

# Innovations

## A Short Description of Some Folk Musical Instruments of Mizoram

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### Abstract

*From time immemorial, the Mizo have been using different musical instruments. Even though we cannot date the origin, the "Mizo of Kabaw Valley during late 10th to 13th century AD had developed their music as nearly as they have done today". The traditional Mizo musical instruments are very simple and crude in comparison to other Indian musical instruments and very out-dated to Modern Musical instruments. They can broadly be divided into three: Beating or Striking instruments; Wind instruments and String instruments. In this paper we will describe about different types of Musical Instruments.*

**Key words:** 1.Khuang, Dar, 2.Darkhuang, 3.Darmang, 4.Bengbung, 5.Talhhkuang

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### Introduction

It is difficult to trace the origin and to arrange the chronological sequences of the heritage of Mizo Music. However, some couplets were developed during the settlement of Thantlang in Burma, estimated between 1300-1400 AD. As recorded by B. Lalthangliana, the folk songs developed during this period were darhla (songs on gong); Bawhhla (War chants), Hlado (Chants of hunting); Nauawihhla (Cradle songs) A greater development of songs can be seen from the settlement of Lentlang in Burma, estimated between late 15th to 17th Century AD.

The Mizos occupied present-day Mizoram from the late 17th century. The pre-colonial period, that is from the 18th to 19th century A.D. was another important era in the history of Mizo folk literature. Prior to the annexation by the British Government, the Mizos occupied the present Mizoram for two centuries. In comparison with the folk songs of Thantlang and Lentlang settlement, the songs of this period are more developed in its number, form and contents. The languages are more polished and the flows also better. Most of the songs of this period are named after the composers.

In precolonial times, the Mizos used the drum, gong and mouth organ made of gourd and bamboo as musical instruments. With adoption of Christianity, musical instruments other than the drum lost their appeal. The first Musical instrument to enter Mizoram was the mouth organ brought in by Mrs Fraser in 1907. Mr Vankhama, a well-known composer was influential in popularizing the guitar in Mizoram.

The Mizos have a traditional way of classifying their folk songs. A study of their folksongs on the basis of their own system of classification shows that the Mizos have about one hundred different types of folksongs. But it can broadly be classified into ten categories:

**Bawh Hla:**

BawhHla is the song that the warriors would sing after taking the head of a rival clansman. It talks about how the severed head whose stench reeked throughout the village is a trophy of his conquest, a prize that he won with the help of his "Thangchem" (a machete used for headhunting). The song is a testimony of his triumph. No other warrior except the killer of the enemy may chant BawhHla.

**Hlado:**

This is the chant or cry raised by the hunters when a successful hunt has taken place. Chanting Hlado was done on the spot, or on the way home, or just before entering the village, or on the celebration. Anyone who witnessed his success could chant Hlado at any time and place.

**Thiamhla and dawihla (Invocation & incantation):**

These two verse forms are chanted by the Priests and the witch while performing ceremonies.

During ancient religious ceremonies, the priest would recite this song as he prepares the sacrificial animals for the rituals. The Creator- SiamtuBulpui 'Sa' was given a sacrifice of a pig, and the Protector- 'Khua min enkawltu' was given the sacrifice of a Gayal (Mithun). This sacrifice is then prepared as a feast of prestige for the attendees who are known as Chawngnu and Chawngpa (the worthy ones), in order to appease the vankhuamipui (inhabitants of heaven). This song is also an incantation that gives blessing of children, long life, good harvest, victory in battle and hunting, and it gives blessing so that one may be a Chawngnu and Chawngpa, and also so that they may become Zawhzazo (one who has completed all the obligations of the Mizo Pagan faith). In order to solidify the prayer, the song invokes the ancestors, the founder of ancient mizo religion, Hualthana, and also asks for all that has been left out and any mistakes in the prayer to be answered as well.

**Dar Hla:**

These are named after musical instruments. Dar hla means 'song for gong'. There are several songs named after the instruments, but Dar hla is the most popular and greatest in number. The compositional significance of these songs lies with the use of three Mizo Dar (Gongs), all tuned to different intervals of the major scale- Aw Pui (Do or the I), Aw Lai (Re or the II), and Aw Te (Mi or the III). This 3 note melody is used in Mizo folksongs to narrate stories to the masses and can be heard in much different iteration.

**Puipun Hla:**

These are songs named after merry and festive occasions. These songs are the most popular among the folksongs. People sung together with dancing at the time of merry and festive occasions.

**Lengzem Zai:**

These are love songs. It has no distinctive form but it was named after the theme. This is presently (c. 1950-2012) the most popular type of folk music in the Mizo community.

**Songs named after tribes:**

Some verse forms are named after the particular tribe such as Sailozai, Saivatezai etc.

**Songs named after villages:**

A few songs are named after the village such as Lumtuizai, Dar lung zai etc.

**Songs named after modulation of the voice:**

A few songs are named after modulation of the voice or sound such as Kawrnuzai, Zainem, Vaizawizai, Puma zai etc. For example, Kawrnu is a kind of Cicada whose voice is gentle and low. So the tune of new song resembling to the tune of Kawrnu is called Kawrnuzai.

**Songs named after individuals:**

A great number of Mizo folksongs are named after individual. Most of them are named after the original composer of the music as well as the verse tunes. But some of the songs are named after a beautiful women or the hero of the tribe. The first six have their own common name while the last four have no such common name. egChawngvungiHla. Chawngvungi, in Mizo Folklore, was one of the most beautiful girls in the land who was under the spell of Sawngkhara'sdawiZawlaidi (Love Potion), and this song talks about the absurdities of her dowry. Her mother demanded Dar Huai (Gong of the Brave), a prized gong that could ring harmoniously on its own, considered too valuable to be demanded as bride price for Chawngvungi's hand in marriage. She was obliged and subsequently given her demands. Due to the breaking of tradition when the Dar Huai was handed over to Chawngvungi's mother, a series of consequential events occurred which resulted in the death of Chawngvungi. Subsequently, Chawngvungi's mother and her in-laws sang a song of lamentation which has been immortalized through the 3 note melody Gong song.

Mizos practice what is known as 'Jhum Cultivation'. They slash down the jungle, burn the trunks and leaves and cultivate the land. All their other activities revolve around the jhum operations and their festivals are all connected with such agriculture operations.

**MimKut** which takes place in August-September in the wake of harvesting of the maize crop, is celebrated with great gaiety and merriment expressed through singing, dancing, feasting and drinking of homemade rice beer zu. Dedicated to the memory of their dead relatives, the festival is underlined by a spirit of thanksgiving and remembrance of the year's first harvest is placed as an offering on a raised platform built to the memory of the dead.

**Pawl Kut** is Harvest Festival – celebrated during December to January. Again, a mood of thanksgiving is evident, because the difficult task of tilling and harvesting is over. Community feasts are organised and dances are performed. Mothers with their children sit on memorial platform and feed one another. This custom, which is also performed during ChapcharKut, is known as 'Chawnghnawt'. Drinking of zu is also part of the festival. The two-day is followed by a day of complete rest when no one goes out to work.

**ChapcharKut:** Of all the Kuts of the Mizo, ChapcharKut has emerged as the most popular and enjoyable, owing perhaps to the humorous stories of its origin and the favourable time when the festival is observed-Spring!

Mizos are fast giving up their old customs and adopting the new mode of life which is greatly influenced by the western culture. Many of their present customs are mixtures of their old tradition and western pattern of life. Music is a passion for the Mizos and the young boys and girls take to the western music avidly and with commendable skill. The fascinating hills and lakes of Mizo-land literally pulsate and resound with the rhythms of the sonorous songs of the youths and the twang of guitars everywhere.

Clothing: The original garment of the Mizos is known as puan. They were used by men and women more or less in the same fashion. One has to see them to believe the intricate traditional designs woven by the Mizo women, born weavers who produce what can only be described as art on their looms. The Mizo have held on to certain patterns

and mottos that have come down through the ages. These designs have become deep rooted in their tribal consciousness and have become a part of the Mizo heritage. The unique value of Mizo PUAN comes from the personal involvement of the weaver, who with great labour weaves her dreams into each work and weft until every design has a story to tell. These traditional hand woven apparels are of different shades and designs without exquisite play of colour combination and intricate weaving patterns have been evolved. Some of the common clothing or puanare:-

**Puanchei:** It is by far the most colourful costume and is used by every Mizo lady.

**Kawrchei:** A distinctive blouse of the ladies

**Ngotekherh:** This traditional puan is worn round the waist originally it was a men's puan but now it is worn by men and women alike.

**Hmar am :** Originally this was a small hand woven cloth of handspun cotton and indigo dye.

**CyhnaHno:** It is a beautiful embroidered silk puan of the Mara's. It is used by both men and women.

### **Musical Instruments of Mizoram**

From time immemorial, the Mizo have been using different musical instruments. Even though we cannot date the origin, the "Mizo of Kabaw valley during late 10th to 13th century AD had developed their music as nearly as they have done today's. The traditional Mizo musical instruments are very simple and crude in comparison to other Indian musical instruments and very out-dated to Modern Musical instruments. They can broadly be divided into three: Beating or Striking instruments; Wind instruments and String instruments.

#### **1.Striking-Instruments**

Most of the Mizo musical instruments used at the time of festivals and dances are striking instruments such as different types of Khuang and Dar, Bengbung, Seki, Talhkhuang. **Khuang:** Khuang (Drum) is Mizoindigeneous instrument which occupies a very significant place in Mizo social and religious life. Khuang is a must on all occasions. It is made of hollow tree, wrapped on both sides with animal skin. The Mizo gives different names according to its size and length. The big sized one is call Khuangpui (Big drum), the middle one is called Khuanglai; and the small sized, Khuangte (little drum). If it is longish, they called it Kawlkhuang.As far as the history of Mizo is concerned it is commonly concluded that the Mizo ancestors started using drum as far back as when they sung and composed song. Lianhmingthanga believes that the Mizo had received drum from Chinese civilization through cultural diffusion. The process of that cultural diffusion might have passed through the Burmese with whom the Mizo had a close cultural contact which took place from the middle of the 9th century AD until the end of Pagan period at the close of 13th century AD.Khuang is the only Mizo traditional musical instrument that is popularly used in the 20th and 21st century. In the olden days, Khuang has no role in the religious functions; but today the use of drum is a must in every church service.

**Dar (Gong):** Other popular musical instruments are various sizes of brass-gongs viz-Darkhuang, Darbu and Darmang.

**Darkhuang:** Also known as **Zamluang (Jamluang)** is a large brass musical drum used as part of cultural activities of dance and festival revelry in the State of Mizoram in the northeastern part of India. It is a costly drum. Beating of this dar or drum or gong is known in the local Mizo language as "Darkhuang-Tum" and the central knob or boss is

known as "Darkhuang-Tum Pawn". In ancient days it was an important musical instrument used to convey or exchange messages. It is also used to convey messages of mourning to distant areas and is therefore known as Zamluang. Since the last several decades it is used in the legislative assembly hall of the Government of Mizoram to take quorum calls of the assembly at its every morning and evening sessions. This gong's cultural usage is also said to be as a dowry gift demanded by the bride's parents, which is attested by the following verse.

Chawngvungi her price so high  
I gave necklace but they refused,  
I gave a gong and they refused  
They demanded our sacred gong,  
Chawngvungi, her price unsurpassed"

The Darkhuang gongs were originally imported from Myanmar (earlier known as Burma) in sets of three gongs with varying modulations giving sounds of emotion. However, Mizos have developed local types which are made in two sizes; the larger gong is known as Darkhuang while the smaller gong is called as Darmang; The collective name of the gongs is dar. These instruments are commonly used during festivals, known as Khuangchawi or Thangchhua, where the Khuallam dance (a mixed-gender dance) is performed.

A large Darkhuang gong measures 3.41 spans in circumference with a diameter of one span (unit conversion 1 span = 9 inches), and has a circular projection at the center which is struck to make the sound. As the drum is considered precious by the people of Mizoram it is normally kept in a basket and is taken out only on special occasions for use.

**Darbu:** Darbu is a set of three different sizes of brass-gongs, producing three musical notes. Darbu is usually played by three experts. Some experts played individually by tying the two gongs, one on each side of his body with rope and hung one gong by his left hand, produce three distinct, rhythmic notes by simultaneous beating. Darbu is meaningfully used on certain occasions like Khuallam and other traditional group dances.

**Darmang:** Darmang is the smallest type of gong. It has no effect without other gongs or instruments, but it is used in the traditional dances to keep timing. All these gongs appear to be Burmese in origin, and therefore, it is tempting to conclude that Mizo got them from the Burmese while they were living in the Kabaw Valley during 9th to 13th century AD.

**Bengbung:** Bengbung is another Mizo indigenous instrument which has some similarity with xylophone. It is a musical instrument consisting of a series of flat wooden bars, producing three musical notes. Bengbung is usually played by girls in their leisure.

**Talhkhuang:** The process of making Talhkhuang is almost the same with that of Bengbung but Talhkhuang is much bigger than that of Bengbung. It is made of three wooden pieces which are curved out, the depth of the curves being made vary so that the sound produced when beaten are different in notes. It is played with a wooden hammer. The Mizo would never take Talhkhuang to their houses or anywhere else except to Lungdawn, the great platform at the entrance of the village. It has played when a chief or the village erected memorial stones.

**Seki:** Seki is the domesticated mithun's horn. The two hollow horns are beaten to lead or to keep timing for the other musical band like Darbu, etc. It was commonly used at the time of group dances are performed.

## II. Wind-Instruments:

The Mizo have six varieties of Wind-instruments such as Rawchhem, Tumphit, Mautawtawrawl, Phenglawng, Buhchangkuang, Hnahtum.

**Rawnhem:** It is a kind of Scottish “Bagpiper” or Chinese “Snag”. Nine small Bamboo pipes or hollow reeds, Having different sizes and lengths are inserted to the dried gourd. One of the pipes serves as a mouth piece. Small portions of the pipes are struck out so that it can produce sound when the instrument is blown. The Musician blows in to the mouth piece, and by controlling the holes with his fingers, he can produced various musical notes.



**Tumphit:** Tumphit is made of three small Bamboos having different sizes and length. The tubes are tied and plated in a row with cava or strings. The upper ends are cut open at different lengths so that each tube has different notes. The players put the open tube against his lower lip and then blow down. This musical instrument was used during ritual ceremonies and particularly on the occasion of a ceremony called Rallulam and chawng festival, the use of this music was a must.



**Tawtawrawt:** This is a Bamboo trumpet. Different sizes of bamboo tubes are cut off. The smaller tube is inserted to the bigger tube and so on. Many bamboo tubes are joined one after another till the last tube happens to be the size of a forefinger from where the trumpet is to be blown. A dry empty gourd, the bottom part is cut off and joined with bigger end of the bamboo tubes. The whole length can be more than five feet.



**Phenglawng:** It is the Mizo flute made of bamboo. Originally, Phenglawng had only three holes producing three different sounds. Flute is popular among the other Indians.

**Buhchangkuang:** This is another flute made of reed or a paddy stalk. This simple instrument was usually played by girls.

**Hnahtum :** The Mizo boys can skillfully turn leaves of many trees into simple but indigenous musical instruments. They can produce interesting sound by blowing deftly folded leaves. This is called Hnahtum.

### III. Stringed Instruments:

The Mizo have only three kinds of stringed-Instruments such as Tingtang; Lemlawi and Tuiumdar:

**Tingtang:** This is Mizo guitar. Mizotingtang is a kind of fiddle or violin having only one string. A piece of bamboo shaft is fixed in the gourd to carry the string made of Thangtung, the fibre of the Malay Sago palm. The hollow gourd is cut open and covered with a dry bladder of animal.

**Lemlawi:** Lemlawi is the family of Jew's harp but the shape and size are different. It is made of small pieces of bamboo. From the piece of bamboo, the craftsman took out a small portion with knife for its string. The sound it produces is controlled by the mouth.



**Pic: Lemlawi**

**Tuiumdar :** This simple musical instrument is also made of bamboo having three strings producing three different notes. From the outer covering of the bamboo, three pieces of cane like strings are curved out. The strings are then raised up by inserting two pieces of bamboo. It is played like a guitar.

All the striking-instruments except Bengbung are used for the group singing or on the festive occasions; while all the three kinds of stringed-instruments are meant for individual. Out of six instruments from wind-instruments only two are meant for public. The Mizo traditional music is performed for its own sake, in its own time and place, and it has its own meaning. Those individual instruments are not popular among the people; and almost all of them are not known by the present generation. The six stringed guitar was introduced during the second

decade of the twentieth century. It has now become part and parcel of the Mizo society. Almost all the Mizo boys know how to play guitar. The guitar alone has replaced all the traditional musical instruments.

There is one popular Mizo saying “Khuanglova chai ang” which means “festival without drum or music”; and this saying shows that without music, the life of the Mizo is incomplete. B.Thanmawia says, “Music to the Mizo is as indispensable as air is to man and beasts”<sup>7</sup>. They sing on all happy and despairing occasions. When condoling bereaved family, they sing the songs of condolence for the whole day and night. When attending marriage party, they sing a song of joyous. They even sing or hum tunes while they are working or walking on the roads. Kathryn McKenzie remarks, “the sound of their harmonious singing and the haunting rhythm of their tribal songs can often be heard”<sup>8</sup>.

A survey of Mizo named indicates that great many of the names are derivatives of traditional musical instruments like Dar (Gong), Khuang (drum), Zai (Sing), Rem (accompanying music), Ri (musical sound). Some of the popular names are as follows:

**Dar (Gong)** : Darchhawna, Darliana, Darlawma, Darhmingthanga etc.

**Khuang (Drum)**: Khuangliana, Khuanglawma, Khuangtuaha, Khuangchhunga etc.

**Zai (Sing)** :Zairema, Zaikunga, Zaihmingthanga etc.

### Conclusion

The Mizo used to celebrate a new song or songs. It is said that one day, a cicada sings beautifully at Lungdawh, the platform at the entrance of the village while the villagers were about to work in the jhum. On hearing the sweet song of the cicada, no one could go on, and all the villagers gathered waiting for Saikuti, the poetess of the village. When Saikuti arrived, they immediately requested her to compose a song on that cicada. She then spontaneously recited the following verse:

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Oh, thou cicada of the wood,  
Your sweet voice of no rhythms,  
Enchanted people from their works.

On hearing this verse, the villagers went back and sang together the whole day in celebrating to the new song. So, the love for music resulted in the love of poetry also.

The Mizo traditional tunes are very soft and gentle that they can sing the whole night without getting tired. Even without musical instruments, the Mizo can enthusiastically sing together by clapping hands or any materials which can produce complimentary sound. All these informal instruments are called Chhepchher. The Mizo in the early period were very close to nature and that music was the tune of their life. In this paper we are discussed about the folk musical instruments of Mizoram.



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