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MIZO ANTI-COLONIAL STRUGGLES IN POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets the armed resistance of Mizo chiefs during the nineteenth century as a structured assertion of autonomy in response to British expansion. It examines how local leaders responded to threats against land, custom, and authority through organised military action, strategic alliances, and refusal to comply with colonial demands. Using the frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon, the study presents these acts as expressions of political intent rather than lawlessness. The analysis highlights how colonial narratives attempted to suppress indigenous perspectives by labelling such resistance as rebellion. The article also explores how Mizo oral histories preserve a different memory of the period one that recognises the dignity and leadership of figures like Ropuiliani, Lalburha, and Kalkhama. The study contributes to ongoing efforts in historical scholarship to revisit anti-colonial movements from regional and indigenous standpoints.

Keywords: *Mizo chiefs, colonial rule, resistance, subaltern agency, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Lushai Hills, British rule in Northeast India, oral history, indigenous authority.*

The Lushai Hills and Colonial Expansion

By the mid-19th century, the Lushai Hills remained beyond direct British control. Mizo society was organised under hereditary chieftainships, with the Sailo clan dominating political life. The chiefs exercised authority over land, justice, and warfare within their territories. British interest in the region intensified following the annexation of neighbouring plains, particularly with the growth of tea plantations along the Assam and Bengal frontiers. For British planters and administrators, the hills represented a strategic buffer zone to secure commercial estates and suppress frontier raids.

From the Mizo perspective, these developments threatened traditional land use, particularly *jhoom* cultivation and hunting grounds. British occupation of

fertile tracts for plantations was seen as a direct encroachment. In response, Mizo warriors launched raids against tea estates and military outposts during the 1860s and early 1870s. These actions were deliberate efforts to resist displacement rather than random acts of violence.

The situation escalated in late 1871, when a coalition of Mizo chiefs attacked British territory, targeting plantations such as Alexandrapore and Monierkhal. During the Alexandrapore raid, Chief Bengkhuaia's men killed the planter James Winchester and captured his daughter, Mary Winchester (Vanlawma 1996, 8). The incident triggered the 1871–72 British punitive expedition, which advanced from two fronts under Generals Brownlow and Bourchier. Several villages were destroyed and some chiefs coerced into submission, but the campaign failed to impose lasting control.

While the British succeeded in recovering the child and inflicting some penalties, permanent colonial administration was not immediately established. Many chiefs withdrew deeper into the hills, and British troops eventually retreated. Nonetheless, the expedition marked a turning point. Over the next two decades, British influence expanded through coercion, diplomacy, and selective alliances.

Indigenous Polity and Early Resistance

The authority of Mizo chiefs rested on a blend of hereditary rule and popular consent, ingrained in cultural values such as *tlawmngaihna* an ethic of courage, service, and honour. Chiefs allocated land, upheld customary law, and defended their territories. Resistance to British intrusion was thus both a defence of personal power and a collective assertion of autonomy.

Early encounters reveal a cycle of raid and retaliation. In 1844, Chief Lalsuthlaha attacked Kachubari, avenging his father's death. Though promised safe surrender, he was arrested the first Mizo chief captured through deception (MS Academy 2025, 50). Such actions sowed deep mistrust. In 1860, Rothangpuia of the Thangluah clan led a major raid near the Tripura border, prompting a failed British expedition. His evasion and later role as intermediary illustrated the mix of resistance and negotiation that characterised Mizo responses.

Chief Suakpuilala exemplifies this duality. After repeated cross-border raids, he signed a treaty with the British in 1871, accepting colonial authority in return for subsidies and recognition (Zothanpuii 2009, 4). This pattern of selective alliance allowed the British to isolate more defiant chiefs.

Despite occasional compromises, many leaders opposed colonial interference. By the 1880s, tensions intensified as new colonial policies introduced taxes and forced labour (Kuli) practices foreign to Mizo custom. These impositions fuelled renewed resistance, culminating in open conflict between 1888 and 1895, often described as the final phase of indigenous defiance in the Lushai Hills.

Subaltern Agency and the Voice of the Oppressed

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides a

useful lens through which to understand the marginalised status of Mizo chiefs under colonial rule. Spivak argues that the subaltern, those outside dominant power structures is often denied a voice, their actions interpreted and narrated by colonial or elite intermediaries (Spivak 1988). In colonial contexts, this meant indigenous resistance was rarely recorded in terms acceptable to official discourse. Instead, acts of resistance were dismissed as criminal or irrational.

Mizo chiefs, in this sense, occupied the position of subaltern agents. Their opposition to colonial rule was characterised in British reports as disorderly or lawless, stripped of political legitimacy. Yet, as subaltern theorists argue, agency can be located in action. The raids, retaliations, and refusals by Mizo leaders represented assertions of autonomy, even if those assertions were recorded through colonial filters.

Ropuiliani's role exemplifies this. As a woman and a chieftain, she confronted both colonial rule and patriarchal dismissal. Her refusal to comply with British demands such as taxation and forced labour represented a direct challenge to colonial authority (Sajal Nag & Lalsangpuii 2024, 79). Her story aligns with Spivak's concerns about the double silencing of subaltern women, but also with the possibility of symbolic interventions that reshape dominant narratives.

Through a critical reading of colonial texts alongside oral histories, the resistance of Mizo chiefs can be recovered as a form of political expression. These were not isolated acts of violence, but strategic assertions of self-determination in a context where indigenous voices were often denied the status of legitimate political speech.

Colonial Violence and the Right to Resist

Frantz Fanon's analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth* offers a powerful framework for interpreting Mizo resistance. He argues that colonialism is inherently violent and that the colonised recover their agency through acts of violent defiance. For Fanon, rebellion is not only a political act but a psychological necessity that disrupts the coloniser's hold over the colonised mind (Fanon 1963 [1961]).

In the Mizo context, the uprisings led by chiefs such as Kalkhama and Lalburha represent more than isolated opposition. They can be seen as deliberate responses to systemic oppression, ingrained in a growing realisation that silence would lead to erasure. When Kalkhama's group ambushed and killed Superintendent William Browne in 1890, it was a symbolic rupture in colonial authority. Similarly, Lalburha's in 1892 refusal to supply forced labour and his violent response to British coercion demonstrated a rejection of colonial dominance. His declaration "we are men too" encapsulates Fanon's idea that the colonised assert equality through confrontation (Ngurthankima 2009, 26).

Fanon's theory also highlights how colonial violence produces resistance. British tactics such as burning villages, taxing, and conscripting labour provoked cycles of retaliation. The violence of the colonised was, in Fanon's terms, an

"answering force" that challenged the myth of imperial invincibility. Even when resistance was defeated, it forced colonial authorities to rethink their strategies, as seen in McCabe's reluctant respect for Lalburha.

Fanon's insights, alongside Spivak's emphasis on subaltern agency, enable us to interpret Mizo resistance not as marginal rebellion but as part of a wider anti-colonial praxis. The actions of Mizo chiefs demonstrate how indigenous leadership resisted not only territorial control but also attempts at symbolic erasure, using defiance as a means of asserting both political authority and collective self-worth.

Resistance in Practice: Early Flashpoints and Frontier Raids

The initial phases of Mizo resistance, spanning the 1840s to the 1860s, were characterised by a series of recurring raids and counter-raids that combined strategic opposition with localised reactions to colonial encroachment. Early confrontations, including those led by Lalsuthlaha in 1844 and Rothangpuia around 1860, expressed a clear unwillingness to acquiesce to British expansion. Although colonial records often framed these actions as criminal, they were, in effect, assertions of territorial defence and political autonomy. By the early 1860s, these raids intensified, increasingly targeting British interests such as plantations and outposts. A particularly notable instance was the 1862 Adampur raid led by Chief Suakpuilala, during which settlements under British protection were attacked, heightening alarm among colonial officials.

In response, British authorities oscillated between coercive military interventions and selective diplomatic engagements. Punitive expeditions, such as those led by Captain Raban in 1861, involved the destruction of villages and agricultural resources but met with limited success due to the Mizos' guerrilla tactics and the protective geography of the hills. By the late 1860s, officials like J. W. Edgar began to pursue negotiated settlements with influential chiefs, offering stipends and official recognition in return for peace. Among those who entered into such agreements in 1871 were Suakpuilala and Vanhnuailiana.

These arrangements, while portrayed by the British as signs of effective control, often concealed underlying tensions. For some chiefs, the treaties represented tactical compromises rather than acts of surrender, while others especially younger or unaligned leaders refused to participate altogether. As a result, resistance continued in multiple and dispersed forms beyond the formal agreements. The British were thus confronted not by a centralised opposition, but by a shifting and resilient network of resistance, shaped by the decentralised nature of Mizo political organisation and a shared commitment to resisting external domination.

The 1871 Alliance of Chiefs and British Retaliation

In 1871, an unusual alliance of Mizo chiefs formed as a collective response to the intensifying British presence in the Lushai Hills. Chiefs such as Bengkhuaia and Sangvunga united across regional divisions

to launch coordinated raids against British outposts and tea estates, including Alexandrapore and Monierkhal. This marked a significant shift from isolated resistance to strategic collective action. The chiefs' motivation, as preserved in oral traditions, was grounded in the defence of land, autonomy, and ecological heritage particularly in response to deforestation and intrusion upon elephant hunting grounds. Bengkhuaia's address to his warriors invoked notions of communal duty and land protection, reflecting a politicised understanding of resistance (Malsawmliana 2022).

The British retaliation was swift and forceful. In early 1872, a large military expedition was launched, leading to the burning of villages, release of captives, and coerced treaties. Although some chiefs signed under pressure, figures like Vandula remained defiant, and Bengkhuaia avoided capture altogether. While British reports portrayed the campaign as a pacification success, local resistance continued in subtle forms. Chiefs such as Bengkhuaia rebuilt their communities and maintained influence until their deaths, showing a partial but resilient refusal to submit. The events of 1871–72 therefore represent a crucial moment of strategic anti-colonial resistance, foreshadowing the renewed conflicts of the 1890s.

The Final Uprising: 1888–1895

The period between 1888 and 1895 marked the third and final wave of armed Mizo resistance. The British, aiming to incorporate the Lushai Hills into their administrative system, faced renewed opposition, especially in the south. The immediate flashpoint was the killing of Lt. J.F. Stewart in 1888 by Chief Hausata. This provoked the Chin-Lushai Expedition (1889–1890), which devastated numerous villages. However, resistance persisted. The imposition of house taxes and forced labour under Captain H.D. Browne in the north incited widespread dissent. Chief Kalkhama of Sentlang orchestrated a well-planned revolt, culminating in Browne's assassination in September 1890. This triggered a harsh British crackdown, leading to Kalkhama's surrender and eventual death in prison, where he was revered as a martyr (Lalhruaitluanga 2023).

Further resistance surfaced with Chief Lalburha, who opposed British demands for forced labour in 1892. When confronted by colonial authorities, his refusal to comply accompanied by a bold assertion of Mizo self-rule, reflected the continued resolve to resist subjugation. Although he was eventually brought under control, he retained his status and passed away in 1933 as a respected elder, unbroken in spirit.

The final prominent figure in this period was Chieftess Ropuiliani, who openly rejected British authority. Her capture in 1893, following a military campaign led by Captain Shakespear, symbolised the formal closure of armed resistance. Nevertheless, she preserved her composure and refusal to submit, dying in imprisonment in 1895.

By 1896, British administrative records proclaimed the region pacified. Yet, these episodes left a lasting imprint. In Mizo oral tradition, the memory of those who resisted colonial intrusion—chiefs, warriors,

and community leaders endures as a narrative of collective defence, honour, and sovereign identity.

Subalterns Who Spoke Through Action

The resistance mounted by Mizo chiefs may be interpreted as a form of subaltern political articulation. Excluded from colonial frameworks of dialogue and representation, these leaders expressed dissent through coordinated acts of defiance raids, uprisings, and guerrilla tactics that signalled a conscious refusal to accept colonial rule. Far from being spontaneous or disorganised, these actions were structured efforts to defend territorial rights and customary authority, amounting to a coherent political vocabulary that acquires clarity in retrospect.

The intentionality of their resistance is evident in the strategic decisions, alliances, and planning undertaken by various chiefs. Instances such as Kalkhama's secret meetings and Ropuiliani's efforts to build coalitions suggest a deliberate political calculus. Their focused assaults on colonial installations and symbols of state power resonate with what Ranajit Guha has termed the "politics of the people," wherein subaltern actors engage in organised political action outside elite channels. Though British documentation often sought to discredit these leaders by portraying them as lawless elements, the records themselves sometimes unintentionally acknowledge the calculated nature of their resistance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation that "the subaltern cannot speak"—insofar as the structures of dominant discourse render their voices inaudible—is reflected in colonial portrayals of Mizo resistance. Those who challenged British authority were routinely dismissed as insurgents or criminals. Yet, in postcolonial scholarship and Mizo historical memory, these figures have been gradually reframed as defenders of sovereignty. While this retrospective valorisation risks simplifying the historical complexity, it nevertheless affirms the legitimacy of their struggle as an assertion of autonomy and collective self-determination.

Dynamics in the Hills

The Mizo resistance aligns closely with Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonialism and decolonisation. Fanon's idea of a divided colonial space – the settler's town and the native's town can be traced in Aizawl, where British administrative enclaves stood apart from indigenous dwellings. Lalburha's declaration that the British should be pushed "to the Vai kawrdai" (MS Academy 2025, 44) reflects Fanon's decolonising impulse: the native's desire not to emulate the coloniser, but to expel him entirely and reassert control over his world.

Colonial violence, in the Mizo case, did not merely provoke defensive retaliation but catalysed a deeper political awareness. Fanon posits that anti-colonial struggle unites fractured communities and fosters emergent national consciousness. In Mizoram, formerly divided chiefs formed alliances in response to British encroachments. The shared use of the term *Vai* to refer to outsiders contributed to a collective identity structured around

contrast, Mizo on one side and non-Mizo on the other. This distinction played a role in shaping an early sense of wider Mizo belonging.

The psychological transformation that Fanon described where resistance endows dignity and self-awareness is also evident. The rebels' temporary victories, such as the killing of Captain Browne, and defiant acts like Lalburha's speech at MacCabe's durbar, reflect an internal liberation. Even in defeat, their resistance forced the colonial system to recalibrate: later British policies in Mizoram grew more conciliatory, and missionaries adopted gentler methods. This confirms Fanon's claim that only through resistance do the colonised compel recognition and restraint from imperial powers.

Reinterpretation in Postcolonial Discourse

Postcolonial India has increasingly recognised the Mizo chiefs not as rebels but as regional freedom fighters. This reframing is reflected in national commemorations, where figures like Dokulha are now honoured as martyrs (Lalruatfela 2024). Such recognition challenges colonial narratives that labelled them as outlaws and repositions their actions within the broader anti-imperialist struggle. Importantly, this is not a mere imposition of nationalist sentiment; many chiefs explicitly claimed political autonomy. Ropuiliani's assertion of her authority and refusal to pay taxes aligns with broader principles of sovereignty seen across India's princely and tribal resistance movements.

This reinterpretation engages with Homi Bhabha's theoretical concepts of mimicry and hybridity, suggesting that resistance was not confined to outright rejection but also included moments of strategic adaptation. While Mizo chiefs predominantly opposed colonial authority, certain actions reveal selective incorporation of colonial tools. Dokulha's submission of petitions in Hindi (Doungel 2015) and the tactical use of British weaponry exemplify this hybrid form of resistance. Such instances did not compromise the overarching stance of defiance; rather, they illustrate the nuanced ways in which subaltern agency was exercised under colonial conditions.

The Mizo experience also contributes to broader postcolonial and subaltern historiographies by challenging the dominance of elite-led narratives in accounts of India's anti-colonial struggle. The prolonged resistance in the Lushai Hills, often dismissed in colonial reports as fragmented or incidental, emerges instead as a sustained assertion of indigenous political autonomy. This perspective aligns with the central objective of subaltern studies: to recover the political rationality embedded within forms of resistance that colonial discourse had rendered incoherent or illegible. Through the triangulation of oral tradition, indigenous records, and colonial archives, contemporary scholarship seeks to re-inscribe agency where it was historically denied. In this context, the resistance of Mizo chiefs stands alongside other indigenous uprisings globally, warranting equal analytical attention within the field of anti-colonial studies.

Conclusion

The nineteenth-century resistance of Mizo chiefs to British colonial rule represents a historically situated instance of local leadership asserting political autonomy through armed opposition. While colonial records frequently dismissed these episodes as isolated tribal disturbances, a postcolonial interpretation recognises them as deliberate political acts shaped by cultural values, historical memory, and collective identity. This analysis draws upon the theoretical frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon to interpret these actions as articulations of subaltern agency. Spivak's critique of structural silencing provides a lens through which to read the chiefs' defiance as a form of political expression enacted through action rather than language, while Fanon's theory of colonial violence contextualises the use of force as a response to dispossession and systemic domination.

Although the Mizo chiefs did not achieve military victory over the colonial state, their defence of land and cultural sovereignty constituted a moral and symbolic resistance that contributed to the longer trajectory of indigenous assertion. Whether in the form of a chieftainess refusing taxation or a warrior confronting colonial authority, these acts challenge reductive definitions of resistance limited to formal political movements. Viewed through this framework, the legacy of Mizo resistance becomes part of a broader anti-colonial archive that complicates the dominance of elite nationalist narratives. Their struggle continues to resonate in contemporary debates on identity, autonomy, and the reclamation of indigenous voices within historical scholarship.

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