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TRADITIONAL MIZO DANCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores traditional Mizo dances as expressions of cultural memory, ritual practice, and collective identity. Drawing on ethnographic accounts and theoretical perspectives from Geertz, Turner, and Schechner, it interprets these performances as acts that encode social values, historical narratives, and communal transitions. Each dance whether celebratory, martial, or funerary offers understanding into how Mizo society remembers, mourns, and reaffirms belonging. Through movement, music, and costume, these dances preserve the moral and emotional life of the community across generations.

Keywords: *Mizo dance, ritual, social memory, performance, cultural identity.*

Introduction

A drumbeat carries across the hills, drawing people together in shared anticipation. In the uplands of Mizoram, dance has long functioned as a way to express memory, belief, and social order. It is performed at harvests, communal feasts, commemorations of death, and moments that mark seasonal or social change. These dance some closely linked to specific groups such as the Lusei, Lai, Mara, and Paite often move across communities, pointing to a history of interaction and shared foundations. The gestures, formations, and sounds are shaped not only by aesthetic choice but by inherited knowledge about living together, honouring the departed, and recalling shared experience.

Clifford Geertz's idea of culture as a system of symbols allows us to understand these dances as acts of interpretation. In this view, the dancer's body becomes a medium through which values, memories, and cosmologies are enacted and made visible. Each movement, each beat of the drum or sway of cloth, carries meaning known to those who move and those who watch (Geertz 1973). Victor Turner's study of

ritual draws attention to how these performances often take place at moments when the usual order of things is suspended. In times of mourning, transition, or collective joy, participants enter a shared emotional space, where distinctions of status or rank may be softened, and the group finds a renewed sense of togetherness (Turner 1969). Richard Schechner, writing on performance, argued that such acts are not invented each time but drawn from previous actions—repeated and adapted in the present. Through these repetitions, older meanings remain active, and new ones may emerge (Schechner 1985).

This article examines several major Mizo dance forms *Khuallam* (*Thîngdim*), *Chai-lam, Zangta Lam, Pawhlothlawh, Cheraw* (*Rawkhatlak*), *Chawnglaizawn*, and *Sar-lam-kai* (*Solakia* or *Rallu Lam*)—through ethnographic sources and oral histories.

Feasts and Festivals: Communal Celebration Dances

Thîngdim / Khuallam (The Feast of Merit Dance)

A procession of young men advances toward a village chief's house, their bodies moving in rhythm beneath the flickering light of torches. One carries a small stick pierced with ginger slices and crowned with rooster feathers. Without speaking, he places it on the wall of a relative's home. This silent gesture marks the beginning of *Thîngdim*, also called *Khuallam*, the guest dance performed during the Mizo *Khuangchawi*, or feast of merit. The symbolic token, recognised by the recipient often a wife's father or maternal uncle signals a request to organise a performance in honour of an upcoming feast. Custom requires that the messenger be offered rice beer, after which preparations begin.

In the days before the event, young men rehearse each evening, drawing interest from the village. On the feast day, the troupe dances from their village to the host's, led by a principal dancer who omits the traditional *Puandum* cloth, marking his distinct role. They move in step, arms flung wide, chanting verses that mix praise with playful requests for gifts. Nearing the host's home, the lead dancer improvises songs that entertain and flatter. The host's wife responds by tossing cloths toward him, a theatrical offering. At the back, a figure mimics the dance with exaggerated missteps, drawing laughter and easing the formality (TRI 2010, 61). What begins as a ritual of obligation becomes a public expression of kinship, performance, and shared festivity.

Khuallam carries meaning beyond celebration. It is a ritualised expression of social ties and public recognition. In earlier times, hosting a *Khuangchawi* feast marked a man's standing in the village, and the performance of *Thîngdim* or *Khuallam* was central to confirming that claim. The dance ends with the host giving small sums of money to each dancer, with added amounts for the lead singer and those who play the drum and gong. Though modest, these payments hold enduring significance. They connect directly to the practice of *lukhawng* a ceremonial payment made to maternal kin after a man's death. By presenting gifts

during the performance, the host fulfils part of that duty while still alive, turning the event into a form of social record. *Khuallam* thus becomes a way of affirming kinship bonds, recognising obligation, and ensuring that prosperity is not kept in private but acknowledged in public (Zawla 2011, 40). Through this act, the host gains respect not only during his lifetime but also in memory.

It can be understood as a cultural narrative, where each element carries meaning within Mizo society. The silent token of ginger and feathers, the flowing *Puandum* cloths, the comic figure at the rear, and the moment of gift-giving all speak in their own way. Through the lens of symbolic anthropology, especially Geertz's idea of "thick description," this dance becomes more than movement, it becomes a form of communication. The clown, often overlooked, carries meaning as well. Like the sanctioned fool in other ritual traditions, he lightens the event and disrupts solemnity, reminding those gathered that joy and satire belong within even the most formal gatherings. As Turner observed in his study of ritual, such moments create a space outside the ordinary, a liminal phase where roles shift, allowing both levelling and reaffirmation. Ultimately, when the host offers gifts and receives songs in return, both communal solidarity and hierarchical obligation are affirmed. The dance thus becomes a site through which Mizo society affirms, negotiates, and renews its values in a collective act.

Gender roles within *Khuallam* have evolved over time. Traditionally, the dance was performed exclusively by men, aligning with a period when public ceremonies and inter-village travel were predominantly male responsibilities. Its association with guests being honoured by male kin or warriors further reinforced this gendered exclusivity. As the dance gradually moved beyond its original ceremonial context, participation widened. Today, in cultural programmes and festivals, women frequently perform *Khuallam* alongside men, reflecting a more inclusive reading of tradition while preserving the dance's core form and rhythm.

Chai-lam (Springtime Circle of Unity)

Once the clearing of *jhum* fields is completed, villagers welcome the arrival of spring through *Chapchar Kut*, a seasonal festival marking renewal and transition. At the heart of this festivity is *Chai-lam*, a dance performed exclusively for this occasion.Oral traditions trace its origin to a time when Mizo ancestors lived between the Run and Tiau rivers, suggesting its long-standing presence in cultural memory (Lalthangliana 2005). The word *chai* refers both to a festive drink and to shared celebration, fitting for a dance that follows hard agricultural labour.

Chai-lam is organised around collective participation. Dancers form a closed circle, alternating between men and women. Men place their arms over the women's shoulders, while women hold the men around the waist from behind. This intertwined formation removes markers of individual identity, expressing unity through physical connection. At the centre stand two figures: one plays the *khuang* (traditional drum), and the other sounds a *mithun* horn.

The drum establishes the rhythm, and on a selected beat often the fourth the dancers raise their voices in unison. The horn's call provides aural cues, coordinating the alignment of movement and song. Through this structure, *Chai-lam* functions not only as festivity, but also as a shared expression of rhythm and voice that reinforces communal bonds.

As the singing begins, dancers stand arm-in-arm, gently swaying while reciting verses passed down through oral tradition. *Chai-lam* is accompanied by a wide repertoire of traditional songs, some of which are believed to predate the Mizo settlement in present-day Mizoram. Over time, poets and singers contributed new compositions, creating a cumulative archive of artistic expression. The names of notable figures such as Pi Hmuaki, Neihlaia, Lera, Mangkhaia, Lalvunga, Zopui (Lallula), Darpuii, Sirvate, and Aikhiangi remain associated with these songs, embedding each performance within a larger cultural memory. To perform them is to evoke ancestral presence, making *Chai-lam* a living repository of oral literature with a theme of love, nature, wit, and contemplation.

At a chosen moment, the lead dancer often a respected elder call for the dance to commence. The circle comes to life as the gentle sway transforms into rhythmic movement. *Chai-lam* involves four principal step patterns, which vary subtly between villages. Dancers may step forward and backward, turn, or move laterally, always maintaining rhythm with the drum. Though stylistic differences exist, the core symbolism remains: the linked arms and circular formation represent mutual reliance. The choreography depends on the presence of every dancer to maintain its integrity. At its centre, the *khuang* and *mithun* horn establish rhythm and voice—the shared pulse around which the performance unfolds.

From the perspective of ritual theory, *Chai-lam* during *Chapchar Kut* marks a transitional moment in the farming cycle, the space between clearing the fields and sowing the seeds. As Victor Turner observed, festivals often create liminal periods where everyday structures give way to shared experience. In this setting, villagers set aside work and hierarchy. During *Chai-lam*, participants form a chain of equals (Turner 1969): elders, youth, men, and women all join in, their arms and bodies linked in a rhythm that reflects mutual reliance. The closeness of the dance allows for a culturally accepted intimacy that strengthens community ties. The circle becomes both a social formation and a shared act of preparation for the agricultural year ahead.

Pawhlothlawh (Dance of Celebration and Protection)

Among the Lai community in southern Mizoram, *Pawhlothlawh* occupies a particular place in both ritual and social life. It is performed during events such as the *Khuangchawi* feast of merit and the *Sa-aih* ceremony, which follows the killing of dangerous animals like tigers. The term *Pawhlothlawh*, drawn from Lai language roots, refers to a clapping or circling movement associated with joy. Unlike open-

air dances such as *Chai-lam* or the processional *Khuallam*, *Pawhlothlawh* is usually held in domestic spaces courtyards or the interiors of houses giving it a more contained and communal character. Both men and women participate, and the occasion—whether a feast or a ritual response to a hunt draws in the wider village.

The dance includes three named sequences: *lamtluang*, *khupsuk*, and *khelkhawn*, each with its own rhythm and accompanying song. *Lamtluang* involves broad, expansive gestures; *khupsuk* is marked by firmer footwork; and *khelkhawn* often brings the sequence to a close with turns or jumps. These patterns reflect an established form maintained through repetition across generations. The content of the performance changes depending on the context: during a feast, songs emphasise the host's standing and generosity; during *Sa-aih*, the lyrics address the need for protection, referring to the spirit of the animal killed. In both cases, the dance links action to collective memory.

Pawhlothlawh shares features with the *Chai* dance of the Lusei, suggesting historical overlap among Mizo groups. While certain elements circular arrangement, coordinated singing, and the use of drums—are comparable, its role in the *Sa-aih* context sets it apart. Among the Lai, hunting large animals such as tigers was both a moment of honour and a source of concern. The animal's spirit was believed to carry potential harm, and *Pawhlothlawh* was one way to respond to this risk through shared movement and song. The loud steps, group singing, and coordinated motion were not only aesthetic choices but part of a ritual logic meant to re-establish order after disruption.

Mourning and Passage: Dances of Death and Remembrance

Cheraw/Rawkhatlak (Guiding the Soul with Bamboo)

In the quiet of a new moon night, villagers gather in mourning. Two bamboo poles lie on the ground, held at either end by seated men. As they begin to strike the poles together in rhythm, a group of young women step forward and move gracefully between them. This is *Cheraw*, the Mizo bamboo dance, here performed as part of a funerary rite not for celebration, but to honour a departed soul.

Known widely today as a cultural symbol, *Cheraw* once held a more solemn role, especially among the Lai and Mara communities, where it was called *Rawkhatlak* or *Rakhatla*. In these regions, the dance was closely tied to death rituals, especially when a woman died in childbirth. Oral tradition recalls the story of Duhmanga and Dârdini: when Dârdini died giving birth, the village mourned. Youths prepared food offerings and left them at the river for her spirit. Upon returning, they danced with bamboo from the riverbank, beginning what became *Rawkhatlak.*

This practice formed part of *Ngandâm Kut*, a ritual held within three months of such a death. A maiden would dance *Rawkhatlak* while the bereaved family hosted a communal meal. The dance, along with offerings and prayers, was believed to

ease the spirit's journey and bring peace. In this way, *Cheraw* functioned as a rite of passage for the dead, blending movement, sound, and collective care into a gesture of farewell and remembrance.

The symbolism in *Cheraw*, also known as *Rawkhatlak* among the Lai and Mara, carries deep meaning. The bamboo poles, struck together in a controlled rhythm, are more than instruments—they represent the obstacles a soul must cross after death. The dancer's careful steps between the poles mirror the soul's passage through the narrow, uncertain paths of the spirit world. In the *Ngandâm Kut* ritual, the clapping bamboo and precise movements reflect a desire to clear these invisible barriers, easing the journey of the deceased (Turner 1969). Victor Turner's idea of liminality applies here: the dead exist between two states, and the community, through dance, helps them transition. The performance also acts as a release of collective grief, allowing the living to express care through rhythm and motion.

Different Mizo communities have preserved distinct ritual meanings for this dance. Among the Mara, *Rakhatla* was performed only for respected elders or chiefs, and only if the family conducted a *mithun* sacrifice. It was considered inappropriate to perform it outside these conditions. Among the Lusei, however, *Cheraw* became associated with post-harvest celebration, where villagers danced to mark agricultural success. These contrasting uses highlight the contextual nature of performance: in one setting, it aids the dead; in another, it honours the earth. In both, coordination and harmony are central. The steps must match the rhythm of the poles, reinforcing the idea that social or spiritual balance depends on collective precision.

The choreography of *Cheraw* includes patterned sequences with names such as *Kantluang*, *Thenkual*, *Pheikhawng chhir*, *Thimkual lak*, and *Buhchhil* (TRI 2010, 162). Each has specific movements, some mimicking birds, trees, or harvest actions. *Thimkual*, for instance, is associated with courtship, while *Buhchhil* may resemble the winnowing of rice. The overall performance brings together the sounds of bamboo and drum with the sweeping motion of dancers in traditional dress. These moments captivate audiences, but within traditional settings, they also heighten emotional intensity. Whether in mourning or celebration, the control of movement imposes a sense of order over death, or over the uncertainties of farming.

Chawnglaizawn (Elegy in Motion)

As a funeral feast comes to its end in a village courtyard, the scent of cooked meat and rice beer lingers in the air. With dusk settling, two lines form men on one side, women on the other. A drum begins to beat, and the men raise their arms, gripping the ends of their cloth wrappers, crossed over their chests. The women do the same, lifting their arms with cloth held high. Slowly, the lines step forward and back in unison. This is *Chawnglaizawn* a dance of farewell, honouring the deceased through movement and rhythm.

Chawnglaizawn is closely associated with the Lai community of Mizoram, where

it holds different meanings depending on the subgroup. Among the Zahau, it is part of funerary rites, performed during burial as a final tribute. For the Halkha, by contrast, it has become a social dance, used in gatherings and festivals without any connection to mourning. Though both groups use the same name and share the basic steps, the context shifts the dance's function from a ritual of parting to an act of celebration. This contrast within a single ethnic tradition shows how performances can carry different meanings across time and community, while still preserving their shared form.

Chawnglaizawn is understood to have originated as a mourning dance performed in honour of individuals held in high regard. According to Lai elders, it was traditionally observed at the funerals of chiefs, warriors, and other prominent figures. In its earlier form, participation was limited to men, often those of comparable social standing to the deceased. The movements were measured and restrained not expressions of grief, but gestures of respect. At intervals, the dancers would pause to deliver spoken tributes or chant eulogies, recounting the actions and qualities of the departed. Through this combination of movement and oral remembrance, the dance functioned as a public act of commemoration, sustaining memory through embodied performance. This practice resonates with Victor Turner's concept of social drama, in which ritual acts provide a means to engage with death while reinforcing communal values such as bravery, leadership, and generosity.

The dancers moved in an organised formation usually in two or four rows, depending on the number of participants. A cloth held across the chest by each dancer introduced a visual element of uniformity, possibly evoking discipline or ritual gravity. The drummer regulated the tempo, using rhythm to signal pauses for tribute. The drum's steady cadence offered a framework for the dancers, providing stability in a moment of emotional intensity. Elements of call-and-response were also present, with tributes occasionally echoed or acknowledged by others before the choreography resumed.

Over time, *Chawnglaizawn* adapted to changing social and religious conditions. With the rise of Christianity, many communities moved away from funeral dances. In such contexts, the dance found new meaning as a performance at festivals or public gatherings. Among the Halkha, it became a form of cultural entertainment, though traces of its original solemnity remain—in the formation, in the gestures, and in the tone. When performed in lighter settings, the tempo may increase, and the expressions may soften, yet the underlying structure keeps it grounded in its past.

The inclusion of women is a more recent development. Originally, the dance was male-only, linked to the status of the deceased. As its function widened, women were included, making the tribute more communal. Their presence may also draw from older mourning customs where women sang laments. By participating in the dance, women extend this vocal tradition into movement, reinforcing shared remembrance.

War and Warrior Traditions in Dance

Zangta Lam (Conquest Commemorated in Song)

In earlier times, the sound of triumphant voices would rise as warriors returned from raids, celebrating victory with song and dance. Though headhunting is no longer practiced, its memory lives on through *Zangta Lam*, a dance rooted in martial history. Among the Paite, a Mizo sub-group, *Zangta Lam* meaning "living man" in the Paite dialect emerged as a way to mark dominance in battle. It was performed to honour those who survived, to recount the defeat of rivals, and to ritualise victory.

An important moment linked to this dance is the *Sak-le-khang* conflict, dated around 1100 A.D. Following this, *Zangta Lam* became part of annual festivals such as *Sial Sawm* and *Lawm Annek*, observed on the final Thursday and Friday of September. These events, possibly tied to the end of the harvest season, suggest a connection between agricultural rituals and remembrance of past victories. *Sial Sawm* likely involved the sacrifice of a *Mithun* a highly valued animal in hill societies while *Lawm Annek* may have been a community assembly. Through this blending of seasonal and martial memory, the Paite reaffirmed both material well-being and ancestral strength.

By performing *Zangta Lam* during these gatherings, the community did more than recall old battles. The dance functioned as a renewal of inherited power, a way to ensure continued protection and success. It marked a moment when farming and fighting two foundations of survival were celebrated together.

Zangta Lam is rich in symbolic content. In its original form, the dance likely featured men warriors reenacting scenes of combat, with weapons in hand or mimed gestures of battle. Songs would have recounted the names of enemies, praised individual fighters, and marked the tribe's victory. This made the dance a form of oral record an embodied way to preserve history. The name *Zangta*, meaning "living man," may have referred to survivors or the assertion of strength over the defeated. Though the specific choreography is not fully documented, one can imagine formations in lines or circles, with loud steps, jumps, and perhaps moments where some dancers played the role of captives.

The dance fits well within theories of social memory. Paul Connerton argued that societies remember through the body, and *Zangta Lam* is a clear example. Its repeated performance sustained a community's memory of triumphs (Connerton 1989) long after the events had passed. For Turner, ritual could store and release shared emotion here, pride, unity, and the warning passed to younger generations. The act of dancing became both commemoration and instruction.

Under colonial rule, when inter-tribal warfare ended, such dances became a way to channel old identities into permitted cultural expression. British observers might have seen only spectacle, missing the memory embedded in the movements. Though not performed as widely today as other Mizo

dances, *Zangta Lam* remains significant among the Paite. Its preservation acknowledges a part of history often smoothed over in modern accounts.

Sar-lam-kai/ So-la-kia / Rallu Lam (Rituals of Head-Hunting and Reconciliation)

In the highlands of pre-colonial Mizoram, few rituals revealed the closeness of violence and belief as clearly as the dances that followed a successful raid. Among the Lusei, it was *Ral-lu-lam*; among the Lai, *Sar-lam-kai*; among the Mara, *Solakia*. Though the names varied, the meaning held firm. Each referred to a dance performed after headhunting when returning warriors brought not just trophies, but spirits. Across the Mizo groups, it marked a shared understanding: that war brought honour, but also danger from the unseen.

Sar-lam-kai was not a standalone act. It was part of *Ral lu aih*, a longer ceremony meant to contain the power of the severed head and restore the man who had taken it. Killing was not the end of the task. The spirit of the dead might follow, unsettled. The risk was real—not metaphor but misfortune, illness, or fear. For five days, the village turned its attention to this risk.

The first two days were for celebration. Food and drink flowed. The saying *zu leh sa chen* rice beer and meat in plenty summed up the mood. These were not ordinary meals, but the community's way of absorbing the act into shared memory. Then came the shift. On the third day, a pig was killed. The warrior, its blood thick on his skin, stepped into another space neither ordinary nor untouchable, but suspended. For the next one or two days, he avoided water. No bathing, no washing he remained as he was, marked and in between.

There were rules. The most serious: he could not approach women. It was said the spirit might take offence jealous that the man turned too quickly to domestic life. A warrior, still unclean from the kill, risked more than insult. The belief was that his strength, even his courage, could be stripped away if the rites were not completed. These days of separation marked him out, not as punishment, but as a shield. His state required care like a man under vow, not yet returned.

Such rituals, while strange to outside eyes, were clear in purpose. They kept the village safe. They allowed the warrior to cross back, slowly, from the edge he had walked. And through dances like *Sar-lam-kai*, the memory of that journey was made visible, for all to see.

The final day of *Ral lu aih* brought the warrior back into society. With the last rites completed, he could once again be touched, spoken to, and honoured. Those who had taken a head and fulfilled the required observances were not just welcomed they were marked. Some wore special cloths or turbans, sat in places of distinction, or were named in songs. Their names entered communal memory not only for the act of killing, but for having done what was needed to contain its consequences.

Conclusion

Mizo dances such as *Chai-lam* and *Chawnglaizawn* are not simply performative displays but forms of social memory and

expression. They mark key events harvests, funerals, hunts, and communal gatherings through structured movement, rhythm, and participation. Each dance encodes meanings that speak to identity, history, and shared experience. Clifford Geertz's view of culture as "webs of significance" allows these dances to be read as movements that carry meaning, not just form. Turner's ideas on *liminality* and *communitas* help frame them as acts that occur at transitional points between life and death, separation and reunion. Richard Schechner's notion of "restored behaviour" highlights how these are not static traditions but repeated enactments that reconnect the present with past practices.

Gender roles shape many of these forms. While men often led ritual and martial dances, women's involvement in public celebrations has grown, reflecting broader shifts. Mourning dances like *Chawnglaizawn* give structure to loss, while *Chai-lam* connects the body to agricultural cycles. *Sar-lam-kai* recalls not only combat but values such as discipline and honour. In today's settings festivals, schools, community events these dances remain part of how Mizo society engages with its past, not through nostalgia, but through continued, meaningful action.

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