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THE MARRIAGE CODE AND TRADITIONAL VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION OF MIZO

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The Marriage Code and Traditional Village Administration of Mizo

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Abstract – The paper presented the marriage code of Mizo in the light of their traditional customs. It examines the procedure for marriage and divorce. In the administration, this paper highlighted the power and functions of the chief, elders, tlangau and the role of zawlbuk.

Keywords: Marriage, Manpui, Pusum, Thuam, Chief, Elders, Village Priest, Tlangau, Zawlbuk.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1. Meaning of Mizo:

The morphological characters evidenced the Mizos belonged to one of the Mongolian racial groups. Historians believe that the Mizos are belonging to the Mongolian race of Tibeto-Burman group. Their language belongs to Tibeto Burman family. The word *Mizo* is a generic term and is literally meant hillmen or highlanders and under this there are various sub groups like Paite, Hmar, Mara (Lakher), Lai (Pawih), Lusei, Ralte etc. All these groups have separate dialects which are closely akin to each other. The most common language is Lusei dialect which is now called *Mizo tawng* and used for local official language in addition to English. The language has no script of its own but in the wake of British annexation the Christian missionaries came and reduced it to a written form in Roman script in 1894.

Mizoram is the state where Mizo lived since 16th Century. Mizoram is a small land locked state in the North East India occupying a total geographical area of **21,087 sq. km. It lies between 92.15° E to 93.29° E longitudes and 21.58° N to 24.35° N latitude.** The state is **bounded by Myanmar in the eastern and southern parts with 404 kms international boundary, in the west it is bounded by Bangladesh with 318 kms international boundary and the state of Tripura with 66 kms interstate boundary, in the north is bounded by Assam with 123 kms and Manipur with 95kms.** As per the 2011 census Mizoram has a population of over 10.91 lakh. Out of the total population, about 5.52 lakh are males and 5.38 lakh are females.

SECTION A: Marriage

Courtship between boys and girls is freely practiced in Mizo society in that a young man is free to court any girl at her residence if he chooses to do so. Thus, the young men would go round the houses of several girls just to court them. This is an accepted custom and the popularity of a girl is judged from the number of young men courting her. This calls for high intelligence, tact and diplomacy on the part of the girls as the slightest manifestation of discourtesy from the girl could cause resentment in the boys, resulting in virtual desertion and loss of prestige for the girls.

A.1. Marriage procedure:

Marriage is settled mostly between the boys and girls through mutual love and affection. The boy (bridegroom) would send his two representatives known as palai to negotiate and to pay the bride price which had to be settled first before marriage could take place. The bride would then be escorted by her friends to the groom's house. A fowl would be sacrificed by the puithiam (Priest) in a ceremony and a prayer would be chanted to spirit of the air for a long and happy married life of the couple. Over this ceremony the marriage would be solemnized. The bride would then return to her parents' place. Relations, friends and guests would have a grand feast of meat and drink in the groom's house. In the bride's house all those who would get shares of the bride's price would contribute pigs and fowls for a feast and half of the meat so collected would be sent to the groom's house for the feast there.

A.2. Marriage Price:

The principal marriage price Manpui was payable to the bride's father or brothers and in their absence to the nearest male relative of the bride. The general

rate of Manpui was four mithuns or eighty rupees in cash. There were also various subsidiary bride prices. Sumhmahruai was an amount of rupees twenty payable to the bride's father or brother. To them was payable another subsidiary price called sumfang consisting of an amount of eight rupees. Pusum was payable to the nearest male relative on the bride's mother's side - generally, the bride's pu, the protector, who would be her mother's brother. The amount varied between four rupees to ten rupees and in case of a chief's daughter, it would be a mithun. Equivalent to pusum was niman paid to the paternal aunt of the bride.

The elder sisters of the bride would get naupukpuan for having carried the bride in her childhood in their puans or clothes. Price was also payable to a palal who would be a trustee or adoptive father of the bride to oversee her interests all through her married life. Voluntary amounts of ten rupees downwards would be considered for payment as thianman, to the friends of the bride. Similar optional payment was lawichal paid to the leader of the escort when a girl was married to another village. The girl going over to the village of the groom would spend the night before the marriage in a friend's or relation's house who would get a share of manpui. Otherwise, the person putting her up would get five rupees as charges for her stay called *thlenin man*.

A.3. Women's possession:

At the time of marriage, the parents of the girl would present her with *thuam* meaning dowry, which normally consisted of necklaces, earrings and good clothes, the necklaces being generally a string of old amber beads worth twenty rupees or so. The *thuam* was the exclusive property of the women and would have to be replaced even if it was used by the husband for any purpose.

The other exclusive properties of the women were puapui, a rather thick cotton blanket woven by hand and a thill, which was a rather large basket for keeping clothes. The baskets were products of local handicrafts. These were invariably taken by the married woman to her husband's house. Other items of such possessions were ordinary woven clothes usually woven by the woman herself, weaving materials (*thembu*), spindle (*hmui*) and other variety of baskets used for every day work by women.

A.4. Necklaces:

It may be remarked here that the marriage price of woman in those days of scarcity and where money value was at the highest would not be less than one hundred rupees which compared to the present day price of four hundred rupees or so was really fabulous and the quantum of marriage price was the main determining factor of the quality of wife acquired. The

present day price of Rs. 400 in most cases is now a mere token.

A.5. Divorce: A man could divorce his wife through what is called Mak, which meant simply that the man was divorcing her. The wife also in her turn could leave her husband by returning all the price paid by the husband. On such separation, the woman could take back all her personal property together with her dowry (*thuam*). In case of adultery (*uire*) by a woman while the husband was alive, the entire price had to be refunded to the husband. In adultery case, only the woman was punishable and not the man. A woman accused of committing adultery but not found guilty had to be taken back by the husband immediately otherwise it would be assumed that he divorced (*mak*) her.

SECTION B: Village administration

There is no distinction of class in the society. Only those who were chiefs of villages and the elders assisting the chiefs in the administration of the village welfare were looked upon as leaders by the village people because of their responsibilities in the days of the chiefs. By and large, people had implicit trust in one another. Fear of theft was almost unknown in the days chieftainship was in vogue and even houses would be left by the inmates with a hewn piece of wood resting against the door to indicate their absence.

B.1. Chief and Elders:

The Chief and his elders were for all practical purposes the parents of the villagers and it was they who would distribute jhumlands to the villagers year after year. They would also administer justice by deciding petty cases of criminal nature in the chief's residence. The chief, in return for the tributes in the form of paddy and other small privileges rendered by the households, would be looking after the welfare of his people to the extent of protecting them from their enemies. The Chief therefore played pivotal and significant role for his subjects. The Chief was regarded as the owner of the village and the surrounding land. He could ask the people of the village to furnish him with what he required. Every man was bound to labour for the chief three days in a year.

The villagers would voluntarily offer their services to build the house of the chief. However, the chief had to exercise his authority with due care and caution as the subjects were likely to desert him if the slightest form of oppression was felt and thus threaten the very existence of the chief.

The chief assisted by his elders would adjudicate disputes that came to him for decision. The losing side would be required to pay a fine in kind which was called *salam*. It was usually a female pig which would be enjoyed by the elders in the form of a feast as

remuneration for the disposal of the disputes brought to them.

Property offences were punished by restitution and fine in kind or cash. Bodily offences were punished by fine. Justice was administered in villages by the chief and the elders in their respective villages. In the case of the more heinous crime, the Superintendent would try and dispose of them.

B.2. Village Officials:

The important officials of the village apart from the chief and his elders were the Village Crier (Tlangau), the Blacksmith (Thirdeng), the Village Priest (Puithiam), the Ramhuals and the Zalens. The Tlangau would announce important orders of the chief and the elders and was to be remunerated by contribution of paddy by each household. The Thirdeng's task was to make agricultural implements and weapons of the villagers and would get one basket of paddy from each of the families. In addition, he would get a fixed share consisting of the spine and three ribs of every animals shot or trapped by any villager. The Puithiam would perform village ceremonials and conduct all sacrifices to propitiate the spirits. For his service, he would get paddy from the villagers.

The Ramhuals were those who had the privilege of selecting the jhumlands in preference to others and for this they had to pay higher fathang (paddy tax) to the chief. The Zalens were those who would assist the chief when the chiefs household ran short of paddy and help him in other similar difficulties. For such services, they would be exempted from payment of paddy to the chief.

B.3. Zawlbuk:

The cradle of village discipline and social service in the days of the chieftainship was what is called Zawlbuk which was nothing but a Bachelors' Dormitory. It was here that the boys learnt the art of discipline and obedience. Minor boys were required to contribute fuel, a bundle of faggots or twigs collected from the forest which would be burnt at Zawlbuk throughout the night. On their attaining puberty, the boys would be freed from such compulsory contribution of firewood.

The Chief, being aware of the availability of young men at Zawlbuk especially at night would ask for volunteers even at dead of night on emergency basis, to run errands in case of deaths or wild animals entering the village and threatening cattle or domestic animals or birds, or any emergent situation calling for concerted prompt actions. Such was the utility of Zawlbuk and the young men here learnt how to obey their elders. With the abolition of the system of Chieftainship and its replacement by democratically

village Councils, the Zawlbuk institution also became a thing of the past.

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