

ARTICLE

Interposed Christology and Primal Sacrifices: Christianity Encountering the Mizo Tribe in India

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Abstract

This paper explores religious interactions beyond the Abrahamic traditions and the Mediterranean Basin, focusing on the encounter between Christianity and primal religion (*sakhua*) among the Mizo tribe in India. The missionary engagement with the Mizo tribe during the late 19th to mid-20th century, and the revival movements (*harhna*), serve as a historical case study, highlighting how contextual theology built a bridge between the two religious traditions. In the absence of shared scriptures and history, the shared worldview between the two religious traditions played a decisive role in their interactions.

Precisely, this paper examines how interposed Christology functioned as a point of contact between the Christian doctrine of atonement and Mizo Primal Sacrificial Interposed Christology therefore refers to the contextualization of Christ as the conqueror of evil spirits and death within local sacrificial systems, particularly *khal* (sacrifice to evil spirits) and *khuangchawi* (eschatological feast and rituals). This involved both a reinterpretation of Christology through indigenous lenses and its insertion into local religious frameworks, realized through two modes of contextualization—intended and unintended (organic adaptation). Additionally, this paper considers how these modes challenge and nuance Heyden and Nirenberg's co-production theory, as the encounter, primarily involved Christology transforming local religious frameworks, even as indigenous elements were incorporated to express it.

Keywords

Mizo, interposed Christology, contextualization, primal religion, atonement

“[F]ar from being antagonistic, primal religions and Christian faith sometimes have possessed a special affinity.”
—Robert Eric Frykenberg¹

Introduction

The term *Mizo* came into common usage in the twentieth century to refer collectively to related Zo-speaking indigenous groups in modern-day Mizoram, replacing the older external labels such as *Lushai*. The Mizo ethnic group and their related tribes (*Zo hnathlak*), together known as “Mizo-Kuki-Chin,” are found across South Asia, including Northeast India and Bangladesh, as well as in the neighboring country of Myanmar in Southeast Asia. Their encounter with Christianity through missionaries in the late 19th century provides a unique context for examining how religious traditions, such as Christianity and primal religion, interact in this part of the world. This article focuses on the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, a crucial phase in Mizo history marked by interreligious encounters between Mizo primal religion (*Sakhua*) and Christianity. These encounters occurred first through missionary efforts and later through revival movements (*harhna*), which will be the focal points of our historical case study. At the outset, it is important to clarify that the term “primal” is commonly used in the Mizo context, and India at large, to refer to traditional or tribal religions. Its usage here carries no connotation of primitivism or inferiority.² Additionally, while the Mizo and their related tribes (*Zo hnathlak*) inhabit various geographical regions, including Bangladesh, Northeast India, and Myanmar, this article specifically focuses

- 1 Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 459.
- 2 Billy J. Zorinthara, “Spirit in Creation: Mizo Primal Cosmology and Its Implications for Anthropogenic Climate Change Concern,” *Studies in World Christianity* 30, no.1 (March 2024): 117–118.

on Mizoram in Northeast India, the homeland of the Mizos and where the majority of them reside.

This article begins with a brief synopsis of the Mizo traditional religion (*sakhua*) to establish the religious landscape of our historical case study. It then explores how Christianity encountered Mizo primal beliefs, first through missionary engagement and later through revival movements (*harhna*). Finally, we reflect on how this encounter between primal religion and Christianity may line up with or diverge from the “theory of co-production” as proposed by Heyden and Nirenberg.³

Spirits and Sacrifices in an Enchanted World

The Mizo people have never ascribed the founding of their religion to any specific figures or leaders. In contrast to religions like Abrahamic religions and others, which rely on written scriptures and canonical texts for direction, the Mizos did not have such written text to shape their understanding of God or theology. Instead, their comprehension of the divine or theology was influenced by personal experiences and oral traditions that had been passed down through generations since time immemorial. The Mizo traditional worldview is an enchanted worldview where there is no clear-cut dichotomy between the supernatural and the natural. Spiritual forces and entities were part of everyday life. The Mizo word “*sa-khua*,” which is now used as an English equivalent for “religion,” originally in the traditional sense means the worship of God (*Pathian*), who is a benevolent Spirit. It is a compound word of “*sa*,” which refers to a family or clan-based ritual, while “*khua*” is a communal ritual directed to this good Spirit. The Mizo also believed in a guardian spirit known as *Khuavang*, who is sometimes identified as the equivalent of the supreme being or “God above” (*Chung Pathian*), and a benevolent spirit known as *Lassi*, who is believed to be the overseer of feral

3 By “co-produced” religions, Heyden and Nirenberg “mean that these traditions, in all their sectarian variety, have always formed, reformed, and transformed themselves through interacting with, thinking about and imagining each other, and continue to do so” (Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg, “When Theology and History Think Together about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 50 (2026), 7. Furthermore, this co-production and “co-dependence” emerges not only from “their shared reservoir and competing canon of prophetic claims, scriptures, and narratives,” but also from the fact that “the historical as a mode of knowledge has itself proven fundamental to each of the three religions not only at their origins, but in every moment of their existence” (Heyden and Nirenberg, “When Theology and History Think Together,” 7), i.e., their shared *history* is a source of co-production.

creatures. While these benevolent spirits are believed to dwell near human beings and animals, they also believed that celestial beings are residing up in the sky or heavens such as *Vanchung nula* (a maiden who dwells in the heavens), *Vanhrika* (lice of the heaven), and *Pu Vana* (grandfather of heaven), all these celestial beings are considered benevolent beings.⁴

Alongside these celestial and benevolent entities, the Mizos believed in the existence of malevolent spirits (*huai*) whom they regarded to be the reasons behind all their sicknesses (demonic etiology). These spirits are believed to dwell in various locations; consequently, the Mizo ascribed them names according to their inhabitant. The one that dwells in the river and springs is called “*tui huai*” or “*sih huai*” (“*tui*” meaning water), while the one whose habitat is the jungle is called “*ram-huai*” (“*ram*” meaning jungle). Likewise, every waterfall, gigantic tree, and large boulder is the “abode of evil spirits,” to whom fowls and animals are sacrificed “to ward off the undesirable consequences of their bad temper.”⁵ Due to this bad temper, some of these spirits are considered to be easily offended when trespassing into their territories. The first local Mizo newspaper, *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu*, translated as “Mizo and Plain People Newspaper,” reported many eyewitness accounts of spirit possession and affliction. In October 1903, one such report described an old woman who fell ill after collecting firewood in the jungle, requiring a piglet sacrifice (*vawk khal*) to alleviate her condition.⁶ Such cases were not uncommon. In 1898, Chalthangi from Lalbuta village was similarly afflicted by a jungle spirit (*ramhuai*) while gathering firewood.⁷ Also, in 1906, a report from Vaihleia village showed that numerous evil spirits resided around the area, particularly near small springs (*sih*) and hills.⁸ Additionally, in Pangzawl village, a woman became mute after returning from the jungle, believed to be possessed by a *khawhring*. Another account from the same region described a woman being possessed (*zawl*) after catching crabs (*chakai khawrh*).⁹ Crabs live in water, and the Mizo people often associate spirits with bodies of water such as springs and rivers (*sih huai* or *tuai*

- 4 Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival as the Cultural Response to Westernization in Mizoram* (Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge [ISPCK], 2007), 64.
- 5 Reginal A Lorrian, *Pioneering Lakherland: The Wonderful Story of the Lakher Pioneer Mission*, 5th ed. (Lakher Pioneer Mission, 1920), 7.
- 6 Dokhuma, “Ramhuai,” *Thu, Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu*, October 1903, 11.
- 7 Chhinga, “Ramhuai Man Thu,” *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu*, September, 1904, 7.
- 8 Bawla and Dorikhuma, “Ramhuai Thu,” *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu*, May 1904, 6.
- 9 Bawktea, “Ramhuai Thu,” *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lehkhabu*, October 1904, 6–7.

huai). Thus, this is likely the case of *tuai huai* or *sih huai* (spirits residing in the water). Possession (*zawl*) was not limited to sickness; there were occasions when possessed individuals would sing or speak in another language, particularly *Pawih*.¹⁰ This language, also known as *Lai*, is primarily spoken in Lawngtlai district of Mizoram, as well as in the Hakha and Falam areas in the neighboring state of Myanmar.

The people were therefore living in constant fear of these spirits, and this belief lies at the core of their sacrifices to evil spirits. At this juncture, it must be emphasized that the Mizo sacrifice to evil spirits is not a “worship of these spirits,” as posited by some missionaries, but rather an attempt to appease the malevolent entities believed to have caused sickness.¹¹ Hence, this particular kind of sacrifice is practiced only in times of sickness.¹² So, when someone fell sick, they would consult the local priest or medicine man known as *bawlpw*, and sometimes an individual known as “*khuawang zawl*” (possessed by *khuawang*). The *bawlpw* would typically diagnose the disease by examining the patient’s pulse.¹³ He would therefore make a sacrifice on their behalf.¹⁴ *Khal* was the name given to this kind of sacrifice, but it may also take a wide variety of forms, depending on the kind of animal that was offered. For examples, sacrificing of fowl like cock was called *ar khal*, a goat was called *kel khal*, and so on.¹⁵ *Ar* means cock while *kel* means goat hence the sacrifice (*khal*) is named after the required animals. When offering the sacrifice, the medicine man would chant a verse passed down “from one generation to another, to drive away the spirits.” The bodies of the sick persons or patients will be “painted with pungent-smelling spices,” as it is believed that the spirits “dislike the smell of spice.” In some cases, the sick person would also be given a “fresh dog’s blood” to drink, over which the priest “chanted to drive the spirits away.”¹⁶ According to an eyewitness

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- 10 Thangluaia, “Ramhuai Thu,” *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin Lekhhabu*, October 1904, 7–8.
 - 11 R.A. Lorrain, *5 Years in Unknown Jungle for God and Empire*, reprint (Tribal Research Institute, 2012), 71.
 - 12 Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin*, Reprint (L.T.L Publication, 2004), 50.
 - 13 R. Vanlawma, *Ka Ram leh Kei*, 4th ed. (MLC Publication, 2022), 427; Zairema, *Lekhhabu Te Pasarih*, 2nd ed. (Zorun Community, 2011), 203; Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear, *The Lushei Kuki Clans* (Tribal Research Institute, 1975), 110–111; D. E. Jones, *A Missionary’s Autobiography, 30 Years of Serving the Lord 1897–1926*, trans. H. Liansailova (Lengchhawn Press, 1999), 30.
 - 14 T. Vanlaltlani, *Tribal Religion: Mizo and Bru* (Lakshi Publishers & Distributors, 2016), 65.
 - 15 J.V. Hluna, “Pre-Christian Religion of the Mizos,” in *Studies on the Minority Nationalities of Northeast India-The Mizos* (Directorate of Higher and Technical Education, 1992), 36.
 - 16 Vumson, *Zo History: With an introduction to Zo culture, economy, religion and their status as*

account, some people received healing through these animal sacrifices, but some couldn't be healed and eventually ended up very poor.¹⁷ They ended up poor because animal sacrifice is expensive and burdensome for the average person. Based on the diagnosis made by the medicine man, people need to purchase animals like goats, hens, and pigs, and they ardently believe in the effectiveness of their sacrifice, so "they are fully prepared to incur debt to provide sacrificial animals."¹⁸ The Lakher tribe in southern Mizoram also resorted to sacrificing domestic animals and birds to evil spirits, which they believed were the cause of illness when someone fell sick.¹⁹ The plight caused by evil spirits, therefore, affects the victims' socioeconomic well-being.

Besides these sacrifices, the extravagant feast and ritual known as *khuanghaw* connected to their eschatological belief further intensified their predicaments. Unlike sacrifices to evil spirits, this ritual is performed to the *Khua* God. The Mizo believed that the spirit or soul of the deceased person would travel to the underworld known as *mitthi khua* (abode or village of the dead). When someone died, they would slaughter an animal to be consumed on the day of the burial (*thlaichhiah*). According to tradition, the animal's spirit would escort the deceased person's spirit into the underworld.²⁰ Someone called Pawla, whose wife is Sanui, guards the gate of the underworld (*mitthi khua*). He is armed with a catapult and uses it to shoot anyone who enters if they have not performed certain good deeds and rituals during their lifetime.²¹

In the same underworld, there is an apartment called "*pialral*," a place of bliss, akin to paradise. Nevertheless, gaining entry into this place is incredibly challenging for the common people. Because it is set aside only for people who earned the title known as "*Thangchhuah*." This is a title given to men of valor who slayed wild animals like bears, snakes, elephants, etc., and such brave men were also called "*ram lam a thangchhuah*," the Mizo words "*ram lama*" emphasize the notion of how one earns such a title by hunting in the jungle.²² These men were entitled to cross the threshold and rest in the *pialral*

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- an ethnic minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh* (published by the author, 1987), 17.
- 17 Jones, *A Missionary's Biography*, 34.
- 18 J. M. Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram* (Synod Publication Board, 1991), 51.
- 19 Lorrian, *Pioneering Lakherland*, 7.
- 20 James Dokhuma, *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*, rev. and enlarged ed. (R. Vanlarawna, 2021), 307-308.
- 21 Zaliana, *Mizo Sakhua Kumpinu Rorel Hma* rev. and enlarged ed. (Tribal Research Institute, 2013), 16.
- 22 J. Meirion Lloyd, *On Every High Hill* (Synod Publication Board, 1984), 15.

(paradise) in the afterlife.²³ The title could also be earned by those who performed the *khuangchawi* feast, which was possible for the wealthy people, and is called “*in lama thangchhuah*.” The words “*in Lama*” emphasize the idea of how the title is earned in the community or village rather than through hunting. Such people earned the title by providing a ceremonial feast known as “*khuangchawi*,” which was impossible for common people due to its cost. For example, it required one female and two male *gayal*/*mithan*, and two pigs, alongside local rice beer (*zu*) for the whole community.²⁴ Additionally, it was not a one-time public feast but included other feasts and rituals such as “*Sakung, Chawng, Dawino Chhui, Sedawi Chhun, Sechhun, Sekhuan, and Mitthi Rawp Lam*.”²⁵ Very few people were able to organize and perform such a feast and ritual because of its prohibitive costs.²⁶

Though the chief purpose of the feast and ritual was to gain access to *pialral* (paradise) in the afterlife, it also had a bearing on one’s social standing in the present life. People who organized the feast and performed the ritual were honored and distinguished from others, earning the right to “wear striped cloths and turbans” decorated with “king crow’s feathers.” They were also “allowed to have windows in their houses,” a privilege denied to others.²⁷ Common people treated such individuals with greater respect than others because they were considered socially distinguished.²⁸ The extravagance of this practice, however, reveals that the salvific path to *pialral* (paradise) provided by the traditional *khuangchawi* was ultimately an economic burden for the poor and common folk.

Christological Reimagination, and Sacrifices: The Interactions

It was within this religious landscape that the missionaries were challenged to rethink their Christological homily. Christianity was introduced to the Mizos by the Arthington missionaries (who later joined the Baptist missionary society) and the Welsh missionaries during the late 19th century. William

23 Zaliana, *Mizo Sakhua*, 17.

24 The “*Gaya*” or “*Sial*” (Mizo term), also known as “*mithun*” or “*mithan*,” is a large species of ox native to Bangladesh, Northeast India, Myanmar, and other parts of Asia. Regarding pigs see, C. Chawngkunga, *Sakhua* (Art and Culture, Government of Mizoram, 1997), 50-51.

25 See B. Lalthangliana, *Mizo Chanchin* (published by the author, 2009), 4 3.

26 Liangkhaia, *Mizo Chanchin* (L.T.L. Publication, 1938), 49.

27 N.E. Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* (Firma KLM Private Limited on Behalf of Tribal Research Institute, [1928] 1976), 94.

28 Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies*, 95.

Williams, a Welsh missionary, made a brief visit in 1891 but succumbed to illness.²⁹ Three years later, Arthington missionaries from Leeds, namely, J. H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge, reached Mizoram in 1894.³⁰ They were members of High Gate Baptist Church in North London but served with the Arthington Mission, a non-denominational mission founded in England by a millionaire, Robert Arthington.³¹ They committed themselves to their missionary work for roughly three and a half years, but since Arthington wanted his missionaries to move quickly from one place to another, they eventually departed to the neighboring tribe in Arunachal Pradesh and transferred their tasks to the Welsh Mission.³² In 1897, D.E. Jones, followed by Edwind Rowlands in 1898, from the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, arrived to fill this void, laying the foundation for what would eventually develop into the Mizoram Presbyterian Church.³³ Later, Lorrain and Savidge, the former Arthington missionaries, returned to Mizoram in 1903, and this time they were sent by the Baptist Mission Society, establishing a Baptist Church in Southern Mizoram, while the Welsh missionaries were assigned to Northern Mizoram.³⁴

Initially, the missionaries' kerygma contained certain Christological motifs, such as Jesus as the one who cleanses sins; the one who dwells in heaven and becomes human; the gracious one, as well as a healer of sickness, and a forgiver of sins. These theological messages can also be seen in the first Mizo Christian songbook, published by the missionaries in 1899, which contains 18 hymns carefully selected from Western hymnals and translated into the Mizo language.³⁵ Typically, though the missionaries regarded the Mizo local religion as paganism or devil worship, they still saw the Mizo sacrificial practice as an archetypal pattern foreshadowing the death and resurrection of Christ. In 1901, Edwin Rowlands, a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary, saw a Mizo medicine man offering a sacrifice to a malevolent spirit on behalf of a young girl who had fallen ill. Reflecting on

29 William Williams: *Mizoram Chanchin Tha thlentu hmasa ber* [William Williams: *The First Missionary Who brought the gospel*] (Synod Executive Committee, Mizoram Presbyterian Church, 2013), 4–16.

30 M. Eleanor Bowser, *Light on the Lushai Hills: The Story of a Dream that Came True* (The Carey Press, 1928), 10.

31 See Dorothy Glover, *Set on A Hill: The Record of Fifty Years in the Lushai Country* (Edinburgh Press Ltd, 1944), 6.

32 Glover, *Set on A Hill*, 8.

33 John Hughes Morris, *The Story of Our Foreign Mission* (Hugh Evans & Sons, 1930), 80–82.

34 *Pu Buanga* (J.H. Lorrain) *Log Book 188–1936*, 69.

35 *Mizo Kristian Hla Bu* (Eureka Press, 1899), 1–36.

this sacrifice, he wrote, “In all this, we can see some *foreshadowing* of the meaning of those words: Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22 [RSV]).”³⁶ He also wrote, “[T]here is no question but that this system points to the sense of need which exists for the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”³⁷ Another missionary, Jones, shared an experience when visiting Chief Suakhnuna. At the Chief’s house, they sang the hymn, “What can take my sins away? Nothing but the blood of Jesus?” After the song, the Chief said, “This is the reason why we used to sprinkle blood,” referring to the sacrifices made by traditional priests through the sprinkling of animal blood.³⁸ The notion of shedding blood seemed to intrigue the missionaries, as their Christological proclamation was initially centered on the cross, which they emphasized as the means of forgiveness and the cleansing of sins. Llyod, a Welsh missionary, also notes, “The blood sacrifices had prepared their minds for the need of Christ, the perfect sacrifice.”³⁹

Nevertheless, despite the missionaries’ optimism, such a homily did not strike a chord with the wider populace for at least two reasons. First, as Lorrian wrote in his 1913 report, “But the people had no sense of sin and felt no need for such a Saviour.”⁴⁰ Because none of the Mizo traditional sacrifices have such an idea. Among the neighboring tribes, such as the Nagas, it has also been observed that “there is no concept of a forgiving god.”⁴¹ This was also the case with the Mizo. Nevertheless, this does not mean that God was never seen as forgiving. The Mizo traditional concept of God included merciful and gracious attributes (*Pathian in zah a ngai ang*). The issue was that Christian doctrine, such as God forgiving the sins of humankind through the shedding of blood, was entirely foreign. Such a notion also baffled the Mizo people, as Pachuau rightly observes, “The people were amazed to hear about the kind of magic there was in such blood. The missionary was quick to learn that he had to change his message.”⁴² Second, the pervasive fear of malevolent spirits kept the Mizo

36 Emphasis added to Hebrews quotation. Also see, Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 51.

37 Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 51.

38 Jones, *A Missionary’s Biography*, 71.

39 J. Meirion Lloyd, *On Every High Hill* (Synod Publication Board, 1984), 78.

40 *Reports by Missionaries of Baptist Missionary Society (B.M.S.), 190–1938* (Mizoram Gospel Centenary Committee, 1993), 93–94.

41 Sashinungla Pongen, “‘I Perceive that in Every Way You Are Very Religious’ (Acts 17:22): Naga Spirituality and Baptist Mission,” *Journal of World Christianity* 6, no. 2 (2016): 291–310, 297.

42 Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Intercultural Hermeneutics: A Word of Introduction,” *The*

people from readily accepting Christianity, as they believed that converting would anger the evil spirits.⁴³ They would eagerly ask, “Is Jesus stronger than *ramhuai* (evil spirit)?”⁴⁴ Jones, a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary, also wrote, “The first difficulty which the Lushai⁴⁵ raise against accepting Christianity is the anger that he will be killed by the evil spirits.”⁴⁶

As the fear of malevolent spirits kept the Mizo from readily embracing Christianity, the missionaries were challenged to reshape their Christological message. Thus, Christ as a “vanquisher of devil/evil spirits” became the point of contact, as Lorrain notes in his report.⁴⁷ In this “interposed Christology,” Pachuau observed that Jesus is portrayed as an exorcist who ultimately conquers these malevolent forces or the devil.⁴⁸ This idea cohered with the work of Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén, published in 1931. The patristic Atonement theory, especially as expressed by Irenaeus, according to Aulén, understands the Christian doctrine of soteriology as a cosmic conflict in which Christ triumphs over evil spirits. He further argues that ignoring, undermining, or suppressing this perspective could distort the whole picture of the atonement. This cosmic drama, in his words, “[I]s the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory—Christ—Christus Victor— fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the “tyrants” under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”⁴⁹

So, when the missionaries reframed their Christology in the context of the local sacrifice to evil spirits, it resonated more with the Mizo people. As Jones wrote, “[S]ome are ready to believe in Christ if they will be kept from illness. Any sickness that they cannot understand is attributed to evil spirits. The Lushais are fond of hearing that Jesus Christ has conquered the Devil

Asbury Journal 70, no. 1 (2015): 8–16, 10.

43 K. Thanzaupa, ed., *Reports of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales on Mizoram 1897–1957* (Synod Literature and Publication Board, 1997), 4.

44 Zairema, *Pi pule biak hi* (Zorun Community, 2009), 2.

45 The Mizo tribe was earlier called ‘Lushai’ by Western colonizers and missionaries. However, the name refers only to a subgroup of the Mizo people rather than the entire tribe.

46 Thanzaupa, *Reports of the Foreign Mission*, 4.

47 Baptist Church of Mizoram, *The Annual Reports of BMS*, 94.

48 Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Mizo ‘Sakhua’ in Transition: Change and Continuity from Primal Religion to Christianity,” *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 1 (January 2006): 41–57, 51.

49 Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert, 2nd pressing (SPCK, 1970), 4.

and Death.”⁵⁰ He “would go about the villages, preaching, singing, and telling people about someone who came down from the sky, went about doing good, healing the sick, raising the dead and being kind to children and women,” teaching them that God is greater than all evil spirits that He would heal them, and that there would be no need to sacrifice to the evil spirits.⁵¹ Mendus, another Welsh missionary, also wrote about preaching to a group of men on the border of Burma, who were afraid of demons, telling them that Jesus is more powerful than demons.⁵² Lorrain also noted, in his logbook, that he often told people in several villages that “demons fear those who have God as their refuge.”⁵³ Lewis, also notes, “To the Lushai mind, Christ’s Resurrection appeals with force, for in that, he grasps the truth of the Son of the Good Spirit triumphing over all the powers of evil.”⁵⁴ In March 1903, when a meeting was held at the Shelthlun Chapel, several locals shared their testimonies about forsaking sacrifices to evil spirits. One elderly man recounted the persecution he endured after deciding to become a Christian and forsaking the practice of sacrificing to evil spirits, a ritual he had followed throughout his life. Another elderly man spoke of hearing about someone whose health was miraculously restored after renouncing such sacrifices and embracing Christianity. Encouraged by this story, he sold the goat (*kel*) he had planned to use for assuaging the spirits (*kel-khal*), embraced Christianity, and, upon doing so, also experienced a restoration of his health.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, it took more than just a simple re-interpretation of the Christological message to convince these locals; the message of “Christ the Victor” became more cogent with the modern Western medicine that they distributed. In 1908, medical missionary Dr. Peter Fraser inaugurated a dispensary, which continued its operations until 1912 and was then managed by a Mizo assistant.⁵⁶ Additionally, Lorrain and Savidge, upon their departure from Mizoram and their return to London, enrolled at

50 Thanzaauva, *Reports of the Foreign Mission*, 4.

51 Mendus, “My Friend Chhuakhama,” in *Pastor Chhuakhama Chanchin leh Sermon*, ed. R. Lalsangliani (R. Lalsangliani, 2013), 119. Also see, Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram*, 48.

52 E.L. Mendus, *The Diary of a Jungle Missionary* (Synod Publication Board, 1984), 37–38.

53 Kyle Jackson, et al, eds., *Lorrain’s Logbook: Notes from a Missionary in Mizoram, Northeast India (1891–1936)*, (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2023), 118.

54 Grace R. Lewis, *The Lushai Hills: The Story of the Lushai Pioneer Mission* (The Baptist Missionary Society, 1907), 29.

55 Jackson, et. al, *Lorrain’s Logbook*, 97–98.

56 *The Presbyterian Church of Mizoram*, 18.

Livingstone College in 1898. There, they pursued studies in hygiene, tropical diseases, and surgery, and then established a dispensary upon their return. Initially, some locals thought that the medicine provided by the missionaries had some kind of magical power. Instead of swallowing it, they would put the pills under their pillow, hoping that they would be cured.⁵⁷ One Mizo pastor observed, “The Mizo have given up their sacrifices to the devils and have now taken up medicines like a duck to water.”⁵⁸ One Christian journal published in 1913 noted that modern medicine had ousted the office of the local priest and sacrifice, and the locals were pleased with the medicine they received from the missionaries because it healed them of their sicknesses.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it provided a better alternative to expensive sacrifices. For example, when Herbert Anderson, the then secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, visited the Southern part of Mizoram, one of the village chiefs expressed to him his wish to become a Christian, asserting that Christianity was “much cheaper” than sacrificing to the spirits. On another occasion, an elderly woman, who had become a Christian, told him that the pills were far cheaper than the thirty rupees she had previously spent on sacrifices.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the nomenclature for modern medicine in Mizo, still in use today, is “*damdawi*,” a compound word that combines “*dam*,” meaning “heal” or “cure,” and “*dawi*,” meaning “spell.” Similarly, the Mizo word for ‘hospital,’ “*damdawi in*,” literally means “house of a healing spell.” This mirrors Mizo’s initial perception of modern medicine as containing inherent healing power, akin to a spell (*dawi*).

While Christological reformulation, coupled with modern medicine, made constructive inroads, another significant factor that was at play in the widespread acceptance of the gospel was a series of revivals that began in 1906. In particular, from the third major revival in 1919 onward, an extensive inculturation of local religious elements, initially deemed paganism, like traditional drums, dance, and songs written in local tune, were integrated into Mizo Christianity.⁶¹ According to one eyewitness

57 See David Kyle, *Lorrain of the Lushais: Romance and Realism of the North East Frontier of India* (The Carey Press, 1944), 17; *The Annual Report of Baptist Mission Society 1901–1938* (Mizoram Gospel Centenary Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1993), 35, 133.

58 Zairema, *Lehkhabu Te Pasarih*, 2nd ed. (Zorun Community, 2011), 205.

59 Vaisam, “In-Thawi Thu,” *Kristian Tlangau*, February 1913, 229.

60 See Herbert Anderson, *Among the Lushais* (Carey Press, 1914), 18, 14; Vaisam, “In-Thawi Thu,” *Kristian Tlangau*, February, 1913, 229.

61 For a more detailed analysis of this inculturation, see Billy J. Zorinthara, “Forging a Third Space for Spirituality and Social Justice: The Dynamics of Mizo Revival Movements in Interweaving Christianity and Primal Religious Ethos,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, no. 2 (October 2023): 170–174.

account, during the revival movements, the fear of evil spirits and demons started to decline in his village, and people began to trust prayers and medicine for healing instead of the traditional costly sacrifices. Some primal religious practices, such as expensive feasts and rituals like *khuangchawi*, were cast off.⁶² This caused great concern among their non-Christian counterparts, who thought that casting off sacrificial elements would suffer from tragedies, sickness, and diseases. However, when no such misfortunes befell the Mizo Christians, they proclaimed, “Surely Jesus has triumphed over the evil spirits.”⁶³ During the same time, in the Southern part of Mizoram, around 500 individuals abandoned their practices of sacrificing to evil spirits.⁶⁴

Among some Mizo revivalists, the sacrifice of Christ was described as “*zawh za zo*,” which traditionally means “one who accomplished all the ritual requirements” including the most expensive eschatological feast (*khuangchawi*), the pathway to their *pialral* (paradise).⁶⁵ Hence, the sacrifice of Christ was seen not only as a triumph over the dreaded evil spirits but also as a way to overcome the torment in the underworld (*mitthi khua*) and a free pathway to paradise (*pialral*). Strom rightly notes, “The Mizo’s frequent blood sacrifices enabled them to comprehend Christ’s supreme sacrifice and the atoning power of his blood. Entrance to *pialral* and avoidance of “*Mitthi khua*” (hell) was possible through faith in Christ.”⁶⁶

With the displacement of traditional sacrifices, the offices of the traditional priests, such as *sadawt* and *bawlpw*, gradually fell out of place. Christian pastors became overtime the new religious leaders. This was not a direct substitution, since their roles and functions differed significantly. While the central role of the traditional priests was primarily limited to times of sickness and festivals, Christian pastors function primarily in preaching, teaching, evangelizing, leading communal worship, and officiating rituals. A unique form of Mizo Christian spirituality known as “*mihlim*” (ecstatic person) or “*zawlnei*” (prophet) also emerged during the revival movements. Though these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, a distinction is also maintained. The *mihlim* carries a broader sense of ecstatic religious

62 Lalhmuaka, *Zoram Thim ata Engah* (Synod Publication Board, 1998), 154.

63 Lalhmuaka, *Zoram Thim ata Engah*, 137.

64 *The Baptist Missionary Society: One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Annual Report 1919–1920* (The Society at Carey Press, 1920), 19.

65 Vanlalchhunga, *Mizoram Presbyterian Kohhran, Nilai leh Beihruah Thupui: Kohhran leh Zirtima Dik lo* (Synod Literature & Publication Board, 2020), 208.

66 Donna Strom, “Christianity and Culture Change Among the Mizoram,” *Missiology: An International Review* 8, no. 3, (July, 1980): 307–317, 312.

experience while *zawlnei*, who are also ecstatic, specifically means prophet. Both concepts come from primal religious concept of “*Khuawang Zawl*” (“being possessed by a benevolent divine Spirit”), where the possessed person functioned as an agent of revelation. As Pachuaui rightly observes, Mizo Christian spirituality “is closely linked to the idea of having a mysterious relation or connection with the unseen Spirit.” In this encounter, the benevolent divine spirit (*Khuawang*) in Mizo primal religion was reinterpreted as the Holy Spirit within Mizo Christianity.⁶⁷

Contextualization and Theory of Co-Production: A Reflection

Unlike Abrahamic traditions, where co-production emerges from shared texts/scriptures and history, Mizo Primal Religion and Christianity interact through resonance in worldview, particularly in concepts like the spirit world, sacrifice, and eschatology. This leads to contextualization, where Christianity is translated into Mizo religious categories. In our case study, two modes of contextualization could be seen. Firstly, the missionaries’ attempt to contextualize the gospel could be broadly described as “intended contextualization,” as there was a deliberate effort to relate the gospel to the Mizos. In this mode, we have seen how the missionaries were also challenged to rethink their initial Christological homily in light of the primal concept and practice of sacrifice. Secondly, the other mode is “unintended contextualization” as there was an unconscious incorporation (organic adaptation) of local cultural elements by the Mizo, especially, from the third revival movement onwards. Concerning the former, Donna Strom notes:⁶⁸

[M]issionaries to Mizo were contextualizing the Gospel message (and method) long before the neologism “contextualization” caught the fancy of the Christian world. Theirs was not the syncretistic accommodation of a “dialogue with truth,” suggested by John Hick, or the “Hinduized Christians theology” advocated by recent Indian theologians, whereby one selects the best insights of other religions, and seeks to evolve a higher truth. Nor was the message to Mizos the neo-orthodox or new-liberal “prophetic accommodation” to the historical moment—endeavouring to discern “where God is at work and calling us to participate in it,” as stated by Shoki Coe and liberation theologians. The Gospel message to Mizos was what

67 Pachuaui, *Sakhua*, 54.

68 Donna Strom, *Wind through the Bamboo: The Story of Transformed Mizo* (Evangelical Literature Service, 1991), 96–97.

Hesselgrave calls “apostolic accommodation”—the didactic method of proclaiming the unchanging supracultural truth of the inspired inherent Word of God in the context of an animistic world, with expectation that the Holy Spirit would use His Word to transform lives.⁶⁹

To be more accurate, the term “apostolic accommodation” is associated with Bruce Nicholls, and “apostolic adaptation” is the preferred term employed by Hesselgrave. “In any case, the primary emphasis [...] is conveying the received message of Scripture into the context of a respondent culture.”⁷⁰ This accommodation or adaptation approach, he contends, resonates with the etymology of the Latin word “context,” which means “to weave” or “to join together.” The scriptural message “superimposed upon culture without adaptation lacks meaning,” thus it should be “woven” with the “third horizon cultural materials.”⁷¹ In the case of the Mizo, as evident from the mission report, it was after the initial failure to communicate the message that the missionaries realized the need to rethink their Christological message.

Initially, the interaction between Christianity and the Mizo primal religion lacked the element of reciprocity, as it was only the missionaries who made an effort to contextualize. However, over time, during the revival movements, the locals began to unconsciously incorporate their primal religion and local elements into Christian practice, such as the use of local drums (*khuang*), dance, and the composition of new songs in local tunes. This unintentional contextualization or organic adaptation process aligns but also nuances the co-production theory because it was not just Christianity adapting to the Mizo primal sacrifice (*Christus victus*), but also the Mizo shaping Christianity in a way that made it uniquely their own. Christ became the exorcist or the medicine man (*bawlpu*) who triumphed over evil spirits. He also became the *thangchhuah pa*, who conquered the primal fear of death by becoming the *zawh za zo* (one who fulfilled the ritual requirements). Thus, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, for the Mizo, provided free access to *pialral* (paradise). This traditional notion of a place of bliss (*pialral*), which was once reserved for heroic figures and the wealthy, is transformed and now made accessible to the weak, the cowardly, and the poor. In this encounter,

69 Strom, *Wind through the Bamboo*, 96–97.

70 David J. Hesselgrave, “The Three Horizons: Culture, Integration and Communication,” *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 28, no. 4 (December 1985): 443–454, 452.

71 Hesselgrave, “The Three Horizons: Culture, Integration and Communication,” 454.

we observe a merging of worldviews and similar beliefs, yet Christianity provides the theological framework that transforms them. While co-production theory suggests that religious traditions actively refine or redefine each other, the interaction between Mizo primal religion and Christianity is largely unidirectional in terms of adaptation and contextualization. Even when bidirectional elements are present, contextualization often functions as a one-way process. This unidirectionality, however, is crucial not only for the missionaries but also for the Mizo people, because it brings liberation from the socio-economic burdens associated with traditional sacrifices to evil spirits (*khal*) and the costly *thangchhuah* rituals.

The primal-Christian interaction also lacked shared scriptures, as seen in co-production theory, since primal religions such as the Mizo tradition are based on oral transmission passed down through generations. However, they share overlapping worldviews. It is this overlapping worldview that makes a point of contact possible. Like the Mizo enchanted worldview, “the biblical worldview ... is thoroughly supernatural. God controls physical phenomena and all so-called natural laws.”⁷² Additionally, the Bible also acknowledges the existence of good and evil spirits, such as angels and demons.⁷³ In addition, the belief in the presence of a plethora of spirits in the Mizo primal worldview, such as the concept of “*huai*” where malign spirits have particular spatial locations along with a benevolent spirit known as “*Lasi*,” also resonates with what some writers have termed “territorial spirits.”⁷⁴ This idea, as Poythress put it, is the “association or confinement of evil spirits or angelic spirits to certain spatial locations or territories.”⁷⁵ Moreover, according to this biblical understanding of “spatial localization of spirits,” it argues that “only God is omnipresent” (Jeremiah 23:24), while “angels and demons alike operate in some spatially limited way.”⁷⁶ This idea aligns with the Mizo primal worldview, where God as *Khua* is understood to be omnipresent, while *Lasi*, the benevolent spirit, is confined to the jungles, as are the malevolent spirits.

This overlapping worldview played a crucial role, as both the missionaries and the locals imagined with each other, facilitating the building of bridges between the two religions. Over time, the organic adaptation

72 Sam Storms, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: A Comprehensive Guide*, Kindle ed. (Zondervan, 2021) Kindle loc. 510.

73 Storms, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare*, Kindle loc. 510.

74 Storms, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare*, Kindle loc. 113 ff.

75 Vern S. Poythress, “Territorial Spirits: Some Biblical Perspectives,” *Urban Mission* 13, no. 2 (Dec. 1995): 38.

76 Poythress, “Territorial Spirits: Some Biblical Perspectives,” 40.

during the revival movements further strengthened this bond, leading to the incorporation of local elements and shaping a distinctly Mizo form of Christianity. As Pachuau also observes, the foundation of the Mizo church's strong emphasis on "charismatic experiences and spirit-led Christianity" lies in the traditional "spirit-centered worldview" that revolves around the belief in the presence of numerous spirits actively participating in their daily lives.⁷⁷ This belief in the existence of the supernatural and active spirits within human lives and society persistently finds "their continuity" in the charismatic revivals driven by spiritual experiences. This intrinsic connection between these elements played a crucial role in the rapid spread of Christianity among the Mizo people and in the emergence of Mizo indigenous Christianity.⁷⁸

Frykenberg made a similar observation in his studies of the tribal group elsewhere in India; he notes, "far from being antagonistic, primal religions and Christian faith sometimes have possessed a special affinity."⁷⁹ This similarity has facilitated people from primal religious backgrounds to navigate cultural change effectively: "turning to Christ what is already there and not a total denigration of one's past."⁸⁰ Likewise, unlike the "abandon theory," which advocates that the Mizo people abruptly abandoned their primal religion upon converting to Christianity, "subconsciously," they integrated "familiar symbols, their values, and worldview" into their newfound faith in Christ.⁸¹

In this regard, the appropriation of Christology in the Mizo context broadly aligns with H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of "Christ the Transformer of Culture," though it does not fit neatly within the model.⁸² This is because interposed Christology did not merely transform existing practices but also challenged the core beliefs. As discussed earlier, it challenged the idea that securing a place in paradise (*pialral*) depended on costly rituals (*khuangchawi*) and achievements such as slaying wild animals (*ram lam a thangchhuah*). As a result, this Christological encounter also reflects

77 Pachuau, *Sakhua*, 51–52.

78 Lalsangkima Pachuau, "Primal Religious Spirituality and Charismatic Revivalism: The Mizo Christian Experience", in *Interconnectivity, Subversion, and Healing in World Christianity: Essays in Honor of Joel Carpenter*, ed. Afe Adogame and Aminta Arrington (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 198–200.

79 Frykenberg, "Christianity in India from Beginnings to the Present," 459.

80 Frykenberg, "Christianity in India from Beginnings to the Present," 459–460.

81 Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Indian and Christian: Historical Accounts of Christianity and Theological Reflections in India* (ISPCK, 2019), 149.

82 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1951), 190–229.

elements of the antithetical model, due to overlapping ideas in practice.⁸³ Thus, the appropriation of Christology in the Mizo context cannot be captured by a single typology. Nevertheless, the outcome of the encounter did result in a transformation of local religious culture.

A similar case is observed among the Chin in the neighboring country of Myanmar. The Chin people also have their own version of “interposed Christology.” Contrary to traditional Chin religious belief, which held that when someone died a violent or accidental death, vengeance had to be sought on behalf of the deceased in order to redeem the soul from the abode of the dead (*Sarhi-Khua*).⁸⁴ The violent death of Jesus on the cross came to be understood as cancelling the need for taking such revenge. In this way, “the substitute death of Jesus opened the doors for conversion, even for people who headed Chin religious and political institutions.”⁸⁵ Thus, in both the Mizo and Chin contexts, transformation of religious belief occurred through shared, though not clean slate, worldviews. This dynamic shows the limits of co-production as a theoretical lens.

Conclusion

Our case study shows that a shared worldview played a crucial role in the interaction between Christianity and Mizo primal religion, rather than shared scriptures and history, as found in co-production theory. In addition, co-production theory is less applicable in this historical context because the primal-Christian interaction was primarily unidirectional. Christianity dominated the theological and doctrinal framework, while primal religious elements, such as sacrifices, rituals, and eschatological views of life after death (*mitthi khua*, *pialral*, etc.) underwent significant changes. In all of this, interposed Christology played a central role in reshaping local primal religious beliefs. Christ became the exorcist and medicine man (*bawlpw*) who overcame the evil spirits. He also became the heroic figure (*thangchhuahpa*) who fulfilled all traditional ritual requirements (*zawh za zo*). Thus, the sacrifice of Christ alleviated their fear of evil spirits and death (*mitthi khua*), and provided free access to paradise (*pialral*). Despite its unilateral nature, the notion of “imagining with each other” is not absent in primal-Christian interaction, as similar dynamics can be observed. In a sense, the missionaries

83 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 47–82.

84 Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies [NIAS] Press, 2003), 234.

85 Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 235.

reframed their Christological homily to align with primal sacrificial concepts, shifting the emphasis from cleansing and forgiveness of sins to Christ as the “conqueror of evil spirits.” At the same time, the locals adopted Christianity within their religious framework, incorporating indigenous expressions into Mizo Christianity, as Mizo songs written in previously prohibited local tunes, as well as traditional dance and drums, were incorporated and prioritized over Western musical instruments and translated hymnals. To this day, Mizo Christians continue to employ local cultural elements in worship to express their newfound faith in Christ. “Continuity and transformation” best describe the interaction between them. Continuity is evident in overlapping worldviews, while transformation occurs as Christianity provides the doctrinal framework, reshaping those worldviews. The dominance of Christian theology in this interaction may, in part, be due to the power imbalance, as it took place within the context of colonization. Yet, the liberating motifs of the theological message made it conducive and receptive to the locals. The fear of evil spirits, the burden of expensive eschatological *khuangchawi* feasts, and sacrifices to evil spirits for healing placed a significant strain on the Mizo tribe. Interposed Christology alleviated these *angst* and socio-economic hardships, offering a sense of relief and freedom.

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