

## Interpreting RihDil in the Mizo Narrative

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### **Abstract:**

This article shall situate the relevance of myth in cultural lores and it shall attempt to analyse the centrality of folklore and belief narratives within the ambit of the same.

### **Introduction:**

RihDil or Rih Lake is a natural lake which is located in northwestern Chin state in Myanmar. It lies at about 3 kilometers from Zokhawthar which is a village at an Indo-Myanmar border. The lake is about one mile in length and half a mile in width. It is about three miles in its circumference and the depth is about sixty feet. It has a heart-shaped outline. The name is derived from a Mizo folktale of Rih-i, a young girl. Rih-i had a younger sister who was murdered by her father upon the order of their stepmother. Rih-i's sister was resurrected with the help of a spirit. It is said that with the same magical spell Rih-i turned herself into a water body that became the lake, now known as RihDil. RihDil has occupied and continues to occupy an important status in the traditional religion of the Mizo people.

### **Myth and Cultural Tradition:**

According to the ancestors of the tribals, it was a corridor to their heaven called Pialral. All souls destined to Pialral must pass through the lake. Pialral is the Mizo paradise, on the further side of the river by the name of Pial. Due to its cultural importance it is often said 'the largest lake in Mizoram, is RihDil, but is located in Myanmar. According to legend, there were two sisters who had a cruel stepmother, who persuaded her husband to rid of them. The father killed the younger sister in a forest. The older sister Rih-i found her decapitated sister and was inconsolable. A good spirit known as Lasi found revealed to her a particular magical tree, possessing a single leaf with which Rih-i revived her sister back to life. To quench the thirst of her younger sister, Rih-i turned herself into a small pool of water using the same spell.

Later, Rih-i was compelled to change herself into a white mithun and she wandered around in search of a safe place. The Rih lake is approximately one mile in length and half a mile in width, and its depth is about sixty feet. Rihdil or Rih lake is located in Chin state of Myanmar just about three kilometers from the village of Zokhawthar. The south-west floor of the lake is supposedly deeper than that of the north-west. The peculiar characteristic of the lake is that it becomes abruptly deep immediately after the water's edge. The village itself is an establishment of adventure that lures the visitor to explore the mysterious and supposedly demon-haunted lake. It is fourteen from Champhai in Mizoram and sixty three miles from Falam, which is a town in Myanmar.

### **Situating the Tale:**

In as far as the notion of geographical borders are concerned, the Mizoram – Myanmar border has been of significance to both the communities that inhabit the land. The said border area, has been relevant in terms of cultural, economic and commercial aspects to both communities. The belief narrative which has been located as central to Mizo folklore is based upon the concept of a lake known as Rih Dil. (Rih – name of the lake and Dil – lake). The belief is a precolonial belief that has transcended across parameters that are related to the postcolonial ethos. Mizos have believed in the concept of death and the after life in terms of the Rihdil, which was then located in the then Lushai geographical domains before British bifurcation of the same. However, after the emergence of Christianity, the belief was regarded to be superstition but even after the division of the Myanmar – Mizoram geographical borders, the significance of the Rih Dil in Mizo folk narrative still emerges as significant. Rih Lake, thus plays an important role in Mizo folklore and tradition till today. The notions of postcolonial belief and hybridity become central. The legendary lake is believed to have been the inevitable passage that spirits of the dead crossed on their way to their future abode known as *MitthiKhua or the abode of the dead*. Some even believed it was the final abode of the spirits. The many myths about this mysterious lake have been a source of inspiration for several Mizo writers and composers, and have immensely enriched their literary output.

Most cultures, including that of pre colonial, pre Christian cultures believed that the soul or spirit lived on even after the earthly body had perished. In the year 1983, Rev. G.O. Newport presented a paper 'Mission work among the Lushais' at the Missionary Conference in Bangalore. The content of the paper belonged to Mr. J.H. Lorrain (called

'PuBuanga' by the Mizos) who was a pioneer missionary of Mizoram. What he wrote about the pre colonial. Pre Christian Mizo belief was:

Two places or conditions are held to exist after death. One of these is called *Pialral* and corresponds to the concept of heaven. The other is called *MitthiKhua*, but it seems doubtful whether this is simply a place of ordinary existence for those who are not good enough for heaven, or whether it corresponds to our hell.

### **The Lore and Identity:**

According to ancient lore, a big river 'Pial' flows between the two aforementioned places and no one can pass over it from one place to the other. Mighty hunters, great warriors go to *Pialral*, where they live at ease with no trouble of any kind. No women can go over there, but small children of both sexes who died before they left their mother's breast; they enter in and reside there. They then proceed undisturbed towards *MitthiKhua* until they reach its entrance where they are accosted by a massive individual called Pawla, holding a pellet-bow in his hand with pellets believed to be as big as eggs. He would interrogate the newcomers and if dissatisfied with their answers regarding their eligibility, such as having the highest social accreditation or being an outstanding game hunter, Pawla would volley shots of massive pellets from his bow. The effect of a hit from his bow was said to cause an injury lasting three years. However the socially accredited persons and renowned hunters were not questioned or harmed. They were allowed to pass through into *Pialral*, ceremoniously riding on the deer they killed during their lifetime.

It is said that the non-privileged ones, in their fear of Pawla, would hesitate to approach him but they would be dragged out of their hiding place by Pawla's wife Sanu so that they could be shot at by her husband. When someone died suddenly and unexpectedly, Sanu was held responsible. Mizo forefathers have believed inherently that when a death occurs the soul of the dead follows a particular path. It is believed that the souls of the dead follow a particular path and that the souls of the dead wander in search of a place to reside in. One of these places is known as *mitthikhua* (*abode of the dead*) and the other is referred to as *pialral*. Mizo forefathers generally believed that the dead would make their way towards the *Rihdil* where there was a plant that grew by the river that was known as '*mitthi pal*'. Beyond the *Rihdil* there was a place that was known as *hruaikawn* (*where one would gather the souls of the dead*). Near the *Rihdil* was a place that was known as *mitthikawkai* (*passageway of the dead*). And even as the souls of the

dead made their way towards the *Rihdil* it was believed that they would make a lot of noise. After this the souls of the dead would walk towards the actual abode of the souls where everything would be at rest.

### **Narratives on RihDil:**

Now there are various stories on how the dead walk towards the abode of the souls. It was believed that a long time ago, there lived a lot of animals by the bank of the *Rihdil*, and because of this, various people would often go to hunt the animals down. One day, a group of friends went out on a hunting expedition and they built a hut in a place that overlooked the *Rih dil*. At sundown, when everything around them grew dark and eerie and the hunters could hear the sound of people who seemed to be chattering animatedly. They listened earnestly and after a while they could even comprehend that the voices belonged to women. This astounded them all, because they realized there were no human beings near them nor were there any villages or any other form of habitation nearby where the women could dwell in. The incessant chattering of the women continued and the hunters became more and more astounded. Even as they listened the sound of the voices grew closer and closer to where they were camping for the night.

Suddenly, one of the men realized in astonishment that one of the voices was that of his wife and this astounded him all the more. He listened closely and he heard a voice asking, "Ah... so you too have come here?"

The voice which he recognized to be his wife's voice replied,

"Ah yes, it happened quite suddenly. And I had no time to even communicate anything to my children.

I wonder if they know about the bananas I stored atop the fireshelf and the dried meat I stored in the new earthen pot? And alas, I have died at a time when my husband is out hunting. My distraught children will dine very frugally until he gets home."

The man was then convinced that the voice belonged to his wife and he said, "Ah...let me lie in wait for her...I shall catch hold of her and not allow her to reach the abode of the dead."

He then went out and waited for his wife. As it was very dark he could not see anything but he could sense that there were a lot of people passing by,

Eventually a time came when he felt that a woman who was approaching the place where he was hiding, was surely his wife.

So he caught hold of her and held on to her and he then pleaded with her,

“ My dear wife...I know it is indeed you .Why have you left me while I was away on a hunt?The children will be terrified to be on their own .You must not go...I will not let you go for we will be lost without you.”he cried.

His wife replied,

“Ah ,my dear husband ,you must let me go.You will not be able to hold on to me.My time has come and I must I depart from this earth.”

However her husband did not let go of her and he held her even more tightly. Seeing that her husband was adamant to hold on to her ,she turned herself into a snake and even then he did not let her go.In great consternation she eventually cried,

“My friends are all going off without me.”

And so determined was she to follow them that, she turned herself into a firefly and flew away.

At the crack of dawn the next day the man set off for home.When he reached home he realized that his wife was indeed dead .

In order to confirm that what he had heard the night before was true he looked around the fireshef and saw five bananas atop it and he looked into the new earthen pot and saw the dried meat.

Then he realized that it was truly his wife’s soul that he had seen on its way to the abode of the dead.

### **Conclusion:**

Mizo forefathers also believe that even after death, the souls of the dead live on in deep longing for their earthly home.After they die,it is believed that the dead walk on till they reach a mountain called *hringlangtlang*- which is the name of a mythical mountain on the way to the abode of the dead, from where the spirits of the departed look back and view with longing the world of men, which they have left behind.And from atop that hill they could perceive human beings as they dwell on earth.It was believed that even as they perceive the dwelling places that they had left behind ,the dead were filled with a sense of nostalgia and in memory of this, they would often shed copious tears.However in *hringlangtlang* there were two very extraordinary things;

the first is the existence of a very beautiful flower which is known as *hawilopar* ,and it was believed that even as the dead look around they cannot but espy this flower, and on doing so they reach out for it and adorn themselves with it. And it is said that even as they do this, the beauty of the flower compels them to forget about their past lives. In

harmony with this, there was also a stream of water that was located atop a mountain, that beckoned to all. And because the waters of the stream were so enticing, none could resist the water and so even as they drank the water the dead forget all about their past and they would only remember that their sole goal was to reach the abode of the dead. This water that was so alluring is known as *lunglohtui* which is the name of a mythical spring, on the way to the abode of the dead, of which the spirits of the departed drink and lose all their longing to return to earth. till today.

Thus the Mizoram- Myanmar border paradigm is kept alive till the present time through the concept of folk narratives. Though a vast majority of the populace are Christians in Mizoram, the lores that are related to RihDil, ensure that many Mizos and tourists visit RihDil, and crossing the international border, while doing so. Therefore RihDil ensures that the Mizo myths have a definite bearing upon cultural and literary memory. It has rendered its mark as an intrinsic link into Mizo belief narratives even as post colonialism and globalisation have rendered tremendous changes into literary and cultural narratives.

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