Senhri Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
A Journal of Pachhunga University College
(A Peer Reviewed Journal)
https://senhri-journal.pucollege.edu.in
10.36110/sjms.2024.09.02.003

2456-3757 (P)
2582-6840 (e)
Vol. 09, No. 02
July-Dec., 2024

THANGCHHUAH: RITUAL, STATUS, AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN MIZO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Among the Mizo communities of northeast India, Thangchhuah referred to a status conferred upon those who fulfilled demanding social and ritual expectations, either by hosting a series of feasts or by accomplishing specific feats in hunting. This article reconsiders Thangchhuah through an ethnographic and historical lens, tracing its cultural logic, ritual framework, social markers, gendered divisions of labour, and changes across time. Drawing on oral narratives and early ethnographic records, the discussion sets Thangchhuah within the broader structure of Mizo belief and social hierarchy. The analysis shows how this institution organised ideas of reputation, reciprocity, and spiritual attainment in ways that shaped village life and memory, even after its decline in the twentieth century.

Keywords: *Thangchhuah; Mizo culture; ritual feasts; social status; gender roles; symbolism; cultural change.*

Introduction

On a cool autumn evening in a pre-colonial Mizo village, the sound of gongs and drums carries through the hills. A feast is in progress. Men and women gather as the host and his wife are borne aloft on a decorated *khuanghlang*, or palanquin, by relatives who sing as they walk. Over the preceding days, the household has slaughtered mithun and pigs, filled pots with *zu*, and handed out cloth, brassware, and even tokens symbolising livestock and firearms. Some items are tossed into the crowd, a gesture of generosity and public display. The moment marks the close of *Khuangchawi*, the final rite in a sequence that few could ever afford to complete. With it, the man earns the title of *Thangchhuah* a name that holds not just status, but the promise of a place in *Pialral*, the Mizo afterlife (Liangkhaia 1976). To reach it, one must have lived in such a way that their memory continues long after the music fades.

The term *Thangchhuah* is drawn from the Mizo words *thang* (fame) and *chhuah* (to accomplish), referring to an individual who has earned enduring recognition through exceptional deeds (Zawla 1993). Within traditional Mizo society, *Thangchhuah* was understood as the highest mark of distinction believed to guarantee passage to *Pialral*, the Mizo realm of honour beyond *Mithi Khua* (Saiaithanga 1981), the common village of the dead. Attainment required one of two demanding paths: either a series of communal feasts of escalating scale (*Inlam Thangchhuah*), or the successful hunting of specified wild animals (*Ramlam Thangchhuah*). Both routes demanded considerable wealth, bravery, and the active participation of kin and neighbours.

This study examines *Thangchhuah* as a cultural institution within traditional Mizo society. It outlines the ritual processes required for its recognition, analyses its relationship to gender and social rank, and interprets the symbolic dimensions embedded in its performance and material forms. Attention is also given to the ways in which *Thangchhuah* was reshaped under the impact of colonial administration and Christian conversion. The central argument is that *Thangchhuah* was not simply a personal distinction, but a collective reaffirmation of core Mizo values reciprocity, prestige, and belief in the afterlife that were significantly altered in the course of wider historical change.

Cultural Meaning and Significance

Thangchhuah held a prominent place in the Mizo moral framework, connecting public recognition with spiritual reward. A *Thangchhuahpa* one who had met its demanding requirements was not seen merely as a man of wealth, but as a model of social virtue, remembered for his generosity, bravery, and commitment to communal welfare. In return, he was believed to receive an extraordinary outcome: entry into *Pialral*, a realm of perpetual abundance, bypassing the *Mithi Khua*, the resting place of ordinary souls. This belief imbued *Thangchhuah* with a religious significance, suggesting that actions carried out for the collective good had implications extending beyond death.

In social terms, *Thangchhuah* represented one of the few distinctions attainable without regard to birth or inherited position. In a society shaped by chieftainship and hereditary privilege, it offered a rare path to recognition based on individual merit and public contribution. As K. Zawla observes, the term implied a form of universal renown within one's community an earned visibility grounded in the ability to nourish or defend the village. Oral accounts suggest that the practice predates the settlement of Mizoram proper. Rev. Liangkhaia notes that the custom of hosting *Thangchhuah* feasts may have originated during the Mizo habitation of the Chin Hills, suggesting a continuity of ritual stretching back to at least the first half of the second millennium (Liangkhaia 1976). Over time, the figure of the *Thangchhuahpa* came to represent not just wealth or prestige, but a form of idealised manhood—one in which individual success was measured by collective benefit and remembered in both narrative and ritual.

Ritual Sequence of Attaining Thangchhuah

Achieving *Thangchhuah* required the completion of a precise and demanding ritual sequence. The *Inlam Thangchhuah* path, which centred on ceremonial feasting, involved hosting six distinct communal feasts in a fixed progression. Each carried its own set of ritual obligations and was larger in scale than the last, culminating in the final *Khuangchawi* celebration. The first of these, known as *Chawng*, extended over several days. On the opening day, relatives assisted in refurbishing the host's home, while village youth gathered for an evening of singing and dancing, referred to as *Thingfar zan* (Parry 1975). A specially prepared rice beer was brewed for the occasion, and the most valiant young men were given the honour of taking the first sip from the ritual cup, or *Huai No*. The following days involved the slaughter of pigs for communal consumption and symbolic gestures such as *Chawng buh thai*, in which the host ground rice at the threshold of his home, allowing the grain to scatter outward a sign of abundance and the readiness to share it (Parry 1975). Completion of *Chawng* granted the host minor social privileges, such as permission to construct a rice shelf or an additional porch on his dwelling.

With each successive feast, the complexity of the rites increased. In *Dawi-no-chhui*, the aspirant made a series of sacrifices to various spiritual entities household deities, guardians of the forest, the sun, and the sky—in an effort to secure their favour. The mid-sequence feast *Sedawi* (also referred to as *Sechhun*) required the ritual slaughter of a young *mithun*, whose skull was then displayed on a carved wooden pole (*Seluphan*) as a symbol of the host's accomplishment (Hrangthiauva and Lalchungnunga 1978). A pig was also offered to *Pathian* (God), marking the first invocation of the high deity within the series. Among the most emotionally resonant rites associated with *Thangchhuah* was *Mithirawplam* or *Sekhuan*, often referred to as the "dance for the dead." In this ceremony, families created effigies of deceased relatives (Some reffered as *Thlahpa*, the Adam of Mizo tribes) and danced with them, accompanied by songs that honoured the memory of the departed and called upon their continued presence. Through such practices, the *Thangchhuah* journey was not cast solely as an individual endeavour but as one undertaken for the benefit of one's lineage an act that combined commemoration with aspiration.

The final and most elaborate stage in the *Thangchhuah* path was the *Khuangchawi*, a feast that marked the fulfilment of the aspirant's obligations. This event required an extraordinary degree of material outlay, involving the slaughter of no fewer than four full-grown mithuns, along with several pigs an expenditure unparalleled in ordinary village life. Invitations extended to neighbouring villages, and the arrival of guests was met with performances of *Khuallam*, danced in honour of the host. At the ceremonial peak, the host and his wife were raised onto a platform (*khuanghlang*) and carried through the assembled crowd in ritual procession. From this elevated position, they distributed gifts textiles, brass gongs, and carved

wooden representations of mithuns or firearms which could later be exchanged for real animals or weapons (Zawla 1993, 31). These objects not only displayed the host's wealth but also affirmed his willingness to share it.

This public redistribution of resources during *Khuangchawi* was not simply a demonstration of generosity; it marked the fulfilment of a moral obligation to the community, positioning the host as a figure who had met the highest standards of social and ritual responsibility. Following the feast, the household entered a period of ritual seclusion known as *serh*, lasting seven days. During this time, family members observed various prohibitions and avoided contact with others, signifying a liminal state between ordinary life and the elevated status they were about to assume. Upon the conclusion of *serh*, the man emerged as a *Thangchhuahpa*. This recognition entitled him to wear the distinctive *Thangchhuah puan* (a ceremonial shawl) and a specially designated turban (Shakespear 1975). He was also permitted to alter the architecture of his house adding extra windows or an extended verandah alterations not permitted to others in the village. According to Mizo cosmology, his soul would, upon death, bypass the village of the dead (*Mithi Khua*) and enter *Pialral*, escorted by the spirits of all the animals he had sacrificed and protected from the wrath of *Pu Pawla*, the gatekeeper of the afterlife.

Alternatively, a man could attain *Thangchhuah* through the path known as *Ramlam Thangchhuah*, which required the demonstration of exceptional prowess in hunting. This route demanded the successful killing of a prescribed range of wild animals, often over many years. Traditional accounts specify that the list typically included a barking deer, sambar deer, wild boar, bear, wild *mithun*, and elephant. To further enhance his standing, a hunter was also expected though not formally required to kill more elusive or dangerous creatures, such as a giant snake (*rulngan*), a flying lemur (*amulka* or *Vahluk*), and a large eagle (*muvanlai*) (Shakespear 1975, 63). Achieving such feats was exceedingly arduous, demanding not only skill and courage but also sustained support from one's community.

The hunter's quest was often accompanied by ritual observances. One such rite was *Kawngpui siam*, in which villagers collectively prayed for the hunter's safety and success before he ventured into the forest. Each significant kill was publicly acknowledged, and often commemorated with a minor feast. Unique customs also distinguished the *Ramlam* route. For instance, when a tiger was slain, men performed the *Chakei (Sakei) ai* ceremony: dressed as women, they danced nine times around the tiger's severed head. This ritual, according to oral tradition, was meant to confuse the spirit of the slain beast and dissuade other tigers from seeking vengeance (Parry 1932, 143).

Should the hunter succeed in completing the list of required animals, he would declare his achievement through a formal feast, announcing his status to the village. A *Ramlam Thangchhuahpa* was accorded the same recognition and

privileges as one who attained the title through feasting. He too could wear the *Thangchhuah puan*, enjoy architectural liberties in his home, and claim the assurance of entry to *Pialral*. Though distinct in their means, both routes through ritual generosity or through mastery of the forest were considered equal in honour and spiritual consequence.

Gender Roles in Thangchhuah

Although the title of *Thangchhuahpa* was formally reserved for men, the role of women was essential at every stage of its attainment. The wife of the aspirant was not a passive figure; she was a full participant in the process, sharing in both the labour and the honour. Preparing for the series of feasts required immense logistical effort, much of which fell to women. They brewed *zu* (rice beer), pounded rice, cooked large quantities of meat, and ensured that guests were well fed and cared for. Their work took place mostly behind the scenes, yet without it, no feast could have succeeded.

During the celebratory gatherings, women also took part in performance and song. In the evenings of *Chawng*, young women (*nula*) joined the circle of dancers, engaging with young men in the *nula ngai*, a form of dance marked by flirtation and wit. Their presence brought a sense of vibrancy to the event, creating the atmosphere of abundance and cheer that was considered necessary for a feast to be auspicious.

Recognition of a man's *Thangchhuah* status extended to his wife and children. As J. H. Lorraine observed, the wife "also shares his title," and their children were permitted to wear the *Thangchhuah puan*, a shawl otherwise restricted to families of that distinction (Lorraine 1997). During *Khuangchawi*, the final feast, the wife rode beside her husband in the ceremonial procession. Both were adorned in their finest garments, symbolising a shared achievement. The man's prestige was not his alone; it reflected the quiet diligence and capable management of a household sustained by his wife. In this way, the honour bestowed by *Thangchhuah* extended beyond the individual, reinforcing the idea that public status was rooted in collective effort.

Although *Thangchhuah* centred on male achievement, it offers insight into the gendered assumptions that shaped Mizo ritual life. Among the Mara, it was customary to serve women first at feasts (*Vothawthi*). This gesture, described as an act of "extraordinary kindness due to their supposed inferiority," reflected a form of deference shaped by paternalism (Parry 1932, 373). Women were shown respect, yet the reasoning was grounded in the belief that they were more vulnerable and therefore required special treatment. The prevailing view remained intact: women were placed outside the realm of physical labour and acts associated with prestige.

Elsewhere, ritual practice reversed this order, though briefly. In the *Chakei ai (Sakei Ai)* ceremony performed after a tiger had been killed men dressed as women while dancing around the animal's head. This act was not intended as mockery but served a specific purpose. By appearing as women, who were not involved in hunting, the men

believed they could avoid the tiger spirit's vengeance. In this context, femininity was used as a form of concealment, thought to offer protection from harm. The belief rested on the idea that those unconnected to violence would remain unnoticed by the spirit world.

These examples show that, even though public recognition and ritual leadership were largely reserved for men, the imagined presence of women shaped the structure and meaning of ceremonial acts. Women's roles though often limited to domestic or background spaces were woven into the logic of ritual. In the context of *Thangchhuah*, gender was more than a social role; it was a symbolic framework that informed how ritual was organised and interpreted.

Thangchhuah and Social Status

Thangchhuah functioned as a key marker of prestige in traditional Mizo society, providing one of the few avenues through which status could be attained rather than inherited. In communities where authority typically rested with hereditary chiefs from dominant clans, the *Thangchhuahpa* occupied a parallel position at times surpassing even the chief in influence. What distinguished him was not lineage but personal accomplishment. By completing a prescribed sequence of feasts or successful hunts, an individual could attain a level of respect otherwise inaccessible, irrespective of birth.

This mechanism introduced a degree of social mobility into an otherwise stratified system. Early colonial observers of Mizo society remarked on the accessibility of *Thangchhuah* to men from modest backgrounds. Oral tradition supports this interpretation. The widely recounted tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala describes how two orphaned brothers, without family wealth or connections, rose through determination and labour (Liangkhaia 1976). Through sustained effort, they acquired the means for Liandova to host a *Khuangchawi*, achieving widespread recognition and eventually marrying into a chiefly household. The narrative, commonly shared with children, conveyed a cultural ideal in which discipline, generosity, and endurance enabled social ascent.

Such recognition was not only symbolic. The *Thangchhuahpa* was permitted certain architectural modifications to his home additional windows, internal partitions, or a raised verandah each signifying elevated rank. His dress further reflected this standing: a striped *Thangchhuah puan* and a feathered turban served as visible markers of distinction. Within village affairs, his voice carried authority. Chiefs often invited him to join the *upas*, a council of elders whose discussions shaped communal decision-making. Although the title was not hereditary, its prestige frequently benefited the entire household. His children, permitted to wear the ceremonial shawl, were viewed as favourable matches in marriage arrangements among respected families.

In this way, *Thangchhuah* functioned as both personal recognition and collective affirmation. It rewarded individual discipline and generosity while reinforcing

shared social values. Status was thus not a product of conquest or inheritance, but of ritual commitment and public redistribution.

Economically and politically, the *Thangchhuahpa* occupied a position defined by both privilege and responsibility. His prior acts hosting large-scale feasts, distributing goods, and supporting community events had publicly demonstrated a commitment to collective well-being. Through ritual and display, he affirmed his role as a moral figure whose resources were made available to others. In this regard, the *Thangchhuahpa* bears comparison with figures in other ceremonial economies, such as potlatch-givers, whose social standing rested not on accumulation but on deliberate acts of distribution.

Symbolism in Thangchhuah Rituals

The ritual structure of *Thangchhuah* was shaped through a deliberate use of symbolic actions that connected everyday materials to wider moral and cosmological frameworks. One such act, *Chawng buh thai*—the grinding of rice followed by its distribution to those assembled carried meaning beyond its immediate function. As the staple food, rice signified both subsistence and abundance. To disperse it publicly was not merely to offer nourishment, but to make a visible statement of one's capacity to support others. In doing so, personal resources were transformed into a form of public recognition.

In *Mithirawplam*, effigies of the dead crafted from the wood of the coral tree were not mere representations but vessels of presence. Dancing with them, singing to them, inviting them into ritual space signalled that the dead were not absent. Instead, they remained tethered to the world of the living through memory and performance. The ritual was as much about inheritance of spirit as of property or name.

Many of these gestures were acts of communication silent, embodied, but clearly understood. The offering of ginger tied with feathers to the wife's family during *Khuangchawi* was one such moment: a speechless proposal of alliance and goodwill. Ginger carried ritual significance, and the feathers, often associated with messaging or sacrifice, suggested that this was both offering and request. It reaffirmed the network of kin ties on which any large-scale communal ritual depended.

Even the dramatic act of hurling gifts—brass gongs, cloth, symbolic tokens for mithun or guns into the crowd inverted daily hierarchies (Zawla 1993). For a moment, the richest became the most empty-handed. This inversion functioned not as spectacle alone but as a redistribution that reasserted social values: wealth was validated only when shared. These gestures inscribed communal ethics onto the ritual form. They reminded all present that power, prestige, and abundance found meaning only through circulation.

The *Thangchhuah* institution expressed a cosmological logic that framed life, death, and honour within a shared moral and spiritual architecture. The belief that all the animals a *Thangchhuahpa* had killed or sacrificed would accompany him to *Pialral* the Mizo paradise revealed a form of reciprocal metaphysics. These creatures,

once offerings to the community and to the spirit world, became symbolic escorts, clearing the way for the soul in the afterlife. They were not just trophies but transformed into spiritual allies.

At the core of the *Thangchhuah* belief system lay an idea of moral continuity: that acts of generosity, ritual observance, and courage in life would be met with stability and well-being in the afterlife. The figure of *Pu Pawla*, the feared guardian said to assault unworthy souls en route to the next world, positioned death as a hazardous transition. *Thangchhuahpa*, through a life marked by sustained social and ritual commitment, was believed to pass safely. His conduct had conformed to the ethical expectations of the community, and in return, he received protection beyond death.

No aspect of the *Thangchhuah* ritual sequence was without meaning. The choice of rice beer prepared, the symbolic gifts distributed, the posts erected, the textiles worn, and the chants recited at specific times of day all carried encoded significance. These actions communicated values such as honour, reverence for ancestors, equilibrium with the unseen world, and the obligation to share accumulated wealth. Through them, the *Thangchhuahpa* not only secured a place in collective memory but also enacted a narrative of ethical life and proper departure.

Historical Change and Legacy

Thangchhuah held a prominent role in pre-colonial and early colonial Mizo society, though its form varied across groups. While the Lusei followed a six-feast sequence ending in *Khuangchawi*, the Mara practised a different set of rites such as *Phidong*, *Vothawthi*, and *Vori* with customs like serving women first at the feast and distribution of raw Mithun eat to the villagers (Parry 1932). These variations reflect a flexible structure shaped by local values rather than a uniform tradition.

The institution began to decline with the arrival of British rule and missionary influence in the late 19th century. Colonial authorities discouraged large feasts, and Christian teachings rejected rituals involving alcohol and sacrifice. With the spread of conversion, ideas of salvation shifted from public ritual to personal faith. Economic changes taxation, monetisation, and new land policies also reduced the capacity to host elaborate feasts.

By the mid-20th century, *Thangchhuah* was no longer practised, though it persisted in memory. Stories like that of Liandova and Tuaisiala continued to circulate, preserving ideals of generosity, perseverance, and social responsibility. In recent decades, cultural events such as *Chapchar Kut* have presented symbolic versions of *Khuangchawi*, now framed as heritage rather than active ritual.

Today, *Thangchhuah* survives not as a living institution but as a cultural ethic. It represents a worldview where social recognition was earned through acts that benefitted the community. Though the rituals have faded, their values continue to shape how the Mizo past is remembered and interpreted.

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