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Assessing the Environmental Impact of Mizo Burial in India: A Path Towards Sustainable Practice

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Abstract The burial process among the Mizos, in Northeast India has evolved over time, influenced by cultural, religious, and environmental factors. Traditionally, Mizos held elaborate rituals for different types of deaths, each with its own set of customs. With the advent of Christianity during the colonial period, burial practices underwent significant changes, including the introduction of Christian cemeteries and the use of coffins. The assessment of the burial process explores the cultural, spiritual, social, and economic aspects, shedding light on the environmental impact after the transition from traditional to modern practices. The study employs a mixed methods approach, including interviews with YMA leaders, to gather insights into burial practices in their own respective community. The study reveals that the use of coffins and cemeteries have environmental implications, potentially contributing to deforestation and resource depletion. It suggests the need for sustainable burial practices, considering eco-friendly alternatives and promoting reforestation initiatives.

Keywords Mizo, culture, death, burial, environment, sustainability

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1. Introduction

The Mizo people or Mizos, constitute an ethnic group with a rich and diverse cultural heritage (Sangkima, 2004). The term '*Mizo*' serves as an umbrella, encompassing various tribes such as Kuki, Chin, Lushai, Pawi, Lakher, Hmar, and Dzo, among others (Lalzarzova, 2014). Primarily belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, the Mizos share common traditions and a legendary homeland (Sangkima, 2004). This ethnic collective has historically been identified by different names by their neighbors and colonial writers, with '*Lusei*' or '*Lushai*' being particularly significant before the widespread adoption of the term '*Mizo*' (Sangkima, 2004).

The Mizos occupy the state of Mizoram, but their presence also extends across Myanmar, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, and other regions where their language, customs, culture, and way of life align (Lalzarzova, 2014). Migration has played a crucial role in shaping the Mizo identity, with historical perspectives suggesting their origins in the high tablelands of Central Asia. The belief is that they originated from the Mongoloid stock, part of the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups (Sangkima, 2004; Lalchhanhima, 2015).

The geographic coordinates of Mizoram are approximately 23.1645° N latitude and 92.9376° E longitude, with a total area of about 21,081 square kilometres (8,139 square miles). Mizoram is a land-locked State, sharing borders with Bangladesh to the west and Myanmar in the east. It also shares borders with Tripura, Assam and Manipur in the north. Like other Northeastern States, Mizoram was a part of Assam called Mizo District. It became a Union Territory in 1972 after carving out of Assam. Mizoram then became a full-fledged State on 20th February 1987 under 53rd Constitutional Amendment of 1986 (Pachau, 1994).

According to the 2011 Census, the state of Mizoram which is situated in Northeast India has a population of 10,91,014 people, where 552,339 are men and 538,675 of whom are women. In comparison to the national average of 940 females, there are 976 females for every 1000 males in the population. The density of the population is 52 people in every square kilometre. Mizoram has a literacy rate of 91.33%, which is greater than the national average of 74.04%.

The Mizo social life was shaped by shifting cultivation practices, and villages were strategically planned on steep hills for defense. The Mizos stand as a unique ethnic community, marked by an intricate history of migration, settlement, and cultural transformation (Sangkima, 2004). Their tribal identity is distinguished by singular social customs, governance frameworks, and lively traditions that persistently influence their contemporary existence. Embedded in their cultural and religious beliefs are perspectives on destiny, the afterlife, agricultural practices, seasonal predictions, and customary laws, serving as guiding principles in their daily lives (Sangzuala, 2023).

The advent of Christianity has significantly impacted the fabric of Mizo culture. The introduction of Christian beliefs has brought about shifts in their spiritual worldview, altering traditional perspectives on fate and the afterlife (Lalchhanhima, 2015). This religious transformation has not only influenced their rituals and ceremonies but has also played a pivotal role in shaping their societal norms and practices. As Mizos navigate the intersections of their indigenous cultural heritage and the influence of Christianity, their identity continues to evolve in a dynamic and intricate change (Sangzuala, 2023).

2. Death and Death Rituals in Mizo Society

Death is considered a major disruption among the Mizos, especially when it affects a person considered important for the moral and functional activities of their community (Pachau, 2014). In pre-colonial Mizo society, death was treated quite seriously and actively by society even more than birth. When someone passes away, the community mourns the loss on a more profound level, halting even daily agricultural work. A person's death had an impact on and triggered emotions among the deceased person's family and the community at large. The family of the deceased had to perform a set of customary rituals as part of the mourning process. This ritual performance was, to a large measure, an open display of the Mizo people's traditional religious beliefs (Tribal Research Institute, 1993).

The Mizos have always considered death to be a great misfortune, calling it *chhiatni* or day of misfortune or adversity. Till today, Mizos have *chhiatni-thatni* which may loosely be translated as days of adversity and days of joy which respectively pertain to death and celebration. Long before Christianity while the Mizo forefathers were yet to migrate from Eastern lands, the Mizo forefathers had always believed in life after death (Sangzuala, 2023). In the olden days, Mizos believed that the souls of the deceased would mostly reach *MitthiKhua* or the Village of Dead (Zatluanga, 1997) which was where the souls of the common people would go. Here, the souls had to work hard like

they did on earth, but it was believed that the work was comparatively less harsh. Their belongings were also almost similar to the ones they had in the land of the living, but they were of much poorer quality than those they had on earth (Chhuanvawra, 2015).

Beyond *Mitthikhua* was a river called *Piallui* and beyond it was a place called *Pialral* (Chhuanvawra, 2015) where only those men and women who attained the status of *Thangchhuah*, a successful humankind on earth could reside. In *Pialral*, there was no need to work as everything was provided for them; they would eat rice and meat and drink liquor together merrily (Laladinga, 2014).

It was believed that in order for a deceased person's soul to leave, it had to be accompanied by an animal's soul and so they would slaughter an animal when a person died. This is known as *thlaichhiah* and would be done on the same day when the grave was dug (Liangkhaia, 2008). *Thlaichhiah* is believed to have been practiced by the Mizo forefathers while they still presided between *Run* and *Tiau* rivers, somewhere between A.D. 1320-1400s as can be seen in the Mizo folk story about '*Tlingi* and *Ngama*' (Thanmawia, 2012).

The slaughtered animal along with *chhangpaite* were believed to accompany the soul of the dead to *Mitthikhua* and would enter *Pawla's* gate (Gatekeeper of the Village of Dead) with all the slaughtered animals. Slaughtering of numerous animals was thus considered as honourable for the deceased. Relatives from near and far would bring animals for the *thlaichhiah* and some members of the community would take great pains in preparing the meat for all to feast on (Chaldailova, 2011).

In the words of NE Parry (1976),

"It is the ceremony performed after a man's burial to speed the soul of the departed on its way. It is to be performed by a man's wife or if he is unmarried by his father or brother or any relation, failing relation it would be performed by the owner of the house a man died in. A pig is killed for the spirit to eat, and a dog is killed to go ahead and show the dead man's spirit the road to mitthikhua, the place to which all spirits must go."

According to K. Zawla (1993) there were different types of graves:

- **Tianhrangthlan:** The grave is dug very deep and diagonally, its walls are lined in stone and the corpse is placed diagonally. This type of grave is for the unmarried men and women.
- **Lungkuangthlan:** The grave is dug, and the floor is lined with a slab of stone and the top of the grave is also covered with stone. This is done for a person of good status in the community.
- **Khaukhurh:** They dig a rectangle hole in the size of the corpse, and sticks are planted fully on top of the grave. This is a grave for a person of low status or commoner.
- **Thinghawnhnuaithlan:** The grave for virgins is below the place for storing firewood and the corpse is buried with a dao. It was believed that *Pawla* does not hit virgins when they reach *Zingvawnzawl* or *Pawla's* gate.
- **Hlamzuihthlan:** The corpse of an infant is placed inside a clay pot and buried beneath the house.

3. Methods and Materials

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively assess the environmental impact of Mizo burial processes. The research focuses on the usage of coffins and graveyards in the modern burial process. The study involves telephonic interviews with 62 Branch leaders of Young Mizo Association (YMA). A purposive sampling method is employed to ensure representation from various communities within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation Areas, providing diverse insights into their burial practices.

Semi-structured telephonic interviews with selected YMA leaders are conducted to gather detailed information on burial practices. Key topics covered include traditional practices, the impact of Christianity, coffin crafting, graveyard usage, cultural and spiritual significance, and the social and economic dimensions of burial rituals.

Thematic analysis is employed to interpret data gathered from interviews and observations. Common themes related to Mizo burial practices and their evolution over time are identified, allowing for the construction of a comprehensive narrative.

4. Evolution of Christian Burial Process

The evolution of Christian burials and memorials in Mizoram during the colonial period is a complex narrative that intertwines the forces of Western Christianity, missionary endeavors, and the resistance and adaptation of Mizo cultural traditions. The early phase of colonization witnessed Christianity draped in Western attire, with the initial missionary goal of aligning tradition with Christianity falling short. Instead, early Mizo Christian converts adopted Christianity in its Western form, resulting in the abandonment of cultural traditions deemed incompatible with the new faith (Kipgen, 1996).

This cultural entanglement became particularly pronounced in the context of funerals, and burial practices emerged as a focal point of tension and controversy between adherents of traditional belief systems and the newly adopted Christian faith. JM Lloyd, a Christian missionary, noted instances where non-Christians in some villages refused to bury Christians, presenting a challenge when there were only a few Christians in a community. This refusal contradicted traditional Mizo custom, where the denial of burial to anyone was considered contrary to societal norms (Lloyd, 1991). The clash between Christianity, asserting its conquest over death, and the Mizo tradition of maintaining relationships with the deceased led to negotiations over Christian burial practices (Lalchhanhima, 2022).

The decision to bury one's kin under Christian rites in a newly established cemetery became a symbolic test of allegiance for Christian converts. The incorporation of certain aspects of Mizo beliefs and rituals into Christian practices was evident, acknowledging the cultural significance of death among the Mizos both before and after their conversion to Christianity. The Mizos, like many other cultures, recognized the significance and solemnity of death, and faith in personal resurrection after death became fundamental to Christian life (Lalchhanhima, 2022).

J.M Lloyd observed changes in customs related to death and burial among Christians, noting a distinct shift in attitude toward death compared to their forefathers. The establishment of a separate plot of land for cemeteries marked a departure from the traditional practice of burying the dead near their houses, a custom deemed unhealthy, particularly for semi-nomadic people (Lloyd, 1991). The introduction of cemeteries and Christian burial practices can be understood within the broader context of the British colonists' efforts to reshape Mizo societies in line with Christian ideals of "civilization."

While there is no precise record of the introduction of Christian cemeteries in the Lushai Hills, the arrival of Zosaphluia (D.E. Jones) in 1897 marked a crucial period. Zosaphluia set up a model village for mission works at Hriangmualkhua (Mission Veng, Aizawl) and introduced a public cemetery for early Christian converts at Hriangmu. The first recorded Christian burials occurred in 1905, suggesting the early establishment of separate burial sites for Christian converts (Lalchhuanliana, 2007). The colonial period also brought innovations, such as the use of coffins in Christian burials, reflecting a broader transformation in burial practices (Lalchhanhima, 2022).

As the Christian population grew due to Western education and the civilizing mission, some Mizo converts advocated for changes in burial practices. Vanchhunga, in a 1914 article titled *Thlanmual Thu*, proposed the establishment of common burial grounds or cemeteries for each village. He argued for the advantages of Western-style burial grounds with epitaphs containing the name and biography of the deceased for more convenient memorials (Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu, 1914). Another church worker, Thankunga, outlined specific rituals for Christian burials, emphasizing the reading of Bible passages, singing songs, and praying during the burial process (Joy, 2014).

By 1929, Makthanga, the Editor of *Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu*, advocated for public burial in every village. He emphasized the changes brought about by colonialism and Christianity, rendering old cultural practices redundant. The article foresaw issues of overpopulation and highlighted hygienic concerns associated with the traditional Mizo custom of random burial. Makthanga's advocacy influenced a 1930 order by the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, requiring every village chief to practice public burial in a village cemetery (Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu, 1929; Vanlallawma, 1998). Chawngtlai, an iconic historical village, stands out as one of the first rural villages to introduce public cemeteries during the colonial period. The village's history intertwines with the Lushai Expedition of 1900, and Christian cemeteries were introduced before the official order for public burial in 1930 (Lalchhanhima, 2022).

The colonial administration's intervention in burial practices extended to the establishment of public burial grounds or cemeteries, driven by concerns about hygiene and overpopulation. Orders from the Superintendent in 1919 and 1930 mandated fixed boundaries for burial grounds and set guidelines for maintaining public health (Rohmingthanga & Michael, 2009). The colonial period also witnessed changes in the administration of cemeteries. Records from the 1920s-1930s indicate that the Church initially had authority over cemetery administration in

Aizawl. However, as the population grew, local communities took charge of cemetery administration, with each locality assigned specific months for routine maintenance (Lalchhanhima, 2022).

The impact of colonialism and Christianity on Mizoram's burial practices is further evident in the transformation of memorialization. The traditional practice of *lungphun*, erecting special headstones or tombstones at graves, evolved during the colonial period. While the tradition of erecting stones was rooted in Mizo culture, it took on new forms and purposes influenced by colonial and Christian concepts. The introduction of Christianity and British administration led to the development of new traditions of memorialization, such as the Christian practice of *lungphun*, symbolizing a departure from traditional practices (Joy and Shendel, 2015).

5. Modern Practice

With the coming of Christianity, many traditional practices changed in Mizo society. The British Missionaries established the Young Mizo Association (YMA) which looked into voluntary participation of all Mizo youth in community welfare activities. Thus, matters related to carrying out funeral practices have always rested in the hands of the YMA ever since its establishment. Although certain practices may differ in different regions and/or among Mizo sub-tribes, the entire Mizo community all over the world follows the YMA's guidelines especially in matters pertaining to funeral practices. Different Christian denominations exist among the Mizos and the Pastor or Priest performs the funeral rites but all other necessary practices are carried out by members of the YMA whenever there is death in the community as stated in the *ChhiatniThatniInkaihhraina*, 2014 Revision (YMA Guidelines) for death and other ceremonies in the community.

In the modern day, all bodies are buried(*inphum*) in the community cemetery though the timing may differ according to the YMA Branch. The main funeral service (*Mitthivui*) is conducted by the Church to which the deceased belongs through the timing of the funeral depends on the local or branch YMA. In some places, the funeral service is held in the Church Hall or Community Hall (YMA Guidelines, 9). The corpses are placed in coffins (*Kuang*) before the funeral. The coffins are made by skilled people in the community and the expense for materials is generated through a community funeral fund contributed by each household in the community (YMA Guidelines 10).

Digging of a grave (*Thlanlaih*) is considered a voluntary duty of young men in the community. This differs from community to community where in some, graves are dug soon after the news of death was announced whereas in others, a few graves are dug beforehand to be ready for any occurrence of death in the community. In some urban communities, the YMA employs workers to dig graves. However, in all communities, the closing up of the grave after a funeral is still considered the duty of male youth in the community (YMA Guidelines, 7).

Erecting of memorial stones (*lungphun*) through a memorial service is done a few years after the death of a family member. This is the last rites performed in remembrance of their dear departed (YMA Guidelines, 20).

6. Assessment of Mizo Burial

The burial process of the Mizos assessed in terms of coffin making, materials used, use of graveyard and grave digging process. The challenges, cultural and spiritual significance, social and economic aspects are also highlighted.

6.1 Coffin-making

The Mizos have always believed that the deceased should be given a solemn farewell. That a person should be laid to rest in the ground after death has always been practiced even before the coming of the Christian missionaries. The Christian belief that man is made from dust and must return to dust further validated the practice. The coming of the Christian missionaries did not affect the Mizos in terms of burial practices as it was more or less similar to Christian practices.

In most Mizo communities, coffins were hurriedly made by YMA members on the news of death in the community and it was considered taboo to make coffins in advance. Whether it was at dawn or midnight, YMA members would start making a coffin as required. With the passage of time and due to the increase in population, deaths in the community became a common occurrence and making coffins immediately became a task. What was once considered taboo, had to be practiced as society progressed. Today, there are very few communities in Mizoram who do not have pre-made coffins in their YMA or community storage (See Table 1).

From Table 1, a majority of the communities (74.2%) make coffins through *hnatlang* where YMA members come together volunteering their time and skills in making coffins to be used whenever death may befall the community. Materials for making coffins are bought from the collection. The YMA leaders would do the groundwork while the voluntary hands of the YMA members would help in assembling the parts. Such *hnatlang* are usually called for when skilled members of the community such as carpenters and those skilled in woodwork are available. The *hnatlang* may be called on a weekend or holiday and sometimes at night when the youth are free.

Depending on the number of hands and ability, the number of coffins made in one *hnatlang* differ among the communities. While one community can make 10 coffins in one *hnatlang*, another makes only 2-3 coffins. The mean number of coffins made in one *hnatlang* has been calculated at 5.1 coffins. Among those who make coffins through *hnatlang*, very few do not make coffins in advance but would do so as soon as there is news of death in the community.

In almost a fifth of the communities (19.4%), *hnatlang* to make coffins are no longer practiced but the YMA would procure all the materials required and they would pay carpenters or skilled labourers to make the coffins. In such cases, a number of coffins would be made at a time under the supervision of the YMA leaders. It has been found that making coffins through paid labour is more efficient than calling a *hnatlang* as the mean number of coffins made through paid labour is calculated at 6.5 coffins.

6.2 Materials for Coffin making

Coffins have been carved out of wood or made with wooden planks which has gradually developed to the use of other materials, with the need to use more economic and environmentally sustainable materials. It has been found that most of the communities in Mizoram (82%) use Duratuff material for making coffins. They would procure the material from stores and make the coffins with it. It has been found that one sheet of Duratuff is not enough to build one coffin and so they use one and a half sheets of Duratuff per coffin.

While many use only Duratuff to make the coffins, some combine it with wood to decorate it. More than a tenth of the communities (12.9%) use Ply Board as a material for coffins, either wholly or only for the cover and decoration. While this is a common practice in the urban areas, in the rural areas there are comparatively fewer deaths, and they have more land for burial and so the YMA in these areas have been known to order wooden planks locally and make coffins only as and when necessary (See Fig.1).

Just as materials used for making coffins differ, the cost of coffins also differs from community to community. Even among those who use the same materials, the costs differ according to their preferences.

As can be seen in Table 2, the minimum amount spent for making a coffin is ₹2500 and is made from wooden planks. The maximum cost of a coffin is ₹12000 and are those that have been ordered from coffin makers. The mean cost of a coffin is calculated at ₹4879.032 per coffin (See Table. 2).

6.3 Use of Graveyard

The use of graveyards among the Mizo community can be found in several writings of Mizo historians. On the influence of British administrators and Missionaries, proper graveyards have been in existence since the 1920s and 1930s. As prescribed by the then administration and for the use of Christians, the graveyards became a community property. In time with the establishment of laws, the graveyard lands have proper ownership.

The current study found that more than half of the graveyards (54.8%) belong to the YMA. They are the stakeholders and caretakers of the land, while almost a third of graveyards (30.6%) are jointly owned and looked after by the Local Council and YMA. In some other communities, graveyards are owned and taken care of by the Local Council (14.5%) only. However, in all communities, it is the YMA who oversee the community graveyards.

With urbanization and the growing number of deaths, the graveyards within the city have become insufficient for many communities. This is the current situation of most communities therefore they buy land on the outskirts of the city for their community graveyard. Thus, there are many communities which have more than one graveyard. While some communities are already using their second graveyards for burial, there are some others who will start using it in a few years' time.

The study probed into the area of the graveyards, the area of land left for burial and how many more years it can still be used. Among the varied answers are those communities who stated that their existing graveyard land would be

filled up within or less than a year. This is based on an approximate calculation of deaths per year in the community according to the YMA leaders. There are also some communities who believe that their graveyards can still be used for around 10-20 years. Since the rate of deaths cannot be calculated and since they cannot predict what challenges may crop up with regard to the graveyard land, only approximate calculations of the leaders were taken into consideration for the study.

The area of graveyard land differs vastly among communities. While some communities have vast lands, many communities face the growing challenge of lack of land for burial. The total area of land used for graveyards is calculated at 107 Hectares in which the majority of the communities each own 5 tins or 2 hectares of graveyard land (Mizo calculation of land in 'tins' where 2.5 tins is calculated as 1 hectare). These account for 39.5% of all graveyard land in the study. Those communities owning 1 hectare of graveyard land constitute 30.2% of total graveyard area. Those owning 8-10 hectares of graveyard land constitute 7% of communities which shows the variation of graveyard land ownership of different localities (See Table 3).

6.4 Grave digging process

The YMA Branch of each Mizo community have '*ChhiatniInkaihraina Dan*' which is a manual for death and burial process in the community, which includes not only burial but funeral and other related activities related to death. The entire burial process practiced by each locality depends on the manual and is altered according to the needs of the time. Rigid practices that cannot be followed in contemporary times have to be modified with the needs and context.

The practice of grave digging by YMA members has also changed with the times. Differences can be seen in grave digging pre and post Covid-19. A majority (66%) of Mizo communities still followed voluntary digging of graves, which is a Mizo tradition from olden times. However, grave digging by paid labourers has become a common occurrence in many communities. An approximate amount of ₹3500 is used for the digging of one grave. The digging of graves by paid labourers became a common practice during the Covid-19 pandemic and some communities have continued the practice due to its practicality. This is more so in urban areas where it is more convenient as graveyards are far from the locality and many youths are unable to volunteer their time and effort in *hnatlang* due to work or studies.

The old age Mizo belief, '*thlanlaihlawk a thiang lo e, mitthi an awm duh*' or 'Digging graves in advance is unsacred, it brings forth death,' has been condoned due to practicality. Today, in many communities, graves are dug in advance through *hnatlang* on weekends or state holidays, and sometimes even at night. Some youths in the community, unable to participate in *hnatlang*, sometimes dig the graves voluntarily with their friends or as an Association or group. This voluntary digging of graves by such groups is of great benefit for the community.

In some communities, graves are dug only on the news of death in the community or in the mornings in cases where the YMA stays up the whole night in the bereaved house. In such cases, young men of the community dig the graves as required. While this practice is an age-old tradition of the Mizos, it is not practical in many urban areas where graveyards are far away in some areas, located in the outskirts of the city.

While graves are similar in most communities in Mizoram, minor differences may occur according to the context such as in grave markings. The study probed into the size of graves in different communities, and it was found that the average length of a grave is 6-6.5ft with a width of 2-2.5ft, and a depth of 6ft. In areas where the land is rugged, some graves may be shallower than the others. The graves of youth, *val-upa* (Youth leaders), and prominent citizens in the community are dug deeper than other graves by the voluntary grave diggers, as a sign of respect and reverence. Such graves are dug about 7 feet deep or more.

Since the '*ChhiatniInkaihraina Dan*' or guidelines is different for each locality, the burial process differs from community to community. While most communities bury their dead in pre-dug graves, some communities still dig fresh graves. It is not uncommon for some families who wish to bury their loved one in the old graves of their ancestors. This considerably decreases the use of land which would be required for digging a new grave. The YMA more or less, respects the wishes of bereaved families wherein as far as possible, families are given the choice of where they wish to bury their loved one. However, in most cases due to the lack of suitable land or when pre-dug graves are available, or for other reasons, re-use of old graves is not permitted by the YMA (see Fig. 2)

6.5 Challenges

The current study also found that most of the YMA branches face challenges regarding their community cemetery. A lesser number of informants (46.8%) state that they face no challenges with regard to the same. Among the challenges faced, the majority are landslides (37.1%) while other challenges are sinking land, overflowing drains, and uneven terrain of the cemetery land (see Table 4)

7. Cultural And Spiritual Significance

Even before the coming of Christianity, the Mizos have always believed in life after death that the dead are buried keeping in mind the journey to the afterlife. An organized burial and mourning practice and tradition has always existed in Mizo society. All such practices have a spiritual significance, pointing to the afterlife. As such, the making of coffins, the funeral process, the burial and gathering of community members at the house of the bereaved become an important part of community life.

The Mizo belief in the afterlife has been reinforced by the Christian belief of an afterlife even in the belief that dust returns to dust and ashes to ashes. Thus, the Mizo traditional practices with regard to death were in fact not altered but simply strengthened by Christianity.

The burial process, however, has undergone a few changes over time. Pre-digging of graves and pre-making coffins was taboo in the past but today it has become a necessary practice. In some places mainly in the rural areas, making coffins and digging graves only on the occurrence of death, is still practiced. However, with a growing population and increasing number of deaths, with everyone busy in their work, what was once profane, has become a conventional way of life in many places.

Whilst changes have occurred and are occurring in practices considered sacred or profane by our forefathers, aspects of the Mizo *tlawmngaihna* remain steadfast. Practices of *tlawmngaihna*, brotherhood and community continue in many ways. Community members still voluntarily gather to make coffins, dig graves, stay up the whole night at the house of the bereaved, and console them even after the dead have been buried. This is the essence of *tlawmngaihna* that lives on.

After Mizo society started having a specific place for burial, graveyards or cemeteries became sacred ground and treated with respect. It is no longer seen as a place to be feared. The YMA take the utmost care in looking after their respective cemeteries and each YMA branch contends to have good and sufficient burial grounds. The richness of Mizo culture is vividly found in the ways that cultural practices have evolved with changing times while still upholding the spiritual and cultural significance of such practices.

8. Social and Economic Aspects of Mizo Burial Practices

The current process of Mizo burial practice has a significant impact on community life, economy, development and environment. The process of coffin making, the materials and manpower required, the use of land for burial, grave-digging and all the financial resources required in the event of death signifies such impacts.

There are vast differences in the amount of time, money and manpower used for making coffins among *hnatlang*, paid labour and ordered coffins. *Hnatlang* is usually called at night or on weekends or holidays where more community members can participate in the making of coffins. It is also done keeping in mind the free time of carpenters and skilled members of the community. *Hnatlang* is an indication of the reliance on *tlawmngaihna*, communal effort and unity in the community. It involves the least expenditure, but less output as compared to paid labour. Ordered coffins require the least time and manpower but the highest expenditure as well.

The materials used for making coffins have also changed over time and environmental implications are also kept in mind. The current study found that wooden planks are no longer used as they are not eco-friendly. The most common material used is Duratuff and Plyboard which is considered eco-friendly, but it is relatively costlier. In the rural areas where natural resources are more abundant and the economy is relatively lower, the materials for coffin making differ from urban areas. The current practices indicate that more expenditure is required if environmental protection is envisioned. In the urban areas, to save time and energy and due to the higher number of deaths, new practices in coffin-making have been adopted. What can be carried out using wooden planks and with lesser costs in the rural areas, cannot be so for urban areas.

The expenditure on coffins by YMA of different communities indicates the high cost of coffins. While some communities spend ₹2500/- per coffin, it costs ₹12000/- for the same in some other community. The average amount spent on a coffin has been calculated at ₹4979.032, which clearly shows the high cost of coffins (See Table 2).

In the study, more than half of the cemeteries are owned by the YMA. Even those owned by the Local Council are taken care of by the YMA. A few other communities, the cemeteries, are jointly owned by the YMA and Local Council. Due to rapid urbanization, many communities face the challenge of land for burials and therefore the common trend is buying land on the outskirts of the city for cemeteries. In a few years' time, even those communities who still own cemeteries in their own localities will have to shift to the outskirts.

In the meanwhile, many communities face challenges in their cemeteries due to landslides, sinking land, uneven and rocky terrain. These are all results of disturbance of the natural environment and call for imperative study into land use for burials. This will bring insight into the economic and environmental factors related to burial and measures to combat environmental degradation (See Table 4).

Grave digging has also undergone changes wherein pre-dug graves have become an urban trend in many communities save for a few communities whose cemetery is located within the community premises. The Covid-19 pandemic had also resulted in changes in digging of graves where instead of the customary digging of graves by volunteer community members, labourers were hired to do the job. Though expenditure incurred is much higher, many communities find it more practical and continue the post-pandemic practice.

9. Suggestions for Sustainable Burial Process

It is evident from the study that the Mizo burial process has socio-economic and environmental impacts. The environmental impacts can be seen today and may lead to more serious hazards in the future. It becomes imperative to have in-depth research and look for solutions to address the issues related to the Mizo burial process.

9.1 Coffins

It has now become pressing to consider whether the time and human resources invested in coffin making is proportional to the expenditure incurred in doing so. It must be examined whether the tradition of voluntary making of coffins by the YMA is still practical and efficient or are we doing it with no gain from the efforts. The use of alternative materials is only a small step in environmental sustainability where Plyboard and Duratuff are used in urban areas as opposed to the use of wood in rural areas.

Many developed countries who also practice burying their dead also face the challenge of expensive coffins. In some places, 'cardboard coffins' or 'biodegradable coffins' are eco-friendly and budget-friendly as well. However, the price of a coffin starts at \$200 (cardboardcoffincompany.com). If that is the case, a wooden coffin with designs would be doubly expensive

The Mizo community may not yet be ready for cardboard coffins but has started using coffins made from Duratuff and Ply board. The other alternative would be the use of bamboo which is a natural resource amply found in Mizoram. If not raw bamboo, it can be further processed into ply boards and will incur less costs. This is the most eco-friendly solution in the Mizo context and would also contribute to the state economy. Bamboo is found in plenty in Northeast India and Mizoram has abundant natural bamboo resources which cover around 57% of its geographical area (Bamboos of Mizoram, EF&CC Department, and Govt. of Mizoram). If we were to take advantage of this resource, a large part of the expenditure on funerals would be lessened, not to mention environmental sustainability and prevention of impending disasters.

9.2 Cemetery

Considering the burial practices being followed, the major concern today is the land for burial. Many communities are worrying over graveyard land and buying new ones. If this is the trend, a few years from now, all communities of Mizoram will face this dilemma. Many communities now have more than one graveyard which is mostly on the outskirts of Aizawl city where there still are empty plots of land. Very soon, Aizawl, the state capital of Mizoram, may well be surrounded by graveyards.

In the current study, each community has a specific and organized process in digging graves, the size of graves, and the distance between graves. Though it may vary by a few inches, the average size of an adult's grave is 6.5ft in

length, 3ft wide and 6ft in depth. The graves are usually 2ft apart which totals to each grave measuring 8.5 X 5ft in size approximately. Therefore, the Area of one grave= $8.5\text{ft} \times 5\text{ft} = 42.5 \text{ ft}^2$.

According to the Registration of Births and Death Report provided by the Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Mizoram during 2020-2022, the number of deaths in Aizawl (urban) was 8892 in number. Assuming that all deaths were buried in fresh graves, $42.5 \times 8892 = 377910 \text{ ft}^2$ or 3.5 ha of land was used for burial, which is higher than calculated mean area (2.49 ha) of the graveyard.

Since this is the contemporary predicament, land for burial has become a huge challenge. In many communities, old graves of relatives are dug, and new coffins are buried there. This has become a common practice especially where land is a problem. While only very old graves are dug, there are a few who do not mind re-digging graves that are only 2-3 years old. This is a temporary solution to land shortages and may not always be feasible.

Some communities do not have rules regarding marking graves, and it is left to the bereaved family to mark and decorate the graves of their loved ones. Affluent families may make the graves bigger and with more elaborate designs while some may just mark it in concrete. The different sizes of graves with no uniformity are one of the reasons for lack of land in the cemeteries. Many localities have started following a uniform way of marking graves which is most practical in the current context.

The most environmentally sustainable burial practice that can be followed is the use of columbarium-like built structures instead of ground burial, coffins will be placed horizontally above ground in pre-made structures. Such structures have been built by two YMA branches of Aizawl city and used by one YMA branch. The latter have placed seven coffins till date. This is a new practice among the Mizos and is yet to be accepted by the larger community. It is being practiced only by Chaltlang Branch YMA as a response to landslides in their cemetery and is built on the retaining wall of the collapsed land. They have also built a small YMA shelter on top of the structure and is also used for cold storage of corpses. In the current burial practice where only 30-40 graves are accommodated, the columbarium-like graves can accommodate 108 coffins. This will substantially minimize the human resources, time and expenditure involved in burial. It is also a solution to the challenges of landslides, land subsidence and those related to uneven terrains. Similar practices can be observed in other Christian communities in different parts of the world. Such a type of burial may not be accepted by the larger society, but it is the sole solution as of now and which we will all be compelled to practice a few years from now (See Fig. 3).

If very old graves, some that have not been visited for decades, graves that no longer bear names, unkempt and long forgotten by relatives, are still to occupy space in the graveyard amidst the dearth of space, then in a few years there will be no place for burial. If such graves could be organized in such a way that the plots become smaller by re-burying the bones in smaller plots or moving to a place where only old graves are marked together, then this could relieve some of the issues faced with paucity of land. Marginal years could be made where those graves older than a certain time can be grouped together in one place which would drastically lessen deforestation as many trees are cut for digging off fresh graves. A few communities have started thinking about these lines which will eventually be a requisite in the near future.

The Mizo burial process will soon become a serious issue, and we must recognize the need for involvement of government departments such as Health and Family Welfare, Land Revenue and Settlement, Environment Forest & Climate Change, Art & Culture, Local Administration, Social Welfare and Urban Development. Without leaving all responsibility in the hands of the YMA, a policy related to matters of death and burial, usage of coffins and burial grounds, a more economically and environmentally sustainable Mizo burial process inclusive of both rural and urban communities, is crucial.

10. Conclusion

The contemporary Mizo burial process reflects a blend of tradition, community solidarity, and adaptation to modern challenges. The study explores the evolution of burial practices from traditional communal coffin-making to more efficient methods involving paid labour and pre-made coffins, driven by urbanization and the growing number of deaths. The utilization of eco-friendly materials underscores a conscious effort towards sustainability, although at a higher cost.

The burgeoning demand for burial land poses a significant challenge, exacerbated by environmental factors like landslides and uneven terrain. Innovative solutions, such as columbarium-like structures, offer a promising avenue

for addressing land scarcity while minimizing environmental impact. The potential reorganization of older graves could optimize land usage and mitigate deforestation.

Cultural and spiritual significance remains paramount, with community members actively participating in burial rituals and mourning practices, underscoring the enduring importance of communal solidarity. Yet, the changing landscape of burial practices necessitates collaboration between local communities and governmental departments to formulate policies that ensure both economic viability and environmental sustainability.

The Mizo burial process reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation, embodying resilience in the face of evolving socio-economic and environmental challenges. By embracing innovative solutions and fostering collaborative efforts, the Mizo community can navigate the complexities of contemporary burial practices while preserving its rich cultural heritage for generations to come.

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Appendix

Table 1: Coffin Making Process in Mizo Communities

Coffin Making Process	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Hnatlang</i> (voluntary work/services)	46	74.2
<i>Hlawhfa</i> (Paid Labour)	12	19.4
<i>Leichawp</i> (Ordered)	4	6.5
Total	62	100

(Source: Interview)

Table 2: Cost of making a coffin

Cost of Coffin (INR)	Frequency	Percentage
2500	2	3.2
3000	8	12.9
3500	5	8.1
4000	9	14.5
4500	7	11.3
5000	15	24.2
5500	1	1.6
6000	6	9.7
7000	5	8.1
8000	2	3.2
9000	1	1.6

12000	1	1.6
Total	62	100
Mean Cost ₹4879.032 (\$1 = ₹86.43)		

(Source: Interview)

Table 3: Area of Graveyard

Area of Graveyard in Hectares		
Ha	Frequency	Percentage
1	13	30.2
2	17	39.5
3	8	18.6
5	2	4.7
8	2	4.7
10	1	2.3
Total Area - 107 Ha		
Mean Area - 2.49 Ha		

(Source: Interview)

Table 4: Challenges with regard to the Graveyard

Challenges with regard to the Graveyard		
Challenges	Frequency	Percent
Uneven terrain	1	1.6
Waterlogged	3	4.8
Land subsidence	6	9.7
Landslide	23	37.1
No challenges	29	46.8

(Source: Interview)

Material used for making Coffin

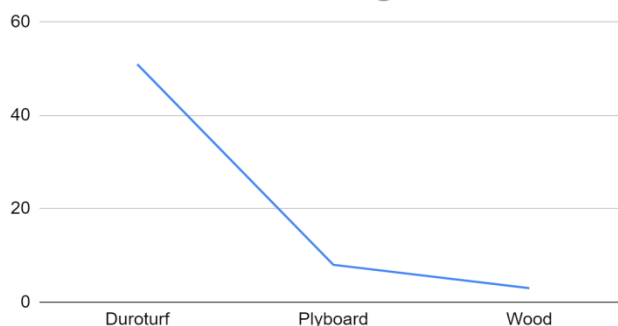


Fig. 1 Material used for making Coffin

(Source: Interview)

Burial practice followed

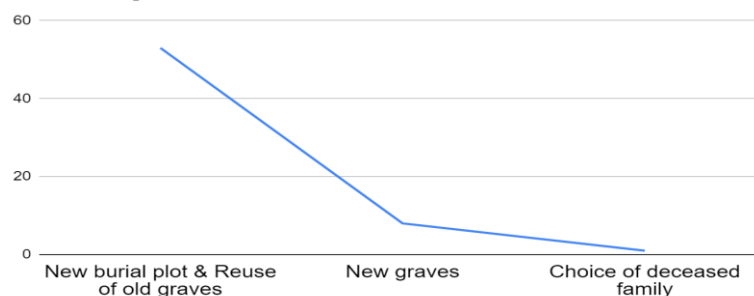


Fig. 2: Burial practice followed
(Source: Interview)



Fig. 3: Columbarium-style graves alongside a traditional grave, Khatla Cemetery, Aizawl
(Source: Author's photograph, January 26, 2024)

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