



COLONIAL NAMING PRACTICES AND ITS IMPACT IN MIZORAM, NORTHEAST INDIA

Rohmingawii¹  & H. Vanlalhruaia² 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

1 Associate Professor, Department Of History, Pachhunga University College, Aizawl, Mizoram, India;

2 Assistant Professor, Department of History, Lunglei Government College, Lunglei, Mizoram, India

Corresponding Author:

Rohmingawii

Abstract

This paper explores how British colonial administrators and ethnographers named, classified, and thereby helped constitute the identities of colonized peoples. When British administrators and ethnographers arrived in the Lushai Hills, in present-day Mizoram, they did more than observe the people they found there - they named them, sorted them, and in doing so, helped create the very identities they claimed to be describing. Drawing on the writings of Buchanan, Rawlins, Macrae, Lewin, Shakespear, and Parry, this paper argues that categories like "Kuki," "Lushai," and "Chin" were not neutral labels for communities that already existed in those terms. They were, in large part, colonial inventions. Before the British arrived, people in the Lushai Hills organized their lives around clan lineages, chieftainship, and village polities, not around the ethnic labels that would later come to define them. Ethnography in this period was rarely just about recording native life as it was; its deeper purpose was to make colonized populations legible and governable. Reading this history through Bourdieu, Foucault, Said, and Dirks, this paper treats naming as one of colonialism's central tools of rule, one with a lasting impact on how people came to understand and define their own identity.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405028>

Keywords: *colonialism, naming, Lushai Hills, ethnographic classification; colonial knowledge production*

Introduction

Naming is an integral aspect of human society. The act of naming, whether of individual, geographical locations, places, or botanical species, is a distinctly human practice with significant implications. The motivations for naming are diverse and may include cultural, sociological, religious, or political factors. Many studies in sociology, linguistics, and related disciplines have examined these practices. From psychological, sociological, and semiotic perspectives, names and the process of naming are considered highly significant because they confer both social and individual identity and imbue meaning. Toponyms are closely linked to the population, and the inclusion or exclusion of inhabitants is often determined by these names, which are frequently contested along racial and ethnic lines. The use of a name can evoke specific associations or qualities. Naming serves to distinguish individuals or groups, delineating who is included as "us" and who is considered "them," thereby shaping social interactions in positive, neutral, or negative ways.

Names and naming are inherently symbolic, often carrying connotations of branding or labeling. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding how naming functions as an instrument of domination. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu argues that language is never a neutral medium of communication; it is always embedded within a "linguistic market" in which different ways of speaking carry unequal value depending on who speaks and from what position of authority. Those who command the legitimate or "official" language are able to impose their terms, categories, and classifications as though they were natural or self-evident, even though they reflect and reinforce existing relations of power. For Bourdieu, naming is an act of what he calls "symbolic violence", a form of domination that operates not through physical coercion but through the imposition of categories of perception and thought that come to be accepted as legitimate, even by those who are dominated by them. The state occupies a particularly powerful position in this process, since it holds the power of legitimate naming- the authority to officially designate groups, places, and identities, and thereby to impose a particular vision of the social world as the only valid one (Bourdieu, 1991; Loyal, 2017). Official acts of naming, whether through censuses, administrative records, maps, or legal categories, are therefore not simply descriptive; they are performative. They bring into being the very social groups or boundaries they claim only to describe, converting a contingent, historically produced classification into what appears to be an objective fact.

This dynamic of naming as a form of domination can be further explored through Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge. Foucault argues that power and knowledge are not separate or opposed forces but are mutually constitutive; knowledge is never produced in a neutral or disinterested space, and every regime of power generates its own forms of knowledge, just as every field of knowledge presupposes and reinforces particular relations of power (Foucault, 1980). Discourse, for Foucault, is not simply a means of describing reality but an active practice that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks- meaning that classificatory systems do not merely record pre-existing categories but bring those categories into being (Foucault, 1972). Colonial ethnography, in this light, was not a neutral exercise in documenting native populations but a "discipline" in the Foucauldian sense, a structured field that determined what could be known about the colonized, who was authorized to produce that knowledge, and which categories of tribe, race, or ethnicity would count as legitimate truth.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) argues that Western scholarship, travel writing, and administrative reporting on the East did not simply describe a pre-existing reality but actively produced "the Orient" as a discursive object - a coherent, governable entity that existed more as a European construction than as an accurate reflection of the societies it claimed to represent. For Said, this body of knowledge was inseparable from colonial power; the capacity to name, classify, and represent the colonized was itself an exercise of authority, positioning the colonizer as producer of legitimate knowledge and the colonized as its passive object (Said, 1978).

Building on this discursive approach, Nicholas B. Dirks (1992) argues that colonial rule in India depended as much on what he called "cultural technologies" as on military force, since these technologies- ethnography, census, gazetteer, survey- allowed the colonial state to render a diverse population legible, bounded, and administratively manageable. Through the newly produced knowledge, the "cultural forms in societies newly classified as 'traditional' were reconstructed and transformed by and through this knowledge, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East" (Dirks, 1996, pp. ix-x). Naming was one of the primary mechanisms through which this process of categorization operated.

Naming in colonial discourse in Northeast India

Naming and identification play an important role in colonial discourse in northeast India. This discourse began with the colonial knowledge-production system. To the colonizers, the northeast of India was perplexing because of its diversity in language, culture, ethnicity, tribes, etc. The state-building process in the region first demanded the generation of knowledge about the types of people, languages, religions, and forests present in the northeast. This led to a serious attempt to prepare an official ethnography under the sanction of Sir Bampfylde Fuller, then Chief Commissioner of Assam, which resulted in a series of monographs on various tribes in the province of Assam. In this process of knowledge production, ethnography played a very important role. "Beginning with a general description of the appearance, racial characteristics or geographical distribution of the people, they go on to describe their origins and genealogies, then laws and customs, religious system and folklore and, finally, their language" (Zou, 2005, p.77).

In this exercise, the naming of people's identities, places, forests and fauna, languages, and religions was taking place. This is highly significant for the many tribes of Northeast India because their identities were not yet concrete or fixed in a homogeneous form but were still in the process of being constituted. Also, because most of these tribes were still in the state of orality, the construction of identity took longer to consolidate in the pre-colonial period due to a lack of cohesion, which the colonizers exploited through written records. Thus, tribes were given identity through the colonial naming and categorizing practices. Sometimes, the colonizers appropriated local, tribe or ethnic identification for a cultural and administrative category to refer to people and places.

The colonial practice of generating knowledge, as well as the process of identification and categorization, was not a neutral practice, and often, it was based on binary opposition. The classification and identification were never simply an identification of something for its own sake but were based mostly on unequal terms. Rather, it was presented in a 'verses' mode which often favours one at the cost of the other. This recurring reliance on binary opposition - civilized versus uncivilized, friendly versus unfriendly, productive versus unproductive - exemplifies what Said (1978) identified as the defining structure of colonial discourse, in which the colonized subject is fixed and known only in relation to an oppositional category rather than on its own terms. Again, the colonial process of naming a particular people's identity or place always carries a second, or dual meaning/categories, which were mostly negative. For instance, the hill was perceived as a space for 'uncivilized hill tribes,' whereas the plain areas were for 'civilized' people. Once the Kukis were subjugated, they became 'friendly tribes' whereas the Lushais were 'unfriendly tribe', this was reversed after the Lushai Hills were conquered (Vanlalhraia, 2025, p. 21). 'Productive' and 'unproductive' areas also depended on colonial commercial interest, not necessarily what the words intended. Hence, uncultivated areas were often perceived simply as 'wasteland'. In fact, the British classified or categorized 'territory', 'region' and people, tribe or ethnic identity on the basis of their administrative convenience.

The colonial names were often adopted from the neighbouring people rather than the people themselves. Names given by neighbouring people often carried stereotypes or negativity which were adopted or appropriated in colonial writings as a way of identifying the people. For instance, 'Shendu' was the term used by the neighboring Arakanese to refer to the Lai and the Mara people; it was negative in tone, but colonial writings appropriated it to refer to these tribes (Chaube, 1999, p.35; Doungel, 2015/2021, p. 86). It is an exonym, and they never called themselves Shendus.

Sometimes, general terms like 'wild tribes', 'warlike tribes', 'headhunters', and the like were used to refer to tribes in the Northeast, and these terms were highly subjective. This kind of stereotyping is very common in colonial writings and has been questioned by historians in recent times. This also shows that the colonial practice of ethnography was far from what was intended at that time.

Ethnography as a Tool of Naming

The use of ethnography as an important tool of the British Empire became more pervasive, especially when colonizers encountered a primarily oral society like the Mizos. It was through ethnographic work that naming and categorization took place and were consolidated over the years. British contact with the Mizos and their cognate tribes predates the emergence of a political unit of the then Lushai Hills. Many discussions of the region occurred before the creation of the Lushai Hills, with different labels depending on political and administrative contexts.

The people in the hills in Mizoram and its adjacent areas were known to the British by many different names such as Lunctac, Kookies, Kokee, Lushai, Lushei, Cuchi Khyen, Shendu, Poy, Chin, etc. The earliest generation of colonial ethnographers who mentioned one of those names included Francis Buchanan Hamilton, John Rawlins, and John Macrae. They were associated with the Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded by Sir William Jones in 1774. From a methodological point of view, ethnography depends on scientific observations of native cultural practices through fieldwork. However, the earliest ethnographical works on the Mizos lack the true essence of ethnographical methods, and the works referred to here were not written based on closer inspections. Yet, subsequent studies, though they have filtered it, have drawn much of their knowledge about the tribes in the Lushai Hills from these earlier works.

Among the first-generation ethnographers who wrote about the Mizos, Francis Buchanan had a significant influence on subsequent ethnographical works. Buchanan joined the East India Company as a surgeon, Surveyor, and Botanist, and he is probably better known for his contributions in his specialized area, but he also happened to be a pathbreaker in ethnographical studies (Sinha, 1993). He originally intended to explore different parts of India and collect as many plant species as possible. While he was in Burma, Buchanan recorded a number of 'Chin' cultural practices. In 1798, he travelled to Chittagong and recorded the cultural practices of the inhabitants (Buchanan, 1798). His collection of information on Burma and the Chittagong Hill Tracts was clearly administrative, with the purpose of gathering information useful for administration. In practice, he was interested in the culture and customs of the native peoples, including food habits, languages, fine arts, religions, economy, tribes, and the native attitude toward British rule. At a methodological level, Buchanan's own practice suggests that he treated religion and language as intertwined categories for understanding a people, as seen in his pair of 1799 essays on Burman religion and language (Buchanan, 1799). His method influenced almost all ethnographers working on the Northeast in the later period. This is why many later ethnographers, including T. H. Lewin, classified people's identities based on linguistic and religious affinities.

John Rawlins was perhaps the first European who produced ethnographic observations on the Mizos. His essay, 'On the Manners, Religion and Laws of the Cucis, or Mountaineers of Tipra' was published by Asiatic Researches in 1790. Although nothing is known about how John Rawlins came into contact with the Mizos or their cognate groups, where he conducted his ethnographic fieldwork, he seems to have communicated with the Mizos through a Persian interpreter, possibly a native Bengali. In this ethnographic text, Rawlins describes religion, customs, marriage traditions, warfare, festivals, and ceremonies. In his endnote, he wrote that a party of Cuci (Kuki) visited the late Charles Croftes, the Commandant for the English East India Company at Jafarabad in the spring of 1776 and entertained him with dance, and promised to return after their harvest (Rawlins, 1790). This account is also found in the work of M. Boucheseiche, who translated this work and published at Leipsic in 1800 (Lewin, 1869/2004, pp. 153-158). This is a widely quoted sentence among Chin-Kuki-Mizo scholars, though its veracity is unclear, and the author provided no reference or note to trace the source.

John Macrae, a Civil Surgeon at Chittagong, also wrote an ethnographic account of the Mizo in his 'Account of the Kookies or Lunctacs' in 1799, which was published in Asiatic Researches in 1803. The original text was transcribed in Persian from a native of Runganeeah, who, according to the author, had long resided among the Kuki as their captive, and was translated by William Jones, the famous Indologist of that time. This text describes the Kuki physical appearance, myth of origin, dress, economy, religion, warfare, tools, polity, agricultural plants, and domestic animals (Macrae, 1803).

In the accounts of the three ethnographers, the terms 'Chin' and 'Kuki' (spelled as Cuci and Kookies) are used to refer to the people living in the area under study. A number of ethnocentric observations can also be found in these texts. John Macrae wrote that the Kookies were the 'least civilized' people in the world, which became a common label to identify Kukis, yet he did not concern himself with how the native people saw themselves, something many ethnographers care to know. The process of data collection by the colonial ethnographers is quite problematic in that they relied on secondary sources, sometimes 'hearsay' or even 'rumours' spread through neighbouring tribes. These authors also seemed to rely heavily on secondary information gathered from the neighbouring Bengali rather than first-hand information from the Kuki people. The ethnonyms used to designate the peoples of this region, like Kuki, Shendu, Lakher, Pawi, among others, are exonyms, names coined by neighbouring groups rather than self-designations, which were subsequently taken up and institutionalized by colonial administrators and ethnographers. 'Kuki,' for instance, was a generic term Bengalis used to refer to the broader cluster of Kuki-Chin-Mizo hill tribes (Reid, 1893/2008), a category that historically overlapped with, but was later administratively distinguished from, 'Lushai.' 'Shendu' was the term used by the Arakanese for groups belonging to the Mara and Lai clusters (Reid, 1893/2008). 'Lakher' and 'Pawi,' meanwhile, were the terms used respectively for the Mara and Lai peoples by the Lusei-dominant Mizos (those

referred as 'Lushai' during the colonial period). None of these terms were self-designations: the Mara call themselves Mara, and the Lai call themselves Lai or Laimi (Shakespeare, 1912/2008; Chhuanawma, 2020).

Kuki became the most common term until 'Lushai' was commonly used by the colonial rulers in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The term 'Kuki', a Bengali word meaning hill-men or highlanders (Reid 1893/2008, p. 5), first entered British colonial records in 1777, when the chief of Chittagong appealed to Governor-General Warren Hastings for assistance against Kuki raids from the hills. Lewin recorded in *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers There In* (1869/2004):

"The earliest record of our dealings with the hill tribes is a letter from the Chief of Chittagong to the Governor-General, the Honourable Warren Hastings, Esq., dated 10th April, 1777," reporting that a rebel named "Ramoo Cawn... has called to his aid large bodies of Kookie men, who live far in the interior parts of the hills, who have not the use of fire-arms, and whose bodies go unclothed" (p. 31).

This episode is also documented by Alexander Mackenzie in his *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* (1884), later reprinted as *The North-East Frontier of India* (1979), a work that remained one of the most important sources for historical writing on Northeast India for decades. The term 'Kuki' was applied without any specific cultural content, and it remains unclear who were considered Kukis in those days; they may simply have been mountaineers beyond colonial control, without any specific category at that time.

T. H. Lewin, Deputy Commissioner of Hill Tracts, was among the earliest colonial officers to produce a sustained first-hand ethnographic account of the hill communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (including Lushai/Kuki groups). As early as 1869, in his book, *The Hills Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers There In*, he used the term 'Lhoosai' to refer to the tribes at the border of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and rightly connected it with the Sailo clans for which the term 'Lushai' was later crystallized, though he acknowledged that this tribe was also called 'the Kookies'. While acknowledging that 'kookie' was the name given to them by the Bengalis, he used it alongside 'Loosai' (eg. 'Lhoosai Kookie') again and again (Lewin, 1869/2004, pp. 138, 153). Lewin also mentioned the terms 'Poy' and 'Lakher Poy', the terms used by the Luseis (Lushais) to refer to the tribes known generally as the 'Shendoos', and noted as being different from the 'Lhoosai' (Lewin, 1869/2004, p. 161).

Lewin was motivated in part by his recognition that no systematic, reliable account of these communities existed despite decades of British contact with the region. After the Lushai Expedition of 1871–1872, he had direct access to the Lushai Hills, and he himself claimed to have close contact with the people and better knowledge of them. Yet Lewin could not escape the colonial mode of labelling identity. In his later memoir, he recorded his distaste for the Khumi and Shendu on grounds of their customs, declining to stay the night in a Khumi village after being "disgusted by the sight of a half-skinned dog," and dismissing Shendu tobacco water as "filthy stuff" (Lewin, 1885/2005). It is observed that Lewin's own framing was also inconsistent: he insisted the Mizo were not a "barbarous race" but a "wild race" (Lewin, 1870). This distinction does not hold in most nineteenth-century European ethnographic usage, where the two terms functioned as near-synonyms.

Military conquest often resulted in the filtering of people's identity into either smaller or larger units, especially from the last part of the nineteenth to the first part of the twentieth century. Group identities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were smaller and more diverse. Lusei and their cognate groups were clubbed under 'Lushai'. Hence, the term Lushai was separated from Kuki. At the time of T. H. Lewin, the identification of the people in and around the then Lushai Hills was more distilled. The term 'Lushai', rather than 'Kuki', came to be used more commonly to refer to the people. However, the use of 'Lushai' was not yet standardized, and the last expedition that ushered in colonial rule in Mizoram was also called 'The Chin-Lushai Expedition 1889–90' in colonial records (Reid, 1893/2008), though it did not cross the political unit of the Lushai Hills.

Naming, and along with it identity, became increasingly distilled by ethnographer-administrators like J. Shakespeare and N. E. Parry, and the term 'Lushai' was gradually stabilized. The Lushai Hills came under British control from 1890, following the Lushai Expedition of 1889 - 90. The territory was initially split into two units: the North Lushai Hills, administered by a Political Officer (Captain H. R. Browne was the first, appointed on 1 April 1890), and the South Lushai Hills, administered by a Superintendent under the Chittagong Division of Bengal, a post Shakespeare already held by 1896. The two units were merged into a single Lushai Hills District on 1 April 1898 (Zorema, 2013/2021, pp. 144-145).

Within this administrative apparatus, Shakespeare became one of the most influential officers in further sifting Lushai identity, though he was not entirely free from the muddle either. He is associated with Mizo Chanchin Laisuih, the first Mizo-language newsletter, published in 1898, though earlier administrative writings, including R. B. McCabe's around 1892, had already used the term 'Mizo' to distinguish it from 'Lushai' as an umbrella designation, so it is not clear that Shakespeare's newsletter was the very first official use of the term (Thirumal et al. 2019). It is also not clear when the people of the area began calling themselves 'Mizo.' Whatever the precise chronology, Shakespeare continued to use 'Lushai' and 'Kuki' in his own published accounts. 'Lushai,' after all, was the administratively sanctioned term, and thus, a politically correct term, and the district itself was named the 'Lushai Hills District.' Problems nonetheless arose, since tribes belonging to the same broader ethnic cluster, like the Mara (Lakher) and the Pawi (Lai), were now excluded in this nomenclature, and came to be classified as separate political categories.

Names, Naming, and its Implications on the Mizo

The intersection between the colonial practice of ethnography and naming is evident in the context of the formation of Mizo identity. Although it is unclear who the Kukis were at the time, early colonial ethnographical works continued to use the term 'Kuki' to refer to the people living in the Lushai hills, though at some point it was separated. J. Shakespeare titled one of his books

'The Lushai-Kuki Clans' (1912/2008). Here, another term, 'Lushai', is added to 'Kuki'. 'Lushai' comes from 'Lusei', which is the name of the dominant clan in the Lushai Hills at the time of the British advent. Many other clans also existed, but the Luseis were the clan that came into contact with the British most frequently; therefore, the British began to refer to the people as 'Lushai', a corrupted form of 'Lusei', and subsumed other clans under it. Though 'Lushai' is not a Mizo word and does not bear any meaning etymologically, the people in the Lushai hills adopted it as it was used by the rulers and named the place as the Lushai Hills. Even at the time of independence, many individuals used 'Lushai' as their title or surname, for instance, Thanga Lushai, Muana Lushai, etc.

The adoption of 'Lushai' to refer to the people living in the Lushai Hills was by no means inclusive of all the people living there. The people in the southern part of the Lushai Hills were generally known as 'Pawi' and 'Lakher', and although they belonged to the same broader ethnic group, they were left outside the identity represented by the term 'Lushai', which itself was adopted from the Lusei clan. This created a sense of alienation among the communities living in the southern part of Mizoram. After India's independence, the Lushai Hills District Advisory Council was set up in 1948 to prepare for the administration of the Lushai Hills District under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, followed by the establishment of the Lushai Hills District Council in 1952. The Pawi and the Lakher, however, had already demanded a separate Pawi-Lakher Regional Council even before the more inclusive term 'Mizo' came to be officially used and the 'Lushai Hills District' was renamed the 'Mizo District' in 1954 (Doungel, 2021/2013, pp. 329, 331). The Pawi-Lakher Regional Council was formed in 1953 and was trifurcated in 1972, eventually developing into the separate Lai (formerly Pawi), Mara (formerly Lakher), and Chakma Autonomous District Councils as they exist today.

It should be remembered that the pre-colonial habitation of the Mizo cognate tribes did not have international and state boundaries running through it as they do today. The colonizers mapped and divided the region for administrative convenience and, in the process, began to use different terms for cognate groups living under different administrative units. Over time, certain names became firmly associated with the people inhabiting different parts of these colonial administrative divisions. Those in present-day Manipur came to be known largely as Kuki, those in present-day Mizoram as Lushai, and those in present-day Burma as Chin. Again, within present-day Mizoram, those living in the southern part were classified separately as Pawi or Poi and Lakher. The fixing of such categories through maps, surveys, administrative records and ethnographic writings can be seen as part of what Dirks (1992) describes as the "cultural technologies" of colonial rule, through which people and territories were classified and made administratively manageable. These names were used not only to denote different geographical spaces but also came to represent different cultural and political identities, thereby reinforcing differences rather than similarities among these cognate groups. This division was further strengthened by the consolidation of Duhlian (Lusei dialect) as the common language of the Mizos, as people speaking other dialects became increasingly alienated, both culturally and politically.

Foucault (1980) argues that knowledge and power are closely connected in shaping and sustaining particular ways of understanding social reality. The power of naming becomes particularly significant when it is backed by official authority (Bourdieu, 1991). The colonial naming practices also had a far-reaching impact on the self-understanding of the Mizo, as can be seen in the early writings of the Mizos. The first history book written by a Mizo, Liangkhaia's *Mizo Chanchin* (2002), originally published in 1938, was largely a history of the Lusei. The Lai and Mara had little or no place in it, although they shared the same geographical and broader ethnic space. The Mizo historical works produced in subsequent years largely followed this pattern, dealing mostly with the Lusei story, with Lusei often treated as equivalent to 'Mizo' and given a more prominent place than the other groups. Some Mizo historians even presented Mizo and Pawi as different and opposing political categories, and at one point used 'Mizo One' to describe those who followed Lusei culture and language and 'Mizo Two' for those who did not. Such a way of understanding Mizo identity has not entirely disappeared even today.

As a result, a nomenclature for the broader ethnic group itself became a site of contestation. There are serious ongoing debates over which term would be acceptable to all. 'Mizo' has not been universally accepted as an umbrella term due to its exclusive political usage; some want to retain 'Chin' while others want 'Zo' or 'Zomi'. The question of nomenclature has therefore become an important issue in the process of identity formation among these cognate groups (Suantak, 2013). In recent years, there have also been efforts to bring the 'Zo' or Mizo cognate groups together, represented by organizations such as the Zo Reunification Organisation (ZORO), but the question of a commonly accepted nomenclature remains unresolved (Doungel, 2025).

Thus, the colonial practice of identifying and classifying the peoples of Northeast India by particular names became an important factor in the identity formation process, either positively or negatively, even in the post-colonial period. Perhaps the popularity of ethnic identity consciousness and assertion in various parts of the Northeast can be traced, at least partly, to colonial naming practices, because they generate confusion among people both inside and outside the group who appropriate the name from colonial writings. The names imposed by colonial power, what Likaka (2009) calls 'naming colonialism', do not disappear with decolonization but continue to structure collective memory and political contestation long afterward, as shown by the ongoing debate over Mizo/Chin/Zo/Zomi nomenclature.

Conclusion

The history of ethnic identity formation in Mizoram, and arguably across Northeast India more broadly, cannot be fully understood without treating colonial ethnography as an active participant in that history rather than a passive record of it. From the earliest accounts of Rawlins and Macrae, through the more systematic ethnography of Lewin, Shakespear, and Parry, each successive generation of colonial writing did not simply describe an already-existing people but actively produced the categories,

for instance, Kuki, Lushai, Chin, Mizo, through which that people would come to be governed, and eventually, would come to know themselves. This was not incidental to colonial rule: the capacity to name, classify, and fix identity in writing was itself one of the primary instruments through which an otherwise illegible and orally organized society was rendered administratively manageable.

Contemporary efforts at reunification such as those pursued by ZORO, are working against a nomenclature problem whose roots are specifically archival and administrative, not simply cultural or linguistic. The unresolved contemporary debate over whether 'Mizo,' 'Zo,' 'Zomi,' or 'Chin' should serve as the community's umbrella term is, in this sense, not a new problem but the deferred continuation of the past. The colonial ethnographic archive did not settle the question of who these people were, and in an important sense, it could not, because the question was never asked for the community's own benefit in the first place. Untangling that inheritance will require the same critical attention to naming, an insistence on asking not just what a people were called, but who did the calling, in whose interest, and with what consequence for those who had no part in choosing the name they would carry.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Rohmingmawii: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing; H. Vanlalhruaia: Data Collection, Literature Review, Analysis, Drafting,

Funding: No

Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Polity Press.
2. Buchanan, F. (1798). An account of a journey undertaken by order of the Board of Trade through the provinces of Chittagong and Tripura in order to look out for the places most proper for the cultivation of species [Unpublished manuscript].
3. Buchanan, F. (1799). A comparative vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burma Empire. Asiatic Researches, 5.
4. Chaube, S. K. (1999). Hill politics in North East India, Orient Longman Ltd.
5. Chhuanawma, L. H. (2020). Lai, Chin, and Pawi: A case of multiple ethnic identities. International Journal of Advanced Research, 8(7), 1642–1649. <https://doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/11434>
6. Dirks, N. B. (1996). Foreword. In B. S. Cohn, Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India (pp. ix–xvii). Princeton University Press.
7. Dirks, N. B. (2001). Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India. Princeton University Press.
8. Dirks, N. B. (Ed.). (1992). Colonialism and culture. University of Michigan Press.
9. Doungel, J. (2021). Emergence of autonomous district council in Mizoram. In Malsawmdawngliana & Rohmingmawii (Eds.), Mizo narratives: Accounts from Mizoram (pp. 327–349). South Eastern Book Agency. (Original work published 2013).
10. Doungel, J. (2021). Lai chieftainship and its impact in politics. Balaji Publishers. (Original work published 2015).
11. Doungel, J. (2025). Cross-border unification campaign of the Zo ethnic group. In Rohmingmawii & G. Chakraborty (Eds.), North East India: The changing frontier (pp. 195–214). Concept Publications.
12. Foucault, M. (1972). The archaeology of knowledge. Pantheon Books.
13. Foucault, M. (1980). Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977 (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
14. Lewin, T. H. (2004). The hill tracts of Chittagong and the dwellers therein. Tribal Research Institute, Department of Art & Culture, Government of Mizoram. (Original work published 1869).
15. Lewin, T. H. (2005). A fly on the wheel; or, How I helped to govern India. Tribal Research Institute, Department of Art & Culture, Government of Mizoram. (Original work published 1885).
16. Liangkhaia. (2002). Mizo chanchin. LTL Publications. (Original work published 1938)
17. Likaka, O. (2009). Naming colonialism: History and collective memory in the Congo, 1870–1960. University of Wisconsin Press.
18. Loyal, S. (2017). Bourdieu's theory of the state: A critical introduction. Palgrave Macmillan. (pp. 67–82). https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58350-5_4
19. Mackenzie, A. (1979). The North-East frontier of India. Mittal Publications. (Original work published 1884)
20. Macrae, J. (1803). Account of the Kookies, or Lunctas. Asiatic Researches, 7(6), 183–198.
21. Rawlins, J. (1790). On the manners, religion, and laws of the Cucis, or mountaineers of Tipra. Asiatic Researches, 2, 187–198.
22. Reid, A. S. (2008). Chin-Lushai land. Tribal Research Institute, Government of Mizoram. (Original work published 1893)
23. Said, E. W. (1978). Orientalism. Pantheon Books.
24. Shakespear, J. (2008). The Lushai-Kuki clans. Tribal Research Institute, Government of Mizoram. (Original work published 1912)
25. Sinha, K. K. (1993). Francis Buchanan (Hamilton): Physician, botanist, and surveyor. Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, 23(1), 36–42.
26. Suantak, B. (2013). The making of the Zo: The Chin of Burma and the Lushai and Kuki of India through colonial and local narratives (1826–1917 and 1947–1988) [Doctoral dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London].
27. Thirumal, P., Laldinpuii, Lalrozami, C. (2019). Modern Mizoram: History, culture, poetics. Routledge India.
28. Vanlalhruaia, H. (2025). The invention of 'space' in Northeast India: A historical perspective. In Rohmingmawii & G. Chakraborty (Eds.), North East India: The changing frontier (pp. 15–24). Concept Publications.

29. Zorema, J. (2021). Establishment of British rule in Mizoram: Initiatives and changes in administration. In Malsawmdawngliana & Rohmingmawii (Eds.), *Mizo narratives: Accounts from Mizoram* (pp. 143–157). South Eastern Book Agency. (Original work published 2013)
30. Zou, D. V. (2005). Raiding the dreaded past: Representations of headhunting and human sacrifice in North-East India. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 39(1), 75–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996670503900103>

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>