



Fascinating Practices of the Hmar with Special Reference to the Custom of *Zawl-inkei*: Past and Present Context

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Abstract: Tribal traditions are replete with fascinating practices that invites notice and attract attentions. Some of these practices are long extinct with no hope of revival while some are in the process of dying. Certain reasons attributed to this are various stages of transition, Christian missionary influence and subsequent conversions, and agents of modernization. With regard to these, a very beautiful practice of the Hmar which is in the process of dying fast is worth studying. This is called *Zawl-inkei* which can be best explained in terms of 'social way to entitle a friend as a blood brother'. The ceremony that marks this 'status quo' is simple, not elaborate but impressive. It is like an oath-taking ceremony that binds the two friends for life, to stick by each other through thick and thin. Even if motion pictures are made or the same treasured in archives, they would not compare to the real practice because their vital essence would be missing. The present article therefore, attempts to describe and analyse this simple but important ceremony in its entirety. But due to lack of works on it, there exists hardly any primary or secondary sources for reference. Therefore, this work is mainly based on little primary source and interviews with elderly, experienced, knowledgeable and reliable persons. The purpose of this study is to bring out one of the most beautiful and meaningful practices of the Hmar community of India and record the same for posterity.

Keywords: Tribal practices, *Zawl-inkei*, transition, modernization, posterity.

Introduction: Tribal communities in India or elsewhere were animists from time immemorial. Long after degrees of transition, they continued following some of their customary practices. With Christianization, they gave up many of these practices on the grounds of heathenism. In the face of this, a few that did not have any clash with their new faith were maintained. However, with the dawn of modernization, even these came to be considered uncivilized by the new generation who no longer value the traditions of their forefathers. The modern bent of mind having been kindled, a few of such practices are en route to extinction. The search for separate identities, to some extent, rekindled love of customary and traditional practices.

Those which still exist in remote areas were revived in urban areas and promoted for posterity. With regard to this, the Hmar tribe too, has many practices which have died out and are dying while very few still stand the tests of time. The present subject is one such which, due largely to its nature of neutrality or non-clashing characteristics both with religion and modernity, continues to thrive although quite different from the historical context in practice or significance.

Definition of the term: According to the Hmar Dictionary compiled by Dr. Vanlal Tluonga Bapui, “*Zawl* means a specially made friend which is often considered a blood-brother. The parties are under obligation to help one another, to share one another’s joys and sorrows’, and the verb form *Zawl-a-inkei* means ‘to make or choose a friend as *zawl*’, and *zawlpa* means a male friend¹. In the present paper however, the term would be referred as *Zawl-inkei*, to denote the practice as a whole.

As has been translated in the dictionary, a *Zawl* is a close friend promoted to the status of a blood brother, to stick to the other through thick and thin and share the same authority in times of joy and sorrow. The *zawlpa* occupies an important place in the other’s personal, social and religious life. When the other is indisposed, the *zawl* is entitled to have the same authority as he would in the other’s house. In case one cannot present himself during the hour of need due to some other pressing duties and problems, he sends a representative. A *zawlpa* can be chosen from any tribe or non-tribe irrespective of race, colour or religion as long as the other gives his consent.

Among the Thadou Kukis, a *zawl* is called *becha* or *bepa*. But they do not necessarily follow the same ceremony followed by the Hmar. However, the nature and characteristics of relationship are the same. Here too, *puondum* plays the same role² as in the Hmar custom. In the case of Lushais, the word *thian* is used to denote this special friend though the meaning is not absolutely identical. Among them, there are two kinds of friends viz., *thianbul* and *thianler*. The *thianbul* takes part in all the sacrifices performed by his friend and gets a share of the animals killed at the *Chawng*, *Sechhun*, and *Khuangchawi* feasts and himself contributes towards these feasts. The *thianler* gets the ears of all wild animals shot by his friend and if his friend performs any of the big sacrifices must clean the head of the animal sacrificed before it is hung up on the pole outside the house. At *Saai*, the feast given after a wild animal has been shot the *thianler* performs the same duty and gives his friend a fowl and *Zu* for the feast³.

The Genesis: In earlier times, a *zawl* was chosen from outside the family, clan or community. One may think that such an act is far from necessary when one has his own brothers, clans and community. But it was necessitated by the status of the tribe. The Hmar were a migratory tribe moving from one to different regions due to certain reasons like famine, epidemics, subjugation, slavery and so on. “In their wonderings, they look for settlements through a ritual. They carry a cock with them wherever they go. When they come to a certain location that suits their need, they call for a rest. If the cock crows the next morning, the *thiempu*/priest would advice the people to set up a village in that particular spot⁴. Cocks carried about the whole day hardly crow the next morning due to certain reasons. Thus, the crowing of such a cock is often considered a lucky

omen. Therefore, the priest stamps the omen with sacrificial rituals and advice the moving population to set up a village in that particular place.

As was a fact, these were not completely isolated places. From their traditional home of Sinlung in Central China⁵ to their final settlement in different parts of Northeast India, the Hmar came in continuous contact with people of different races, colour, culture and traditions. At such times, necessities prompted some of the men to befriend the earlier settlers. They gave gifts and secured them as blood brothers. These aided them in their new ventures and settlements. These friends stood by them from enemies, unpleasant persons, helped them in their illness and shared their joys and sorrows. They made such friends at every settlement. Pu Lalzuilien Thiek says, “such a *zawl* has the power to save his *zawlpa* from the bullets of a gun. Sometimes, unfriendly natives may meet a new settler while hunting or roaming the jungles for wild fruits and other edibles or in his wonderings through villages etc. He may be caught at gun point. But if his *zawlpa* happens to be there, he could stand for the other and thus save him from such danger⁶. Because of its amazing power, this practice of *zawl-inkei* continued throughout their wonderings till the present times and has become one of the most beautiful traditional practices of the tribe.

Zawl-inkei is also said to have originated “due to certain needs that arose for orphans. In those days, orphans occupy a low status and many a times, were treated with disdain. As such, they were helpless with none much willing to be on their side or extend a helping hand as and when needs arose. Therefore, they usually ask their friends to become a blood brother through the custom of *zawl-inkei*. Thus, they acquire brothers who became their support and strength. In return, they remain faithful to their *zawl* even in the face of death⁷.

According to Pu. L. Chawngtho Khawzawl, two persons with the same name, for example, *Lalnunmawi* can call each other as *zawlnu/zawlpa*. Besides having the same names, two persons may also call each other as *zawl* if they have the same nickname/pet name, for example, *Lalhmingmawi* and *Lalpiengmawi* could both be called *Mawii* for women and *Mawia* for men, in which case, the two persons may call each other as *zawlnu/zawlpa*⁸.

Description: *Zawl-inkei* is mainly a custom that takes place practically among men. The two parties could be young or married. Usually, when a young man develops a deep friendship with a particular friend, he asks if the other would be willing to be his *zawlpa*. The other understands the responsibilities of such friendship and sometimes, due to poverty or lack of confidence, ill health and others, the friend rejects the request. But this hardly happens. If the friend accepts the offer of becoming a *zawlpa*, a ceremony follows. However, these ceremonies are not always solemnly organized by everyone. For example, if A seeks a *zawl*, he may give him a black cloth with a few lines of white coloured border called *Puondum*. Regarding the value, power and significance of *puondum* gifted to a *zawl*, Pu. Lalzuilien says, “Suppose a person’s *zawlpa* happens to shoot a person accidentally during hunting expeditions and matters were likely to get out of hand, his *zawlpa* can save him if he fetch the *puondum* and cover the body before the council gathers and stands firmly for the accidental deed of his *zawlpa*.. In such a circumstance, the other party could be under

compulsion to forgive and make peace with him".The cloth would therefore, be treasured by B. The *puondum* serves as a reminder of their 'status quo' and the receiver is reminded of his loyalty to the giver.

From the moment B receives the *puondum* from A, he becomes a blood-brother with a silent promise to stick to the other through thick and thin. Sometimes, such exchange of *puondum* is followed by a tea-party. Other times, the first would ask his friend to dine with him where he offers the *puondum* and their relationship takes a new turn of blood-brothers. Yet at other times, the ceremony is organized solemnly over a meal with prayers offered by a priest called for the special purpose. Here, A gives a *puondum* to B, they share *sazang*/spine of an animal killed for the occasion. I happened to witness one such ceremony in 2017 where my uncle's son chose a *zawlpa*, prepared a meal, invited a selected number of his paternal and maternal uncles and aunts, other distant brothers and sisters who came and helped in the preparation of the meal and took part in the ceremony.

The Ceremony: During the day, an animal of A's choice is killed and prepared for meal. Earlier, it was a wild animal shot or caught by traps. While cutting up the animal, preferably a pig now, the spine is kept aside, boiled and kept ready for the special meal. When everything is complete, selected relatives, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters gather for the meal. The father/mother of A (in case father is not alive) welcomes all that came, speaks about the occasion and its significance and asks anyone if they would like to say something.

Sometimes, instead of the father of A, the *zawlpa* of the father/ the elder brother/ a distant brother/a Church Elder speaks why A and B have taken such steps,clarifies the difference between their earlier and present friendship, their duties towards each other, the need for loyalty, the sacrifices they have to make for each other etc. He lays stress on the fact that the step taken is something serious for life and would be treated with honour, respect and loyalty. After this, a priest or a Church Elder invited for the occasion gives advice and asks A to let B wear the *puondum* which was kept ready for the occasion. He then tells the two friends to join hands and pray to God to bless their friendship and asks God to help them always stay faithful to each other for life. Then the meal is set.

A special table is laid for the two friends. If possible, plantain leaves are used as plates (to show adherence to their forefathers' tradition). One big plate is laid for the two friends served with rice. A hole is made in the middle of the heap of rice where the meat and others were placed in the centre. This is done with an intension that both the friends would begin from their respective ends and eat the rice and meat on their respective sides till they meet each other at the centre. This custom of eating in one plate is still followed in rural areas. It has a very significant meaning. It shows unity among the members of the family, and it was a time when parents educate their children on the basic necessities of moral and religious conduct. It was also a time when they assigned their children with their respective duties for the day.The meat being eaten, another helping if required, would be served to them again. However, this seldom happen because ample rice and meat is heaped on the plate before they eat.

After the priest had prayed and the food served, the most important and the main act of the ceremony is enacted. The two friends are asked to hold the cooked spine from both ends. Then an elder cut the spine in the middle into equal length. This is called *Sazang intan* which means ‘the sharing of an animal’s spine’. The spine being the most important part of a vertebrate, this act is done to make them understand the importance of their new relationship and the heavy duties and responsibilities they have undertaken. Then both the friends have to eat their share. As it is not possible to finish half a spine, (which is usually done in the case of small wild animals) they usually take it home after the meal. Thus A and B are bound by custom to become ‘*zawl*’ or blood brothers for the rest of their lives.

Responsibilities of a *Zawl*: The custom of *Zawl-inkei* comes with heavy duties for both friends. The friend taken as a *zawlpa* has several important duties towards his friend and vice versa. Some of the important services expected from a *zawlpa* are discussed below.

In matters of marriage: In case A is unmarried and about to get married, his *zawlpa* has certain responsibilities. He has to help the former with his bride. If the former opts for a love marriage, the latter has to help him elope with the girl. Sometimes, he goes along when his friend elopes with the girl. Sometimes, he remains behind and serves as a messenger to both the families of the couple. His duty does not end here. When the couple returns from wherever they had been, B has to speak on behalf of A (in case A’s father no longer lives). At such times, he has a huge responsibility of being a father, a brother and a friend. This goes both ways. In case A opts for an arranged marriage, B has certain obligations. He would be seen in the former’s house almost on a daily basis beginning from the time of proposal, always on the lookout for any necessary work.

In case of women, a *zawlnu* spins, weaves and fetch firewood or water together. Jhum and other household works are shared between them. She is the best guide and confidant in matters of love and marriage. She acts as the go-between her friend and her sweetheart. In marriage, she becomes the witness and bridesmaid. They remain faithful till the end of their lives, sharing, caring and doing things together⁹.

The duties and responsibilities also include monetary help besides advice, planning, manual work and the likes. As the wedding dawns, his responsibilities increase especially if his friend no longer has a father. According to Pu Gregory L. Lhouvum, “the *zawlpa* is like a Prime Minister who is in charge of the whole event with eyes, ears and mouth at his friend’s disposal. He supervises the various workers on behalf of his friend. On things he is not directly in charge, he keeps a silent watch, making note of necessary things in the house¹⁰. If A’s father is alive, B works in accordance with A’s father while keeping a close watch on his friend’s needs. The same is done by A in case of B.

In matters of death: The occasion of death is just as important as marriage. In fact, it is more so as sorrow is harder to bear. In case of death on either side of the two friends, the *zawlpa* would be available at every nook and corner of the house, performing such acts as are necessary in the house. He gives no chance to his friend in matters of importance. He becomes his friend who does as his friend would. Here, if the deceased was his friend, he takes the place of the dead friend as a son to his friend’s father while performing his own

duties. Even after the death of his *zawlpa*, he keeps a watchful eye on his friend's family and performs all his duties towards the surviving members of his *zawlpa*'s family.

The responsibilities of a *zawlnu* are not much compared to a *zawlpa* as the community is strictly patriarchal and women have no say in matters regarding all important decisions social or otherwise. But she sits beside her friend's coffin, mourns her and may keep an eye on her deceased friend's children. On the other hand, children of the deceased consider her a guide and seek her advice in many matters¹¹.

Miscellaneous: Marriage and Death are not the only occasions when a *zawlpa* comes to his friend's aid. Social, religious, economic and political life includes the advice, support and aid for the other. In fact, every act associated with daily life like cutting jhum land, hunting, fishing, weeding, business enterprise, occasional functions on either side calls for a *zawlpa*'s attention towards his *zawl*.

So far, only duties and responsibilities have been discussed with nothing pleasant about the custom of *Zawl-inkei*. However, just as the duties and responsibilities are heavy, the dues/shares are also numerous. Every happy occasion benefits a *zawl* with a fair share of his dues. He also receives his share in successful hunts of his friend in which "he receives the spine of any animal killed. If the spine would be too less for the friend's family, some portion of the meat is given to him". Sometimes, *Sahruoi* (the fat along the back of the animal cut in long slice) is divided between the former's sisters and his *zawlpa* to show that he is a member of the family. Customarily, this part of the animal's meat belongs to sisters. Besides, he receives a fair share of the services from the latter¹².

He enjoys the love, respect, honour and company of his friend's family as his own. He is an authoritative figure in his friend's house and personalizes him. Any occasion that marks his *zawl*'s success would see him first just as he is omnipresent in the other's misfortune. In case he is unable to present himself in his *zawl*'s sorrow and joy, he would send someone to represent him.

As for a *zawlnu*, she receives special treatment in all her friend's good times and share her bad as well. She gets a share of the animal's shoulder meant for sisters on any special occasion of her friend. She remains a friend, a guide, and an advisor who stands through thick and thin. In her friend's wedding, she serves as the bridesmaid and receives whatever her friend gifts her¹⁴.

Historical and Present Context: In earliest known times, when a man wants to take a *zawlpa*, he would give him the spine of an animal killed in a hunt or trap along with a simple cotton-spun cloth called *tuibopuon*. This cloth is of comfortable length woven to serve the dual purpose of a bed-sheet and a blanket. This was before people were acquainted with the art of dyeing. When soot came to be used in colouring cloth black, a simple *puondum* or black cloth was used for the occasion. In the present times, this *puondum* has yet undergone changes with some lines of white strip running at the corner of the cloth. "Another way is through the drinking of traditional beer, *Zu*. The two would share a straw and drink from the same pot. It is from this that the famous phrase '*ZubelPahnam*/ rice-beer pot clan' has taken birth whose relationship is still continued by some in the present times. Regarding this, Pu Lazuilien says that if one takes a *zawl* from the Naga clan, he has to exchange salt with the other. Salt serves as a reminder to both the friends that they

should always retain their friendship and remain faithful to their undertaking. It signifies that they should be like salt¹⁵.

The present context of *Zawl-inkei* is a little different from the historical aspect. These can be attributed to certain social changes in the wake of modernization. Just as filial relationships today lack seriousness, the sanctity of this particular bond has dwindled in degrees. Some do it for the sake of doing without giving much value to it. And yet, among the youth, they do it for the fun of it. Need for making a *zawl* from another tribe have also appeared less necessary in these days of peace. However, this is continued in the present times.

This custom is sometimes broken for certain reasons. Among the Lushais, two friends at any time can break their friendship by mutual agreement. In earlier times, this was done by standing the villages a round of drink. No *banman* is claimable if two friends separate or cease to pay each other the customary dues¹⁶. Among the Hmar, this custom is something sacred and cannot be broken at will. But in many cases at present, when a *zawlpa* dies, the friend enrobes the body with the highest robe of honour—a traditional cloth called *Thangsuopuon*. He serves refreshment in the name of his deceased friend to the congregation gathered to mourn him. To many people, this is considered an act that marks the end of their friendship. This should not be the case.

According to Pu. Ruolthokam Puruolte, “Even after the death of one of the *zawls*, it should be born in mind that the friendship cannot and does not die, it continues between them whether they will it or not. It is a sacred promise between two people in front of family, friends, Church Elder/Pastor/Priest, a bond of trust, loyalty and faith, an oath taken and heard by God, and the friendship should automatically be carried on. This friendship is passed down from generation to generation unless the other side no longer has surviving successors. This in fact, is how we, the Leiri and Changsan, two completely different clans have remained brothers to date. Any occasion of joy and sorrow, Changsan clans play the lead role in a Leiri house. This status does not and should not die¹⁷. He then went on to narrate how his grandfather’s *zawlpa*’s great grandson came to perform the duty of his great grandfather on the occasion of his (Pu Ruolthokam)’s wife’s death in August, 2018.

In spite of this, the relationship between this man made blood brothers may end when generations of both sides no longer value the intimation of their parents or grandparents with their *zawl* and fail to let it thrive. This could be because they have taken their respective *zawls* and found many difficulties in maintaining their grandparents’ contemporary *zawls* as well as their own. Lastly, the earlier custom of choosing *zawl* from other tribes and communities are almost given up. This is perhaps because the present generation lives in peacetime and finds less need to take such steps. Therefore, *zawl* is chosen mostly from among one’s own locality and tribe.

Conclusion: The custom of *Zawl-inkei*, to many people, may be considered something too petty to be laid on the table of discussion. But the origin, nature and characteristics as well as implications bear witness to its significance for the tribes practicing it. Although people may no longer be serious about it, it has served as a beacon light in arousing the curious mind as to the necessity of maintaining a custom as this. It is therefore, only right that the least customary practices of hills and plains people are recorded for posterity.

Endnotes:

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