They don't see a need to engage substantially with the practice.

and Paihte languages. In a certain manner, the disciplined visually oriented culture is opened up to reign in a rich imaginative auditory sensorium.

In this intervention, we seek to discuss two issues relating to writing of media literary historiography of Mizoram both in the colonial and in the contemporary context. They are:

1. To demonstrate that the indigenous oral performative form known as 'Thawnthu' is not merely ahistorical and a nonliterary form but incorporates both the literary and the historical into its ambit. 'Thawnthu' displays an aesthetic in its telling and the very structure of its narrative. It frequently takes up an impossible situation and finds a concatenation of human, non-human and celestial reasons for explaining the impossible. For instance, there is a popular tale about the 'Hnahthial plant' which the Luseis think dies before it matures.[11] In the world of

[11] Chemtatrawta (Sharpener of Dao)

Once upon a time there was a man called Chemtatrawta. He had gone down to a nearby stream and seeing a good useful looking stone he sat himself down near it to sharpen up his dao. But he had not been there long before he felt a severe pain and he found that a lobster had pinched one of his testicles, and he was infuriated.
He seized a big bamboo nearby, upon which Kha-um creeper was climbing, this so enraged the creeper that it struck a wild fowl with its vicious fruit. The wild-fowl became wild with fury likewise and scratched furiously at the earth with its foot. Within no time it had scattered an ant nest, and the ants in desperation being in no mood for courtesy, nipped the testicles of a wild boar, who at once, in his pain uprooted a plantain tree which, crashing down, disturbed a peaceful bat having its daily snooze. The bat seeing an elephant perched right on the elephant's very trunk, and this so upset the elephant's dignity that he rushed at the house of a poor old woman, trampling it under foot and smashing it like a match-box. So, terrifying the poor old woman, who out of anger and fright left her excrement too near the village water supply. The villagers observing the old woman's indiscretion, surrounded her in anger and called on her to explain why she had done such a vile thing. So she told them what the elephant had done to her house. The villagers then went to the elephant and asked the elephant why he had trampled on the woman's house and the elephant quite said because the bat had actually alighted on his nose. While the bat explained that he had been disturbed by the boar who said he had been bitten on the testicles by the ants, who said they would have done nothing if they had been left alone by the wild fowl who said that he had only been upset because of the cruel assault of the Khaum creeper, who blamed Chemtatrawta who then was also very angry and exclaimed that he only cut down the bamboo on account of the pain caused to him by the lobster who had nipped his testicle. So it came about that at last the lobster was called on to explain what he had meant by such an insolent assault/ act which resulted in all problems. The lobster now found himself in an awkward position and murmured hesitantly "Ehmm-Ehmm-Ehmm- if you put me into the fire I will become red, and if you put me back into the water again I will become pale." So, the people not being satisfied put him into a fire and the lobster became redder and redder as he predicted. Then they put him again into the water. He became paler and paler. The lobster very soon was able to recover from the painful test and so he swam off again trying to enjoy his river home. Here ends the story of Chemtatrawta. But in some corner someone said that before the lobster could reach its home, the men chased him with a Hnahthial stick they tried to kill him. Although they could not do this the unfortunate lobster was also injured by the Hnahthial stick that he died. But before he actually died he cursed the Hnahthial stick saying: "Curse on you for your cruelty to me- you will die before your seeds can mature", which may account for the scarcity of such plants to this day and for the fact that they do not mature before they die.
See Laltluangliana's Mizo songs and folktales. P.?

the Luseis, the Hnahthial realizes itself only as a plant and not as a tree. In this Lusei tale, the thawnthu portrays the actual and also accounts for the unrealizable actual. It deals with ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’. ‘What is’ is historical and ‘what ought to be’ may be mythical or speculative. Thawnthu connects the historical with the mythical and the real with the magical. Or it is possible that the thawnthu is questioning the Kantian idea of ‘what there is’ after all. Perhaps, for the thawnthu, there is no distinction between ‘what is’ and ‘what we can make of it.’

Another interpretation for this ‘thawnthu’ needs to account for both the recreational and the instructional aspect of the folktale. The mention of the man’s testicles being bitten by the lobster may have invoked laughter in young kids when it was told to them by their grandmother. It is also possible that the narrative may have caused fear among boys who are generally eager to brandish their dao at anything which they come across. The fear of castration is unconsciously built into this ‘thawnthu’ and the anxiety associated with the loss of sexual powers may correspond to the ‘hnahthial’ plant not becoming a tree and explicitly bearing fruits. In other words, one grows into a man only through the regulation of one’s conduct which is not inner directed but it is seemingly regulated from outside. Likewise, the ‘hnahthial plant’ cannot grow into a tree because of the concatenation of reasons that is not within the control of the ‘hnahthial plant’ alone and it is cursed by the lobster, thus ‘you will die before your seeds can mature.’ The term that is associated with the ‘hnahthial’ is ‘stick’ which may signify the male organ and the lobster may connote a female counterpart. In a strictly patriarchal Lusei society, it may not have been possible to openly militate with an explicit discourse against gender based oppressive practices. This narrative unconsciously teases out the vulnerability of male dao centric culture. The sharpening of the dao needs to be a responsible act and the reading of this tale and tales such as these should carry the ethical burden of anticipating the forgotten lobster. So, this intriguing folktale allows for more than

one interpretation and the idea of 'thawnthu' may refer to an interpretative grid that facilitates the fathoming of the mythical and the fantastic. A little later, we will illustrate how another 'thawnthu' captures the real and the historical along with the mythical.

SECTION I

Analysis of texts, contexts and performances of the folk genealogy of Lusei language

a) Text = mythical
b) Context = historical
c) Performance = propitiatory act

In order to demonstrate that thawnthu addresses the historical and not only the mythical, we have taken a genealogy myth that surrounds the origin of the Lusei language and its people. In our analysis, we argue that this myth is informed by the contemporary events that the Luseis were facing at that juncture. It is true that there was a moral aesthetic which informed the narrative and this aesthetic may be inferred as providing literary or artistic experience. This folktale or thawnthu is recorded in the region's most famous ethnographic text titled, 'A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India' written by its most empathetic colonial official, T.H Lewin. It may be interpreted that this official who lived for several years among the Luseis and married a Lusei women as well, actually brings his internalized Christian idea of the origin of language unconsciously into the recording of this text. In this text, Lewin observes[12]

> "Our ancestors", said he, "came originally out of a cave in the hills. This cavern may be seen at the present day near Van Huilen's village among the Burdaia clan. Strange noises are heard to issue therefrom, and no one willingly approaches the spot. At first we had a great chief whose name was Tlandrokpa. He married God's daughter and was very powerful chief.

[12] See T.H.Lewin, A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India. p.242

> To prepare for the marriage all the animals were summoned to clear a road through jungle by which to bring the bride home.
>
> At that time, which was longer than long ago, all living things spoke with one language, and all the animals obeyed the call except the sloth, his cousin the huluq monkey, and the earth-worm; therefore it is that to this day these animals are ashamed and hide themselves, not loving the sunlight. Then there were great festivities. Tlandrokpa gave Patien (God) his great gun; one can hear the sound of it often when it thunders, that is when Patien goes out hunting up there.
>
> Sometime after the wedding Tlandrokpa quarrelled with Patien, and was conquered by means of the great gun and its fire. And the earth took fire and burnt with great heat, and the whole race of men would have been consumed; but Patien's daughter counselled us, and we came towards the sea, where there was much water, and so our ancestors saved their lives. Here in the new country, there was great scarcity of food, for at that time men did not eat flesh; but at last, by reason of great hunger, they began to kill and eat animals. Then the creatures spoke and begged for mercy in such pitiful words that it was hard to slay them, until at last Patien's daughter besought her father, and he took from the animals their power of speech. Since then food has been plentiful among us. This we have heard from our ancestors."

In the recounting of the origin story, Lewin also seems to invest in it, a Christian conception of language. Here, animals, gods, nature and human beings converse with each other without any barriers. The difference between speak and speech does not trouble the participants. Sound was a pre-given attribute. This pre-given attribute is withdrawn due to the circumstances sketched in the plot. Speech becomes an attribute of only human beings or the Luseis in particular. The daughter of the God conspires with her father to destroy the power of speech given to the animals. The inheritance of the language is shrouded in an impossible situation of either staying alive by eating the flesh of the animals or starving to death by refusing to change their food habits. The power of the word is acquired through destroying a certain ecological relationship with the world. The word conveys an ecological crisis. To speak is to lose a certain invisible connection with the larger world. It is as if the word is plucked out of a thickly ensconced world of interconnected and almost invisible reality.

This narrative seems to possess a structure of the Biblical origin of language with a male God gifting or withdrawing the gift of the power of speech. The daughter of the God seems to metaphorically refer to the mythical Eve. Though Lewin was fascinated by the simplicity of the Hills people and wants to produce an authentic account of the denizens, he seems to unconsciously provide a Christian structure to the genealogy. In this structure of the narrative, it appears that the power of restraint needs to be exercised rather than the power of desire. On the one hand, language is seen as expressing instincts or desire, on the other, language is seen as self-regulating.

From 1860's to 1880's, the Lushai region is plagued by a series of bamboo famines. There is widespread hunger and misery around. The genealogy of the language that Lewin records is actually the local history of natural disasters frequently occurring in the region. Since practicing swidden agriculture becomes difficult due to the rapid multiplication of the rat population during the bamboo famines, the Luseis may have hunted more frequently than they used to in normal times. The Hills people followed a moral economy of hunting and hunting was not merely treated as an instrumental activity. Some animals like tigers were not hunted and other animals when they were killed, the community had to appease the spirits of those animals. There is a propitiatory element in this narrative–to seek a corrective to their corrigible moral symbolic universe. This propitiatory act may hopefully ward off a potential future occurrence of the bamboo famine. If they don't appease the spirits of the animals that were killed, the Luseis believed that famines may recur.

The narrative employed appears to be what is popularly known as 'Thawnthu' or folktales. There are multiple voices in the thawnthu. The situation of the plot is at once historical and mythical, real and magical. The temporality of the narrative is historical and mythical. Lewin records this narrative as merely mythical and magical and he fails to see the historical and the real. Very often, colonial ethnographers refuse to see the historical and real in the narratives of the hills people. Folktales were seen as ahistorical artifacts and they cease to have meaning for leading real lives.

Perhaps, the idea of one language as mentioned in the narrative refers to a meta-language that is referential to the immediate world. The literal meaning of the word ‘‘sawi chhuak’ refers to ‘speak out’ and the etymology of the word lies in ‘chham chhuak’ which means ‘to chant’. Language that seems to be mentioned in the narrative is closer to ‘chham chhuak’ rather than ‘sawi chhuak’. In contemporary Mizoram, ‘sawi chhuak’ is also interchangeably used to refer to the sermon. The traditional priest, ‘Puthiam’, chanted in order to communicate with the dead (humans and animals), evil and good spirits and nature spirits of trees and plants. Chanting established a connection with the visible and the parallel invisible world. In some sense, the Puithiam provided a psychic identity for the community. The language was seen to offer a way to the interior realms of one’s being. The word ‘chhuah’ translates itself to ‘to show, to show forth, to display, to exhibit, to set forth, to expose, to expose to view, to produce, to disclose.’ This is the manner in which Lorrain translates the term ‘chhuah’ in his dictionary.

The theory of language that seems to evolve from this narrative is that it should not obfuscate the myriad connections human beings have with the animate and the celestial world. To exist is to exist in the historical, mythical and the magical world. Language appears to be a medium of existence in the finite and in the infinite sense. Language is not necessarily related to meaning but to action and experience.

In providing a literary media historiography of Northeast, we are suggesting connections between contemporary literary practice and the colonial philological ethnographic project. In this context, we are examining the controversy relating to the production of the literary and the historical in the postcolonial period. Though this controversy is framed in the postcolonial period, we argue that its roots lie in a certain manner of reading the colonial events. In an indirect manner, we would want to find connections between a lack of a newspaper culture as rooted in a tension between two narrative forms, namely ‘thawnthu’ and ‘chanchin’.

The production, circulation and consumption of newspapers do not correspond to the status of Mizoram as having the largest literacy rate in the eastern India and for the

country at large.[13] The thawnthu form of narrative is strongly rooted in oral performative tradition and the chanchin form is connected to literary tradition with its moorings in a nascent scribal culture. The term for the newspaper is 'chanchinbu' and it embraces a documentary genre. The historical can also be a form of a 'chanchin' narrative. Chanchin has to be based on factual sources. The genre allows for a realist form of linear and literal narrative. We believe that the latter form has yet to gain popular acceptance. In some ways, the linear and literal narratives are also being interrogated as not so authentic genres by the contemporary Mizo elites.[14] Chanchin has yet to sufficiently domesticate the performative genres relating to oral tradition in Mizoram.

Since the colonial state does not realize the need to rearrange the order of things, it is solely interested in producing the representation for the already existing historically immutable world of the hills people. In providing a representation of the historically immutable world, the claim to reduce their world of things to representations and commodities receives acceptance and weak contestations. There was a struggle to resist the policy of free labour introduced by the colonial officials in the erstwhile Lushai Hills. The category 'coolie' was the most despised term in the colonial Lushai Hills District. Hence the elaboration of the colonial state took place in the textual production. They regulated the Luseis in the manner in which they wrote their ethnographic and philological texts. Indeed, it was a textual economy that regulated the Luseis rather than the political economy. It may be perceived as a failed or a successful effort depending on where you place the emphasis, on political economy or textual economy, of the colonial state to reorder things in this part of colonial India.

What this meant was a complete disregard of the 'auratic,' performative traditions of oral culture, stress on collective orgiastic life which needed episodic altered states of being, and cryptic engagement with the natural and celestial world. In some sense, the Lusei world was irreducible to discernible representations. It was not knowledge through

[13] There are 91 daily newspapers published in 2010. Mizoram has around 228 working journalists for a population of more than 10 lakhs. Less than half a dozen newspapers can boast of a circulation beyond 5000. The highest circulated Mizo language newspaper 'Vanglaini' sells around 35000 copies.

[14] See Zohmangaiha, *Mizo Thu leh Hla Hrilhfiah Dan hi* in *Thu leh Hla*

which they reproduce themselves. Folktales are genres which engage with their world not reducible to representations. Stories are about secrets that are not necessarily solved but the folktales create the urge to engage with these riddles.

The arrival of the colonial state marked an emergence of a discourse that describes the Hills culture as ahistorical. It was considered to be ahistorical because it lacked writing, a state system and a formal religion. There were neither texts nor architectural monuments that reproduced the memory of the community as historical community. Since there existed no conventional sources for writing history, the community did not embrace an intellectual tradition of historical practice. These were reasons adduced by the colonial officials to designate the hills people as ahistorical community.

The colonial rulers adopted an isolationist policy where the Luseis remained outside the political and textual economy of the sub-continental mainland. While the sub-continental mainland inhabited or aspired to inhabit the world historical time, the fragments like the Lusei Hills region was allowed to occupy ‘another time’ or ahistorical time.

The establishment of the church was an effort to inaugurate ‘the human’ among the denizens of the hills. All prior practices relating to the hills people came to be associated with a lack of history and other finer impulses needed for the production of a literary, artistic and material culture. In effect, the church had to initiate the Luseis into humanity and transform this humanity into Christianity. Introducing a scribal culture was considered to be a civilisational strategy that helped to make a distinction between the promiscuous oral and the disciplined written culture. The writing of the grammar and dictionary sanitized the permissive oral, performative traditions which re-inscribed the previously undifferentiated Lusei body and thought.

SECTION II

Pitted against this indigenous form is the contemporary ‘Chanchin’ form which is perceived as a documentary form inaugurated by the colonial officials and the missionaries. This acquires prominence with the written Lusei language but fails to engage with the rich oral performative traditions adequately. The effort to literise the Lusei language produced a mode of reading that was devoid of a free play of the human faculties. For the missionaries, the move to literise the Lusei language was primarily a strategy to enable the Luseis to read the Bible or the revealed world. The mode of reading initiated by the missionaries does not stress the need to read the world as authorized by human beings, it only allows them to read the world authorized by God.

It may not be a large claim that the Bible written in Lusei (Mizo) language is still recognized as the most important literary text in contemporary Mizoram. One of the important exercises in standardizing the Lusei language was related to the translation of the Bible. Even today, there is an absence of complete consensus on the question of diction, grammar and orthography concerning the Mizo language among the literary elites. In fact, the Bible has been revised several times and it provides one source of authoritative reference for grammar and diction. Yet, there is no definitive work on standardization of the Lusei language.

In the absence of standardization of the Mizo language, the chanchin is vulnerable to contestation over its form. In some sense, it appears that the Mizo language has yet to evolve a dominant form of prose or chanchin. Unlike the history of the mainland Indian languages, the Mizo language is simultaneously going through a process of both literisation and literarisation. Chanchin as a narrative form may singularly be a product of a process of literisation but its elaboration is a consequence of subjecting the form to both technical and aesthetic values. Since the aesthetic values are determined by the puritanical form of protestanism practiced by the Mizo community, the chanchin has not rapidly acquired an aesthetic elaboration in the process of the language being simultaneously literised and literarised.

We argue that the documentary form introduced by the colonial rulers and the missionaries is based on a theory of language that: 1. The universe can be reduced to a system of representations and 2. The philological work presupposes the pre-eminence of human speech as sound or phonetics.

Sub-section-I

From the earliest work on philology, the effort of the empire has been to evolve a picture of language that could contain the principle of representing the world in a hierarchical manner. By hierarchy, it means that the written word as a form of representation is valued more than the spoken word.

To draw the picture of the Hills people through the written word is to elaborate the Lushai as a subliminal subject of both the colonial state and the Church. The entire effort to reduce the Lusei speech into writing is undertaken to transform the subliminal subject into a God fearing and law abiding subject. The temporal context of this moment of transformation is rendered a-historical and it is narrated as if the process happened outside time itself. It is for this reason that in the popular imagination, the contemporary Mizo identity is received as a product of the colonial state and the institution of the church. There is no history attributed to the making of 'this' moment and the distinction between culture and nature and history and myth is flagged off. In this scheme of reasoning, what existed before colonialism was attributed to nature and not to culture and the Luseis supposedly inhabited a certain form of temporality that did not completely coincide with the modern notion of time, empty and homogenous, in Walter Benjamin's famous words.

The earliest Mizo intellectual to experience the urge to historicise was Liangkhaia. He lamented that there was not sufficient written material about their past and that the past was available in unreliable form of tales and memories. Liangkhaia was the first to experiment with the writing of Mizo history in 1938. His manuscript was published many years later but his idea of history was a product of reading imperial histories of other nations and societies written in a positivistic mode or chanchin.

For Liangkhaia, history was supposed to be just a compilation of facts and he found it difficult to access archival material about the scriptless Mizo ancestors. Out of eleven chapters in his book, almost seven chapters were written based on oral sources. Only the last four were written based on archival materials. The first seven chapters of the book dealt with the period between 750 A.D to 1870 A.D and the last four chapters dealt with Mizo history from 1870 to 1945. In the introduction, he states that he was not to be held responsible if his oral sources proved to be wrong.

Interestingly, the title of his work reads 'Mizo Chanchin.' Both these terms 'Mizo' and 'Chanchin' require clarification. Among the Lusei elites, there is a realization that they need to account for a larger collective entity based on language and territory and they seem to use the term Mizo for this emergent identity. There is a fixity that is attached to language, territory and ethnicity of the speakers of the language. For this emergent identity that is radically new, Liangkhaia is producing an antiquity.

The term chanchin refers to a linear narrative that is based on actual facts. Though this form of narrative may have a history beyond the colonial period, Liangkhaia uses this term to convey its utility to represent the contemporary and the historical. Chanchin appears to make a distinction between 'was' and 'is'. Actually, the experience of Mizo identity is a product of early 20th Century history, but Liangkhaia is trying to go back to a history of one and a half millennia to account for this identity. Chanchin allows for such an account. It is ironic that Liangkhaia, though situated in colonial knowledge practice, seeks to look at both the arrival of colonialism and the church as just important points in the journey of Luseis from ancient times. However, Liangkhaia is clear that until the advent of the missionaries in their lives, this long journey from southern China from 6th century AD till late 19th century was shrouded in darkness.

Liangkhaia deploys the term Chanchin to chronicle the period of darkness and the period of enlightenment. Chanchin is a narrative that makes a clear demarcation between causes and consequences. The causes of the period of darkness were due to

the presence of a life form that refuses to elevate itself either to spirituality or humanity. Enlightenment was the consequence of the presence of the colonial state and the institution of the church. Chanchin as a historical genre has no access to retrieve resources that may facilitate the claim that Luseis have had resources that would transform them into fully realizable human beings prior to the arrival of the British and the missionaries.

Since Liangkhaia was immersed in a positivist colonial episteme, he did not feel the need to interrogate the theory of language that informed the effort to literise the Lusei language. For him, historical practice was a modern practice and he felt accurate compilation of facts constituted history. This recounting of the past as historical facts did not militate against the acts of the colonial state and the church, constituting the Lushai as an ahistorical subject in search of a credible history. Liangkhaia found it necessary to acknowledge the contribution of the colonial rulers and the missionaries in investing spiritual and secular power to discipline the Luseis as spatio-temporal subjects. To historicise was not seen as an act of disciplining both the present and the past of the Luseis and the pruning of other temporalities which they inhabited such as the unrealizable actual that was mentioned before with reference to thawnthu. Liangkhaia was in search of an old history that provided visible knowledge and not wisdom.

Philology became a ground for operationalizing the linguistic practices of non-modern communities within this knowledge domain. In the Lushai Hills District, colonial officials and missionaries used philology to translate the supposedly crass linguistic practices into acceptable modern form of language which essentially meant providing script for the Lusei speech.

During the colonial period, philology is practiced as an ahistorical discipline. The move to literise the Lusei language appears to be an investment in transferring this liminal subject onto the plane of history. History requires subjects who are on its fringes and it reconstitutes them as entities who will not demand historicizing their liminal position. In a Newtonian understanding of the universe, light is reduced to particles and it forbids

any spiritual or moral clothing of the particles. The term liminal is used in this sense of the word or at least, this is how the missionaries read the Lusei subjects. Philology came as a rescue to resurrect the particles into a form of light that received its energy from outside and did not emanate from within.

The genre of documentary is an opening up of the particles to an immutable and not transitory radiance. Perhaps, in the pre-colonial world of Luseis, things were not devoid of auratic properties. For instance, the term for photograph in Lusei is 'thlalak,' where 'thla' refers to 'shadow' or 'soul' and 'la' refers to 'take' and the Luseis literally translated this term as 'snatching the soul.' It may also mean that the soul provide the shade for the nurturing of the physical being. It is for this reason that the Luseis initially refused to pose before cameras for taking pictures.[15]

They first needed to shut out the self generating liminal characteristics of the world of Luseis in order to convert them into representations or commodities. The genre of documentary is easily received in places where they have extinguished the self generating radiance of the properties. It is our contention that the oral performative practices engage cryptically with the self generating radiance of things in the Lusei world.

On occasions, the colonial ethnographers express surprise at the possibilities that the scriptless Lushai language offers. For instance, a colonial official, Brojonath Saha, who wrote the first treatise on the grammar of the Luseis was amazed to find a rich profusion of verbs in the Lusei language. They were forced to offer historical reasons for the partial elaboration of their dialect and consequently of their intellectual growth. However, the lack of a script for the Lusei language is largely perceived as an historical deficit. So the question remains whether the colonial experiments in philology is aimed at

[15]There is an incident related to the colonial official who took several Lusei chiefs on a trip to Calcutta. In Calcutta, they were asked to pose before the cameras. On their way back to the Lushai Hills, they became anxious because they thought their souls might have departed to the medium of the pictures themselves. http://www.misual.com

producing the Lusei as a subject of history or as a liminal subject in the Newtonian sense.

As mentioned previously, the colonial state does not regard the Lusei as an equal subject of the empire and the Church demands a sanitized form of the Lusei to become its subject. In the interstices of being the subject of the colonial state and the subject of the Church, it appears the identity of the Lusei is located. Besides, the residual pre-Christian ethos treated as timeless manifestations, echo in the making of the contemporary Mizo identity. Actually, the folktale is not merely ahistorical form, it is pregnant with history as well. In effect, it provides a way of situating the Mizo identity in the intersection between the literary and the historical. A colonial reading constrains the inheritance of both the literary and the historical. **A certain disavowal of colonial meta-events may clear way for the 'thawnthu' to transform itself into both a literary and a historical genre.**

In the postcolonial debate, among the Mizo intellectual and literary elite, this question about its authentic inheritance with regard to the literary and the historical emerges in the pages of their journal, 'Thu leh Hla.' In one of the issues of this journal, there is a controversy sharply posed as to how Mizos should inhabit 'the literary.' This journal is published by Mizo Academy of Letters. The article 'Mizo Literature Hrilhfiah Dan hi' written by Zohmangaiha, a literary critic, questions the dominance of the written word against the absence of a rich popular performative tradition of songs and music. The argument for coalescing the literal with the performative brings us back to the question of the contemporary Mizo's looking at language as performance.

Sub-section II

It is clear that Luseis did not consider the acquisition of speech as an essential attribute of becoming human although it was a necessary condition for being or existing. Both utterances and non-utterances formed the repertoire of language and expression. For instance, deep reverence of the people for the tiger disallows the utterance of the tiger's name 'sakei' and many such instances of non-utterances can be found. Some

words were feared to bring evil and therefore they avoided utterances of such words. The experience of unuttered words takes us to the question of how to decipher the Lusei way to language. It appears that words were connected to life and they were not lifeless sounds. To receive the sounds also meant to experience the silence of those sounds. In a way, those silences acquired life through their non-utterances. So, a theory of language should incorporate the experiences of both sound and silences.

The foundations of the philological work during the colonial period led to the arrival of the ‘Chanchin’ narrative form. The chanchin narrative form does not account for the silences and so also the entire philological tradition inaugurated by the colonial officials and the missionaries. The philological tradition is informed by considering language as a medium of cognition or recognition.

The colonial state needed a documentary mode of narration in order to produce and regulate the world of representation. It appears that the Luseis did not make an absolute distinction between the world of the real and the magical. The documentary mode of narration converted this indistinguishable Lusei world of the real and magical into a monolithic narrative. This conversion of a plural universe into a single moral and ethical universe restricted the inheritance of the oral performative practices into the chanchin form. In fact, chanchin may be regarded as a dominant form deployed for the ethnographic accounts.

The missionaries enhanced the value of ‘chanchin’ in order to contain other narrative forms like songs, dance and dangerous ‘thawnthu.’ For instance, the missionaries considered dancing to be perverse and banned the Lusei women from dancing. Recently, Mizo women theologians have argued within the church that the role of dancing created a space for spiritual experiences and that its proscription needs to be revisited. Indeed, many performative traditions are associated in creating a network of psychic and therapeutic support systems.

It is for this reason certain performative practices relating to reciting of love songs and war songs were strongly discouraged, and on occasions banned. These performative traditions were sometimes practiced under altered states of being when entire village used to collectively drink and perform as previously mentioned. This collective altered state of consciousness that was needed to realize a different plane of collective being was seen as a degenerative practice. Interestingly, Mizoram is the only state where prohibition is introduced in the northeast in postcolonial India. 'Chanchin' as a literary form is introduced with a certain idea of social and moral hygiene. It is a disenchanted narrative form that reduces the world into cold numbers and facts and fails to capture the essence of things. It makes no difference between one thing and another.

In the narrative form of the 'chanchin,' the thing acquires only a representational value. In the first newspaper of Lushai Hills District, 'Mizo Chanchin Laishuih,' (1898), the word 'chanchin' appears in the literal sense. Though the newspaper uses a form of reportage depicting the events on the hills, there is a fear, though not stated directly in the text, that the depiction of the thing like the tiger in the news item, lacks a reference to its essence or the secret of the Lusei's complex relationship with the tiger.

> Rewards for hunting Tigers and Bears
>
> Whosoever kills a tiger or a bear, and displays the head to the Borsap (superintendent), will receive a cash reward. If the hunted tiger is a full-grown one, he will be rewarded Rupees Twenty five, if the hunted tiger is a cub, he will receive Rupees Ten and then if the prey is a bear-cub he will receive Rupees Five. Then, if he shoots any other wild-animal, money will not be given to him.

If one were to comment on the performance of the colonial state in reproducing itself in terms of its economical and political imperatives, it is possible to suggest that the colonial state fails to integrate the Hills district into the larger colonial project of the sub-continent. In fact, when it finds that it cannot extract an economic surplus from the region, it endeavors to change a semi-pastoral community into workers. Initially, there are attempts to extract free labor from the chiefs. Somehow, the subsistence economy of the Hills does not drive the Hills people into a state of destitution where they are

forced to labour for wages. In the highly non-monetised economy of the Hills, the colonial state's move to convert labour into commodity simply refuses to take off. Among other reasons, there are stiff resistances from the natives against forced labour. Both swidden agriculture and non-monetized labour functioned in a manner that it only produced a subsistence economy based on a barter-like form of exchange. In the absence of the conditions for producing the political economy on the Hills, the alliance between the native elites, local administration and the missionaries created a situation where the production and regulation of a textual economy emerged.

In the context of the formula for preserving tradition and indigenous culture or to take a position of 'to rule is to rule less.' In the colonial ethnographic accounts, it is frequently mentioned that the Luseis are 'generally amenable and law abiding citizens' but at times, they are given to 'excesses.' The excesses pertain to rice beer drinking, refusal to perform work throughout the year and liminal experiences acquired through long bout of dancing and singing. Many of these excesses—a vibrant part of their culture—is discouraged and sometimes banned by the church. The colonial administration was aware that the missionaries had managed to contain the excesses through their own forms of governmentality. The missionaries were initially curious about the compliance of the Luseis to their indigenous culture. They are keen to change the focus of compliance and not just discipline the 'excess.' It is in this sphere that they imagine the textual economy.

Conclusion-

This intervention engages with a need to problematise the lack of the historical and the literary in contemporary Mizo culture. We have attempted to examine this question from a re-reading of the principle that involved the colonial philological programme including the writing of grammar, dictionary and other texts. Though the project of colonial philology was basically an effort to literise the Lusei orature, the project in itself did not exhaust the meaning of the Lusei orature. This intervention makes a distinction between two forms of narrative, thawnthu and chanchin, as expressing two distinct worldviews,

one dealing with wisdom and the other with knowledge. Chanchin as a literary form is linear and acquires its inheritance in the philological programme whereas thawnthu is not clearly grounded in a historical temporality and it resists being completely subsumed by the meaning imposed by the philological programme. Thawnthu also embraces other kinds of temporality associated with the mythical and the poetic.