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TIME, ECOLOGY, AND MEMORY IN THE MIZO HILLS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the Mizo Indigenous Calendar as a culturally informed system of timekeeping that encodes ecological understanding and collective memory. Drawing from frameworks in cultural ecology, indigenous knowledge, and the anthropology of time, the study approaches the calendar as more than a chronological device. It is presented as a structured system that conveys environmental awareness and cultural values. The calendar's twelve thla (months), each named after seasonal patterns, agricultural phases, or ritual occasions, are examined as expressions of local knowledge. The argument advanced here views the calendar as an unwritten record of the Mizo community's engagement with their environment, where time is understood cyclically through agricultural rhythms, phenological cues, and religious observances. By analysing the meanings attached to each month, the article reveals how subsistence practices, seasonal changes, and ceremonial life are interrelated in ways that shape social cohesion. These temporal structures contribute to the preservation of identity and adaptive knowledge in the face of both ecological shifts and historical transformations.

Keywords: *Mizo Indigenous Calendar, Phenological Timekeeping, Cultural Ecology, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Environmental Memory.*

Introduction

Indigenous calendars, in many societies, have never been mere devices for marking time. They hold within them the accumulated observations of generations, structured not in abstract numerals but in seasons, plants, rains, and rituals. Among the Mizo of northeast India, the traditional calendar served this function with quiet constancy. Its months, named for what was seen, felt, and done at particular points in the year, offered a framework for living as much as for remembering. In a region where the spoken word held primacy well into the colonial period, this calendar acted as a steady guide, a means of tracing the familiar cycles of cultivation and celebration, of mapping the shifting signs of rain and bloom. The naming of each month (*thla*) was not arbitrary; it marked the rhythm of

life in the hills, from the cutting of jhum fields to the gathering for feasts. What emerges from this structure is not simply a record of seasonal change but a cultural narrative, one in which memory is sustained through repetition and practice, and where knowledge of the land is passed not through books but through names, stories, and shared time.

The Mizo calendar took shape in a terrain where the demands of hill agriculture left little room for error. Practised under the system of shifting cultivation, or *jhum*, the yearly rhythm was dictated not by fixed dates but by signs in the soil, the air, and the forest. Decisions when to burn, when to sow, when to expect the rains were fixed in a temporal system closely aligned with the land itself. The calendar that emerged was neither static nor ceremonial alone; it was a guide for survival in an environment that required attentiveness and flexibility. Before the arrival of the Gregorian calendar in the colonial period, this indigenous system offered a coherent way of understanding the passage of time, anchored in seasonal shifts and the collective labour of the village.

Timekeeping without Clocks

In a time when mechanical timekeeping devices were unknown, the Mizo relied on other means to mark the passing of hours. Among these, the crowing of roosters served as a reliable signal. Different calls at different times of night and morning provided cues for waking, preparing for work, and recognising key moments during the day. These auditory signs were part of a broader system of interpreting the environment, one that reflected both attentiveness and adaptability.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Among the Mizo, knowledge was not something written down or framed as universal. It was learned in the fields and forests, passed quietly from one generation to the next. People watched for signs: when the wind shifted, when birds changed their calls, when the first shoots emerged after clearing the land. Over time, this attention to detail formed a shared understanding flexible, revisable, yet dependable enough to guide decisions from one year to the next.

The calendar was part of this system. Each month carried with it what the community had come to recognise when bamboo was best cut, when flowers would appear, when a ceremony should be held. Sometimes, it meant looking to the sky. A crescent moon beside a certain star might suggest it was time to prepare for a hunt or a raid. These patterns were not followed blindly. They were remembered because they worked.

Cultural Ecology

The Mizo calendar emerged from the land itself. Its timing followed the needs of jhum cultivation—when to cut, burn, sow, and harvest. These were not private choices but shared acts, requiring the village to move together. Rains, flowering trees, and soil moisture marked the steps, guiding when and how to proceed.

Anthropologists have called this cultural ecology: a way of seeing how people and place shape one another. In the

Mizo hills, this was not a theory but a lived fact. The calendar helped organise work, set moments for rest, and signalled when people should come together. It held in memory what was needed to survive, not through writing, but through rhythm.

Anthropology of Time

Time, for the Mizo, was not counted but observed. A flower blooming, a bird's call, or the rising of a star signalled what was coming. The calendar marked these signs, turning them into shared understanding. Each month *(thla)* was tied to something real work to be done, a festival to prepare for, or a quiet time of mourning. This was not time measured by hours but by happenings.

Evening arrived when the Pleiades rose. March began with the *vaube* tree. Such moments fixed the year in memory and gave shape to daily life. This way of keeping time, bound to the land, held the community together in a rhythm both familiar and learned. The calendar became a way to move through the year not just to organise, but to remember.

Structure and Meaning in the Mizo Indigenous Calendar

The Mizo understanding of time rests not on numerical progression, but on the memory of signs what the land reveals, what the community does, and what must be remembered. The Mizo Indigenous Calendar is divided into twelve *thla* (months), each named after a prominent feature or activity that characterises that particular period. These names carry with them a texture of meaning, combining weather patterns, cultivation rhythms, and social gatherings into a shared sense of the year's movement. Through this structure, the calendar provides not just orientation in time but also a framework for living—marking the moments when the forest is cleared, when crops are harvested, and when the village comes together to celebrate or prepare.

The calendar may be read as a sequence of phases, each connected to a specific ecological or social rhythm. Some months are shaped most clearly by agricultural labour. **Pawlkut thla**, falling in what is now January, is named after the *pawlkut* or straw festival (*pawl* meaning straw, *kut* meaning festival). This was a time when the rice harvest had been completed and the leftover straw lay in the fields, fallow yet full of meaning. Families gathered to mark the end of the agricultural cycle, sharing food before preparations for the next round of cultivation began. In the following month, **Ramtuk thla** (February), the community turned its attention to the forest. The name, which translates as "forest-cutting month," signalled the start of *jhum* preparations. Men entered the hills to fell trees and clear plots; the selection of sites and the division of labour were acts that involved both ecological knowledge and collective decision-making.

Later in the year, **Mimkut thla** (September) marked the corn harvest. As *mim* refers to maize, and *kut* once again to festivity, this month preserved the memory of a crop that ripened earlier than rice, responding to the specific growing conditions of Mizoram's hills. The celebration of this harvest revealed the

diversity of crops in the shifting agricultural cycle, and the knowledge needed to maintain them. Then came **Khuangchawi thla** (October), remembered for the feasts it brought. These feasts *khuangchawi*—were sponsored by those who had succeeded in cultivation and could afford to host the village. They were not merely celebrations; they were assertions of generosity and status. To host such a feast was to become *thangchhuah*, a person recognised for their contribution to the collective good. It was during this month that the weeding was finished, and the promise of a full granary hung in the air.

By **Pawltlak thla** (December), the year had run its course. The rice was harvested and stored. The name itself meaning "completion of straw" spoke to closure. It was a quiet month, one of rest and reflection, but also anticipation: *Pawlkut* would soon return in January, and with it, the beginning of another cycle.

Each of these agriculturally defined months contains within it not only the memory of tasks but the logic of survival. They mark when to act, when to share, when to give thanks. In doing so, they tie the passage of time to the physical world and to the practices that sustain it. The calendar becomes not a list of dates, but a record of the Mizo relationship with their environment—a way of telling time that speaks of soil, sky, and society all at once.

Seasonal Signs and Ecological Timing

Certain months in the Mizo calendar take their names not from human action, but from what the land reveals flowering trees, ripening fruits, falling rains, or a shift in light. These names reflect a habit of attention, developed over generations, that treated natural changes as signs of what must come next. In this sense, the calendar functions as a guide drawn from the landscape itself where time is tracked not in abstract terms but through what can be seen, felt, and remembered.

Vau thla (March) is named after the *vaube* tree (*Bauhinia variegata*), whose blossoms mark the end of the dry clearing season. When the forest began to flower, it signalled that the brush cut in Ramtuk thla could now be set alight. The blooming was not only a spectacle but a cue linking the rhythm of plants to the schedule of cultivation. A month later, in **Tau thla** (April), wild berries ripened. Among them, the yellow *hmuhtau* (*Rubus ellipticus*) was familiar to villagers, especially children (Lalthangliana 2005, 93). These fruits marked the late dry season. By then, the burning of *jhum* fields would be complete, and the earth was being made ready for sowing. Again, the plant world offered its timing.

With **Tomir thla** (May), the rains began. The word "tomir" carries the sense of wetness soaked fields, softened trails, a change in air. This was the time to plant. The arrival of the southwest monsoon and the sowing of seeds occurred together, and both events were folded into the month's name (Lalmalsawmzauva 2016, 8). In **Nikir thla** also known as **Lalmanga nu hlawh rawih thla, Hnuhlak thla and Thlado** (June), attention turned skyward. This was the turning of the sun, the summer solstice

when its path began to shift after reaching its northernmost point (C. Lalaudinga 2020). Mizo cultivators recognised this moment, not through instruments, but by how the days felt: longer at first, then gradually shorter, with air thickening as the rains deepened. Work continued under changing light and heavier skies.

Vawkhniakzawn thla (July) was marked by the full force of the monsoon. Its name, evoking relentless rain, reminded people that this was the most difficult time to be outside. The fields were largely weeded by now, and attention shifted to watching the slopes and the streams—checking for damage, for runoff, for anything that might threaten the crops just planted. The calendar, here, marked not only a season but a need for vigilance.

Much later in the year, **Sahmulphah thla** (November) signalled the cooling of the land. The rains had withdrawn, and a different kind of clarity returned. Mornings turned sharper, the air drier. The exact origin of the name may be uncertain, but its use was clear: it marked the beginning of the cold season and a slowing down of agricultural activity.

Ritual Time and Social Order

Not all months in the Mizo calendar were tied to cultivation or climate. Some were shaped by beliefs about the unseen—about what happens to the soul after death, about when it is fitting to celebrate, and when restraint is required. Among these, **Thi tin thla (August) also known as Mimkut Naupang (Younger version) and Mimkut thla** (September) also known as **Savunga Mimkut** stands apart (Dokhuma 1992, 83). Its name, meaning "the month when the dead depart," marked a solemn period in the Mizo year. According to customary belief, this was when the spirits of those who had died in the past year left the world of the living and journeyed to *Mithi Khua*, the village of the dead. It was not a time for feasting.

In Thi tin thla, the village quieted itself. Weddings were postponed, dances set aside. Laughter was subdued. The prohibitions were not merely ritual but social. This was a period for remembering, not rejoicing. Such restraint was observed not as obligation but as recognition: the dead deserved honour, and their departure required space. The calendar thus carved out a month for grief a shared silence, observed across generations, that reaffirmed both cosmological belief and communal empathy. The harvested vegetables are placed at the *Tuium hunna* (the household water place), in the belief that the soul of the deceased would become a *Khawimu* and consume them.

In contrast, other months were occasions for gathering. **Pawlkut thla** (January) and **Khuangchawi thla** (October) were known for their festivals. These were periods when families opened their homes, food was shared, and the village came together in thanks. Pawlkut marked the end of the rice harvest. Khuangchawi, though less tied to a specific crop, was a feast of status and generosity hosted by those who had the means, remembered for what it revealed about a household's success, and

honoured for what it offered to the wider community.

Celestial Timekeeping and Omens

Among the Mizo, certain stars held meaning not because of their names but because of what their positions signified. When warriors planned to set out on raids, they paid close attention to the sky. A crescent moon with a star on its right was called ***Chem a chawi*** "it carries a dao." If the star appeared on the left, it was known as ***Mi lu a chawi*** "it carries the enemy's head." The second was seen as a sign of success. These observations shaped the choice of when to act. The sky, in this sense, offered cues that were not ignored (Malsawmdawngliana & R. Lalsangpuii 2024, 209).

Such preparations were cautious and deliberate. Young men who had not yet proven themselves were not permitted to join. Families were warned to remain alert while the warriors were away. The raids were planned for the dry season, when there was no farming to interrupt and the weather allowed for clear travel. Observation of the sky was paired with knowledge of the land.

One remembered case is the raid on the Alexandrapur tea garden on January 23, 1871, carried out by the warriors of Bengkhuaia (C. Vanlallawma 1996, 6). The decision to strike during the cold months reflected long-standing knowledge, raiding when the air was clear, when fields were quiet, and when the signs above appeared favourable (Laldinmawia 2023).

Time was not measured by mechanical devices but read from the sky. Certain stars marked not just the passage of hours but the rhythm of everyday life. The Pleiades, known locally as **Siruk**, played this role with quiet regularity. When Siruk rose in the eastern sky at dusk, it signalled that evening had begun. As it reached the zenith, it marked the time for visitors to take their leave. At this moment, a rooster known as **Lenghawn ar** would crow a familiar sound that prompted boys and girls to end their play. They would sing *Tin dialah,* a parting song, and return to their homesAs the months shifted, Siruk appeared earlier in the sky. By February, it had moved westward, its changing position once again guiding the actions of the community. By May, it disappeared entirely from sight. Its absence was linked to a strong wind known as **To thli**, said to have swept the stars from the sky. This wind was also called **Siruk la thli**, the wind that carried away the Pleiades. This seasonal pattern corresponded with **Tomir thla**, the month of rain and planting. A saying "*A sikruk la in kan lo thawk chhuak*" suggested this moment as a time for gathering and collective work (Malsawmdawngliana & R. Lalsangpuii 2024, 210).

Other constellations were also part of this shared understanding. The Great Bear, or **Zangkhua**, was observed as it moved in a circular path across the sky (Lorrain 1940, 559). When the constellation turned upside down in the early hours, usually around four in the morning; it was taken as a sign that dawn was near. For those awake, it offered reassurance: a signal that night was ending and light would return. In difficult moments, people reminded themselves with the phrase *Zangkhua ala bungbu ang*, reminding the

hope that hardship too would pass (VL Ruala 2023).

One more star held meaning for those who travelled. **Sisil**, a northern star, was thought to remain still in the sky, not from strength but from weariness. It was believed to suffer from soreness and so did not move. Yet in its stillness, it offered direction. Travellers and hunters looked to Sisil for guidance, trusting its position to find their way across the hills and forests of home (Malsawmdawngliana & R. Lalsangpuii 2024, 211).

The Calendar as Archive and Memory

For the Mizo, the calendar was not just an agricultural guide but a record of memory. Each *thla* carried traces of past seasons, events, and shared experiences. The return of a month was a reminder of what had been done before and what needed to follow.

This system grew from close observation. *Ramtuk thla* recalled forest clearing and the feel of damp earth, while *Thi tin thla* was lived in silence, honouring the dead. The calendar existed in movement and practice, learned by doing rather than formal teaching.

Memory was reinforced through recurring natural signs the blooming of *vaube*, the shifts of wind and rain. Though flexible to change, the structure remained grounded in these cues. Festivals like *Pawlkut* linked present harvests to past feasts and hardships, blending time and memory into shared practice.

Even with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, the old names and rhythms persisted in conversations and habits. They continued to shape when to act, celebrate, or rest. Through this, the calendar wove together ritual, labour, and identity, offering a rhythm that balanced continuity with change.

Conclusion

To follow the Mizo Indigenous Calendar is to trace a way of life shaped by land, work, and memory. Time was not measured in isolation but lived as a shared rhythm. Each *thla* gathered what the people had come to know when the rains might come, when the soil would yield, when the stars would shift, and when the community should act together or pause.

This was more than agricultural timing. The calendar also stored memory. Month names carried habits and recollections. Some asked for silence, others for celebration. Through them, time was given shape and feeling. Even as religious beliefs changed, the rhythm stayed. Its form allowed for continuity while leaving space to adapt.

Calendars such as this do more than divide the year. They hold the memory of how people have lived with their surroundings. In a world where time is often abstracted, the Mizo calendar reminds us that when to act is as meaningful as what to do and that such understanding, passed through practice, can endure without ever being written down.

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