

Buallawn Israel: The Emergence of a Judaising Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India

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Through the efforts of a small number of western missionaries, Christianity has taken a firm hold among the tribal peoples of Northeast India.¹ Frederick Downs attributes this success less to the activity of the missionaries themselves than to the fact that the introduction of Christianity coincided with a 'felt need among the people involved'. In many cases, that need had been brought about by social or cultural crisis, which can be traced back to the subjugation of the tribes to British political control and the changes in their lives ushered in by this event.² Downs goes on to elaborate many of these changes.

Formerly the tribal communities had been self-governing, village societies which had not known domination from external powers. These communities had been non-literate societies, with limited contact with the outside world. They were economically self-sufficient and lived according to their traditional customs and values. British conquest ended this autonomy and imposed British administrative and judicial institutions in place of traditional ones. New rules prevented certain traditional practices which may have been central to their religious life, culture or social structure.³

Having minimal contact with outsiders, tribals could previously look upon all strangers with equal disdain. Now, subjected to external rule, they saw the superiority of the foreigners' weaponry and military organisation, while the material goods which these strangers possessed, along with their other accomplishments, mandated respect — simultaneously serving to

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¹ The total population of the region at the 1981 census was 26,608,000, of whom 11,095,000 were recorded as being tribals. The total number of Christians in the region was 2,581,000, of whom 2,225,000 were of tribal origin (K. Thanzauva, 'Introduction', in K. Thanzauva [ed.], *Towards a Tribal Theology: the Mizo perspective*, Mizoram, 1989, p. 2).

² Frederick Downs, 'Christian Conversion Movements among the Hills Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in G. A. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: religious conversion and revival movements in medieval and modern times*, 2nd ed., Columbia, Mo., p. 155.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

undermine the pride that the tribals had for their own society and faith in their particular traditions. The appearance of consumer goods undermined economic self-sufficiency. Literacy, coupled with new forms of communication which facilitated contact with the world beyond the local society, and role models provided by westerners — as officials, traders, missionaries and soldiers — all shook the old certainties, exposing the tribals to new ways of looking at the world.⁴

Important as was the British military conquest, Downs suggests that 'It was not the force of arms that finally destroyed the old culture; it was the force of modernisation'. To survive, 'primal' or tribal cultures require isolation. Exposure to the wider world 'undermines and eventually destroys' their mythological foundations.⁵ In these circumstances — and indeed echoing Robin Horton's thesis on the link between cosmology and the social environment⁶ — people will inevitably adopt a new perspective to make sense of their changed world.⁷

Downs suggests that Christianity rather than Hinduism came to fill this role, in part because adopting Hinduism would have resulted in the complete absorption of the tribal communities, at the lower levels of the caste system, while Christianity allowed groups to preserve their distinct identity.⁸ Even though their self-esteem had been bruised by the westerners' superiority, the gospel message of a God who yet loved each one of them gave the converts scope to develop a fresh source of pride.⁹ Furthermore, the identification of the rulers with Christianity added to the power and prestige of this religion, while the educational systems established by the missionaries created a class of individuals equipped to participate in the new social order. The missionaries' invention of written forms of the tribal vernaculars, using the Roman script, also served to distance the emerging educated class from neighbouring civilisations, inclining them instead towards the West.¹⁰

With the end of warfare and raiding between villages, people came to discern a common identity extending beyond the face-to-face, village

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶ G. A. Oddie, 'Introduction', in Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Lal Dena, *Christian Mission and Colonialism: a study of missionary movement in Northeast India with particular reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947*, Shillong, 1988, pp. 87-88.

⁷ Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁰ Ferdaus A. Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia: social impact and political implications*, Dhaka, 1987, p. 41.

community, embracing all members of the tribe or people who spoke the same language. The development of standardised, literary forms of these languages by the missionaries, and participation in church councils encompassing all members of the tribal/ethnic group connected to the same church, have helped to create new, broader social identities. In turn these have in recent times inspired separatist political movements.¹¹

Conversion movements, for Downs, represent the attempt of tribal peoples to accommodate so many dramatic changes in their lives, and to maintain a distinctive identity once their isolation and old institutions had been destroyed. To understand such movements, we need to recognise 'the role of Christianity as the central agent of acculturation in a situation where traditional societies were giving way to the process of modernisation'.¹²

Of the numerous tribal groups in Northeast India, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people (henceforth collectively called the 'Chikim'¹³), in Mizoram, Manipur and across the border in Burma, are now among the most thoroughly Christianised. As one would expect, the social conditions which Downs suggests encouraged the growth of conversion movements were to be found among the Chikim at the time of their conquest and the inception of missionary activity.

In both Mizoram — formerly the Lushai Hills — and Manipur, Christian missionaries arrived in 1894, three years after the territories had been subjugated by the British: Manipur as a princely state where the Chikim were a hill-dwelling minority, and the Lushai Hills under direct rule, a territory in which the tribals predominated. Historically, the Chikim were shifting cultivators. Before making use of a plot, they would first fell the vegetation and burn it, creating a relatively fertile piece of land to grow their crops. As the soil's fertility declined, the villagers would move on to a new location, erecting their homes on the ridges of the

¹¹ Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 105; B. B. Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest: a study of politicisation of culture*, Jaipur, 1979, pp. 168-69; Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹³ The term 'Chikim' is a neologism, invented by H. Thangjom ('Towards constructive destruction', in L. Haokip [ed.], *Kut Festival Souvenir*, Imphal, Manipur, 1990, pp. 19-21), formed as an abbreviation from the three words Chin, Kuki and Mizo, applied to the same people in different territories (B. Lalthangliana, *History of Mizo in Burma*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1977, p. 69). The term is particularly attractive because it translates as 'all the clans' in various Chikim dialects. The term Mizo, meaning 'Hill people' was adopted to serve the same function in the early 1950s (Goswami, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23, 90-91). However, after the Lushai Hills had been renamed Mizoram, it has come to refer primarily to people living in this state.

hills and clearing the slopes for cultivation.¹⁴ The Chikim tribes now located in Mizoram and Manipur are relatively recent settlers, having reached their current location during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵

Ironically, although the colonial authorities restricted access to the areas occupied by the Chikim to protect what they saw as primitive peoples from exploitation by more worldly-wise plainsmen, the population did undergo dramatic social upheavals. The colonial administration was partially responsible, imposing taxes which forced people to participate in the money economy, and prohibiting intervillage raiding. However, the missionaries, who were their main contact with the outside world, played an even bigger role.

The missionaries helped create a common language in Mizoram by taking 'Dulien', the main dialect spoken in the area, and using it as the medium of instruction. The extant literature in the language was what the missionaries had themselves translated and made available, namely tracts from the Bible. The influence of the missionaries in education was further extended when in 1912 the civil administration withdrew entirely from the field, paying a small subsidy to the missions to undertake this task.¹⁶ Consequently, anyone who entered the education system would be likely to emerge from it as a baptised Christian. And education was popular for those who wished to utilise the new opportunities created by the Europeans. As a legacy of this historical situation, today Mizoram has the second highest level of literacy among all the states in India.

The traditional world view of the Chikim was essentially supernatural, with a belief in spirits who were present all around. Illnesses were usually attributed to their power. Cures were effected by healers or priests, who would seek to appease harmful spirits with sacrifices. The missionaries, westerners who operated from a natural interpretation of disease, treated ailments with modern medicines. Medicine, like education, was left by the

¹⁴ F. K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society: a tribal people of Burma adapted to a non-western civilization*, 2nd ed., Aizawl, Mizoram, 1980, pp. 47-52; H. N. C.

Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes*, 2nd ed., Aizawl, Mizoram, 1986; Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram Encyclopaedia (in Three Volumes)*, Bombay, 1990, p. 50.

¹⁵ Gangmumei Kabui, *History of Manipur, Vol. 1: Pre-colonial Period*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 274; Lehman, *op. cit.*, p. 25; B. B. Goswami, 'The Mizos in the Context of State Formation', in S. C. Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, New Delhi, 1987, p. 313. In 1993, the other main tribal aggregation in Manipur, the Nagas, began a campaign of threats and violence to oust the Chikim from the state, asserting that they had usurped Naga lands.

¹⁶ Quarishi, *op. cit.*, p. 26; Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

authorities in the hands of the missionaries, who could show themselves to be more powerful healers than were the traditional practitioners. The use of these healing powers encouraged conversion to Christianity, partly because the cured were more receptive to the message from their healers, but also because the missionaries urged the sick to say a short prayer when taking the medication, suggesting that it was Christ who was working through the medicine to effect recovery.¹⁷

As puritanical Protestants, the missionaries consciously sought to alter behaviour which they considered unacceptable. They forbade the drinking of *zu* (rice beer); insisted on 'modest' (western) dress for their followers; discouraged the *zawlbuk* (the communal dormitory where the young men of the village had been expected to reside until marriage) as an invitation to 'immorality'; disapproved of divorce and remarriage; and agitated for the abolition of the 'bawi' system of servitude, which they considered tantamount to slavery.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the cultural biases of the western missionaries, who instilled in their early followers an abhorrence of their ancestors' customs¹⁹ and suppressed many aspects of the old culture — even where these were not inimical to fundamental Christian teachings²⁰ — after an initial period of hostility from the natives, they gradually won the respect and hearts of the majority. The behaviour of Christian villagers during the famine of 1912 in Mizoram, who willingly shared what they had with everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, led to many new converts. In previous famines prosperous villagers had fended off the hungry to preserve what they had for themselves.²¹

The 1901 census recorded 26 native Christians in Mizoram; in 1911 there were 1,329. By 1921, the figure had risen to 27,791, close to a third of the population — notwithstanding the fact that enumerators were apparently stringent in whom they registered as a Christian. In one village, all the members of a particular family were counted as Christians except for a five-year-old boy, who was entered as an animist because 'he was so hungry at meal times that he would begin eating without first saying grace'.²²

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-07.

¹⁸ Anthony Gilchrist McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1977, pp. 125-31; Dena, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-75.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁰ Quarishi, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

²¹ Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

²² Dena, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Christianity has continued to grow in both Manipur and Mizoram, after India gained independence in 1947, and after foreign missionaries were forced to leave the region in 1970. While the total number of Christians has been increasing, the 1981 census showed a significant decline in the proportion of Christians to the total population in Mizoram, from 86.1% in 1971 (286,141 individuals) down to 83.7% (413,340 individuals). In Manipur in 1981, 420,000 Christians constituted 29.7%, while tribals totalled 460,000, 32% of the state's population.²³ As we have previously noted, most of the Christians in the area are of tribal origin.

If Christianity met 'a felt need' for the tribals when the missionaries arrived, then clearly its continued growth suggests that the need is still present. And yet the rising proportion of non-Christians suggests that some former Christians have been leaving the faith. For these people, it would seem, Christianity no longer adequately fulfils their perceived needs. Given the many positive effects which Christianity has had on the population, why people should choose to leave the religion calls out for explanation.

One new phenomenon recorded in the region has been the appearance of 'Jews': 1,000 in Mizoram, and 2,900 in Manipur, according to recent Indian government sources.²⁴ Judaism is not a missionising religion and there has not been an influx of Jews from elsewhere in India, or from other parts of the world. The Jewish populations in these two states are indigenous Chikim tribals who have come to attach themselves to the Jewish faith.

During the past forty years, a Judaising movement has taken root among the Chikim in Mizoram, Manipur, and the Chin State of North Burma.²⁵ This movement has propelled a small segment of the Chikim to full conversion to Judaism, settlement in Israel, and adoption of a radically different lifestyle. As of August, 1994, there were around 150 such people living in Israel, mostly young adults between 18 and 30 years of age, and more are expected to arrive in the near future. These people are not the founders of the Judaising movement but represent its second generation, having themselves been raised in families which had already embraced

²³ Thanzauva, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁴ Yosef Goell, 'Forget the Lost Tribes, Aid Lost Souls', *The Jerusalem Post*, Friday, August 26, 1994, p. A6.

²⁵ Myer Samra, 'Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-product of Christian Mission', *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 6 (1), 1992, pp. 7-22.

some form of 'Judaism' before they were born, or when they were still young children.²⁶

Certainly in this process there has been a 'stepping over the threshold' from one religious community, Christianity, to another, Judaism. Such a 'change of religious fellowship' would generally 'suggest dissatisfaction, restlessness, seeking something better' and 'a palpable declaration that association with the old community was somehow negative compared to identification with the new community'.²⁷ While this is true for those who have now completed the process of conversion, in this paper we shall examine the beliefs and practices of the early followers of the Judaising cult, to show that many of them saw the path they were treading as one mandated by their faith in Jesus: somewhat ironically, in their endeavour to become better Christians, they have drifted in the direction of Judaism.

When Protestant missionaries began operating in Manipur and the Lushai Hills (present day Mizoram) in 1894, there was some initial rivalry between the various missionary societies, but the missionaries came to agree upon the division of the territory among themselves. The American Baptist Foreign Mission Society operated in Manipur, the Welsh Calvinistic Foreign Mission Society (a Presbyterian group) in North Lushai Hills,²⁸ and the British Baptist Missionary Society in the South Lushai Hills. Each mission jealously guarded its 'spiritual hegemony', blocking the attempts of other denominations, such as the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church, to enter its domain. The colonial administration recognised these exclusive jurisdictions and helped the established denominations against encroachment by newcomers.²⁹

While the early missionaries were puritanical in their approach, in 1906 Revivalism was introduced into the area, with its emphasis on charismatic leadership, ecstatic worship, biblical interpretation and prophecy, and possession by the Holy Spirit. Although this movement led to a dramatic

²⁶ Myer Samra, 'True Converts of Honor', *The Jerusalem Post*, Sunday, October 16, 1994, p. 6; Yossi Klein Halevi, 'The Unwanted Immigrants', *The Jerusalem Report*, November 17, 1994, pp. 26-27.

²⁷ Oddie, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁸ In December, 1994, one hundred years after the first missions took hold in Mizoram, out of concern for the decline of Christianity in the West, the Presbyterian synod in the State considered a proposal to send missionaries to work among the Welsh. This proposal lapsed owing to a less than enthusiastic response from the Church which had initially missionised the Mizos.

²⁹ Dena, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-70.

surge in conversions, eventually both the churches and the civil administration sought to curb it, since the unrestrained interpretation of the Bible which it fostered and the demands made by self-proclaimed prophets challenged the authority of both the missionaries and the government.³⁰ But attempts to control the movement proved unsuccessful. Significantly the revivalist United Pentecostal Church is today the third largest denomination in Mizoram, after the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches. Many splinter churches have also come into existence, most of them being off-shoots of the revival movement.³¹

From their earliest encounter with the Bible, Mizos found parallels with their pre-Christian traditions, leading some to speculate whether they might not have an Israelite origin.³² By 1936, the revivalist Saichhunga was asserting that the Mizos were 'the lost tribals of Israel'.³³ In 1951 this idea was taken up by Mela Chala, the barely literate Head Deacon of the United Pentecostal Church in Buallawn village, which lies 140 km. north of Aizawl, the state capital of Mizoram. Mela Chala had a vision which persuaded him that the Mizos were descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Consequently, to escape annihilation in the impending war of Armageddon, they had to follow biblical precepts directed to the Israelites, and to return to their historical homeland, Israel.

While others before him had also proclaimed their community's Israelite origins, Chala was the first to draw programmatic implications from this revelation, initiating a movement which, notwithstanding circumstances running counter to his prophecies, has continued to influence behaviour to this day: in Mizoram itself, and among Chikim communities in neighbouring states. Chala's revelation has led ultimately to the settlement of the Chikim young adults in Israel, and to a speech in Parliament by the Chief Minister of Mizoram in January, 1991, alluding to the ancient heritage of his people, who crossed the Red Sea with Moses. It has featured in material published by the Manipur Government in celebration of Kuki culture, and has been the central thesis of numerous pamphlets by proponents in Manipur and Mizoram, and of the popular book *Israel-Mizo Identity*, which has already undergone two English editions and one in Mizo.³⁴

³⁰ B. B. Goswami, 'By-Product of Christianity on the Hill Tribesmen of North-east India', *Review of Ethnology*, 7/1-9, 1980, p. 43; McCall, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

³¹ B. Thangchina, 'Christian Unity in Mizoram', in Thanauva, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³² Samra, 'Judaism', pp. 11-12.

³³ Rev. Lalbiaktluanga, 'Theological Trends in Mizoram', in Thanauva, *ed. cit.*, p. 66.

³⁴ Zaihanchungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1990; *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Mizo Edition), Aizawl, Mizoram, 1992.

It seems difficult to imagine a community of cultivators, whom one would expect to be deeply attached to their land, who could feel that their real home lay elsewhere, yet the fact that they had come from somewhere else so relatively recently and that they had a long memory of frequent movement, makes it plausible for the Chikim to identify with the wandering Israelites and to contemplate their true home as being in another place. I was touched by the pathetic plea of Sêna, a 93-year-old man who had worked as a cultivator in Mizoram all his life, expressing an anxiety that he might die in the only place he had ever known, without reaching Israel. 'Could you kindly organise to take me to Jerusalem?' he begged, 'Will there be any hope for me? If I go to Jerusalem, our ancestral city, no matter if I die, no matter at all ... Mizoram is not our land, though we are living here till this day. Our ancestral land, our actual homeland, is Israel.'

Sêna was anxious that he might die in Mizoram. He did not want to be buried there, in this 'strange' land — the only land he had ever known. 'So long as I am in Mizoram, I am a stranger. So instead of burying my head in Mizoram, I would prefer to come as a bullet in Israel.' I understood this last expression to mean that he would prefer to go to Israel rather than dying in Mizoram; even if in Israel he were to serve as cannon fodder in the country's battles, he would feel fulfilled.

Nowadays, belief in the Chikims' Israelite origin is not confined to any one single church group. It is an article of faith among a number of small Revivalist groups whose beliefs and practices may be incompatible with one another. In addition, many members of conventional churches are also convinced of their Israelite origins, although their churches do not preach this as a doctrine. These ideas are also expounded by certain political groups seeking support among the scattered Chikim.

Mela Chala's early followers are today associated with various denominations, some of them retaining their adherence to Chala's teachings, while others have distanced themselves from them. The members of Mela Chala's family are equally divided among different denominations. While his widow kept faith with her husband's teachings, their son Challiankhuma has rejoined the United Pentecostal Church, which observes Sunday as its sabbath. Chala's daughter Challianmuani belongs to G. J. Hnamte's Church of God (Seventh Day), which rejects the notion of the Chikims' Israelite origin. Its members celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday and observe other Old Testament practices, while retaining their faith in Jesus.

Chala's youngest son, Para, who lives in Kolasib, northern Mizoram, was a follower of 'Messianic Judaism' until 1991, a group essentially following his father's teachings. After one Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail visited

Mizoram that year, he shifted to a congregation which observes conventional Judaism. Para claims to know little of his father's teachings and practices, since he was quite young when his father passed away in 1959, at age 40.

I was in Aizawl in April, 1992, to learn what I could about Mela Chala, his early followers, their beliefs and practices. I met and interviewed several individuals who had been associated with Chala's group during the 1950s. My principal informants were Chala's daughter Challianmuani, now a widow in her mid-40s, the 93-year-old Sêna, whom we have already met, and Manliana, who has taken the name Ben-Zion. Aged 57, he is a member of a group attempting to observe conventional Judaism.

Manliana was born in Buallawn, and his family accepted the teachings of Chala around 1953. In his adult life, he remained a cultivator in the Buallawn district until 1981, when he moved to Aizawl, where he now works as a peon in the public service. Sêna did not live in Buallawn but was attracted to Chala's teachings in the mid 1950s, and sought to practise them in Lungdai, his home village. He is now a member of Dr H. Thangruma's International Church of God (Zionist), which separated from Rev G. J. Hnamte's group in the 1960s. This sect also worships Jesus while claiming, as Chala himself asserted, that the Mizos are descendants of the lost tribe of Manasseh.

Challianmuani's congregation, the Church of God (Seventh Day), is linked in fellowship to similarly named groups in other countries. Although this church observes Saturday rather than Sunday as the Sabbath and celebrates the biblical festivals, G. J. Hnamte, the church's leader in Mizoram, rejects the claim that the Mizos have an Israelite background. As Challianmuani made clear when I tried to ascertain if she had kept up her father's tenets, she does expect to go to Jerusalem when the Messiah comes, though not because of any Israelite ancestry, as her father had taught, but 'as a believer, as a Christian. Not as a descendant of Manasseh, but because Jerusalem is the meeting place, the gathering place of all nations of believers.'

When I probed whether she accepted the proposition that she was a descendant of the ancient Israelites, her response was doctrinally correct Christianity:

So far as we claim to be Christians and to be children of God, we are Israelites. This is not on account of my father's teaching or his concerns, but it is the teaching of Scripture. Believers are children of

God, and Children of God are Israelites. We are grafted onto the tree of Israel, not descendants.

Today, I understand, most of the former members of Mela Chala's group are members of this church. As Rev. Hnamte put it, 'In 1975, they merged with me, with the Church of God (Seventh Day). They're honest people, but those who commit adultery, they join this Judaism because there is no place for them in our church.'³⁵

From my interviews with Challianmuani, Sêna and Ben-Zion I shall attempt to convey something of the teachings of Mela Chala, along with the history, activities and beliefs of the Buallawn group, and how their experiences have influenced political and religious developments in the region. I shall attempt to weave together, from the accounts of these informants, a brief historical sketch of the group.

The village of Buallawn no longer exists. There was an uprising in Mizoram in 1966, with the Mizos seeking to break away from India.³⁶ To control the people better, the Government clustered neighbouring villages together so that they could be more easily watched.³⁷ The Buallawn people were shifted into a new village called Ratu, only a couple of kilometres away. This remained the focus of the Israelite cult until the mid-70s, when new groups arose to proclaim the 'truth' initially in Bualzang village near Churachandpur in Manipur, then spreading back to Mizoram and into Burma's Chin State.

As one approaches Buallawn, there is an imposing *pura* or memorial stone just outside the village. Carved at the top of the stone, in English, are the words 'MEMORY OF ISRAEL'. Etched in the bottom right hand corner is a six cornered star, perhaps more like a six petalled flower than the star of David, which presumably it is meant to represent. Framed in between is a text in Mizo which, translated into English, reads: 'For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. [Blessed be

³⁵ In light of this statement, it is significant that Dr H. Thangruma who founded the Church of God (Zionist) had been expelled from Mr Hnamte's group after having divorced his first wife and remarried. Similarly, two of Thangruma's early followers who came to lead the move to Judaism, Joseph Rei and Levy Benjamin, had both also divorced and married again.

³⁶ Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

³⁷ See Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, pp. 172-177.

the God of Israel who] has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.'

This *pura* indicates the way the Buallawn Israel group saw themselves, thanking the Lord God of Israel that they, as one of the lost tribes, had now discovered their identity. With God's help, they had been redeemed and had found salvation. The *pura* affirms their conviction that they are Israelites, recently returned to the fold. Yet the passage tells us more, for in fact it is Luke, chapter 1, verses 49, 50, 68 and 69, and Jesus is the 'horn of salvation' referred to. Strikingly, to express their conviction that they are the redeemed children of Israel, they have turned to the New Testament for their validation. What we have here is a people who have come to regard themselves as Israelites, and have deemed it imperative to observe the laws in the Bible applicable to Israelites — *because* they believe in Jesus. Although they see themselves as Israelites, they are still operating from a Christian world-view, with assumptions about Israelites, which they apply to themselves, taken from Christianity and the New Testament as well as the Old.

Ben-Zion recalls the start of the movement, around 1952, although, because the members of the group did not write what they were doing, they 'didn't know dates exactly'. Nonetheless, the movement began when 'Chala had a vision. He was sleeping and in his vision God had told him "You are the people of Israel. You must go back to your country, back to Israel."' As Sêna recalls the revelation,

Chala was the first among Mizo people who came to know, to see, that Mizos are sons of Israel, of Manasia.³⁸ God revealed to Chala, through his Spirit, saying that the Mizos are all descendants of 10 lost tribes of Israel. That is God's revelation to Chala, who was first to realise that Mizos are Israel. Therefore his followers all realised, from around 1953, that they were Israelites, of the tribe of Manasseh. All the villagers of Buallawn embraced Chala's vision, and asserted they were Israelites. All people of Mizoram heard and knew that they were all Israel, but unfortunately, they were all uneducated people.

This revelation had both pleasing and disturbing implications. Ben-Zion tells us, 'They were dancing with joy when he told his vision. They didn't

³⁸ The suffix '-a' denotes a masculine noun in Mizo, in which language all names end either with '-a' for males, or '-i' for females. Thus the biblical name David is rendered 'Davida' and Jesus becomes 'Jesusa'. The word 'Manasia' consequently suggests the male Manasi, here being equated to the biblical Manasseh.

know where Israel is, and so they went searching where Israel is to be found. So they tried their very best to learn about it.' While it was a source of joy to be told that they were the people of Israel, it was disturbing because they did not know how they were expected to behave as Israelites, nor where the land of Israel was located. Furthermore if they did not return to their proper homeland, they might be destroyed. As one Levy Benjamin records in a submission to Israel's Chief Rabbinate, Chala, along with a number of other Mizo men, had received 'the word of the spirit of the Lord, ... telling them that we are Israel ... Henceforth from every part of Mizoram we cried longing for our homeland Israel and searched every possible way for contacting' it.³⁹

Ben-Zion reminds us, 'Judaism was not yet born at the time of Chala', the group retaining their faith in Jesus, although they now rejected the term Christian as a designation for themselves, and saw themselves as Israelites. A wedge had developed between them and the conventional Christians, Presbyterians, etc., who 'didn't regard us as Christians, because we read the Bible and did as we saw [we should do]'. Conventional Christians considered that they had crossed beyond the bounds of Christianity and referred to them as the 'Israel Pawl', the Israel Group.

Sêna, today a member of the Church of God (Zionist), a church which recognises the messiahship of Jesus, is loathe to call himself a Christian. Although he was born a few short years after the arrival of the first missionaries in Mizoram, into a family which adopted Christianity when he was still a child, he nonetheless declares, 'We are not satisfied with that Christianity. I hate that missionary who sowed the seed of Christianity. They did not teach us the very origin of the Mizo tribes, [our] history.' Had they done so, he suggests, all the Mizos would have realised that they were from the tribes of Israel.

How as Israelites they should conduct their lives Chala and his followers deduced from reading the Bible. A central tenet was the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday rather than the Sunday observed by conventional Christians. But even this change created difficulties with neighbours. 'From the beginning, because we were among the Christian people, it was very difficult, because people looked down on us.' They were not, however, aware of how the Jews kept the Sabbath. As Sêna recalls, 'I began to observe Sabbath day around 1957. First we believed God urged us to observe Sabbath because we had no energy to work, we became like a sick

³⁹ Letter dated 3 February, 1984, from Levy Benjamin, General Secretary of Manasseh People Shinlung-Israel Northeast India, Mizoram, to the Chief Rabbinate (sic) Council, Israel.

person on that day.⁴⁰ His wife, in particular, appears to have become immobilised on the Sabbath. 'Her body, all parts of her body and mind, were forcibly controlled by Spirit, by God', so that she 'could not work, she had no energy, had no appetite for food, and was very exhausted. With no mind, and no energy to work, she was forced to observe Sabbath day. ... We were always weary or weeping, ... with tears on our cheeks, because of our yearning for Zion, for Jerusalem.

'We observed Sabbath day as a holiday. We did not work, we observed, as far as I can, strictly, as our Christian friends observed Sunday. But from the beginning, as we remember that we are descendants of Israel, we observe Sabbath as an important sign between God and his people Israel.' And, in accordance with the reckoning of the days of creation in the Bible, 'Sabbath began sunset Friday, and ended the next sunset'.

As well as observing the Sabbath, the followers of Chala also abstained from pork. Sêna avers, 'From the beginning when we observed sabbath day, we abstained from unclean meat as mentioned in the Bible, Leviticus, chapter 11, concerning pork et cetera'. However, circumcision was not practised. In later years, the question of circumcision was to become a central point of conflict on which daughter congregations would part company, between those who took the view that they were obliged to follow the commandment which appears in Genesis 17:11-12 to circumcise their male children, and those who held that one only needed a 'circumcised heart' (cf. Jeremiah 9:26). Indeed, as some of these people have interpreted St Paul's pronouncement (Romans 3:4) on the subject, the actual performance of a physical circumcision indicates a lack of faith in Jesus as saviour.

The three pilgrim festivals recorded in the Old Testament, Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles, were observed in a fashion, but apparently none of the other Jewish holidays. Challianmuani recalls that Passover was celebrated some time in April. A *puithiam* (priest) would kill a lamb, 'and [he] impaled the lamb with two sticks, in the form of a cross'.

⁴⁰ This recalls Downs (*op. cit.*, p. 170) concerning 'The Christian no-work day, Sunday', which many new Christians understood 'in much the same way as they did the old taboo days when it was considered inauspicious to leave the village or carry on normal work'. In Mizo, the word *hrilh* is used for this kind of taboo. Writing about customs at the time of British contact, Parry notes that 'an individual or a whole village may be *hrilh* according to circumstances. A person who is *hrilh* must do no work except the ordinary household tasks and there are certain other prohibitions which vary with the nature of the *hrilh* ... *Hrilh* may be divided into *hrilh* due to the occurrence of a misfortune and *hrilh* on account of a festival or a sacrifice' (N. E. Parry, *Lushai Custom: a monograph on Lushai customs and ceremonies*, Aizawl, Mizoram, 1988, pp. 88-89).

After they had butchered it, the members of the family ate the lamb (cf. Exodus 12:6). Sêna states that

on the day of Passover, we did a sacrifice of sheep and goat, and laid up some stones, piled them up as an altar, spilling blood of the animals on the altar [cf. Exodus 29:16], smearing the blood and making *beraw*, incense. ... The sacred parts of the animal were sacrificed on the altar, and the rest of the flesh we ate. Sometimes we prepared some Mizo *chhung*, bread from rice. It doesn't rise like European bread.⁴¹ Passover was observed sometimes two or three days, sometimes seven, according to convenience.⁴²

Sêna, who is illiterate, cannot recall that any particular foods were avoided on the Passover. He emphasises, however, that they never worked during the festival, and after dinner, prayers were recited. These were Christian prayers as 'we did not know any Jewish prayers'. Ben Zion also recalls that at Passover they smeared 'blood of animal on the doorpost' (cf. Exodus 12:22). The date for the festival of Pentecost was established according to Sêna 'by counting 50 days just after the day of Passover' (cf. Leviticus 23:15-16). This festival was observed 'simply as a holiday. Sometimes we prepared a feast. Always there was group singing, making merry, that's all. Sometimes they prepared Mizo *chhung*.'

The Feast of Tabernacles, says Sêna, was celebrated in October. 'We usually observed for seven days, with no work [cf. Leviticus 23:41]. We would keep it very carefully and seriously, all as we can, to signify we are tribes of the descendants of Israel. Sometimes we would kill sheep and a cow ... but we don't know, don't have the [correct] rate of animals to kill. Sometimes one, or perhaps three.' And according to Challianmuani during Tabernacles 'they went to the outskirts of the village and built a hut from leaves and from branches and made a congregation there' (cf. Leviticus 23:42). Ben Zion adds that they 'stayed there all day and night, but went back to sleep at home'. As Challianmuani reminds us about such observances, 'They did it *because* they believed in Jesus, and they also believed they were Israel'.

In addition to performing these rites, the Buallawn community also believed they were obliged to return to Israel. Now the search for Israel took on an exciting and dramatic cast. Although, Ben-Zion tells us, they

⁴¹ The eating of leavened bread during the Passover is expressly forbidden (Exodus 12:15-20).

⁴² The Bible calls for the observance of seven days (Exodus 12:15-19).

were aware of Israel's existence from the Bible, they did not know for sure whether this land existed 'in the [i.e. this] world or in heaven'; and 'so they opened the Bible and read' to find out where Israel might be. They also sought information from other written sources. Since there were no newspapers in Buallawn, they trekked to Aizawl, a difficult task at the time before proper roads had been built, looking for information. Three times they set out, by foot, 'Silchar, Manipur side, to find a magazine with information about Israel, and they found it on the third time'.

Once again, the Holy Spirit helped, for Chala had a vision that guided them on to the right path. According to Ben Zion:

After the second time, Chala was told to go to Burma, and there he would 'meet one *Kawl* [i.e. Burmese] *Puithiam* [priest], and ask him, and he will tell you everything. That *Kawl Puithiam* will be able to tell you many things about Israel, and how you are descendants of Israel people. That *Puithiam* may tell you that you are one of the Ten Tribes of Israel, and you will find a newspaper, and on the right page you will find an address, on the right side. That will be Israel's address.' This is what he was told in his vision.

In due course, this vision was fulfilled. As instructed, Chala went off to Burma accompanied by a friend, Darnghaka the village headman, a man who was literate in Mizo but not in English. As prophesied, they met up with a priest in Burma who, Ben-Zion explained,

told him, 'You are one of the Ten Tribes of Israel, and your ancestor is Manasseh'. Then after the meeting with the *Kawl Puithiam* they went to Imphal, and found a newspaper in a hotel. In the newspaper they found an address on the right side. They inquired about the address, but people thought Chala and his friend were [Police] C.I.D. officers. Therefore they were afraid to talk with them. As they could not get information from the people, they took that paper, and brought it back to Buallawn. They were very happy they found this thing, and knew it was God's oracle. So happy were they, they killed an ox and had a feast. From that paper, they knew it well. They were sure that there was a land of Israel, but had not known if it was in the world or in heaven. Now they realised, it was in this world.

The processes and the faith he had initiated survived Chala's death in 1959. At last his followers had an address for Israel. According to Ben

Zion, 'So they sent a letter to that address and sealed it with their tears', adding the practical comment, 'and they put more paste'. Sêna's account of what happened next is moving:

It was learned, the Prime Minister of Israel carefully opened that letter before 120 honourable members of the Knesset [Israel's Parliament]. As soon as he opened that letter of memorandum, they said the Parliament building was shaking, as if there had been an earthquake. So members ran out of the Knesset, but outside, there was no shaking. It just occurred inside the Knesset, so that it was some sort of miracle by God. The opening day of that letter by the Prime Minister was 15 October, 1960, but just after that they had to go to Calcutta and members of Buallawn Israel headed off and out: east, west, south and north in Mizoram. And all the minds of the Mizo people were convinced [of their Israelite status] and see, and wake up to remember of which tribe we belong.

Ben Zion continues,

The letter was sent to the Parliament of Israel, and they got a reply: 'We received your letter. We are very happy to receive your letter, and the Parliament was shaking like anything to receive your letter. Your country is very far from ours. There is one Consul — or ambassador — Mr Taskhere' — I do not know exactly what he was, but he was someone important — 'in Calcutta. From now, correspond with him, and he will do everything in our behalf, he will do everything on our behalf with you.'

The shaking of Parliament on the opening of the letter from Buallawn is apparently understood as a miracle which underscores the importance of the information that it contains, announcing to the people of the Jewish State that they had these long lost brothers, who were now ready to join them and return to Israel, their ancestral land.⁴³ Ben Zion is not exactly sure when this incident occurred, adding with regret that the letter from the Knesset was lost during the Troubles, that is the Mizo Uprising of 1966.

⁴³ Another informant - now living in Israel - who is aware of this tradition, has offered a less miraculous interpretation of the incident. She suggests that the Mizos have interpreted a metaphorical expression literally. The letter received from Israel indicated how stunning the members of the Knesset found the message it contained. They, rather than the Knesset building, were 'shaken' by the news.

Receipt of this letter in Mizoram had a great impact on the people there. To quote from Ben Zion, 'When this news arrived, it spread like wildfire. We had a public meeting in a theatre, where now the Vanapa Hall is standing [i.e. in the heart of Aizawl], and the whole people were shaking like anything. Many people sold their houses, some brought their bedding to go to Israel — even though they did not know where it was.' Chalianmuani recalls that before her father had died his younger brother Chhunga had prophesied that there would be turmoil and disaster by 1966. Salvation was possible only by taking refuge in Israel. 'People thought he was a sluggard. He was weeping all the time, day and night.'

The cumulative effect of all these things, the fear of disaster in Mizoram, the contact established with Israel — tenuous though it actually was — the hope of leaving and resettling there, and the turmoil they had created in the state, convinced the authorities that the people of Buallawn were potentially dangerous. Consequently Darnghaka who had followed Chala as leader of the movement and of the people of Buallawn was asked by the Government to go to the District Court. According to Sêna, the Government 'forcibly asked him to put his signature before the judge of the District Council Court, not to continue their movement again', not to preach the doctrine that the Mizos were descended from the Israelites, on pain of imprisonment. Darnghaka signed the bond, and to this day I am told he is afraid to say anything publicly about the Buallawn beliefs, even though people are no longer prosecuted for voicing them. Nowadays Darnghaka is an elder of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Ratu village.

The focus on Israel and salvation had an adverse effect on the practical requirements of daily living. People forsook their property to ready themselves for the move to Israel. Even the agricultural labour on which life depended was affected. Chalianmuani is apologetic about her lack of education. She did not receive an education in Mizoram because her father saw no point in putting her into school and then having to pull her out once the family was ready to leave. She was to obtain her education in Jerusalem. As G. J. Hnamte explains, 'People thought if they go to Israel, they would have immortality. They imagined it was a holy place, and the uncircumcised, strangers and gentiles would not be able to enter the city. In this dream-land, they hoped to find perfection, and so they collected money for this purpose.' Even Laldenga, the man who was to lead the revolt in 1966, helped these millenarian visionaries at one stage, an event which was celebrated in song, though some have suggested that he was looking for popularity and political supporters.

The dramatic impact — and the confusion — which Chala's preaching had on the Chikim is evident from Hminga, a leading Baptist pastor, who wrote in 1963:

A few years ago a Zionist movement sprang up from the extreme revivalist group which might have been inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible ... The people who adhered to the movement claimed that the Lushai [i.e. Mizo] people were the lost tribe of Israel. They soon caused a stir throughout the country. They taught that Christ's second coming was drawing near and that the return of the people of Israel in dispersion to their home land was a sure sign. They said, 'Christ is going to establish His Kingdom on earth, in Israel, and we, being the lost tribe of Israel must also return to our home land'. There were several people going round the villages collecting names of those who would like to join the migration party. There was a time when 'Migration into Israel' was in the lips of almost everybody in Lushai.⁴⁴

Hminga tells us that 'people argued about it [the Israelite prophecy] everywhere. More than once I had a long argument with people who said, "Suppose what the Zionists are saying is right, what will become of us, shall we not be found disobedient to the will of God".'⁴⁵ But the prospect of settling in Israel never materialised for the Buallawn community. In accordance with the instructions from Israel, contact with the Jewish community in Calcutta was initiated. Although the Jews and Israeli representatives were fascinated by the story the Mizos told as to how they had discovered their Israelite roots, this was not sufficient basis for acceptance in Israel under the Law of Return. Even if the claims could be substantiated, they were informed, they could not migrate to Israel since they were not recognised as Jews.

According to Hminga, the delegation who had gone to Calcutta 'came back disappointed', their hopes apparently scotched. 'As a result the movement soon declined although a very small remnant still cling to the movement.'⁴⁶ Whereas Hminga thought this setback on emigration had all but extinguished the Zionist movement, commitment to such prophecies

⁴⁴ Quoted by Shalva Weil, 'Conversion among the "Children of Menasseh"', unpublished paper, NCJW School of Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991, p. 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

may survive and even become more fervent after disconfirmation.⁴⁷ While the faith of Buallawn faded from view, among themselves villagers in Buallawn (and Ratu from 1966) were still professing their Israelite status. Little was being done to propagate such beliefs farther afield. Still, the memory of Chala's claims lingered and occasional pilgrims made their way to Ratu where they were graciously received.

The movement received a new lease of life when the Mizo Revolt erupted in 1966. The Buallawn group were initially sympathetic to the rebels since they believed the rebels 'were fighting for the religious cause', although they were apparently disillusioned in due course.⁴⁸ At the same time, Goswami notes that with 'the outbreak of the Mizo unrest, the Biblical story of the lost tribe of Israel got prominence, along with the belief of the return of Christ. These themes were, however, short lived. Yet these themes created a lot of frenzy and frustration among the religious minded Mizos.'⁴⁹ How the hope for independence merged with the tribals' concept of themselves as Israelites was highlighted for me by the story of one informant, Hlupuii (now known as Elizabeth) who related that she had dreamt that the rebels had wrested their autonomy and appointed her to take charge of a hospital in Ratu village. As a result of this dream, she visited Ratu and eventually joined the Israelite Pawl.

Another sideline of the Uprising was the visit to Mizoram of General Jack Jacob, a Baghdadi Jew from Calcutta, the second ranking officer in India's eastern command. As Ben Zion tells of the encounter:

One Indian Army Major General came here. He was very popular, and asked to meet the Israel people. One woman was carrying a baby in a *puan*⁵⁰ and the General asked her to stop. He said, 'O, that looks like a *talith/sisidh* of Israel'. So that General Jacob went to Ratu, near Buallawn, and sent a messenger to ask the people to come to Ratu, to talk to him. Only four people came. This was after the disturbance in Mizoram, so people were afraid of the military. Four of them went to

47 Leon Festinger, H. W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, Minneapolis, 1956, pp. 4-5.

48 Goswami, 'By-Product', p. 46.

49 Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, p. 193.

50 The *naupuak-puan* is a special cloth which Mizos use for carrying children on their backs (Zaithanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity*, 1990, p. 81). This *puan* (shawl, cloth) is white with black stripes across it, and knotted tassels hanging from the sides. It does resemble the *tallith* (or *sisidh*), the prayer shawl worn by Jews, although it differs in important details: most particularly in that it does not have fringes at the four corners of the garment, the crucial ritual feature of the prayer shawl.

meet the General. When they reached the place where he stayed, he asked them, 'Would you like to drink rum or fruit juice?' They said, 'No. We are celebrating our festival at present.' He was very pleased but they did not know whether he was an Israelite or not, so they were afraid. He asked them about their religion, and how they celebrated. After he went back they learnt he was an Israelite, so they were so sorry. If they had known, they would have had so much to say to him, and everyone would have come. They hadn't come because they'd thought they'd be arrested, because they'd been called by this Eastern Commander.

Around 1969, Pastor H. Thangruma who was familiar with Chala's claims visited Ratu to receive instruction in this faith. Thangruma began to preach Chala's ideas in Churachandpur, the principal Chikim town in Manipur. His followers included people who belonged to various clans and tribes, people from diverse walks of life, with widely different levels of education. Members of this congregation did not share the Ratu people's inhibition about proclaiming their good news. Consequently evangelists went out in all directions with their message, throughout Mizoram, across Manipur and the Chin State of Burma, indeed wherever the Chikim peoples were to be found.

Like his predecessors, Thangruma attempted to make contact with Israeli authorities and members of the Jewish community in India, proclaiming the Israelite origins of his people. Again like his predecessors, he was perturbed by the news that this background would not entitle him to settle in Israel. To this day, Thangruma, who now resides in Aizawl, retains both his belief in his people's Israelite background and his faith in Jesus, and continues to assert that he and his followers should be entitled to settle in Israel.⁵¹

In 1974-75, a split occurred among Thangruma's followers in Churachandpur and spread to Mizoram in 1976. The breakaway group had come to reject Jesus as the Messiah and sought to follow the teachings of Judaism. They too have had a struggle to achieve acceptance from the Jewish world, although their efforts have slowly paid off. In 1976, ORT India, a Jewish-run technical college in Bombay, began to accept students from this community, initially as day students, and subsequently also as boarders in the college's dormitories, where in addition to learning a trade,

⁵¹ In 1994 one of Thangruma's daughters joined the followers of Judaism, resulting in her estrangement from her father.

they had the opportunity to see and to learn conventional Jewish practices, sending information about them to their kinfolk in Manipur and Mizoram.

The connections of this community with the Jewish people were immeasurably strengthened in 1979, when contact was made with Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail from Jerusalem, who heads an organisation called Amishav, which is searching for descendants of the Lost Tribes, to bring them back to Judaism and to the land of Israel. As were the leaders of Buallawn Israel, Amishav is motivated by a belief that the coming of the messianic era requires the redemption of the Ten Tribes. That they may be living as gentiles when discovered is not a problem, for they can undergo conversion to Judaism; and sincere conversion is held to be proof of one's Israelite origin.⁵²

With this theological base, Rabbi Avichail has been willing to accept the Israelite claims of the Chikim and has helped members of the community to understand and to follow normative Judaism. Much of this assistance has been from a distance, through correspondence, the Rabbi sending books on Jewish religion to these remote congregations. In 1981 Rabbi Avichail encouraged three young members of the community, two men and one woman, to go to Israel to study Judaism. After spending a couple of years in Israel, the men went back to India to teach their communities.

Since November, 1989, Rabbi Avichail has assisted the 150 members of these communities now in Israel to reach the country, where they have studied Judaism, undergone formal conversion, and settled as orthodox Jews. Most of these new settlers have been young adults, who have in effect gone as proxies for their elders' long-cherished dreams. After completing their religious studies, the men have been conscripted into the Israeli army, where several have served in elite combat units — recalling the fortitude of Sēna, who dreamt of serving Israel 'as a bullet'.

The Israelite movement has waxed and waned as circumstances have changed. Rabbi Avichail's intervention has fulfilled the aspirations of some of the dreamers of Zion and has created a powerful stimulus for further growth of the Israelite movement. His two visits to Mizoram and Manipur, in 1991 and 1994 aroused considerable local publicity and attracted many people to the Jewish group. If the people of Buallawn may have looked foolish forty years ago when they sought to reach the Promised Land without any means of actually getting there, the Rabbi's role in helping a small portion of the Chikim to settle in Israel may serve as a vindication of Chala's vision.

⁵² Eliyahu Avichail, *The Tribes of Israel: the lost and the dispersed*, Jerusalem, 1991, pp. 57-62.

In this paper our concern has been to examine the nature of the Buallawn Israel movement established by Mela Chala in the 1950s. In doing so, we have ventured back into the history of contact with western missionaries, and forward to the more recent developments of the Israelite idea among the Chikim. As interesting as it may be to ascertain the factors which have eventually led people with belief in their Israelite origins to abandon their faith in Jesus as saviour and to convert to Judaism, our central concern is to understand what motivated the Buallawn movement itself, that is before conversion to Judaism was even considered.

As Downs has shown, conversion to Christianity was in many respects a movement by the tribal population in Northeast India to adjust to the social, cultural and political crises, the rapid changes of modernisation, which followed in the wake of subjugation to British rule. While Downs wrote of conditions generally throughout the region, our examination of the situation in Mizoram and Manipur from the 1890s confirms the validity of this approach to a study of the Chikim.

When Mela Chala began to preach in the early 1950s, this was also a time of dramatic change, linked with a social and political crisis. British rule ceased in 1947 and Mizoram became a part of the Union of India, as a district of the state of Assam, while Manipur, ostensibly an independent princely state, merged reluctantly with India in October, 1949.⁵³ As the British were preparing to relinquish their imperial rule in India and Burma, members of the administration expressed concern over the possible exploitation of the hill people in Mizoram and neighbouring districts, and toyed with a proposal to retain a hill-tribe protectorate.⁵⁴ A number of Mizo leaders advocated the incorporation of their territory into Burma, but the majority accepted the proposal to enter the Union of India.⁵⁵ Some individuals insist they believed this would be for an initial 'trial period' of ten years, after which they would have the opportunity to settle their final status.⁵⁶

The Chikim had come to respect and even to feel affection for the missionaries and the British administrators. As Christianity became entrenched among the Chikim, it was now a source of pride to highlight

⁵³ V. Venkata Rao, T. S. Gangte and Ksh Bimola Devi, *A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Volume IV: Manipur*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 39.

⁵⁴ McCall, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁵⁵ Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest*, pp. 132-33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

the fact that although Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims lived in nearby areas, 'none of these great religious and philosophical systems exerted any appreciable influence on the religious and cultural life of the Mizos'.⁵⁷ Only Christianity had been able to make headway among them, as if their ancestors had been waiting all along for the right religion to make its appearance.⁵⁸

The affection felt for the British did not extend to the Chikim's relations with the plain-dwellers of India, whom they designate by the pejorative term *vai* and regard with a combination of suspicion and contempt.⁵⁹ Furthermore, through the influence of the missionaries, and the use of the Latin script, the Chikim had come to identify with Western civilisation and to fear the prospect of being overwhelmed by the 'heathen', Hindu culture. Indeed, Downs suggests that when people had become dissatisfied with their old ways, the spread of Christianity was assisted by a fear that to adopt Hinduism would compel them to abandon their tribal identities and accept an inferior position within the society they would be entering.⁶⁰

This fear of Hinduism and aversion to Indian civilisation was aggravated in the post-independence period, when in the interests of nation-building the government embarked upon 'a policy of complete integration of the tribal areas, together with total assimilation of the tribals into the mainstream Indian population'.⁶¹ Attempts to promote the use of Assamese were resisted by the Mizos, while the failure of the Assamese government to cope with the famine of 1960 eventually led to the revolt of 1966 and Mizoram's abortive bid for independence.⁶²

⁵⁷ Rev. Dr Zairema, 'The Mizos and their Religions', in Thanzaiva, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 31.

⁵⁸ Myer Samra, 'The Tribe of Manasseh: "Judaism" in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram', *Man in India*, 71 (1), 1991, p. 184.

⁵⁹ B. B. Goswami, 'Outgroup from the point of view of Ingroup', *Man in India*, 55 (4), 1975, pp. 326-330. This attitude is still strong. On 26 September, 1994, a Mizo was murdered in Silchar, a predominantly Bengali town in Assam just outside Mizoram through which most of the State's imports including foods, fuel and manufactured goods must pass. The following day, apparently worked up by opposition politicians, Mizo mobs burnt and wrecked all the heavy vehicles on the road from Silchar, and smashed, torched and looted all Bengali businesses in Aizawl. This reaction caused hardship for the Mizos in the light of their dependence upon Silchar, and conditions took several months to stabilise.

⁶⁰ Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁶¹ Quarishi, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶² Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 541-42.

The Buallawn group had adopted their Israelite beliefs prior to the outbreak of the Mizo Uprising, while this political and cultural ferment was brewing. Although eventually their ideas have led a small section of the Chikim population to 'step over the threshold' from the fellowship of Christians into Judaism, a separate religious community, this was neither the intention nor the expectation of the people concerned, neither of Chala nor his followers.

The Bible teaches that all people are descendants of the same ancestors, from Adam and Eve, and from the children of Noah after the great flood (Genesis 10:32). Since the Bible narrative focuses on the Middle East, Chikim Christians have presumed that ultimately their origins are from that region. The Buallawn community took this further by seeing themselves not only as descendants of Noah, but also of the Israelites, the people whose history is followed in the Bible, a people with whom the Christianised Chikim had become very familiar through their attachment to the Bible.

Mela Chala was an evangelist for the United Pentecostal Church, a revivalist sect, when he experienced his visions. Such sects are particularly concerned about biblical prophecy and the exact meaning of the words of the Bible from which they seek signs on how they should conduct their lives.⁶³ For these groups, inspired by messianic hopes, the people whose history is recounted in the Bible, the Jews — and the state of Israel — have a unique prestige. The re-establishment of the Jews' national existence after a break of almost 2,000 years is taken to be the fulfilment of prophecy and a portent to the realisation of many others. Such prophecies may come directly from the Bible, or may have been revealed to the sects' own leaders, under the inspiration of 'Spirit', as Sêna calls the third entity in the Christian Trinity.

For the Baptist Hminga, Chala's group were 'extreme Revivalist(s) ... inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible', though nonetheless basing themselves upon the Christian holy book. The elements of Israelite practice which they sought to follow — Sabbath observance, the Pilgrim Festivals and dietary restrictions — are all to be found in the pages of the Bible. While the followers of Chala were 'fundamentalists' in a Christian sense, Goswami⁶⁴ identifies in them and other cults which have arisen in the region a sentimental attachment to their pre-Christian society and to 'some of the values of the traditional culture'. Interestingly, they have looked backwards, both into their own pre-Christian traditions and into the

⁶³ Samra, 'The Tribe'.

⁶⁴ 'By-Product'.

pre-Christian elements of the Bible which the missionaries had taught them, and believed they had found the same thing, leading them to identify themselves with the pre-Christian Israelites.

This belief has a psychological value, for the discovery of their ancient Israelite origins redeems the Chikim's ancestors from the status of 'headhunting savages' which the missionaries assigned to them. Instead, Chala's revelation suggests that they were the people at the centre of the Bible narrative — and indeed, even distant kinsmen of the revered Jesus.⁶⁵ Furthermore, from being a small, insignificant community in the vastness of the Indian population, by writing themselves into the Bible the Chikim achieve the ability to see themselves at the centre of revelation and of world history. Thus, the notion that they are Israelites and that they are destined to return to the land of Israel provides an avenue of escape from *vai*-dominated India.

In this context, it is possible to appreciate how at the same time as the Israelite belief took hold, Christianity was also continuing to spread among the Chikim, after India's independence and the exodus of foreign missionaries. Mela Chala's ideas were not anti-Christian. He remained a firm believer in the role of Jesus as redeemer and was convinced that the messianic kingdom was soon to be established. In Chala's vision, the Chikim play a more illustrious role in the redemption than other Christians, because of their purported Israelite origins. This idea appealed to the majority of Chikim, leading to widespread enthusiasm for migration to Israel, as recorded by Goswami and Hminga, and described by our informants Sêna and Ben-Zion.

But Chala's prophecy was not fulfilled — certainly not in his lifetime. The Messiah did not reappear; the Chikim were not transported to Israel; and consequently Challianmuani did not receive her education. With the failure of the prophecy, it lost most of its mass support, although it continued to persist among the people of Buallawn and other small pockets of the population, bursting onto the wider stage each time the Chikim faced a common crisis. Yet with each revival, it took a different hue: clearly the Messiah did not come in 1959, perhaps he would in 1966, or in 1987 (when Mizoram achieved statehood within the Indian union); leading to a multiplication of the specific ideas followed by the various communities which have been nourished by Mela Chala's original vision.

Chala himself had not 'stepped over the threshold' from the Christian fellowship to Judaism, but his ideas helped to uncover the seeds of this

⁶⁵ Samra, 'Judaism'.

religion embedded in that matchless legacy of Christian missionary penetration, the Holy Bible.

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