

## RELEVANCE OF 'ZAWL' SYSTEM AMONG THE HMARS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

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### Abstract

The Hmar belongs to one of the ethnic tribes under the Zo umbrella also referred to as Chin-Kuki-Mizo. Among the Hmars kinship can be classified into three broad categories of which the *Zawl* system, a kind of fictive kin, offers a unique essence and insights into the social structure and household administration of the Hmars. *Zawl* can be understood akin to the African system of blood brotherhood. Yet, the place a *Zawl* holds in the Hmar society has its own connotation and significance that goes beyond the bond of friendship. It is a kind of extended system of kin formation, not necessarily related by blood, who occupied a prominent place in a family as close as one's kin; at times, a *Zawl* can represent on behalf of the family on different occasions. It is sealed by a ritual based on a reciprocal basis. This paper explores the role and standing of the *Zawl* system among the Hmar tribe.

**Keywords:** Hmar Tribe, Cultural Identity, Zawl System, Kinship Relationships, Family

### Introduction: The Hmar Tribe

The Hmar tribe belongs to one of the ethnic tribes under the *Zo* umbrella, which is also referred to as Chin-Kuki-Mizo. *Zo* is a generic inclusive term used to refer to all cognate tribes claiming a common theory of origin (Vumson, 1987). Under the *Zo* umbrella, there are different tribes and sub tribes spread across Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India. Depending on their areas of settlement, they are identified by different names. In Myanmar, they are known as Chin, and India as Kuki and Mizo. In India, they are spread across the Northeastern states of India inhabiting predominantly the states of Manipur, Mizoram, the Hills region of Assam,

and part of Tripura (Dena, 2008 ; Hmar, 2013). The origin of the Zo people is enveloped around two main theories. In the absence of written records, their origin is mainly traced back to their traditional oral stories and folklores (Dena, 2008). One popular theory about their origin is that they might have originated from *Sinlung*, a mythical place believed to be located in China, although there are no substantive written documents to substantiate the claim. Another theory of their origin is advanced around belonging to the Manasseh tribe, one of the lost tribes of Israel (Thangtungnung, 2015; Chongzik, 2014). This explanation lacks evidence despite gaining momentum supposedly coinciding with the advent of Christianity among the Zo cognate tribes. Albeit, the inability to authenticate their historical origin, these popular beliefs help shape their identity echoing a commonality across different territorial boundaries in terms of their origin.

The Zo tribes relied mostly on colonial writings to trace their historical records. Even for the Hmars, it was only after Manipur and Assam were annexed that the Britishers came into contact with them. Major Shakespeare placed the Hmar under old kookies (Chongzik, 2014:171; Thangtungnung, 2015). According to Shakespeare, the name Hmar could have originated on account of the way they tied their hair, knotted on the nape of the neck. In another explanation based on the direction of their migratory route from Myanmar, they came to be called Hmar, meaning Northerner (Hmar, 2013). Thangtungnung explained as, "those others who migrated to north came to be called the Hmars meaning northerners" (2015: p 42). In the work of G.A. Grierson's linguistic survey of India the Hmar spelt as Mhar was on record for the first time (Varte, 2014). Despite the late entry on the official record of the colonisers, Shakespeare when he came in contact with the Hmars acknowledged their differences in attributes in comparison with their kindred tribes.

Whatever maybe constructed in terms of their origin astride along two theories, oral tradition served as a pre requisite form of reconstructing their past and account of their history and culture. It remains true particularly in the context of the *Zawl* system of the Hmars, wherein it is sketchily represented in the writings of the contemporary writers and academicians. The understanding of its role and functions in the Hmar society is passed down from generation to generation, mostly through oral practices. In the absence of well written laws on the practice of the *Zawl* system, it leaves room for differences in practice and interpretations across the Hmar inhabitant regions. This very aspect on the *Zawl* system makes this study meaningful. This study examines the role of the *Zawl* system in the administration of Hmar households.

### **Social Structure of the Hmar Society**

The social structure of the Hmar tribe is based on the pattern of 'Family-Clan-SubTribe-Tribe' pattern (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1976:153). Family forms the basic economic and social unit. In essence a Hmar household is characterised and bounded by kinship ties that exemplified characteristic of having both descent and alliance theories. Descent is traced mainly through the unilineal male line. With regards to marriage, the Hmar society is open and flexible. It follows neither exogamy nor endogamy. Alliance can be made both within or outside the

clan depending on the choice of the partners. Traditional Hmars were clannish and preferred to settle based on their clan and lineages. The places where they had once settled, such as *Keivawm*, *Khawzawl*, *Khawbung*, *Biete*, *Thiek*, and *Zote*, located in the North eastern part of the present Mizoram, are still known by their clan or lineages name (Inboun, 2021). The Hmar tribe consisted of about 22 major clans. Clan is interpreted analogous to *pahnam* in the Hmar language. *Pahnam* are further sub-divided into more than 200 *hnam siper* (sub-clans or clan segmentation) (Margareth, 2021). Clan plays an important role in understanding the kinship system of the Hmar. *Pahnam* forms the base of the kinship system among the Hmar. The solidarity of *pahnam* is manifested in the performance of various customs and rituals in every household. At times, it also takes on the role of traditional court of law for the Hmars. Any disputes between two households are settled by the *pahnam*, represented by elder members from both the clan, which among the Hmars is called *pahnam rorel*.

### Kinship System of Hmar Tribe

The kinship system of the Hmars can be exemplified as having both the characteristics of descent theory and alliance theory. It is centered around male tracing from male descent. Male are accorded with more roles and responsibilities in carrying out functions in household administration and in the society. Moreover, the understanding of kinship system among the Hmars indicated otherwise the influence of paternal authority, kins and clan in the administration of a household. Kinship among the Hmars can be classified into three broad categories, viz., consanguine kinship, affinal kinship, and fictive kinship.

- 1) **Consanguineal kinship:** This type of kinship is exemplified by the clan or *pahnam* system. According to Inboun (2021), consanguine kinship implied a social liaison between a male member of a clan and also an alliance of different households sharing the same clan and lineage. This exemplified the centeredness of men in society and how kinship relationships are shaped. *Pahnam* usually represented the household in both good and bad times and bestowed the right to settle disputes between any two households (Inboun, 2021).
- 2) **Affinal kinship:** Hmar families were bound by kinship ties, and marriage among the Hmars not only solidified relationships between two households but also centered around the display of relationships among clans (Sanate, 2014; Inboun, 2021). Affinal kins who hold important roles are *Makpa* (son in law), *Laibung* (kinsmen) and *Pu* (maternal uncle) (Sanate, 2014). Marriage arrangements are carried out by *Laibung*. *Laibung* is composed of male members from the same clan, derived from patrilineal descent, who act as intermediaries representing the family. They form an important part of household administration. A household can assign the role of *Laibung* to any of its clan members. It should be noted not all blood relations were necessarily *Laibungs*. In addition, Hmars practices associating different terminologies to differentiate between the paternal and maternal sides of the relationship. Uncle and aunty from the paternal side are addressed with the prefixes '*Pa*' and '*Ni*' respectively. While uncle and aunty from maternal side are addressed with the prefixes '*Pu*' and '*Nu*' respectively. *Pu* is a

prefix used to address relatives on the maternal side. It is also used to address the elderly. In this context the word *pu* connotes relatives from the maternal side. Although the Hmars follow a patrilineal system, the maternal side has a standing in performing certain rites in the family rituals. The maternal portion of the bride price called *Pusum*, is paid to the head of the family. During the condolence service, the maternal side is expected to serve *Pu zu*, a ritual to commence the funeral service. *Zu* literally means wine. However, when used within the context of Hmar literature describing Hmar custom, it connotes traditional rice beer, which they used to brew locally. Rice beer is common among the tribes of Kuki-Chin-Mizo. However, with the advent of Christianity in the region, tea was gradually introduced as a substitute for rice beer (Haimendorf, 1968).

- 3) Fictive kinship (Ritual Kin):** Fictive kin can be defined as 'those adopted unrelated relatives where the rights and obligations of kinship are bestowed and socially recognized as members of the family'. Fictive kinship among the Hmars is established through ritual. There are two broad fictive kins among the Hmars. One is *Saphun* and the other is *Zawl*. *Saphun* means adopting another *Sa* (religion/clan) as one's own and other liability for all practical purposes. Through *Saphun* it allowed a clan member or member who is an outsider not necessarily who belong to Hmar tribe to adopt another clan or become a Hmar tribe. This indicates that the Hmar clan system is flexible and that one can enter into the fold of a clan not only by blood or marriage ties (Inboun, 2021). A *Zawl* is another type of fictive kin akin to African concept of blood brotherhood. It is sealed by a ritual based on reciprocal basis. Any male can adopt a *Zawl* by offering him a portion of meat and if reciprocated the other party will offer a tea. This ritual cemented their bond a lifetime. A *Zawl* holds a significant place in the administration of a household, who at times can represent on behalf of the household. As this paper looks into the aspects of a *Zawl* details description is spelled on the adjoining paragraph.

### The Zawl System

The *Zawl* system forms fictive kin, where the relationship is beyond descent and affinity. It is a bond between friends cemented by certain rituals. How did the practice of *Zawl* system develops is little known. It could have stemmed from the need for a household to live along the line of cooperative primarily to garner support and build relationships across different villages and clans. Considering the prevalence of inter-tribal warfare, inter village warfare among the cognate tribes, it must have developed to forge relationship akin to making alliance in extending family circle. This assumption seems plausible considering on of the cognate tribes of Zo the Kuki require to adopt from another village. Apart from the brief mentioned in the context of the Hmar family system/ household administration and kinship, there is scanty literature on the *Zawl* system. The practice is orally passed down from generation to generation, with no written law that mandates one to adopt a *Zawl*.

The *Zawl* system is found to be practice among other cognate tribes of Zo with slight difference in the adoption and practices. The Paite tribe also called it as *Zawl* and form an

important role in household administration. However, the Paite requires to adopt *Zawl* only from within the same village or locality. Among the Kuki it is known as *Bepa*, and requires adopting from another village. Among the Hmars they usually adopt a *Zawl* from outside the clan, who could act as a blood related sibling for all practical purposes

Regarding the practice of *Zawl*, one can adopt only among the same gender and not across mixed gender. Ritual practice across gender differs in terms of gift. Adoption of a *Zawl* by men involved a gift of a portion of the meat of the back of animal known as *Sa zang*, a slice of the pig's back from the neck down to the tail, and was usually about three inches wide, to the adopted man. On the other hand, for women it is a gift of the meat portion of *khak*, a slice of the meat portion of jaw<sup>1</sup>. In Hmar culture, when one tends to have a *Zawl*, they address one another as *Zawlpa* by men and as *Zawlnu* by women.

Regarding the selection of a *Zawl*, there are no set criteria as such to adopt a *Zawl*. It depends on the two parties. One normally chooses with whom they are friends or with whom they feel they can rely. Anyone can adopt a *Zawl* simply by informing the person, "*Zawl in ka man thei che am?*" meaning can I take you as my *Zawl*. One can adopt as many *Zawl* as one wishes to have. If the person accepted the offer, the one who extended the offer would take a slice of *sa zang* meat to the house of his new *Zawl*. On the other hand, the new *Zawl* would reciprocate the gift with tea, to the giver's residence. After some time, the new *Zawl* would also have to give the same portion of the meat whenever they killed an animal during a feast or for any reason. In other words, acceptance implies a willingness to return the gift as well as the confirmation of the relationship. It was customary, albeit not obligatory, to adopt a *Zawl*.

*Zawl* system is practice across gender, however, for women to have a *Zawl* is a rare case. In today's society it is seen that only male tends to practice keeping of *Zawl*. During an interview with Pu Hmingchunghnung, he remembers his mother having a *Zawl*, but the practice among women has wane over the years. One reason he ascribed is the lack of role a women's *Zawl* has to play in a patriarchy society, so much so that over a period of years the practice of adopting a *Zawl* is uncommon and unheard of among Hmar women folks. It can be said that the centrality of patrilineal descent in according relationship across kins reduced women to view it from the lens of male that a system like *Zawl* among women have almost rendered it into oblivion.

### **Role and Place of *Zawl* in the Hmar Society**

1. Payment of bride price. A *Zawl* can pay the bride price on behalf of the groom's family.
2. Payment of *Zuorman* ie payment made to *Zour*. During marriage ceremony the bride is escorted by her close friends and relatives to the groom's resident who help carry the bride's articles to her new house. The *Zawl* on such occasion can voluntary paid and distributed the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Pu Hmingchunghnung, Aizawl, on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2022.

*Zourman* i.e. payment made to *zour* who escorted the bride to groom's house. In today's ceremony *Zourman* is paid in cash, the amount which ranges from Rupees 10 to 50.

3. *Mansiper* (subsidiary price) which is divided under three heads. One head which is called *panghak* (trustees) is distributed among the bride's father *Zawl* (fictive kin) (Crossthang, 2014).

4. A *Zawl* can represent and stand on behalf of the household/family of his *Zawl*. This aspect makes the *Zawl* a central key member in a family. In case anyone deceased, the one who is alive as being his *Zawl* can represent his *zawl's* widow family and take part in the decision making of his deceased family. He acts as a trustee for the family of his deceased *Zawl*. *Zawl* play an important role that he can represent his *Zawl* family on equal footing as family member along with those of near relatives.

In addition to these, Hmingchunghnung (2022) elaborates on the rights and responsibilities of a *Zawl* as below: -

1. A *Zawl* is regarded as the blood brother of his counterpart who has adopted him as *Zawl*. Once being adopted as *Zawl*, he has the right to act on behalf of his *Zawlpa* so far as he is entrusted by his *Zawlpa* in any respects.
2. He has in turn the right to engage his *Zawlpa* to act on his behalf if and when necessity arises or to enlist him alongside himself in dealing with the things that may require *Zawl's* presence.
3. He usually has the responsibility to be considerate towards his *Zawlpa's* family and should always be ready to oblige when and where the role of a *Zawl* is needed from his *Zawlpa's* family.
4. He has also the responsibility to act on behalf of his *Zawlpa* when and where his *Zawlpa* cannot afford to do or is no more. He is supposed to be the unfailing aide and mentor to his *Zawlpa* in times of need. He has to stand in for his *Zawlpa* if the need be in some cases when his *Zawlpa* is not available. So the role of a *Zawl* is almost indispensable for a normal family. A good *Zawl* is like the right-hand-man of his *Zawlpa*. In fact, the position of *Zawl* is above friendship.

## Conclusion

*Zawl*, fictive kin among the Hmars, offers a unique understanding into the household administration that transcend beyond the product of affinal and consanguineal kins. A *Zawl* can and have a standing to function as a representative of a household thereby it can traverse and enter into the fold of both affinal and consanguineal kins. The fictive kin of the Hmar also showcased the flexibility depicting that anyone can enter into the fold of Hmar customary ritual and practice.

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