International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-5; Sep-Oct, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

The Poetics of Understanding Mizo Pasts

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Received: 15 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Sep 2025; Accepted: 17 Sep 2025; Available online: 21 Sep 2025

Abstract— *Mizoram is the hilly, southernmost state of India's North East. The Mizo are a people who in all they do, think or believe, like to celebrate and commemorate, or simply mark their experience in song. With the introduction of writing, many of these survive today in the written form and are considered the earliest Mizo poetry. Colonial interventions compelled rapid cultural, political, and social changes on the people of these hills. While writing is generally associated with civilization and progress, the project of literacy cannot be divorced from the imperialist agenda that brought literacy to oral communities. It also meant that their past was rendered invalid; for lack of any written archival record, they were considered a people with no history. This paper will attempt to explore how songs offer a space for memory and remembering, and allow access to the past that history writing has not.*

Keywords— ***Mizo, Orature, Literacy, Writing, Songs, Memory, History Writing***

Introduction

Mizoram is the hilly, southernmost state of India's North East, bordering the states of Assam, Tripura and Manipur, as well as international borders with Bangladesh in the South-West and Myanmar to the East. Mizo culture has primarily been an oral one. Mizo oral culture came before written forms and has survived into contemporary times where the written word seems to permeate all forms of communication. While the written word is generally associated with civilization and progress, the project of literacy has usually caused ruptures in the society it is introduced into. The transition from oracy to literacy comes with various concomitant disruptions in world view, cultural practices and access to new cultural tools, especially in the case of writing skills and technology. How did written technology impact an oral community? What effects did writing have on the poetic traditions of Mizo Orature? Thus, this paper will explore the ways in which writing impacted Mizo Orature and the poetics of an Oral Community.

From Orature to Literature

According to legend, the Mizo had a script in ancient times, but they lost it. In his essay "The Story of Lost Manuscript in South Asia", Lalhruaitluanga Ralte refers to early Mizo writers and more contemporary researchers, who offer various versions of the legend,

> Tradition says that the written script of the Mizos was written on a sun-dried animal skin, which was eaten by a hungry dog while unattended. One writer had it that the script was written on leather scroll which was lost while living a nomadic life. Others said that the leather scroll was used as a cover of a wooden mortar, used for pounding rice. Unfortunately, a hungry dog ate it while unattended. So, the precious script was lost long ago.[1]

My point of departure for this paper is the rendering of a Mizo literature from existent orature, especially the conception of Mizo poetry, to understand how literate cultures inform and impact cultural practices of transmitting memory in oral communities. The discussion of impact also involves questions of reception, and whether Mizo society has managed to sufficiently recover enough from the rupture to renovate their poetic practises. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the terms 'songs' and 'poems' or 'poetry' interchangeably.

Mizos are a people who like to celebrate and commemorate, or simply mark their experience in song, in all they do, think or believe[2]. Songs were created and passed on orally in pre-literate times through performance. From sometime in the 18th Century onwards, names of individual composers began to be acknowledged as a certain manner of "authorship" began to take shape. Originally created as two to four line songs, the form drew from folk songs that had been popular

and handed down through generations. Often tunes were borrowed from existent folk songs or even other song creators but what distinguished them was the lyrics.[3]

With the introduction of the alphabet and the arrival of the written technology under the colonial 'civilising' project, what were so far songs, transmitted across and down through performance, were rendered into the written form. Stripped of their performative forms and tunes, these renderings then came to be the earliest Mizo poetry. It must be mentioned that the rendering of these songs into literate forms were not done by the song creators themselves, many of who were women, but by those who were first introduced to writing by the British, and most likely men[4]. The original creators may not have even known that their works had been rendered literate, having died even before the colonisers arrived at their shores.

The Poetics of Community Memory

While it is safe to say that a significant number of songs created by women were rendered into literate forms, it is possible that many other creators were left out. The first known 'author' or creator was Pi Hmuaki, who lived and created much before the advent of the British. Oral tradition however, has it that she was buried alive by her village community for fear that she would have left no more songs for others to create.

Up until Pi Hmuaki was known to create her songs, the culture of song was a participatory community practice. Most songs of the time were made during community feasts and other festive events. Songs came out of a collective practice that focussed on the community experience which placed it in the public realm. When Pi Hmuaki began creating, she most likely adapted the same method used in community practice for her personal one. The common practice in creating new songs in community was any individual speaking a line then the gathering repeating it as a tune that was already being sung. In doing so at an individual level, she took public community practice and made the songs created thus her personal creations. For as long as her songs represented a community context, there was admiration and appreciation for the songs and her ability because they gave expression to the community's experience, even if it was from her perspective alone.

It is critical to mention here that it was not just songs that were rendered literate but also varied stories and accounts of past experiences and exploits that had been – until then –communicated orally. Once literacy set in, there were a number of early literate Mizos who understood the need to maintain a record of their own, and not depend on colonial records about them. They were the earliest oral historians who became scribes of Mizo memory[5]. While documents and dates are often one of the key points in the writing and study of History, gathering information on the past in a primarily oral community that is based largely on a combination of memory, recollections, and oral traditions does not always allow for the unearthing and verification of facts. For the Mizo, it is almost as if songs verify that an event or occurrence actually took place because the particular experience was memorialised in the form of song, and the mention of places, geographies, and events in song supported findings. It happened; therefore it has been commemorated in song and story to remember by the community. The memory arises out of lived reality. It is living memory for those up to two, perhaps even three generations of those who experienced that reality.

Unlike history, memory does not lay claim to factuality deduced through written documents as empirical evidence. Instead memory can only present "truth" arrived at through an inductive, hermeneutic process of meaning-making through which facts are transformed into values, and knowledge into wisdom that can shape the impending future. Hence the telling of it is essential, this transference is as close to the memory as it can get for succeeding generations who may have never lived the experience but share narrative lineage in it. This transference is how succeeding generation remember and share in the memory.

The Creative Subject and the Gendered Space

Legend says that Pi Hmuaki was buried alive with her great gong which could be heard for seven days after. Curiously, for someone reputed to be so prolific, only a handful of her songs remain with us today – and the only one that finds continual reference is the one she composed as the young men of her village buried her. This throws up some provocative questions, what else has been buried?

Pi Hmuaki was known to be a *'lungleng mi'* – Mizos generally consider themselves to be *lungleng mi*, but even among them, Pi Hmuaki was considered to be especially so – a person of rare depth, feeling, and imagination. *Lungleng* or *lunglen* is an affect that is entrenched in existential longing. A longing for times, places and people long past, and an acute awareness of the transience of the

present into the imminent future. It bears both anxiety and hope. The Mizo experience is suffused in *Lunglen* and characterised by it. Pi Hmuaki was known to be so prolific that she had created songs for every person in her village, except two young men. This made the men of her village anxious that it was a threat to future song creators, and there would be nobody else left to compose about; even if somebody wished to create songs about their own father, Pi Hmuaki would have already done so. When she created a song for the last two men, it was decided that she should be put to death. Since she had neither harmed anybody in the community, nor endangered the safety of her community, there could be no real justification to kill her. Hence it was decided by the chief and his council of elders that she would be buried alive. To take care that she would not suffocate underground, they left a hole big enough to insert a large hollow bamboo through which air could enter the grave.

To Pi Hmuaki the decision was an insult to her and demeaning to the men themselves. She felt that the men dishonoured themselves and her, unable as they were to actually put her to death and justify their decision. The scathing quality of her most well known song to this day demonstrates that she considered it treachery. It is quite clear from the song that those who buried her were full grown adult men; in the vocabulary of tender support used to encourage children, her last song, and perhaps the most well remembered of them was an ironic call to the men to do the job well as she bade them to cover her properly:

Nauva te u, Nauhaiate u

Tha te te khan mi haichhilh rawh u.

(Little ones, dear young ones

Take care to cover me well)[6]

Realising that she continued to create songs about them below, they hurriedly covered the grave. In an attempt at irony, she was buried with one of her most prized possessions, a bronze gong[7] that she brought out to accompany her songs on occasion. It is said that she could be heard playing the gong for seven days after.[8]

If what Mizo memory records is considered true[9] and Pi Hmuaki was indeed the first "poet" among Mizo people, then the reason for why she was considered a threat to the future of Mizo song should not be passed off for mere lack of judgement. Exploring the times and events recorded in narrative through her songs explains the social circumstances she lived and negotiated in. When Pi Hmuaki began creating songs on her own, the practice was no longer limited to community gatherings alone, and therefore no more a male domain. The fact that a woman had claimed some kind of personal right over the public practise of creating new songs, well-regarded as she might have been was unimaginable. The most unacceptable threat she presented was that she played her gong; the great gong *darkhuang* was the biggest of the Mizo instruments, and the most valued. Played in public only by men, the gong was usually used at ritual events in the community, and always at the death of a chief or an elder as a display of grandeur. Since there was no specific regulation on when it could be played, people who owned the *darkhuang,* usually men, were allowed play it when they saw fit. Pi Hmuaki played the gong she owned to accompany her own songs which implicated both male position and the value of the *darkhuang*. This was an overreach for a woman, a wrongdoing but one that had neither a precedent nor practice they could follow as punishment for such a wrong. She knew that she had the benefit of age and experience; when the men in her village resolved that she should be put to death, it was dishonourable to the community as a whole. The knowledge that Pi Hmuaki had was not mere understanding of the approved standard of behaviour and customs that subjected her to the confines of socially acceptable norms. Her knowledge came from a continual engagement with her community, and the invisible social structures that she was a subject of. The same forces shaped a subject that was capable of action that would threaten the status quo that she was subject to. Her knowledge also came with a body that had experienced danger, force, and disruption apart from the daily encounters of a Mizo woman living within those structures. This subjectivity that was actively aware of an inner self that refused to be defined by societal practises, and was conscious of a sense of self and identity, is precisely what threatened the men in Pi Hmuaki's community; enough to put her to death.

When they decided to bury her alive with an air vent and her great gong - the insinuation was not lost on her as she continued to beat the gong for seven days in a superb inversion that both defied those who buried her gong with her, and lamented her own impending death, symbolically invoking the gong's purpose of at funerals of chiefs and elders. Until today, Mizo people still beat the great gong seven times at the funerals of elders – whether women or men, in the community.

CONCLUSION

Whether history or legend, Pi Hmuaki is a metaphor; not just for Mizo poetry, but for Mizo pasts as well. History writing has rendered this significant past invalid, since they are based on oral tradition; for lack of any written archival record, Mizos were long considered a

people with no history. During colonial times, records were maintained by colonial masters, which additionally suggested that the history that was written was not their own, further alienating them from their actual lived experience and memory. It is these as well as other such songs, and the lore that surrounds them that keep the knowledge and memory of that past alive for the Mizo people. Pi Hmuaki's drum still beats a remembered tattoo from beneath the rubble of a past that History Writing cannot accommodate.

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[1] R Lalhruaitluanga "The Story of Lost Manuscript in South Asia" in L.Kiangte ed.,*Writing in Mizo Manuscripts* (New Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts, 2017), 55

[2] B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Hun HluiHlate* (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1998),358

[3] R.L Thanmawia, Mizo Poetry (Aizawl: Mizoram Publication Board, 1998), 104

[4] Among them was K.Zawla whose work I refer to across much of this article

[5] Rev. Liangkhaia was the first of the pioneer Mizo writers who took up the task of putting Mizo memory of their pasts into writing.

[6] All translations mine

[7] She owned a *darkhuang*, the Mizo great brass gong; a status symbol and prized possession that only a privileged few in the community could own.

[8] Zawla, K. 1981 (1964). *Mizo Pi Puteleh an ThlahteChanchin.* (Aizawl: Gosen Press, 1981),268 andThanmawaia R.L. 2020(2012). *Mizo Hla Hlui (Mizo Folk Songs)*(Aizawl: Dindin Heaven, 2020),228-229

[9] As opposed to fact which limits discussion to what happened and how, rather than why and the hermeneutic possibilities it generates, because information that is stored in memory is a process of constant recollection, interpretation, and reconstruction unlike information that is recorded in documents that can be accessed and pulled out unaltered.