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TLAWMNGAIHNA – An Unique spirit of Self-Sacrifice Embedded in Mizo Culture.

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The concept of Tlawmngaihna, derived from the Mizo language, is strongly rooted in Mizo culture. It embodies the idea of selflessness, altruism, and an unwavering sense of duty towards others. Several writers and scholars have noted that the term tlawmngaihna is untranslatable and does not have an equivalent word in English. According to Lalthangliana while other societies may have a concept similar to tlawmngaihna, they seem not to have a precise word to capture its essence. Instead, they may explain it in ways that vary depending on the context and situation. In contrast, the Mizo people have a distinct and expressive word, tlawmngaihna, which makes their concept unique and explicitly recognised. Khiangte wrote that it is the "ethical code" that means "to be hospitable, kind, unselfish, courageous, industrious and helpful to others in all respect…the core of their philosophy of life."

Tlawmngaihna is a Mizo code of ethics that closely refers to the classical sociological concept of altruism, and defined as altruistic principles and selfless actions. asserted that "its closest meanings are altruism, chivalry, and selfless sacrifice." It is about showing kindness, generosity, and hospitality to others without expecting anything in return. It is a moral obligation to help those in need, be it strangers, regardless of their social status and relationships. In the context of the community, individual interests and needs become secondary where one puts others above oneself. Individuals who embody these principles are recognised as Tlawmngai, a title the Mizos aspired to achieve. As a result, those who are considered as Tlawmngai are admired and respected within their community, earning a reputation as exemplary members of society.

From a young age, children are instilled with the value of tlawmngaihna by being taught to be obedient, show respect to elders and guests, and be kind to one another. During meals, children learn to wait for the eldest family member to start eating before they begin. It is considered impolite for younger ones to eat before the elders, so they wait patiently until the eldest person takes their first bite, only then can the rest of the family members start eating. A song composed by Liandala in 1959 (Akashvani Aizawl, 2019) states:

Aia upate zah thiamin
An thu te awihin zawm fo rawh
Pi Pu te ro thil hlu a ni
Aia Upate zah thiam rawh.

It means respect elders, obey them at all times, it is the valuable treasure of the old, respect the elders.

Sangkima believed that the reason the Mizos were able to easily let go of old values and practices and adapt to a new religion was because their strong attachment to the moral code of tlawmngaihna served as an ideal for them. This quality allowed the Mizos to adjust smoothly to any changes in their way of life. According to Sangkima, this adaptability was particularly evident when the Mizos accepted Christianity, as the concept of tlawmngaihna naturally aligned with Christian teachings on self-sacrifice. The merging of tlawmngaihna with Christian values facilitated their acceptance of other changes as well.

GENEROSITY:

Khiangte explains that Mizo hospitality, which is "closely connected with the concept of tlawmngaihna", is commonly practised by most people. He describes how any Mizo would welcome a mikhual (traveller) into their home, offering food and lodging for a night or two without expecting anything in return. This hospitality includes both dinner and breakfast and even chawfûn, "a packet of boiled rice meal" for the traveller to carry on their journey, especially in times when modern transportation was not available. In the hills, it was common for travellers to receive free food and lodging for a night. There is a well-known saying that goes, "mikhual an hnar ngailo," which means never turn away a guest.

While some individuals might opt out of extending this hospitality, which could be seen as impolite, those who follow the principles of tlawmngaihna would never deny a stranger food and shelter. The extent and regularity with which

someone offers such accommodation to strangers often indicate their "possession of tlawmngaihna." Moreover, children are taught from a young age the importance of tlawmngaihna, or generosity, towards guests. This means setting aside the best portions of meat or any food items for visitors rather than allowing family members to consume them. By offering the finest food for guests, they show respect and honour, demonstrating a deep-seated value of hospitality.

Major A.G. McCall, who served as superintendent of the Lushai Hills from 1931 to 1943, observed this hospitality during his time in the region and recorded the following account of his journey in the Lushai Hills (Mizoram): A cleanly turned out chief with varying supporters may seek to halt us on our way with an invitation to accept some Lushai rice beer or fruit or tea, perhaps even an offering of eggs neatly packed in cotton in a bamboo container, or sometimes a fowl as a token of welcome in keeping with age-long traditional hospitality. He stated that during fieldwork- respondents often shared tea with me and, on occasion, even invited me to join them for a meal. This gesture vividly reflects the ingrained practice of hospitality within Mizo culture.

In Mizo tradition, it has long been customary to ensure that any guest visiting our home is offered at least a cup of tea before they leave an expression of warmth and generosity. Furthermore, in Mizo culture, serving local chicken to guests is a revered tradition, symbolising favour and hospitality. Invitations from relatives and friends often come with a warm promise of serving country chicken, especially Arpui tui lai (an egg-laying hen). An egg-laying hen is particularly significant because it represents a future source of food and economic benefit (eggs), thus offering it suggests a sacrifice by the host. This act goes beyond just feeding a Pi or Ka pi is a respectable term in the Mizo dialect which means Madam, Mrs. or Smt. It also refers to a grandmother, an elder woman, and a married woman. Similarly, Pu or Ka pu is a term of respect for a man, like mister (Mr.) or Sir, also used to refer to a grandfather or a married man.

A SPIRIT OF SHARING:

In the spirit of tlawmngaihna, food is not just a source of sustenance, but a catalyst for connection and community through sharing. The act of sharing food symbolises a basic yet important element of societal interaction. This principle is distinctly evident within the Mizo community, where sharing of food is commonly practised. This practice is not merely a cultural tradition but a fundamental aspect of their society, reinforcing their communal identity and values. It is hard to imagine a meaningful social experience that does not involve sharing food, whether a casual cup of tea with a friend, a family meal, or an elaborate community feast.

The Mizos practice of giving some portion of the dish to others, and to share some portion of the first harvest with others is still in practice today. Among the many practices of sharing, these two are highlighted here because they showcase the communitarian ethos that deepens relationships and strengthens the community. When a cook prepares a special dish for their family they usually do not cook just for themselves; instead, they consider others and make a bit more than their family will need. This way, they can share a bowl with nearby neighbours and friends. If they know that a particular dish is a favourite of their relatives, neighbours, or friends, they intentionally prepare it with those people in mind, so they can give it to them. This tradition remains vibrant even today. Such practices of sharing cooked dishes reflect deep-rooted communal values and were particularly prominent during the pandemic, when neighbours often exchanged meals, fostering solidarity during challenging times.

In the case of sharing their first harvest with neighbours and relatives rather than keeping it all for themselves it shows an element of Tlawmngaihna. This is especially true during the dry season when few people cultivate vegetables in additional fields or jhum. Those who plant extra fields during the dry season typically share part of their harvest, usually enough for a single meal. Quoting a Bible verse, "As the saying goes, 'Better a neighbour nearby than a relative far away' (Proverbs 27:10, NIV), in Mizo community neighbours were naturally prioritised even before Christian ideology began to influence Mizo society." However, food sharing was not a strict obligation; rather, it was seen as a gesture of kindness and community spirit, known as Tlawmngaihna. Furthermore, they primarily share with those who do not produce enough or are in need. There is no obligation to share with those who have more, as it holds little value in such cases. During the dry season, when crops are scarce, those with extra fields who harvest and share their crops make a significant and appreciated gesture, bringing joy to others.

The famous Mizo maxim, sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi, which literally means "one who shares with others will survive but one who eats alone will die," conveys a moral principle about food and culture. This proverb reflects a broader philosophical perspective on communal sharing and generosity, highlighting how food practices can embody and reinforce the ethical values of tlawmngaihna. It underscores the belief that food is not solely a means of physical nourishment but also a reflection of moral values and social interconnectedness, shaping individual and community identities. Thus, as a close-knit society, Mizo society exemplifies a communitarian ethos that is rooted in the practice of sharing food.

On the other hand, food sharing in Mizo culture is a complex phenomenon, embedded with social nuances and moral implications. When an individual offers food to another, it is often initially declined, not only as a gesture of politeness, but also to avoid being perceived as a burden or to spare the giver from feeling obligated. This paradoxical behaviour reflects a deep seated cultural ethos of tlawmngaihna, which prioritises collective well-being over individual needs. While sharing food is considered a virtuous act—demonstrating generosity and community spirit—accepting it can sometimes evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment, particularly among men. This is rooted in the Mizo cultural belief that community members are responsible for one another's well-being, especially concerning food. A lack of food is not viewed solely as an individual hardship but as a collective shortcoming. As a result, individuals may decline food offers to avoid placing a perceived burden on others or implying that the community has failed in its duty of care.

As one of the respondents Prof. Rualkhuma Colney said, a man's reputation is at stake if his neighbour goes hungry or lacks food, highlighting the cultural obligation to prioritise
communal welfare over personal interests. He also stated that in modern society, where animals are raised for food and not for sacrifice and sold by weight, it is customary to share meat with family and neighbours rather than keeping it all for oneself. When someone slaughters a pig, they typically offer some portions to their neighbours as a gift, but the neighbours often decline to accept it freely because they value reciprocity and mutual support, embodying the spirit of tlawmngaihna. This intricate dynamic shows the
significance of food sharing in Mizo culture, where refusal to accept food can be a manifestation of respect, humility, and consideration for the well-being of others. This phenomenon illustrates the tension between individual agency and collective values, highlighting the complex relationship between the sharing practices and tlawmngaihna in shaping the Mizo identity.

THE YOUNG MIZO ASSOCIATION (YMA)

This Association is an influential non-profit NGO, is built on the principles of tlawmngaihna. Established on June 15, 1935, by Christian missionaries and some Mizo church leaders, YMA is a voluntary organisation that plays a significant role in Mizo society. It functions in almost every part of Mizoram and other areas with a Mizo population. Membership is open to everyone, regardless of tribe, clan, gender, status, religion, or any otherdistinctions. YMA is involved in a wide range of activities, including education, health, disaster relief, cultural preservation, etc., where members engage in voluntary work, sacrificing their time and energy for the benefit of the community. The leaders and committee members of the YMA are also responsible for guiding and motivating the youth to embrace and practice tlawmngaihna in their lives. Through community service, cultural and social events, and cultural awareness and preservation initiatives, they exemplify the selfless and valued principles of tlawmngaihna.

DEATH RITUAL:

YMA embodies the spirit of tlawmngaihna by supporting bereaved families in Mizo society. To illustrate, when someone passes away, local YMA members gather to console and assist the family. They transform the house into a communal space by rearranging furniture and setting up wooden benches from the YMA's property house, which is available in every locality. Meanwhile, others build the coffin, demonstrating the community's collective effort to comfort and care for one another in times of need.

In Mizo tradition, if someone passes away before 9 a.m., the funeral is typically conducted on
the same day, around 1 or 2 p.m. However, if the death occurs after 9 a.m., a ritual is observed where the neighbours sits vigil throughout the night. During such events, young men and women stay up all night singing worship and funeral songs, providing comfort to the grieving family. While some YMA members sing and keep vigil inside the

house, others prepare tea and traditional food, a thick rice porridge with chicken or pork, to keep everyone awake and energised. Tea is served multiple times throughout the night, with all the necessary utensils and equipment provided by the YMA and prepared in the neighbours' houses, ensuring that the bereaved family does not have to provide anything. Another group of volunteers assists with serving the refreshments. Notably, the tradition of preparing and serving food and tea varies by locality. Typically, men are responsible for preparation, while women handle the serving, although in some areas, men also serve the food. After the refreshments are served and eaten, the women gather the used utensils, wash them, and then return to the singing. The vigil typically ends at dawn with a prayer.

Afterwards, the women sweep and clean the house, while the men prepare the space for the funeral ceremony.On the morning following the overnight vigil, young men who did not participate in the vigil rise early to take the task of digging the grave for a burial, known under the guidance of older men. This is another vital part of the Mizo funeral traditions, and the immediate family members of the deceased do not participate in this work. Women also do not participate in the grave digging but provide tea, food and water to the men involved in the task. In some localities, however, both food and drinks are provided by the men, with women having no involvement in this task.

After the funeral process is done, in Mizo tradition, each household in the locality is expected to support the family by donating a cup of rice, and firewood, typically collected by young women going door-to-door. If a household cannot spare a cup of rice, they are expected to contribute a small amount of cash instead. These death rituals and practices reflect the deep sense of community and support within Mizo society, perfect examples to explain the treasured concept of tlawmngaihna, as the YMA takes on the responsibility of providing for the family in their time of grief. It not only eases the burden on the bereaved but also strengthens communal bonds by ensuring that the family can focus on mourning rather than logistical concerns.

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