

Bridging Cultures: Missionaries, Sports, and Social Change in Colonial Mizoram

Lalmalsawmi Thadou

Research Scholar, Department of History & Ethnography
Mizoram University
Email: msithado@gmail.com

&

Hmingthanzuali

Assistant Professor, Department of History & Ethnography
Mizoram University
Email: hmingthanzuali@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the transformation of games and sports and its implications on Mizo society during the colonial period using the voices of those who experienced this era first-hand. It examines how British arrival, establishment of education, and missionary initiatives reshaped Mizoram's sports culture and the broader cultural and social dynamics associated with it. The narratives highlight the dual role of colonial influences and the adaptability of the native population in integrating new sports while preserving traditional Mizo games. Additionally, the article delves into the changing attitudes toward gender roles in sports, showcasing how these shifts established new societal norms. Drawing on oral histories and personal accounts, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the lasting impact of colonialism on Mizoram's sporting traditions and its role in shaping social and cultural identities.

Keywords: Colonial, Missionaries, Games and Sports, Natives, Memoirs

Introduction

Games and sports serve as a vivid reflection of societal values, prejudices, divisions, and unifying symbols.¹ Despite their cultural and historical significance, the academic study of games and sports has long remained underexplored. This

¹ Ramchandra Guha, *A Corner of Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*, (Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2014), 3.

gap offers a fertile ground for scholars to investigate the social structures and cultural dynamics of societies through the lens of recreational activities, providing a unique micro-historical perspective on broader historical contexts. The emergence of sports studies as an academic field gained momentum in the 1960s, and British cultural studies of the 1980s further expanded this domain. Scholars have since produced a substantial body of literature, addressing themes such as national identity, gender roles, and social class, and examining the role of sports in shaping these aspects of society.² Initial research primarily focused on the development of modern sports and ethics in England, later transitioning to explore the spread of sports to other continents through colonial encounters.³ Sports historians have illuminated past communities by analysing their leisure activities, values, and everyday behaviour, contributing significantly to the study of identities and social structures.⁴

Despite this burgeoning scholarship, the study of the history of games and sports in a society like Mizo remains underrepresented. Mizo society has remained largely incognito to the outside world for many centuries. It was only after British intervention in the late 19th century that documentation of Mizoram's historical past began, predominantly through the records of colonial administrators and missionaries. These records often emphasized the changes and initiatives introduced by these entities, but official records of government and the response of people in the field of games and sports have been largely overlooked, even though it is an important lens for analysing the culture and social structure. Recognizing this gap, the present study examines records, including colonial and missionary documents, alongside oral and written memoirs of elder citizens. By doing so, it seeks to uncover the social dynamics and cultural structures of Mizo society through the lens of its games and sports history. This exploration sheds light on how games and sports became a site of colonial intervention and cultural transformation, revealing their multifaceted role in Mizoram's socio-cultural evolution.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding, the research combines records analysis, oral history collection, and secondary data review. Primary sources such as missionary reports and educational documents from the late 19th and early 20th centuries form the foundation of the study. To capture local perspectives, oral interviews and memoirs of elder citizens who experienced colonial and missionary interventions are collected. These narratives reveal how traditional Mizo games and sports were preserved and adapted, and they provide nuanced accounts of how societal norms, particularly regarding gender and class, evolved in response to new

² Maarten Van Bottenburg. "Beyond Diffusion: Sport and Its Remaking in Cross-Cultural Contexts," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983):35.

³ Bae Vidacs, "Through the Prism of Sports: Why Africanists Study Sports?," *Africa Spectrum* 41, no.3(2006):332.

⁴ Martin Johnes, "British Sports History: The Present and The Future," *Journal of Sport History* 35, no.1 (2008), 65.

recreational activities. A detailed review of scholarly works on sports history, colonialism, and cultural transformation in Mizoram and other colonized regions is conducted to contextualize findings. This includes an examination of studies on identity, gender dynamics, and the role of sports in societal change.

Early Mizo Society and Indigenous Games

Early Mizo society was characterized by its close-knit communal structure, where individuals shared similar activities and responsibilities. Everyday life revolved around Jhum cultivation, unlike in modern times, where people are engaged in diverse occupations. Games and recreational activities were primarily the domain of children, as men and women were engaged in roles dictated by societal norms and the agrarian lifestyle. Men typically spent their time cultivating land, while in their leisure time, they engaged in hunting as both a recreational activity and an ancillary economic source. Women, on the other hand, devoted their days to household duties and assisting men in cultivation, leaving them little room for leisure or recreation from dawn to dusk.

Children, free from the burdens of adult responsibilities, enjoyed ample leisure time and actively engaged in games such as *kalchhet*, *inkawibah/inbah*, *sakuhuilut*, *arpasual*, *inbuk*, *selemchaih*, *in sesik*, and *lirhbiang*, all specifically designed for their enjoyment. In the absence of formal education, the *Zawlbuk*⁵ served as an informal institution for teenage boys. It was a place where they acquired knowledge, developed social skills, learned discipline and competition under the close supervision of the Val Upa⁶ (elderly guardian). Boys were groomed through strict guidance, ensuring adherence to societal expectations. For them, achieving the status of *Ramlama Thangchhuah*⁷ was considered the pinnacle of accomplishment. For women, the opportunities for recreational activities were limited, reflecting their responsibilities in household chores and agricultural work. A few games, such as *inlungvawr*, *inkawibah*, and *inhruipawh*, were available to them; However, their involvement in games and sports was minimal due to time constraints and societal expectations as caregivers. This limited engagement is one reason women were largely excluded from the recreational and competitive aspects of games and sports in early Mizo society. Thus, the structure of early Mizo society inherently shaped its recreational practices, with distinct roles for men, women, and children that influenced the availability and participation in games and sports. These dynamics underscore the gendered and age-specific nature of leisure in traditional Mizo culture.

⁵ A bachelor's dormitory in early Mizo society. Sometimes, even a married man used to stay here at night.

⁶ Young adult man who was capable of leading all the young men in *Zawlbuk*.

⁷ One who attained *Thangchhuah* by hunting the prescribed animals such as the Bear, Tiger, Elephant, Wild Bison, and *Vahluk* (a flying lemur).

Transforming Lives Through Education and Sports: Role of Missionaries

The Charter of 1813, enacted during colonial rule in India, granted Christian missionaries the authority to propagate Christianity across the country.⁸ This not only facilitated the dissemination of Christian teachings but also created avenues for the introduction and promotion of Western culture, ideas, and values.⁹ A consequential domain of this cultural infusion was the realm of games and sports, which underwent a substantial transformation as Western practices influenced the introduction of new games and the adaptation of traditional ones.¹⁰ In the Lushai Hills, these cultural shifts became apparent following the establishment of a stable colonial administration in 1898. Welsh missionaries, among the earliest to engage in missionizing the region, recognized the cultural and social potential of sports. Games and sports served as vehicles for transmitting British values, including behavioural standards, interpersonal norms, and societal conformity. However, this transformation was gradual, evolving through sustained efforts by the missionaries. Welsh missionaries, through the introduction of Western education, incorporated new games and sports into school curricula, particularly in mission schools. This initiative marked a significant turning point in the development of games and sports within the region, fostering their popularity and institutionalization.¹¹

In the North Lushai Hills, educational initiatives also sought to challenge existing societal norms, particularly concerning the education of girls. Missionaries such as E. Chapman and M. Clark¹² worked diligently to change perceptions that deemed girls' education insignificant. They introduced an educational model combining practical skills relevant to daily life with games and sports. This holistic approach aimed to garner societal acceptance while promoting physical and mental well-being.¹³ Qwen Rees Roberts¹⁴ states that while new games were introduced in the school, many traditional games continued to be played, particularly in girls' schools. Hockey and badminton were first introduced, and girls actively participated in these sports, at least on school premises.¹⁵ Rev. F.W. Savidge and Rev. J.H. Lorrain¹⁶ underscored the link between physical activity and mental health in their 1912

⁸ Hillary M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801-1908*, (New South Wales: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10.

⁹ Brian Stoddart, *Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire: Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 651.

¹⁰ J. Meirion Lloyd, *On Every High Hill*, (Mission Veng: Synod Publication Board, 1984), 10.

¹¹ Qwen Rees Roberts, *Memories of Mizoram: Recollections & Reflections*, trans. C.H Thangkhuma and Pu H. Ngurthansanga, (Mission Veng: Synod Press, 2003), 64.

¹² Baptist missionary who worked in the South Lushai Hills.

¹³ E. M. Chapman and M. Clark, *Mizo Miracle*, (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1964), 33.

¹⁴ One of the most remarkable and prominent Welsh missionaries, who served as the Headmistress in one of the Mission schools, *Hmeichhe Sikul* (presently known as P.C. Girls' School) from 1945-1965.

¹⁵ Roberts, *Memories of Mizoram*, 64.

¹⁶ Welsh missionaries who worked in the South Lushai Hills.

report. Activities such as road construction, soil excavation, and grass clearing were introduced alongside traditional education.¹⁷ By 1914, new sports, including hockey, became part of the school routine, fostering physical strength and discipline. Organised matches, held regularly, highlighted the missionaries' efforts to integrate sports into the daily lives of students.¹⁸

The integration of sports extended beyond schools, influencing broader societal dynamics. For instance, the first recorded participation of boys and girls in 'School Sports' at Serkawn in 1935 reflected the growing acceptance of sports as a communal activity.¹⁹ This transformation was further bolstered by the popularity of sports such as badminton, hockey, and football, which emerged as the most favoured games in the region. Regularly organised tournaments with enticing prizes elevated the social status of winners, marking a significant shift from pre-colonial values. Success in sports began to be equated with enhanced social standing and career opportunities, particularly in government employment.²⁰ This newfound perception fueled a competitive spirit among the younger generation, embedding sports deeply within the societal fabric.

As missionaries were allowed to continue their work even after India gained independence, the colonial period in the realm of games and sports extended well into the 21st century and continued to act as a cultural Bridge. The missionaries' contributions to education and sports played a pivotal role in reshaping the lives of the people in the Lushai Hills. While their efforts undeniably advanced literacy and physical well-being, games, and sports also became tools for cultural assimilation. As part of the colonizers' broader strategy, sports facilitated a cultural connection that bridged the gap between indigenous and Western traditions, leaving an enduring legacy on the region's social and cultural landscape even today. This transformation illustrates how education and sports, initially introduced as instruments of colonial strategy, gradually evolved into empowering tools that shaped the aspirations and identities of the people in the Lushai Hills.

The Role of Natives in Preserving Tradition and Shaping Sports

The accomplishments of missionaries in colonial Mizoram were deeply intertwined with the contributions of local natives. Trained by missionaries to act as agents, these individuals ensured the continuity of the mission's goals, even after the departure of the missionaries. The local community, particularly those educated in mission schools, played a dual role, facilitating the spread of new games and sports while safeguarding traditional ones. Local educators and students actively participated in maintaining a balance between traditional and introduced sports. As

¹⁷ F. W. Savidge and J. H. Lorrain, *BMS. Rawngnbawlina Reports (1901-1938)*, trans. Rev. Dr. Raltawnga, (Lunglei: Baptist Publication Board, 2014), 104.

¹⁸ Savidge and Lorrain, *BMS Rawngnbawlina Reports*, 162.

¹⁹ Savidge and Lorrain, 250.

²⁰ Lalsiama, *Mizo Leh Sipai*, (Delhi: Jeffson Publishing House, 1993), 9.

Liani²¹ noted, traditional Mizo games were particularly popular in primary schools, with children eagerly engaging in sports like *Tira Mei Kaia*, *Sakuh Uilut*, and *Inkawibah* alongside western-introduced volleyball and badminton.²² Similarly, Chhingpuii²³ reflected that despite the structured missionary education system, programs like Bulbul and Guides emphasized outdoor activities rooted in local culture.²⁴ However, traditional games often dominate outside school settings, especially for girls. Family expectations and household responsibilities limited their participation in newer sports. Boys, on the other hand, displayed a greater openness to adopting sports like football and hockey, which were seen as more masculine sports, reflecting a subtle gender disparity. Economic challenges shaped the accessibility of newly introduced games. As L.N. Tluanga²⁵ recounted, while football and hockey gained popularity, cost constraints often restricted their widespread adoption, particularly in rural areas. Children innovatively adapted using pomelos as makeshift balls, a testament to their resourcefulness and enthusiasm.²⁶ Highlighted that colonial-era sports events, including competitions in football, hockey, and races, became an annual tradition, fostering community engagement. At the same time, traditional games like *Pawnto* remained widespread among children on the street in the evening and in school during recess as a form of recreational activity.²⁷

During the later colonial period and into the post-colonial period, engagement in sports began to offer social recognition, particularly for youth excelling in competitive games. However, socio-economic inequalities often influence opportunities. C. Hmingthanga²⁸ observed that children from affluent families or those with government-employed parents enjoyed additional privileges, while economically disadvantaged students had to exert greater effort to gain recognition.²⁹ This shift in values also redefined gender roles in sports. Unlike pre-colonial norms, where teenage girls' participation in games and sports was rare, the colonial period saw increased involvement of girls in games and sports such as hockey and badminton. Lalbiakdiki³⁰ recalled participating in hockey tournaments

²¹ Who attended Hmeichhe Sikul during the 1930s and subsequently became a teacher in the same school from 1955.

²² Hmeichhe Sikul, *Presbyterian Church Girl's School, Centenary: 1903-2003 Souvenir*, (Mission Veng: Synod Press, 2003), 94.

²³ Born in 1929, finished her primary school in 1934 and started to work in Hmeichhe Sikul from 1947-1987.

²⁴ Chhingpuii, Interviewed by Lalmalsawmi Thadou, Khatla, November 20, 2021.

²⁵ Born in 1933, finished his Primary School in 1942, Middle School in 1942 and High School in Mizo High School in the year 1947.

²⁶ L. N. Tluanga, Interviewed by Lalmalsawmi Thadou, Mission Veng, November 24, 2021.

²⁷ Chamliana, Interviewed by Lalmalsawmi Thadou, Mission Vengthlang, December 10, 2021.

²⁸ Born in 1938, a former student of a Welsh missionary school during the 1940s, and later educated in other mission schools.

²⁹ C. Hmingthanga, Interviewed by Lalmalsawmi Thadou, Mission Vengthlang, October 20, 2021.

³⁰ Born in 1938, studied in Mission schools and wife of the former Chief Minister of Mizoram.

wearing skirts, emphasizing the evolving societal acceptance of women in sports. Despite lingering conservative attitudes, active participation by girls did not diminish perceptions of femininity.³¹ Chhuanliana³² further noted that while traditional gender roles persisted, colonial-era education and sports gradually allowed women greater freedom to engage in outdoor activities, reflecting broader societal change, and this continued into the present time.³³ The transition from pre-colonial to colonial Mizoram marked a significant evolution in the understanding and practice of sports. In early Mizo society, the concept of modern sport did not exist. All activities were recreation without a material price or remuneration, often reflecting social structures with loosely defined roles for children. However, as children transitioned to adolescence, gender-based divisions became more pronounced, limiting leisure opportunities, especially for girls. The introduction of organised sports during the colonial period introduced new concepts of competition, rewards, and social status. This shift paralleled changes in gender dynamics, as women gained more freedom to participate in sports while maintaining household responsibilities.

The contributions of native communities in shaping the sports culture of colonial Mizoram were profound. While missionaries introduced new games and sports, the locals acted as intermediaries, ensuring these activities were embraced and adapted within their cultural framework. At the same time, they preserved traditional games, fostering a unique blend of tradition and modernity. This transitional period not only redefined the societal perception of sports but also catalysed significant changes in gender roles, creating pathways for broader participation and societal transformation. The legacy of this era continues to influence the sports culture in Mizoram today, illustrating the enduring impact of this complex interplay between tradition and colonial influence.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural fabric of Mizo society underwent a profound transformation during the colonial period, influenced by the introduction of colonial administration, missionary efforts, and Western education. The educational system implemented by missionaries proved highly effective, with thoughtfully designed curricula that captivated children's interest and served as a cornerstone for advancing games and sports in Mizoram. This integration of sports into education not only altered traditional customs, beliefs, and values but also reshaped the attitudes and perspectives of the Mizo people.

While traditional Mizo games and sports continued to hold significance, the colonial era introduced new sports that rapidly gained popularity. Marking a

³¹ Lalbiakdiki, interview.

³² Born in 1929, he studied in the Mission schools and later served in the army. He also worked in the M.E. Boys' School.

³³ Chhuanliana, Interviewed by Lalmalsawmi Thadou, Bethlehem Vengthlang, December 6, 2021.

departure from the pre-colonial period, Mizo society began to regard sports not merely as recreational activities but as viable career opportunities. This shift reflected an evolving societal outlook, where sports became a pathway for achieving social mobility and recognition. The native population played a pivotal role in promoting new sports. Their receptiveness to these activities facilitated their integration into Mizo culture, fostering widespread engagement. However, this transformation was not without its challenges. Economic disparities became apparent, as not everyone could afford the equipment for participating in certain sports. Despite this, sports offered individuals a unique avenue to attain social status. Success in sports was often met with reverence and tangible rewards, such as cash incentives and government employment, which provided a strong motivational force for the youth.

The introduction of Western sports during the colonial period intertwined deeply with the evolving dynamics of Mizo society. By providing opportunities for achievement and recognition, sports emerged as a powerful catalyst for social mobility. Those who excelled in sports were celebrated not only for their athletic prowess but also for their ability to elevate their standing within the community. While it is evident that colonialism played a significant role in introducing new opportunities, it is critical to acknowledge the agency of the Mizo people in embracing and adapting to these changes. The missionaries' civilizing mission would not have succeeded without the willingness of the native population to integrate new games and sports into their lives. The interplay between colonial influence and the native community's receptiveness reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of Mizoram. Sports, once a leisure activity, became a conduit for education, societal transformation, and economic advancement. The present-day prominence of games and sports in Mizoram owes much to this historical period. However, it is essential to recognize that this transformation was not solely the result of colonial imposition but a collaborative evolution shaped by the aspirations and adaptability of the Mizo people. This legacy underscores the profound impact of this era on the identity and progress of Mizoram, where sports remain a symbol of cultural pride and opportunity.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declared that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding statement

The author did not receive any financial assistance for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Aizawl: H. Liansailova, 1998.
- Bottenburg, Maarten Van. "Beyond Diffusion: Sport and Its Remaking in Cross-Cultural Contexts." *Journal of Sport History* 10 (1983): 35.
- Carey, Hillary M. *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801-1908*. New South Wales: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Chamliana. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. December 10, 2021.
- Chapman, E. and M. Clark. *Mizo Miracles*. Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1968.
- Chhingpuii. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. November 20, 2021.
- Chhuanliana. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. December 6, 2021.
- Guha, Ramchandra. *A Corner of Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*. Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2002.
- Hmeichhe, Sikul. *Presbyterian Church Girls' School, Centenary: 1903-2003 Souvenir*. Mission Veng: Synod Press, 2003.
- Hmingthanga, C. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. October 20, 2021.
- Johnes, Martin, "British Sports History: The Present and the Future". *Journal of Sports History* 35 (2008): 65.
- Jones, Rev. D. E. *A Missionary's Autobiography*. Translated by Rev. J.M. Lloyd.
- Lalbiakdiki. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. December 3, 2021.
- Lalsiama. *Mizo Leh Sipai*. Delhi: Jeffson Publishing House, 1993.
- Lloyd, J. M. *On Every High Hill*. Mission Veng: Synod Publication Board, 1984.
- Roberts, Qwen Rees. *Memories of Mizoram: Recollections & Reflections*. Translated by C.H. Thangkhuma and Pu H. Ngurthansanga. Mission Veng: Synod Press, 2003.
- Samuelson, Ramchuani Sena. *Love Mizoram*. Aizawl: First Impression, 1985.
- Savidge, F. W. and J. H. Lorrain. *B.M.S. Rawngbawlina Reports 1901-1938*. Translated by Rev. Dr. Raltawnga. Lunglei: Baptist Publication Board, 2014.
- Stoddart, Brian. *Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire, Comparative Studies in Society and History*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Tluanga, L. N. Interview by Lalmalsawmi Thadou. November 24, 2021.
- Vidacs, Bae. "Through the Prism of Sports: Why Africanists Study Sports?". *Africa Spectrum* (2006): 332-333.