

*Possessing Christianity in Northeast India: Kelkang, 1937**

KYLE JACKSON

*Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Email: kyle.jackson1@kpu.ca*

Abstract

In 1937, a spirit moved in the mountains of Northeast India. It presented local villagers with a visceral anticolonial vision, laicized religious practices, and offered alternative definitions of expertise and literacy that sidelined colonial and missionary authorities. Its message pulled together a complex range of clans, pilgrims, and roadworkers, and reconciled them according to contemporary local logics. This article uses the ‘Kelkang incident’ of the Lushai Hills District (today: Mizoram) to reverse the polarity of conventional writings on prophetic rebellion in two ways. First, it asks not how the colonial state dealt with a prophetic rebellion, but how a prophetic rebellion dealt with the state. Second, it asks not what the moving spirit of Kelkang symbolized, but what it did and how people interacted with it. Placing upland spirits, humans, terminology, and concepts at the centre of the analysis, the article argues that a more open-minded approach to the history of religion can better reveal processes of mediumship and rapidly indigenizing Christianities as well as the much broader malleability of concepts like ‘conversion’, ‘revival’, and ‘Christianity’.

Introduction

In 1937, at the peak of the rainy season in the eastern Himalayan forests of British India, a spirit moved.¹ In the village of Kelkang, the spirit

* I wish to thank the people of modern-day Kelkang for their guidance and hospitality, in particular Pi Tuahthangi, Upa Papianga, Upa Lalsapa, and Rev. Lalrammawia. I am grateful to H. Vanlalhruaia and Kima Khawlhing for their assistance and to David Hardiman, Roberta Bivins, and Luke Clossey for comments on an earlier draft. This article also benefitted from the criticisms, encouragement, and suggestions offered by editor Norbert Peabody and two anonymous readers at *Modern Asian Studies*. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and to the International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden) for supporting this research.

¹ What colonial officials labelled the ‘Kelkang incident’ or ‘Kelkang disturbance’ can be reconstructed from several archival collections. The J. M. Lloyd Archive in Durtlang,

controlled the body of a 36-year-old cultivator called Thanghnuaiia Ralte, causing him to speak *vantawng* and *tawnghriatloh* ('heavenly languages' and 'unknown languages'). It guided the illiterate farmer towards passages in Christian scriptures freshly translated by British missionaries in Aijal, the administrative centre of the Lushai Hills District (today: Mizoram) (Figure 1). Thanghnuaiia assembled followers who were soon overcome with emotion and exhilaration (*hlim*) in church services, feasts, and prayer meetings, often dancing late into the night to the sound of booming drums. Revelations came next: the British empire would come crashing down, the local Mizo people would be free from colonial domination, and Christ's Second Coming was imminent.² Kelkang's medical dispensary stocked up with foreign medicines, its mission school, and Mizo pastors overseen by Welsh missionaries in Aijal—all were to be rejected. Most alarming to the Mizo chief Liannawla, who answered to colonial authorities, villagers abandoned their fields and ceased paying house tax.³ Finally, the spirit (*thlarau*) dictated that, if the

Mizoram, holds several key Mizo-language sources, including 'Tunlai chanchin (Mizo ram chhung)' ('The latest news [from within Mizoram]'), *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*, September 1937, pp. 130–1; A. G. McCall, 'Kelkang khuaa mi (thlarau thiang-hlim changa lan duh avanga lam leh thlarau ruih a tule titu kristian) te hnena thu sawi' ('Announcement Made to the People of Kelkang Village [the Christians Who Want to Appear as though They Have Attained a Higher Level of Revival by Dancing in the Spirit]'), *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*, October 1937, pp. 146–50; and A. G. McCall, 'Kelkang khaw harhna buai hremna' ('The Punishment of the Leaders of the Revival at Kelkang'), *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*, October 1937, pp. 150–2. The Mizoram State Archives (hereafter MSA) and the Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod Centenary Archive (hereafter MPCSCA), both in Aizawl, contain two uncatalogued bound files of A. G. McCall's 1937 trial notes, official depositions, and related documents, the latter collection being a comprehensive facsimile of the first. At MPCSCA, the two files are both entitled 'Mizoram Harhna Chungchang' (hereafter MHC and MHCII). The Calvinistic Methodist Archives at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (hereafter CMA) preserves several related files, particularly CMA HZ/1/3/39, CMA HZ/1/10/1, CMA HZ/3/53, and CMA 27,366; extensive documentation on A. G. McCall is available in the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections of the British Library (hereafter BL), London, catalogued as BL Mss Eur E361. The two main Mizo-language treatments are Chhawntluanga's *Kelkang Hlimpui 1937 (Harhna ropui tak chanchin)* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1985) and the commemorative booklet *Kelkang Hlimpui Diamond Jubilee Documentary Souvenir: 1937–1997* (Kelkang: Prebyterian Church Kelkang, 1997). I am grateful to Upa Papianga of Kelkang for sharing these latter sources with me.

² 'The Deposition of Sina Ralte', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Thankiauva Haohul Pawi', MHC, p. 2; A. G. McCall, 'Judgment in Case No. 35 of 1937', MHC, p. 8.

³ See, for example, McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, esp. pp. 1, 3, 5; 'The Deposition of Kaphranga Tlao Pawi', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Laiawara Pawi', MHC, p. 1;

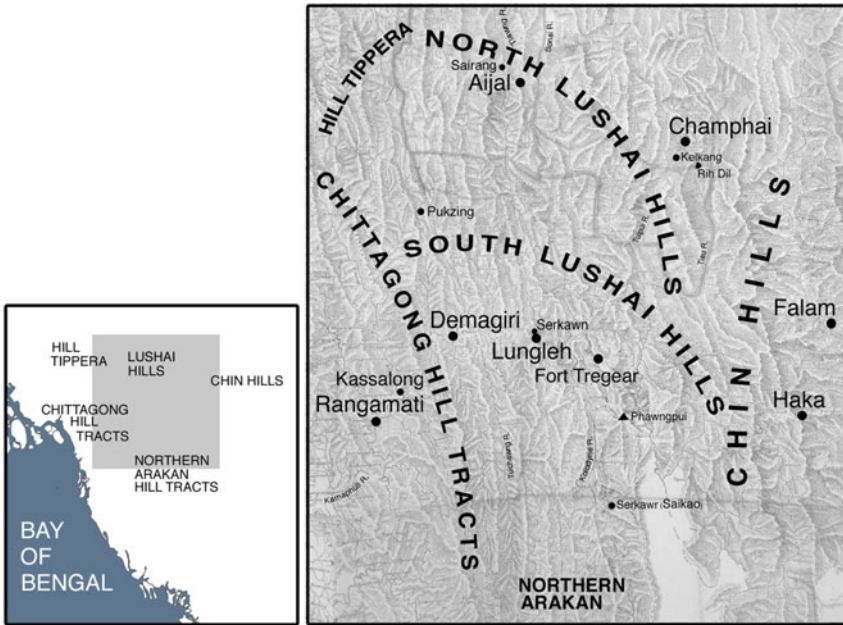


Figure 1. Highlighted area shown on map of the Lushai Hills and region, *circa* 1905. *Source:* Author, 2018, with base map from A. W. Davis, *Gazetteer of the North Lushai Hills* (Shillong: Assam Secretariat, 1894), n.p.

superintendent of the Lushai Hills District, A. G. McCall, dared to interfere, he should be killed.⁴ In the upland forests of Kelkang, Christian villagers defiantly rejected colonial and missionary experts, and awaited judgment day.

Judgment arrived on 4 September 1937, though in a guise no one expected. McCall arrived with military guard, established a strict curfew, and oversaw a five-day, open-air trial. Ninety-six men in the village were then forced into punitive work gangs and the village's firearms were confiscated. The church drum was seized, silencing the heartbeat of the movement. Kelkang's three most prominent human leaders were

'The Deposition of Hrangbawia Kaltang Pawi', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Rosavunga Chhongthu', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Thangchhima Lushei', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Dothuama', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Thankhuma Chhongthu', MHC, pp. 1, 2; 'The Deposition of Kapchhingvunga', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Kapdaii Lushei', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Lianhranga', MHC, p. 2.

⁴ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 6; 'The Deposition of Lianbuka Lushai', MHC, p. 1; A. G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (London: Luzac & Co., 1949), p. 221.

fingerprinted (Figure 2) and sentenced to deportation to Sylhet and three years' rigorous imprisonment.⁵ The *thlarau* itself escaped capture.⁶

Across South Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many so-called 'tribal' groups accessed channels of disruptive, prophetic power in the face of British colonial domination and read the world in their favour against long odds.⁷ Such moments of prophetic rebellion have often been depicted as failed 'millennial movements', easily quelled by the colonial state. In India's north-eastern political frontier, colonial authorities faced little trouble in putting down such revolts: the borders of the hill districts often formed a revolving door for the incarceration of spirit mediums. The notorious Jadonang was arrested in Cachar and moved to a jail in Imphal. His protégé, Gaidinliu, was arrested in Pulomi and imprisoned in jails at Gauhati, Shillong, Aijal, and Tura, consecutively. And Thanghnuai was arrested in the Lushai Hills and jailed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.⁸ But, as historian

⁵ McCall, *Lushai*, p. 222; McCall, 'Judgment', MHC.

⁶ Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden, and Karin Vélez, 'The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge', *History Compass*, vol. 14, no. 12, 2016, p. 594.

⁷ This is a vast literature. Stephen Fuchs provides a brief but now dated overview of several such movements in his *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1965); Ghanshyam Shah compiles a useful bibliography in his *Social Movements in India: Review of the Literature* (London: Sage, 2004), pp. 92–117. Ranajit Guha's classic treatment examines several spirit movements in wider context: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also Kalinkar Datta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855–57* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, reprint 1988); K. S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement, 1874–1901: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1983); K. S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983); J. C. Jha, *The Kol Insurrection of Chotanagpur* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink & Co., 1964); David Hardiman, 'Assertion, Conversion and Indian Nationalism: Govind's Movement amongst the Bhils', in *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings*, (eds) Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 255–84; Vinayak Chaturvedi, 'The Making of a Peasant King in Colonial Western India: The Case of Ranchod Vira', *Past & Present*, vol. 192, 2006, pp. 185–215; and Shashank Shekhar Sinha, 'Adivasi Movements and the Politics of the Supernatural in Colonial Chotanagpur', *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Occasional Paper: History and Society*, vol. 53, 2014, pp. 1–40.

⁸ On Jadonang and Gaidinliu, see Arkotong Longkumer, 'Religious and Economic Reform: The Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka in the North Cachar Hills', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2007, pp. 499–515; and Arkotong Longkumer, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement of Northeast India* (London: Continuum, 2010). Also see McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 6; A. I. Bowman to

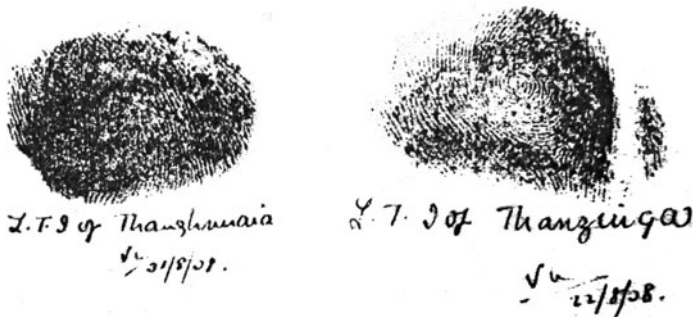


Figure 2. Thumbprints of Thanghnuai Ralte and Thanzinga Pawi, August 1938. *Source:* 'Mizoram Harhna Chungchang', Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod Centenary Archive, Aizawl, Mizoram, India.

Vinayak Chaturvedi argues, a focus on the failure of peasant movements as 'inchoate', 'naïve', or half-baked nationalisms easily quashed by imperial forces can obscure the substance of the movements themselves.⁹ Prophetic tribal movements are important not for their failure, but for what they were reaching for.¹⁰ This article lifts the veil on a little-known, spirit-led rebellion, but it reverses the polarity of conventional writings: its first objective is to ask not how the colonial state dealt with the prophetic rebellion, but how a prophetic rebellion dealt with the colonial state.

Scholars have found illuminating explanations for such moments of prophetic rebellion in theories of group derangement or individual psychosis,¹¹ social

A. G. McCall, 25 August 1971, draft of Bowman's 'Accounts of Lushai, 1931–43', BL Mss Eur E361/91, p. 66. Here, Bowman notes that the contemporary Congress Party attempted to capitalize on the suppression of some of these hill movements, for instance portraying Gaidinliu as 'a Hill equivalent of the Rani of Jhansi [Lakshmibai]'. On Gaidinliu in the Aijal jail, see the draft manuscript attached to the letter Ian to Tony, 25 August 1971, BL Mss Eur E361/91.

⁹ Chaturvedi, 'Making', pp. 159–60; the terms 'inchoate' and 'naïve' appear in Guha, *Elementary*, p. 11.

¹⁰ This idea is inspired by the work of Janet Gyatso in another context; see Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 18.

¹¹ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); Howard Peckham, *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1961), p. 98.

catharsis,¹² human imagination,¹³ class struggle,¹⁴ ‘rational adaptation’ to the challenges posed by Christian missionaries,¹⁵ manipulation by cunning ‘prophets’,¹⁶ the timely identification of ‘messiahs’ or probable ‘heroes’ for ‘redemptive processes’,¹⁷ attempts to restore a ‘golden age’,¹⁸ to secure Western material ‘cargo’,¹⁹ or in combinations of these theories.²⁰ All are about the motivations of humans, whether individually or collectively. However, for those actually participating in these movements, the lead roles were played not by humans, but by an invisible world of spirits: people did what they did because of spirits.²¹ Older, familiar spirits and well-known processes of spirit possession were less shouldered out of people’s lives by colonial domination than implicated in new relationships with new actors, whether missionaries, officials, or tax collectors. In Northeast India, the spirit world directly influenced the ways in which many hill peoples contested political changes because invisible actors provided avenues for action against an oppressive colonial regime. And, in the Mizo world specifically, possession, even by a more novel Christian *thlarau*, was nothing exotic or unusual.²²

¹² Anthony Wallace and Sheila C. Steen, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 50.

¹³ Michael Lambek, ‘Afterword: Spirits and Their Histories’, in *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, (eds) Jeanette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 238; Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, (trans.) Lisa Sergio (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963); and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).

¹⁵ Richard M. Eaton, ‘Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1–44; Robin Horton, ‘African Conversion’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1971, pp. 85–108; ‘rational adaptation’ in Robin Horton, ‘On the Rationality of Conversion: Part I’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* vol. 45, no. 3, 1975, p. 234.

¹⁶ Fuchs, *Rebellious*, p. 145; Peckham, *Pontiac*, p. 116.

¹⁷ Burrige, *New Heaven*, pp. 11–2.

¹⁸ Norman L. Friedman, ‘Nativism’, *Phylon*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1967, pp. 408–15.

¹⁹ Worsley, *Trumpet*.

²⁰ Longkumer, ‘Religious’. See also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957).

²¹ See David M. Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

²² James C. Scott makes a similar attempt to “deexoticize” [Southeast Asian] prophetic movements’ in his *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 311–5 (‘deexoticize’, p. 311.)

Approaching Kelkang with a more open-minded, empathetic, and Mizo-centred perspective—one that that strains (as far as is possible) to ‘see things their way’—requires historians to take seriously a world in which both religion (a word for which no Mizo-language equivalent existed) and spirit possession cannot be easily separated from reality.²³ Focusing on the Kelkang movement—an event barely known outside of Mizoram, but one that has attained almost legendary proportions within it—this article’s second objective is thus not to speculate about what the moving spirit of Kelkang might symbolize, but to investigate what it did and how Mizos interacted with it.²⁴

The spirit of the Kelkang movement rejected the regimented hierarchies and the authority of English and Welsh experts—administrators, teachers, missionaries, doctors, and trainees. It offered an alternative vision of expertise and alphabetic literacy—one not on offer at the schools of foreign missionaries. It presented villagers with a visceral anticolonial vision and laicized Christian religious practices. And it brought together and reconciled a complex range of clans, roadworkers, and pilgrims in Kelkang according to existing Mizo logics. As the village’s reputation as a community wielding transcendent Christian power circulated along expanding colonial road networks, a new role opened up for the first generations of Mizo Christians—that of the pilgrim—who returned home from Kelkang with new technologies of spiritual power.²⁵ While J. H. Lorrain, F. W. Savidge, and E. L. Mendus remain the household names in the regional history of

²³ Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (eds) *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); Chapman, Coffey, and Gregory borrow the phrase from Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1–8, 47.

²⁴ The basis for such a methodology is articulated and expanded upon in Clossey et al., ‘Unbelieved, Part I’; Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden, and Karin Vélez, ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II: Proposals and Solutions’, *History Compass*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, e12370; and Roland Clark, Luke Clossey, Simon Ditchfield, David M. Gordon, Arlen Wiesenthal, and Taymiya R. Zaman, ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III: Responses and Elaborations’, *History Compass*, vol. 15, no. 12, 2017, e12430. For a case study experimenting with such an approach, see Andrew Redden and Kyle Jackson, ‘Gods, Spirits, People’, in *Using Primary Sources: A Practical Guide for Students*, (ed.) Jonathan Hogg (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), available at <https://liverpooluniversitypress.manifoldapp.org/read/untitled-493687ea-d192-4880-b61e-19bd082917ba/section/0b9435bf-9209-45e7-bf35-81be5a2c3da3> [accessed 1 May 2020].

²⁵ Lalsangmuana, ‘A Historical Evaluation of 1937 Kelkang Revival Movement’ (B. Div. dissertation, Aizawl Theological College, 2003), p. 27.

Christianity in Mizoram, it was the skill of highly mobile Mizo spirit trancers, with names like Thanghnuaiia, Pasina, and Thanzinga, that placed uplanders at the centre of an indigenous movement towards a specifically Mizo Christianity.

Sources

Save for the Mizo-vernacular articles written by mission-educated Mizos in the 1930s, historians have very little access to stories told by Mizo villagers themselves, particularly by the silent majority (roughly 80 per cent by the end of the 1930s) who did not read or write. Extant materials from Kelkang are unique in that, thanks to McCall's open-air trials, a colonial typewriter came to a Mizo village. It was when government officials and missionaries characterized the movement as seditious, irrational, 'demoniacal', and full of 'dangerous possibilities' that Kelkang was launched into the colonial archive.²⁶ Kelkang's cultivator-leaders seem to have lamented their particular misfortune in so drawing the state's eye: 'This dancing in the Church is not an extraordinary thing,' Thanghnuaiia would tell McCall. '[B]ut if the Chief reports [it to the state] of course it becomes a bad thing There is this dancing of course in many villages.'²⁷ Indeed, dancers, trancers, and the spirit-possessed were common enough in the Lushai Hills District in the early 1930s, whether among those following

²⁶ 'Demonical' in McCall, *Lushai*, p. 222; 'dangerous possibilities' in Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1942), p. 42. On archivability, see Scott, *Art*, pp. 292, 295, 312. Other similarly 'archivable' movements in neighbouring administrative regions have attracted attention from scholars of Northeast India and Northwest Burma. On the early twentieth-century visions of the prophet Pau Cin Hau in neighbouring Burma's Chin Hills, see Pum Khan Pau's 'Rethinking Religious Conversion: Missionary Endeavor and Indigenous Response among the Zo (Chin) of the India-Burma Borderland', *Journal of Religion and Society*, vol. 14, 2012, pp. 1–17. On the Gaidinliu movement in Assam's North Cachar Hills, see Longkumer, 'Religious'. Revivalism in the mid-1930s did not stop at the border of the Lushai Hills District: in the neighbouring district of Chin Hills in Burma, one Thawng Khaw Zam led a movement from 1935 onwards before being excommunicated from the ruling American Baptist Misison. On this, see Zaichhawna Hlawndo, 'A Study of the Cultural Factors in the Foreign Missions' Thinking of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2011), p. 120.

²⁷ 'Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuaiia Ralte', MHC, 17 September 1937, p. 3.

customary practices, those identifying as Christians (with roughly 60,000 people in each of these groups), or among migrants from neighbouring regions.²⁸ The Kelkang trial records are thus unique in permitting a glimpse into cultural elements that typically danced beneath the radar of the colonial archive.

There is much about the records to recommend caution. Refracting between Mizo and English languages and between oral and written forms, the trial records from Kelkang are full of limitations. All 73 testimonies were recorded in a context of intimidation, and some testimonies are (perhaps strategically) curt. The depositions also reveal very little about the involvement of women at Kelkang. One of only three brief references comes from the male villager Thanvela, who records hearing ‘things [about the movement in Kelkang] from women and children’.²⁹ A second reference comes from the chief Liannawla, who briefly mentions a ‘women’s side of this spirit business’.³⁰ McCall interviews only one woman—the widow Kapdaii Lushai, who was the only interviewee to ultimately refuse McCall’s demand that all villagers publicly renounce the movement. Perhaps McCall’s interview choices reflect what he expected to see in Kelkang: male leadership. In the early 1930s, a Welsh mission budget crunch saw the regional Presbytery’s funding slashed for Mizo women’s formal roles to shore up financial support for male pastors. While McCall’s interview choices prevent a clearer glimpse of women’s roles in Kelkang, these roles were not only present, but also, given the case of Kapdaii Lushai, perhaps even the most fervent.³¹

The court records contain much that is useful: they began as oral statements, under the control not of the typist, but of the testifiers, and they reflect elements of what Mizos said during an unprecedented political moment in the Lushai Hills.³² Statements were translated and recorded on the spot by the Mizo clerk Lalbuka, with expert assistance

²⁸ Similar experiences recurred amongst the earliest Mizo Christian converts in various locales from 1906 onwards; see Lalsawma, *Revivals: The Mizo Way* (Aizawl: Lalsawma, 1994).

²⁹ ‘The Deposition of Thanvela’, MHC, p. 2.

³⁰ See Liannawla’s interjection during ‘The Deposition of Kapdaii Lushai’, MHC, p. 1.

³¹ Attempts to plug these evidentiary gaps have been exploited where possible, particularly through the author’s interviews in modern-day Kelkang and by revisiting interviews conducted by the Mizo pastor Lalsangmuana in Kelkang in the late 1990s; see Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’.

³² This point borrows from Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 110–1.



Figure 3. Unidentified Mizo leaders, A. G. McCall, J. C. McCall, and dog, *circa* 1930s. *Source*: Collection of C. L. Hminga, BL EAP454/6/1/7.

from McCall (pictured in [Figure 3](#)).³³ The records capture a spontaneity that suggests a degree of precision: the three human leaders of the movement, Thanghnuai and his disciples Pasina and Thanzinga, often interrupt other villagers' testimonies, bystanders interject during other depositions, and the textual record tracks closely. The trial records also contain awkward elements seemingly sanitized from later public accounts. For instance, in memoirs published 12 years later, McCall stereotypes the movement's leaders as scripturally ignorant.³⁴ But, in the village court records, cultivator-mediums confidently contest McCall's claims to superior biblical knowledge and reject any notion of inferiority: when McCall presses Thanghnuai—who was married and only visiting Kelkang—why he stayed in the village alone over the rainy season ('Did Christ abandon a wife and children he was pledged to support[?]', the illiterate cultivator invokes Luke 24:7 ('Christ said

³³ By 1937, McCall was already the longest-serving superintendent in the district, with some seven years of experience.

³⁴ For instance, McCall, *Lushai*, p. 220. The trope is common in private missionary correspondence as well; see, for instance, Gwenllian Mendus to 'My dear', 2 January 1938, CMA, HZ/1/3/39, p. 4 ('The Lushai Church is after all very young and inexperienced, and in the far off districts especially very ignorant still').

unless one hates his own life and his family he is not worthy to be my disciple’).³⁵ Pasina Chhonglut Pawi answers the same question bluntly, perhaps even subversively implying *McCall*’s ignorance: ‘Christ had no wife.’³⁶ Pasina then goes further, referencing the disciple Peter, who, like Thanghnuai, ‘also left his home and parents’.³⁷ Mizo villager Tlangbawia Tlao Pawi meets *McCall*’s cynical view of Mizo mediumship head-on: ‘God always speaks through humans. Others [besides the villagers in Kelkang] have been Isaiah and the early prophets.’³⁸ Thus, if read carefully, and alongside the counterweights of archival materials in Mizo and English languages, as well as modern interviews in Kelkang, the court records provide a unique glimpse into a Mizo world.

Approaching Kelkang

A brief overview of the region’s past will help position the Kelkang movement within the broader context of colonial rule. Set roughly between the Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy rivers, the mountain region that would one day be called Mizoram was towards the end of the nineteenth century home to culturally and linguistically diverse groups of people who had so far managed to exist outside of state rule. Some scholars suggest this evasion was intentional—that altitude, rugged mountains, and thick forests, combined with uplanders’ relatively egalitarian social organization, malleable identities, and mobile subsistence patterns, added up to a defensive strategy against the taxation, crowd diseases, and labour demands typical of lowland states.³⁹ Trade goods and guns had nonetheless scaled the mountains via long-standing trade networks,⁴⁰ hinting at the existence of the remote Raj somewhere beyond the hill populations’ northern, western,

³⁵ ‘Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuai Ralte’, MHC, p. 3.

³⁶ ‘Examination of Accused Person: Pasina Chhonglut Pawi’, MHC, p. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ ‘Deposition of Tlangbawia Tlao Pawi’, MHC, p. 1. Tlangbawia was an *upa* (‘elder’) in the Kelkang church.

³⁹ Scott, *Art*; Jangkhomang Guite, ‘Colonialism and Its Unruly? The Colonial State and Kuki Raids in Nineteenth Century Northeast India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1188–232.

⁴⁰ Gunnell Cederlöf, *Founding an Empire on India’s North-Eastern Frontiers, 1790–1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

and eastern frontiers. At that time, political power in the hills was dispersed along complex webs centring on individual chiefs at the village level and articulating along lines of kinship, debt, reciprocity, marriage, and friendship.⁴¹ The mobility of these hill polities would frustrate the first colonial surveyors in the region.⁴²

Most influential amongst the upland clans at the close of the nineteenth century was a group that the British would term the Lusei (later: Lushai). They and neighbouring hill populations followed lifestyles that outsiders rendered flatly as ‘animism’, though living in the region actually meant active, reciprocal, and contingent negotiation with an array of individual spirits, animals, and deities in one of the world’s most complex ecosystems.⁴³ Some of the most important negotiations had to do with clan, and thus village, membership. Highland clans such as the Lusei, Ralte, Hmar, Fanai, and so forth had lived separately in villages each under the protection of a unique *sakhua* (a clan group’s ‘guardian spirit’). Clan boundaries could be porous: villagers or captives might adopt another clan’s *sakhua* and thus secure adoption into another village, through negotiations involving the destruction and consumption of animal wealth. The absence of the written word in precolonial times obscures much of these transcendent pasts today but this does not render them any less alive.

The British characterized the broader region as an ‘unadministered’ periphery devoid of true political borders. Of course, these uplands did have internal boundaries that were administered politically, agriculturally, and environmentally: this was an upland centre as much as it was a colonial frontier.⁴⁴ But colonial stereotypes painted hill populations as essentially different—as ‘head-taking savages’⁴⁵ and

⁴¹ Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴² Thomas Simpson, ‘“Clean Out of the Map”: Knowing and Doubting Space at India’s High Imperial Frontiers’, *History of Science*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3–26.

⁴³ Kyle Jackson, ‘Colonial Conquest and Religious Entanglement: A Mizo History from Northeast India (c. 1890–1920)’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warwick, 2017), Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Alexander Mackenzie, ‘Bengal File No. L/20 of 1889’, quoted in Robert Reid, *The Lushai Hills: Called from History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam* (1942; repr. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1978), p. 9. On aspects of British conceptions of the ‘frontier’, see Lalruatkima, ‘“Frontiers of Imagination”: Reading over Thomas Lewin’s Shoulders’, *Studies in History*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2016, pp. 21–38.

‘warlike race[s]’⁴⁶ that practised ‘backwards’ slash-and-burn (or *jhum*) agriculture. The swathes of forest that uplanders reserved as proximate ‘hunting grounds’ crucial for both sustenance and ceremony were misrecognized as ‘uninhabited’ and ‘empty’ jungle.⁴⁷ Colonial tea, rubber, and teak plantations, as well as hundreds of thousands of imported settler-labourers, soon intruded on these forest reserves.⁴⁸ The assertions of territorial sovereignty by hill peoples in response only served to confirm the British stereotype that styled them as ‘unruly tribes’ culturally predisposed to ‘murder, pillage, and burn’.⁴⁹ The latter decades of the nineteenth century saw colonial agents respond to ‘tribal raids’ with ‘punitive expeditions’ of their own, with a particularly violent instance finally bringing the region under discussion into formal state rule.

There is little solid evidence concerning indigenous perceptions of the earliest moments of colonial rule. Certainly, the Raj’s claims to abstract, overarching, and geographically expansive power made little sense in this politically atomized upland world. As stockaded colonial headquarters began to dot the landscape in the 1890s, British engineers could remark that ‘[o]ne of the things most difficult to make a Lushai understand is that the Political Officers at Fort White, Falam, Haka, Lungleh, and Aijal all serve the same Government’.⁵⁰ The sheer violence of the period would also have been astonishing. The prolonged conquest saw villages burned, families held hostage, and crops destroyed, all often amidst famine conditions.

The ‘Lushai Hills District’ was officially annexed in 1895 after years of desperate resistance; three years later, its internal subdivisions were amalgamated to create geographically the largest district in Assam Province.⁵¹ The arrival of diverse groups of colonial agents—Punjabi

⁴⁶ For instance, ‘a warlike race like the Lushais’ in ‘Annual Administration Report of the Manipur Agency for the Year 1878–79’, in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. CIX* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1874), p. 19.

⁴⁷ Guite, ‘Colonialism’.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1219; on the case of wider Assam, see Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴⁹ Bertram Sausmarez Carey and Henry Newman Tuck, *The Chin Hills: A History of the People, Our Dealings with them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of Their Country*, vol. 1 (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1896; repr. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1976), p. 1.

⁵⁰ G. H. Loch, ‘Diary’, 19 September to 7 November 1892, BL Mss Eur Photo Eur 108, p. 2.

⁵¹ On early colonial administration in the region, see Pum Khan Pau, ‘Administrative Rivalries on a Frontier: Problem of the Chin- Lushai Hills’, *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 34,

carpenters, Santali labourers, Gurkha soldiers, Bengali farmers—bolstered the social diversity of the region, particularly in colonial headquarters.⁵² A British superintendent oversaw the district and wielded exceptionally wide-ranging powers. The Indian Penal Code was just one of many political norms whose operation the Raj formally ‘excluded’ from the hill ‘frontier’. A regulatory ‘Inner Line’ likewise limited outsiders’ travel into the hills.⁵³ On the ground, defeated chiefs learned to carry out the will of a handful of local British agents, even as chieftainships were conferred or cancelled in ways that ignored highland common senses about merit and authority.

From an administrative perspective, this was a backwater region to be run on the cheap. Expedient here was a *corvée* labour regime that saw tens of thousands of Mizo men (and in some cases women and even children) forced to build state infrastructure and to carry goods for the government.⁵⁴ New roads, pathways, and bridges allowed the formation (and sometimes the subsequent evasion by highlanders) of new systems of state control and surveillance, as well as the development of new commercial and missionary presences that kick-started a fundamental refashioning of the region’s political, ecological, and religious landscapes.⁵⁵ In these first decades of colonial rule, ordinary people had to navigate wrenching transitions to modern forms of governance, a cash economy, state borders, the written word, armed occupation, disrupted ecologies, and schemes for their permanent settlement.⁵⁶

Infrastructure provided for the circulation of the additional violence and disease that would drive Mizos towards other colonial institutions, particularly the dispensaries, schools, and churches of Christian

no. 1, 2007, pp. 187–209; and Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel, *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Chapter 6.

⁵² Kyle Jackson, ‘Globalizing an Indian Borderland Environment: Aijal, Mizoram, 1890–1919’, *Studies in History*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2016, pp. 39–71.

⁵³ P. Chakraborty, *The Inner-Line Regulation of the Northeast India* (Titagarh: Linkman Publications, 1995).

⁵⁴ Jackson, ‘Colonial Conquest’, pp. 74–80; Willem van Schendel, ‘Beyond Labor History’s Comfort Zone? Labor Regimes in Northeast India, from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century’, in *The Lifework of a Labor Historian: Essays in Honor of Marcel van der Linden*, (eds) Ulbe Bosma and Karin Hofmeester (The Hague: Brill, 2018), pp. 189–92. For a discussion of forced-labour regimes in neighbouring Naga Hills, see Lipokmar Dzüvichü, ‘Empire on Their Backs: Coolies in the Eastern Borderlands of the British Raj’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 59, no. S22, 2014, pp. 1–24.

⁵⁵ Jackson, ‘Globalizing’.

⁵⁶ Jackson, ‘Colonial Conquest’.

missionaries who intended their religion's dispersal in 'pre-packaged' form.⁵⁷ However, like the material detritus and trade goods that had washed into the hills during the final decades of the nineteenth century, the missionary message was open to Mizo interpretation: where uplanders had repurposed umbrellas into head-scratchers or pounded foreign coinage into bullets, they now interpreted the missionary message in ways equally unintended. New and novel religious knowledge was incorporated alongside the old and familiar.⁵⁸ This occurred most significantly in periodic moments of indigenization that, from 1906 onwards, missionaries styled as 'revivals'.⁵⁹ Upland singers likewise adapted the content and quality of missionary music to better suit their own melodic sensibilities.⁶⁰ Soon, a highland Christianity was emerging as an intricate tapestry woven by thousands of unofficial Mizo mediators—a complex process that this article will start to unravel by closely following one of its threads in a single village.

By the 1920s, a decade prior to the events at Kelkang, something new was underway in the regional landscape of Christianity. In some locales, so-called 'amulets' were being discarded en masse; in others, Christianity was becoming fashionable and a marker of social status. Culturally, Mizo elements of dance, music, and poetry suffused church services in increasingly open ways despite the ongoing disapproval of missionaries. A new era of diverse and self-confident Mizo Christianities paralleled the rise of new denominational, medical, and educational options in the hills. Though the complete Bible would not be available in Mizo translation until 1959, half of the population self-identified as Christian by the mid-1930s, and the broader populace was soon the most literate in Assam.

Despite the kaleidoscopically diverse social landscape in the region at colonialism's outset, a new 'Mizo' identity was also coalescing in the early twentieth century. British agents and census-takers misinterpreted

⁵⁷ I borrow the term from Karin Vélez, *The Miraculous Flying House of Loreto: Spreading Catholicism in the Early Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 8.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Pachuau and van Schendel, *Camera*, Chapter 4.

⁵⁹ See Lalsawma, *Revivals*.

⁶⁰ Joanna Heath, 'Khawhar Zai: Voices of Hope in the Bereavement Singing of Mizo Christians in Northeast India' (Ph.D. dissertation, Durham University, 2016); and Kyle Jackson, 'Hearing Images, Tasting Pictures: Making Sense of Christian Mission Photography in the Lushai Hills District, Northeast India (1870–1920)', in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, (ed.) Maya Kominko (Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers, 2015), p. 453.

and arguably produced several ‘tribal’ identities, but the privileging of the dominant Lushai clan’s dialect in the emergent spheres of education and print media did even more to catalyse this wider identity. A newly mapped territory and its newly fixed boundaries allowed the imagination of a highland nation’s origins and individuals began seeking more geographically expansive nomenclature with which to define themselves.⁶¹ Mission-educated graduates and authors especially conscious of wider geographical scales were at the intellectual forefront, seeking to place the ‘Mizos’ within the broader frames of world geography and civilization that their schooling and, occasionally, travels underscored. The technology of writing itself helped standardize narratives of history, identity, and origin—elements that once existed in a state of relative oral flux in the hills.⁶² In this article, I thus use the term ‘Mizo’ as convenient shorthand during a period in which the wider identity itself was still crystalizing—a process to which the spirit at Kelkang in fact contributed. It is a term that remains ambiguous and contested (if also hegemonic) in the region today.⁶³

The spirit of Kelkang

In the 1930s, the two largest missionary authorities in the district—the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission in the north and the Baptist Missionary Society in the south—denounced what they saw as an exceptional ‘hornet’s nest’ of end-times speculation amongst Mizo Christians, as well as the attendant dancing and ‘disorder’ that came with it, particularly in their easternmost jurisdictions.⁶⁴ Touring Welsh missionaries were amazed at how well versed Mizo students had become, on their own accord, in the *Book of Revelation*, and wondered at

⁶¹ Jackson, ‘Colonial Conquest’, pp. 204–13; and Joy Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), Chapter 3.

⁶² Joy L. K. Pachuau, ‘Chhinlung: Myth and History in the Formation of an Identity’, in *Chin History, Culture and Identity*, (ed.) K. Robin (Delhi: Dominant Publishers, 2009), pp. 150–2.

⁶³ Such contestations tend to group in several identifiable directions over the twentieth century: several minority groups came to define themselves as Christian but not Mizo (for example, the Lai, Mara, or Hmar peoples), others as Mizo but not Christian (for example, those who continued to reject the overtures of both foreign and hill missionaries), or those who identified as neither Mizo nor Christian (for example, the Bru, Chakma, Indic Indian, or Gorkha peoples).

⁶⁴ David Edwards to E. L. Mendus, 25 May 1934, CMA HZ/1/3/39, p. 2.

people's willingness 'to believe literally in ... the beast and the dragon, and the two hundred thousand horses with serpents as tails'.⁶⁵ For reasons difficult to pin down, *Revelation*, first translated into the Lushai dialect in 1911, was flung to the forefront of public discussion in the 1930s. Village children 'repeated long passages of [*Revelation*] to one another from memory'.⁶⁶ Church congregants set it to the mnemonic of song, and *hlim* churches (literally, 'joyful' churches, used to designate dancing and singing congregations who were, in local idiom, 'with the spirit') sang its verses over and over. In Aijal, the Mizo pastor Liangkhaia felt compelled to produce a 'Commentary on the Book of Revelation' for distribution to adult Sunday School classes across northern Lushai Hills.⁶⁷

A lively and growing print news media added fuel to the growing fires of expectation. By 1936, Welsh missionary Gwenllian Mendus had launched a world current events (*tunlai chanchin*) column in *Kristian Tlangau*, the mission's popular periodical, printed at Aijal's Loch Printing Press (Figure 4) and distributed monthly across the entirety of the district.⁶⁸ Mendus was publishing for a market ravenous for Mizo-language books and articles: the Mizo script itself was only four decades old by the mid-1930s, yet Mizos were already the most literate population in broader Assam, with literacy rates that had nearly doubled across the 1930s, reaching some 20 per cent by 1941.⁶⁹ Mendus had an eager audience: 'There is no [traditional] newspaper in Lushai so the task is a responsible one.'⁷⁰ Global conflict featured heavily in her world news

⁶⁵ E. L. Mendus, *The Diary of a Jungle Missionary* (Liverpool: Foreign Mission Office, 1956), pp. 58, 88; also see C. L. Hminga, *The Life and Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* (Lunglei, Mizoram: Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987), pp. 161–2.

⁶⁶ Mendus, *Diary*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ J. M. Lloyd, *History of the Church in Mizoram* (Aizawl: Synod Publication Board, 1991), p. 298.

⁶⁸ On the rise and uses of print media in the Lushai Hills, see David Vumlallian Zou, 'The Interaction of Print Culture, Identity and Language in Northeast India' (Ph.D. dissertation, Queen's University, Belfast, 2007).

⁶⁹ A. G. McCall to the Welsh Mission, Aijal, 20 February 1937, CMA 27,353, p. 1; Lloyd, *History*, p. 296. Census records suggest that public literacy in mid-1930s Lushai Hills had reached nearly 20 per cent—a crude measure that flattens extreme gender disparities and how uneven the on-the-ground reality was. Such statistics better approximate male literacy in the colonial centres than in far-flung villages; see J. V. Hluna, *Education and Missionaries in Mizoram* (Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 1992), p. 225.

⁷⁰ Gwenllian Mendus to [friend(?)], [no day given] October 1936, CMA HZ/1/3/39, p. 5.



Figure 4. The Loch Printing Press ('Synod Press'), detail, undated. *Source:* Photograph album, MPCSCA.

columns: 'alas, it seems at the moment as if I had nothing but wars and rumours of wars to report on,' she confides to a friend in 1936.⁷¹ Amidst the contemporary fervour for both the *Book of Revelation* and print media, these 'wars and rumours of wars' were not lost on Mizos. Missionary news channels emphasized looming conflicts that, when viewed by Mizos through a *Revelation* lens and memories of the First World War—a time at which some 2 per cent of the district's population was shipped to foreign battlefields as labourers—looked a lot like signals of Christ's revolutionary return. Christian Mizo students sang out: 'I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit [*thlarau*] is saying to the churches.'⁷²

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Missionary E. L. Mendus writes: 'I asked the students to sing for me, and straight away they sang for me [*Revelation*] Chapter iii, verses 7-13', Mendus, *Diary*, p. 58.

For the Baptist and Welsh Calvinistic missionaries who lived and worked in the region, the steadily amplifying interest in apocalyptic literature and themes was both a blessing and a curse.⁷³ On the one hand, it stoked an unprecedented upsurge in church attendance and boosted church coffers.⁷⁴ On the other, official missionaries fretted about the spread of ‘hysterical’ teaching and dancing in Mizo churches, promoted specific hymns that they supposed Mizo congregants would find less danceable, and condemned the ‘menace’ of ‘crude’ Mizo ‘superstition’ and the ‘waves of emotion or weird doctrines’.⁷⁵ Gwen Mendus captures the irony of the missionary quandary in a letter from 1938: the ‘chief problem this last year was the revival, strange to say’.⁷⁶

It was within this broader regional context of interest and expectation that, in April of 1937, an illiterate cultivator from Vandawt, a rural village north of Aijal, began walking eastwards across the district.⁷⁷ We know little about Thanghnuaia’s early years or his family life, save that his father died when Thanghnuaia was 11, and that Thanghnuaia appears to have had both a wife and children in Vandawt.⁷⁸ He was travelling to Kelkang that year to collect a hill buffalo (*sial* or *mithun*) as

⁷³ For a discussion of the Mizo historical and phenomenological experience of ‘revival’ (*harhna*), see Jackson, ‘Hearing’, pp. 475–7. Also see Lalsawma, *Revivals*.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Pasena to Mendus, 19 October 1934, CMA HZ1/3/39, p. 2, 5.

⁷⁵ A. I. Bowman, ‘Major A. G. McCall’, unpublished manuscript, BL Mss F180/5, p. 13 (‘hysterical’); David Edwards to Pu Mena [E. L. Mendus], 25 May 1934, CMA HZ/1/3/39, p. 2 (‘menace’); ‘crude’ and ‘superstition’ in David Edwards, ‘North Lushai Hills’, in *Reports of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales on Mizoram, 1894–1957*, (ed.) K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: The Synod Literature and Publication Boards, 1997), p. 145; and Gwenllian Mendus to ‘My dear’, 2 January 1938, CMA HZ/1/3/39, p. 4 (‘waves’). On hymns, see Gwenllian Mendus, diary book ‘X’, 30 August 1936, CMA HZ1/3/10, p. 9. Anthropologist Fenella Cannell points out the potential for leaders to deliberately ‘routinize’ church services in the interest of ‘member control’; see Fenella Cannell, introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, (ed.) Fenella Cannell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 30, quoted in Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, ‘Fractured Christianity amongst the Tangsa in Northeast India—Bible Language Politics and the Charm of Ecstatic Experiences’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018, p. 223.

⁷⁶ Gwenllian Mendus to ‘My dear’, 2 January 1938, CMA HZ/1/3/39, p. 3.

⁷⁷ On Vandawt in earlier times, also see the diary of A. W. Davis, 18 February to 14 March 1893, BL Mss Eur Photo Eur 108. On the colonial infrastructure travelled by Thanghnuaia, see ‘Report on Roads in the Lushai Hills ending 31st March 1933’, BL Mss Eur E361/19, p. 2.

⁷⁸ ‘Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuaia Ralte’, MHC, 1; McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 9.

a bride price for his sister.⁷⁹ The timing of his journey might suggest an intention to return home as soon as he had collected the debt, as the roughly 20-day round trip would have allowed a slower return journey (*sial* in tow) before the onset of the heavy monsoon rains and yet sufficient time to plant crops in Vardawt's mountainside fields—land that would have been customarily burned in February and March in preparation for sowing.

Thanghnuaiia faced a tough slog eastward. He would have crossed nine mountain ranges, moving against the grain of the region's north–south-running ridges and valleys, the topographic corduroy that saw most journeys measured in walking time rather than in linear distance.⁸⁰ Arriving in Kelkang, Thanghnuaiia found that the animal he had hoped to collect had died.⁸¹ A functionalist interpretation of what happened next might suggest that a fresh sense of the distance and terrain between himself and the colonial and mission administrations in distant Aijal catalysed Thanghnuaiia's subsequent 'possession' and emboldened his anticolonial and anti-missionary 'revelations'.⁸² A more Mizo-centred perspective—one that takes Mizo possession (*zawl*) on its own terms and one that does not write off the sworn testimony of Mizo villagers a priori—could suggest that the *thlarau* that possessed Thanghnuaiia chose the location of its *zawlnei* (its medium or its prophet) well. The relentless rains came almost immediately, with some 102 inches falling in the region that season.⁸³ Behind the triple fortifications of mountain ranges, monsoon rains, and washed-out roads, the movement in Kelkang developed where state and mission power most frayed at the edges.

⁷⁹ 'Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuaiia Ralte', MHC, p. 4.

⁸⁰ A traveller walking roughly 200 kilometres eastward from Aijal would have encountered five bridges in 1933; walking the same distance southward from Aijal towards Lungleh, she would encounter none. Thanghnuaiia would perhaps have noted that the five bridges he crossed—two permanent wire bridges and three temporary suspension bridges—were all strong enough to support the *sial* he planned to return with; see 'Report on Roads', Mss Eur E361/19, p. 2.

⁸¹ 'Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuaiia Ralte', MHC, p. 4; also see the 'Warrant of Commitment on a Sentence of Imprisonment: Thanghnuaiia of Vandawt', 18 September 1937, MHC, p. 2 ('Prisoner's Property Taken Over by Jailer').

⁸² On this theme, see Scott, *Art*, esp. pp. 302–35 ('High-Altitude Prophetism').

⁸³ I am grateful to the family of C. S. Zawna in Serkawn for sharing their historical rainfall records with me. These have now been made available via the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), 'Record of the Rainfall of Serkawn Station from 1912 to 1946', BL EAP454/8/25.

We can know very little of the genesis of the movement or the motives of the *thlarau*. A possessed Thanghnuaiia began speaking *vantawng* ('heavenly tongues'). The village's existing Christian converts—numbering about a third of the settlement's 180 houses and together under the administrative authority of Aijal's Welsh Calvinistic mission, its Presbytery, and its touring Mizo and foreign pastors—took notice, confirming the biblical precedents of *vantawng*.

Early on, the *thlarau* guided the illiterate Thanghnuaiia and his followers towards a range of alternative ways of reading. The first innovation was a literacy of chance. In Thanghnuaiia's hands, the Bible would fall open to reveal the *thlarau*'s message for Kelkang. Alternatively, he would 'put a piece of something in a Bible' to divine the *thlarau*'s message.⁸⁴ Pasina, an alphabetically literate villager, assisted by reading these revelations aloud for all.⁸⁵ Other innovations followed. Some villagers experimented with deriving verbal noises from the biblical texts, imaginatively inhabiting gospel stories; others wrote plays for communal performance from the Bible stories chosen by the *thlarau*. Here, the word came alive as new ways of reading presented new options for a Christianity of revelations performed, seen, and heard.⁸⁶ Still others amplified those portions of scripture in which people spoke in tongues.⁸⁷ Other innovators spelled the Mizo word *kross* ('cross') with their bodies in dances. Others still 'would all read the Bible' and then perform a portion of it, such as 'imitating Christ on the Cross'.⁸⁸ Distant from the region's central hubs of schooling, the village of Kelkang would likely have been the last place that missionaries would have expected to find literacy. But this was a village soaking in it. Understood not simply in a narrow alphabetic sense, but also as the skilled interpretation of text—the ability to look at and decode textual symbols for meaning—literacy deeply touched the human experience in Kelkang in ways that command us to 'rethink the notion of literacy as exclusively alphabetic'.⁸⁹ Mizo participants extracted rich meaning from printed text, not just as readers of biblical text, but also as *users* and *experiencers* of it.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ 'The Deposition of Sena', MHC, p. 1; McCall, *Lushai*, pp. 220–1.

⁸⁵ 'Examination of Accused Person: Pasina Chhnglhut Pawi', MHC, p. 1.

⁸⁶ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 5.

⁸⁷ McCall, *Lushai*, p. 220.

⁸⁸ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Joanne Rappaport and Tom Cummins, *Beyond the Lettered City: Indigenous Literacies in the Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. x.

⁹⁰ See Zou, 'Interaction', pp. 217, 219; and Arkotong Longkumer, "'Lines that Speak": The Gaidinliu Notebooks as Language, Prophecy, and Textuality', *HAU: Journal of*

Across the Lushai Hills in this era, mission schools held a near monopoly on alphabetic literacy in the region and were busily producing the first generations of Mizo pastors, evangelists, low-level administrators, and bureaucrats. Literate students—primarily males—pursued the ‘credentials of colonial modernity’, navigating standardized processes of accreditation.⁹¹ Literacy, diplomas, and certificates made Mizos visible in the eyes of state and church authority, and served as a conduit towards subservient but nonetheless significant positions in the political, educational, medical, and religious management of their fellow Mizos.⁹² District-wide, mission schools, mission dispensaries, and the mission’s travelling pastorships were all staffed from the cadres of Mizo experts produced primarily in Aijal and Lungleh. At the village level, conventional literacy was most visible via hated house-tax registers and the records of the government’s forced-labour demands, both of which were monitored monthly in each village by touring ‘Circle Interpreters’ and by British officials during tax-assessment years. In Kelkang, as elsewhere in India’s north-east and beyond, village-level texts and the English language were not only markers of colonial modernity, but also inherently bound up with foreign domination.⁹³ The *thlarau* of Kelkang

Ethnographic Theory, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, pp. 123–47. The touring Mizo pastor P. D. Sena, trained and authorized by the dominant Welsh mission of Aijal (and today remembered in village lore as a thoroughly Europeanized man, complete with felted hat and leashed dog), made five visits to the village from January to September. From April onwards, he became exasperated with the increasingly unorthodox uses of the written word, exclaiming that the Bible ‘was not for use as a fortune telling book’. Books and literacy became a battleground: Rulkhama Tultim Pawi, an elderly cultivator at Kelkang, recalled that P. D. Sena even ‘threw away [some of the village’s] books’; ‘The Deposition of Sena’, MHC, p. 1 (‘fortune telling’); ‘The Deposition of Rulkhama Tultim Pawi’, MHC, p. 1 (‘threw away’). For a comparative case on the creative use of missionary books by indigenous people in North America, see Phillip H. Round, *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663–1880* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁹¹ See Derek K. Peterson, ‘The Politics of Transcendence in Colonial Uganda’, *Past and Present*, vol. 230, 2016, p. 198.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ On related themes of peasants’ cooption or destruction of apparatuses and symbols of authority, see, for example, Guha, *Elementary*, pp. 28, 51–5, 248–9; Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Peasant Pasts: History and Memory in Western India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 26; David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 218; Scott, *Art*, p. 229; C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39–42; and Chaturvedi, ‘Making’, p. 158. For a comparative perspective on related themes in Southeast Asia, see Scott,

rejected all of this, instead opening up alternative and performative literacies to everyday villagers.

Many in Kelkang then began to speak in what the chief called ‘strange languages’.⁹⁴ As the villager Taibawnga Zahao would later patiently explain to McCall: ‘I myself also talk in a strange language. Sometimes my language is different to others—there are many of these languages. It is the language directed by the spirit [*thlarau*].’⁹⁵ Another villager, Chaldaia Fanai, used a natural metaphor: ‘If [you] put a rat inside a bamboo the noise is that of the rat and not the bamboo and it is the same when we speak it is the voice of the spirit.’⁹⁶ The nuance of this distinction was apparently important to villagers like Chawntluanga Zahao: ‘I have never heard [the mediums, the *zawlnei*] say that their voice is the voice of God but that they are used by the voice of God.’⁹⁷ McCall could not convince the Mizos otherwise: ‘[T]hey claimed with the utmost obstinacy that it is possible for a man to speak and the voice is not that of himself but that it is the voice of the spirit.’⁹⁸

The *thlarau* did this work according to the sort of sonic codes characteristic of spirits in the region, where distinctive languages evidenced spiritual power.⁹⁹ When the *thlarau* inaugurated a period of intense communal feasting in Kelkang, it used the voice of the human possessed to make the sound of the animal to be killed, whether goat, pig, or hill buffalo.¹⁰⁰ Taibawnga Zahao reported that the *thlarau* ‘used’ human tongues to do this: ‘It is not his noise but that of the spirit.’¹⁰¹ Other villagers, predicting disaster for their neighbours still refusing or

Art, pp. 305–11. For a useful discussion of the productive power of writing through the introduction of foreign bureaucracy and surveillance, see Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 10, 12, 269.

⁹⁴ ‘The Deposition of Liannawla Zahao’, MHC, p. 2. See also ‘The Deposition of Kapchhingvunga’, MHC, p. 2.

⁹⁵ ‘The Deposition of Taibawnga Zahao’, MHC, p. 1.

⁹⁶ ‘The Deposition of Chaldaia Fanai’, MHC, p. 1.

⁹⁷ ‘The Deposition of Chawntluanga Zahao’, MHC, p. 1.

⁹⁸ ‘Examination of Accused Person: Thanghnuai Ralte’, MHC, p. 4; McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 8.

⁹⁹ ‘The Deposition of Thankiauva Haohul Pawi’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, ‘The Deposition of Hrangbawia’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Thankhuma Chhongthu’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Chhawngthiauva Sasem Pawi’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Taibawnga Zahao’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Lianhranga’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ ‘Deposition of Taibawnga Zahao’, MHC, p. 1.

unable to participate, looked up to the skies and made ‘hissing noises’.¹⁰² Chaldaia Fanai called the spirit language ‘mixed Latin and other languages. Sometimes they speak English’.¹⁰³ Missionaries in Aijal would assert their authority, later mocking such claims and contending that the uplanders would say ‘things such as “One! Two! Three! Right about turn!” knowing no English and thinking they are under the influence of the Spirit!’¹⁰⁴ But the sounds voiced by mediums are better read not as evidence of Mizo ignorance, exoticism, or excess, but as counter assertions of authority in line with spirit sonic codes and a broader rejection of colonial and missionary supremacy.¹⁰⁵ If the language of colonial command in the Lushai Hills was English, Mizos commanded it too, not by colonial education in mission compounds and mission schools, but via spirit possession—a pathway to knowledge antecedent to colonialism in the region, and one that leapfrogged the missionaries who, powerless to stop the process, could only label it primitive ‘spiritual pride’ or the ‘disregard of their own pastors and leaders and of the missionaries’.¹⁰⁶

The *thlarau* inaugurated a heightened sensory experience in Kelkang.¹⁰⁷ Bells clanged and drums boomed to commence and soundtrack meetings. The dried horns of *sial* were beaten together to welcome cultivators back from the fields.¹⁰⁸ Smells, too, had a role to play, signalling one’s position in regard to the movement. ‘Any who was not a Christian they used to drive out saying they were of bad smell,’ Thankuma Chawngthu testified before McCall.¹⁰⁹ The chief, Liannawla Zahao—an authority figure aligned with the colonial government—was told that he ‘had a bad smell’.¹¹⁰ We know that the elderly chief, himself not a Christian, suffered from *ruhseh* (or what missionaries knew as rheumatism); Mizos

¹⁰² ‘The Deposition of Lianhranga’, MHC, p. 3.

¹⁰³ ‘The Deposition of Chaldaia Fanai’, MHC, p. 1. Also see McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Gwenllian Mendus to friends, 2 January 1938, CMA HZ1/3/39, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ On the appropriation of ‘signs of authority’, see Guha, *Elementary*, especially his chapter on ‘Negation’, pp. 18–76.

¹⁰⁶ Gwenllian Mendus to friends, 2 January 1938, CMA HZ1/3/39, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ On the sensory experience of Christianity and the Christian missions in the Lushai Hills District, see Jackson, ‘Hearing’.

¹⁰⁸ Lalsangmuana’s interviews with Upa Santhawnga (29 December 2002) and Sengliani (5 May 1997), Kelkang, in Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’, p. 35; author’s interview with Pi Tuaththangi, Kelkang, 19 June 2014, (trans.) H. Vanlalhruaia.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Deposition of Thankuma Chhonthu’, MHC, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Deposition of Liannawla’, MHC, p. 2.

traditionally applied the curative and pungent fats of pythons, tigers, or bears to those with the affliction.¹¹¹ Perhaps physical odour and, by extension, healing authority was at issue here, for the Christians claimed that all medicines had become irrelevant: Pasina and others now possessed sufficient healing powers via the spirit.¹¹² But the chief's 'bad smell' was more likely a transcendental one—an aroma detectable by those with the *thlarau* and one that placed him outside of the movement. Other verbal attacks clearly concerned the chief's authority and symbols of it: 'They told me to take off my hat otherwise they would beat me,' Liannawla testifies.¹¹³

The *thlarau*'s revelations also implicated the everyday, human experience of physical movement in Kelkang.¹¹⁴ The surrounding natural and built environment channelled human movement in a very specific way: the village's primary entrance was, and remains, to the east, with most inward movement coming from villagers' sloping fields and the more populous plains below. Upon entering the village, a traveller walking westward immediately encounters a steep, upward gradient. In the 1930s, the chief's house was one of the village's westernmost buildings, positioned at altitude above other houses and distant from the village entrance—an arrangement typical in the hills, where those claiming positions of authority (chiefs, missionaries, colonial officials, healing specialists) often laid claim to the high ground.¹¹⁵ Far from socially neutral 'facts', the locations of structures were also

¹¹¹ 'The Deposition of Liannawla', MHC, p. 4; for Mizo cures for *ruhseh*, see J. H. Lorrain, *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1940), p. 404; H. Buanga, 'Old Lushai Remedies', 13 June 1940, BL Mss Eur E361/24, p. 5.

¹¹² McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 1; 'The Deposition of Kaphranga Tlao Pawi', MHC, p. 2. The villager Tlangbawia Tlao Pawi was one of many who sought and expected physical healing through participation in the communal feasts; see 'The Deposition of Tlangbawia Tlao Pawi', MHC, p. 1.

¹¹³ 'The Deposition of Liannawla', MHC, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Archaeologist Matthew H. Johnson argues that scholars must move beyond vague pronouncements on the 'meanings' or 'typologies' of space to focus instead on what he calls the more 'direct', 'real', and 'empirical' realm of everyday human movement through built spaces and environments; see Matthew H. Johnson, 'What Do Medieval Buildings Mean?', *History & Theory*, vol. 52, 2013, p. 383.

¹¹⁵ Author's interview with Upa Papianga, Kelkang, 19 June 2014, (trans.) H. Vanlalhruaia. The correlation between altitude, prominence, and social standing is still very much evident in Mizoram's modern capital city of Aizawl, where the city's well-to-do families can afford to live at higher elevations along the city's central ridge. The city's contour lines thus approximate a hierarchy of socio-economic status. The phenomenon has some basis in practical considerations, too; for instance, in the rainy

‘materializations of social relations in space’.¹¹⁶ To access the chief’s house and its authority in Kelkang was tough going—it was an aerobic experience that had its own haptic feel, involving lactic acid and breathlessness.¹¹⁷ By contrast, the original home in which the *thlarau* worked its wonders through Thanghnuai (and which served as an early meetinghouse, today commemorated with a concrete monument and plaque) was located at the opposite end of the village, at the base of the hill. These observations help illuminate later events, when the *thlarau* began revealing its vision for the spatial reorientation of the village. The *zawolnei* prophesied that a church would be built at the very height of the village: the spirit, like all authority in the hills, belonged in the highest places.¹¹⁸ To frustrate the prediction, Liannawla, the chief, relocated his family home to this prophesied place—a pre-emptive, spatial strike. However, when his wife became distraught at the possible consequences of so spurning the *thlarau*’s predictions (perhaps providing a clue as to her own open-mindedness towards the claims), the chief abandoned this dwelling and the new church was built.¹¹⁹

Occupying the physical high ground, the *thlarau* began claiming political high grounds, too. It voiced that the British empire would soon fall in a war, freeing Mizos from government (*sawerkar*) oppression.¹²⁰ Attendance at the Civil Surgeon’s local dispensary then dwindled; children ignored the local mission-authorized school and its teacher, Dothuama; and fields increasingly lay abandoned, putting the villagers at risk of defaulting on their house tax, for the *thlarau* promised that husked rice

season (*fw*), human and animal waste, as well as the runoff from erosion, drains downwards.

¹¹⁶ Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, Public Works and Social Space in Colonial Orissa, c. 1780–1914* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), p. 9.

¹¹⁷ The historical villages of Kawnpui, Durtlang, and Lungleng are good examples in which the impressive, colonial-era houses of chiefs remain in prominent positions largely above the houses of villagers, and in which one can still experience some of the ‘feel’ of walking to a chief’s house.

¹¹⁸ Throughout the history of Christianity in the region, prominent hills have been held as special sites for accessing spiritual power through prayer and these continue to be popular with the faithful, for instance, in South Vanlaiphai, Theiriati, Reiek, and Durtlang. Today, Kelkang’s ‘prayer mountain’ (*Hmun Thianghlim*, or ‘Holy Place’) attracts its own pilgrims. Interview with Upa Papianga; Upa Lalsapa, sermon, Kelkang Presbyterian Church, (trans.) H. Vanlalhruaia, 20 June 2014.

¹¹⁹ Villagers today count 14 incarnations of the Kelkang church building, from 1912 to the present; interview with Upa Papianga.

¹²⁰ ‘The Deposition of Sina Ralte’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Thankiauva Haohul Pawi’, MHC, p. 2; A. G. McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 8.

would soon fall as Mizo manna from the skies.¹²¹ Eventually, P. D. Sena—the Mizo pastor trained and authorized by the Welsh mission in Aijal to periodically visit and guide the Kelkang Christians under his *bial*, or touring circle—was barred from preaching. The *thlarau* would not permit him to speak.¹²² Pasina amplified the message: Mizos ‘should not bow down to the paid servants of the Missions’.¹²³ Instead, preaching authority in Kelkang was radically devolved to include any *hlim* layperson (those ‘joyful’, meaning ‘with the spirit’).¹²⁴ The Welsh mission’s prescribed order of service and Sunday School materials, all published out of Aijal, were cast aside to make room for spontaneous revelation and dancing. Finally, the *thlarau* rebuffed the ultimate authority of P. D. Sena’s white missionary handlers: the leaders of Kelkang *hlimpu* (‘the great *hlim*’) proclaimed their independence of any mission, colonial or global authority, ‘their Missionaries, Circle staff, Superintendent or even Parliament Members’.¹²⁵

Liannawla ultimately alerted authorities. Losing control over the symbolic high ground was one problem, but losing economic productivity of the village meant defaulting on the village’s annual tax—a finable offence.¹²⁶ After months of attempts to settle matters locally, messengers were dispatched to Aijal. On 4 September 1937, 36 hours after receiving the news, superintendent A. G. McCall departed Aijal with 12 soldiers of

¹²¹ See, for example, McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, esp. pp. 1, 3, 5; ‘The Deposition of Kaphranga Tlao Pawi’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Laiawara Pawi’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Hrangbawia’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Rosavunga Chhongthu’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Thangchhima Lushei’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Dothuama’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Thankhuma Chhongthu’, MHC, pp. 1, 2; ‘The Deposition of Kapchhingvunga’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Kapdaii Lusheii’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of Lianhranga’, MHC, p. 2.

¹²² Lalsangmuana’s interview with Neihthiauva, 27 December 1996, in Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’, p. 45; ‘The Deposition of Chaldaia Fanai’, MHC, p. 1; ‘The Deposition of [P. D.] Sena’, MHC, p. 2.

¹²³ ‘The Deposition of Dothuama’, MHC, p. 2.

¹²⁴ P. D. Sena, ‘Kelkang *Harhna*’, *Kristian Tlangau*, August 1964, p. 27; Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’, p. 33.

¹²⁵ McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 1; Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’, p. 49.

¹²⁶ No doubt, Liannawla also considered his local reputation—something crucial to the region’s chiefs. Today, towering memorial stones from the period can be found aggregated on the Champgai plain and modern travellers to Kelkang can pause to look over the amassed handiwork of the region’s first literate stonemasons, who recorded in sandstone slabs (*lungphun*) the names of regional chiefs alongside tallies of their rice-wealth and great deeds.



Figure 5. Members of the Assam Rifles outside the Indian Officer's Club, Aijal, 19 September 1930. *Source:* Collection of L. Sawithanga, BL EAP454/11/1/2.

the Assam Rifles (Figure 5).¹²⁷ Kelkang's long-standing affiliation with government-contracted road-repair gangs called *melveng*—including many who had lived in Kelkang itself—proved advantageous here: a Public Works Department sub-officer in Aijal, a Mizo man called Rualkhuma, learned of the superintendent's plans and alerted local *melveng* workers. The news made a remarkably speedy journey some 200 kilometres to Kelkang, apparently via nodes of *melveng* camps and the customarily nimble Mizo method of relay-runners.¹²⁸ With McCall's impending arrival, the *thlarau* now made its biggest political claim of all—the power of death over the superintendent himself: 'if the Superintendent interfered with the words of the Holy Spirit he should be killed.'¹²⁹

Some in the village presumed that the power in Pasina's raised hand alone would make McCall 'at once become stiff'.¹³⁰ Others were

¹²⁷ McCall, *Lushai*, p. 221.

¹²⁸ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 6.

¹²⁹ McCall, *Lushai*, p. 221.

¹³⁰ 'Deputation of Thankhuma Chhongthu', MHC, p. 1.

unconcerned about temporal matters: ‘let the soldiers or any other do us harm—no matter.’¹³¹ A safer, communal strategy was finally devised in the church. Pasina would open himself to the spirit directly before the British superintendent. McCall would surely lose his temper at the sight and this would be the sign for what must follow: the village would communally trample McCall to death—a method full of meaning to which we will return.¹³²

McCall had informants of his own. Perhaps passing as pilgrims, his agents determined that the village had been forewarned of his arrival. Hurrying, McCall arrived early in the morning of 12 September; Pasina was arrested as he was praying in the forest, perhaps for success in the day’s planned political assassination. Without his leadership, and given McCall’s surprise arrival, the plot was thwarted. A boisterous crowd nevertheless gathered as the superintendent arrested the other human leaders: McCall writes that

young men commenced to press slowly forward in a surly manner—provocative and insolent. To avoid the infliction of blows from rifle butts by the escort I went for them to break them up but they only just made way and were disinclined to move off. This is very unusual behaviour for a Lushi [*sic*] village.¹³³

Oral histories in Kelkang today recall how these villagers brazenly pushed the caps off the soldiers (*sipai*).¹³⁴ A five-day trial ensued in the courtyard in front of the church.

Kelkang through trial records

In their reports home, Welsh missionaries would characterize all of this—Kelkang and its spirit mediums, creative literacies, alternative languages, and heightened sensory experiences—as the corruption of Christian ‘revival’ by a group of backwards primitives. Missionaries in the region had fretted about similar ‘disturbances’ periodically, sometimes taking matters into their own hands in extraordinary ways. When a group of female spirit mediums attending a Baptist mission school were accused of slandering other villagers with prophetic knowledge, one of the girls

¹³¹ ‘Deposition of Lianbuka Lushai’, p. 1. Also see Hrangdawla’s interjected testimony recorded on the same deposition.

¹³² Zou, ‘Interaction’, p. 217.

¹³³ McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC, p. 2.

¹³⁴ Interview with Tuaththangi.

‘was brought into hospital, told kindly that she was obviously a very sick woman and must be kept in bed and away from other people, given a few draughts of nauseating and harmless medicine and generally made a little uncomfortable’.¹³⁵ The case of Kelkang, it seemed to Welsh missionaries in the north, was a dangerously derailed version of Welsh (and other) genuine revival precedents. McCall himself mocked the ‘croaking about, trembling, shaking hands, [and] limbs’ of Kelkang’s exotic, ‘jumping babbling pranks’.¹³⁶

It is tempting to follow the missionaries and McCall in viewing the phenomena at Kelkang through Euro-normative categories such as (imitated) ‘revival’ or (failed) ‘millenarianism’, or to see the booming popularity of the *Book of Revelation* as straightforward evidence of a contemporary Mizo concern with the end of the world. Certainly, this is how Christian missionaries, bureaucrats, and historians have approached many similar phenomena across India’s north-east. But, as Arkotong Longkumer has recently shown in the Naga context, millenarianism in Northeast India need not be read in this way.¹³⁷ Given the everyday ordinariness of transformative ‘prophecy, dreams and signs’ in this upland world, the priorities of millenarianism here can be better seen as ‘transformation rather than disruption’ and as social revolution rather than revival or rapture.¹³⁸ What if we attempted to shift our perspective, to understand such movements a little more on their own, upland-normative terms—not as failed ‘end-times revivals’, but as *zawl*, as possession by spirits whose aim was transformation?

Possession in the Lushai Hills was routinely possible by any number of invisible agents. It was in fact *McCall’s* conception of personhood—one in which an individual, a ‘distinctive whole’, was set ‘contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background’—that was the exotic outlier in Kelkang.¹³⁹ Indeed, such

¹³⁵ Beatrix M. Scott, ‘Indian Panorama’, unpublished manuscript, The Cambridge South Asian Archive, United Kingdom, Lady B. M. Scott Papers, box 1, pp. 166–7.

¹³⁶ McCall, ‘Judgment’, p. 5.

¹³⁷ Arkotong Longkumer, ‘Freedom and Frustrated Hopes: Assessing the Jadonang Movement, 1917–1932’, in *Northeast India: A Place of Relations*, (eds) Amit Baishya and Yasmin Saikia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 181–200.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 182.

¹³⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 59, quoted in Frederick M. Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 48.

an idea of personhood remains a strange idea in the broader context of global cultures.¹⁴⁰ Contemporary upland logic understood that the form of Thangnuaia's body was permeable and that invisible spirits controlled certain gifted humans—something that would have made the later fingerprinting (Figure 2) of upland spirit mediums as human individuals all the more perplexing.¹⁴¹ This permeability was what Frederick M. Smith had called the 'imposition or investiture on an individual personality of an independent and unseen external agent'.¹⁴² It is what Mizos called *zawl*. In the trial records, testifiers repeatedly attempt to make the concept clear to McCall: *vantawng* was the human voice coopted by a spirit. They consistently and clearly distinguish a difference: 'neither [I] *nor the spirit* ever talked of rice falling,' Pasina exclaims during one interview.¹⁴³

Brought face to face with armed state authority, the villagers at Kelkang were not caught intellectually flatfooted. Instead, upland thinkers confidently articulated the theory of cultural relativism: in the Lushai Hills, those who 'have the Holy Spirit ... tremble and dance but in civilised countries they do not tremble and dance but they have joy in their hearts so the holy spirit works according to the country'.¹⁴⁴ Such a formulation suggests that so-called 'tribals' were thinking with the concept even prior to its widespread use in Western academic circles—indeed, that a little-known spirit medium called Pasina Pawi may have developed, contemporaneously, one of the key intellectual legacies of Franz Boas, celebrated founder of anthropology.¹⁴⁵ Pasina held that the phenomena at Kelkang could not be measured by any foreign yardstick: in the rugged upper reaches of the district, the village was its own *Mizo* 'Upper Room' complete with, in Pasina's words, its own 'day of Pentecost'.¹⁴⁶ The participants in this intensely local movement remained well aware of a global scope. They confidently inserted

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Chatterjee, *Forgotten*, p. 318.

¹⁴² Smith, *Self Possessed*, p. 66.

¹⁴³ All other records suggest that the *thlarau* had indeed given out the rice prophecy; here, Pasina may be escaping personal culpability or signalling that a human medium other than himself vocalized the words; see 'The Deposition of Thankhuma Chhongthu', MHC, p. 2, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁴ 'Examination of Accused Person: Pasina Chhonghlut Pawi', MHC, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ On other indigenous precedents for, and influences on, Boas's thought, see Isaiah Lorado Wilner, 'A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2013, pp. 87–114.

¹⁴⁶ 'Examination of Accused Person: Pasina Chhonghlut Pawi', MHC, p. 3.

themselves as different-but-equal members of a world historical Christian family.

Throughout the trial records, McCall parses villagers into offenders and bystanders. To do so, he asks individual villagers whether they ‘believed’ in the revelations. For many present in Kelkang, human belief was—like McCall’s alternative ideas about personhood—irrelevant to the reality of possession or revelation, and yet provided an avenue to minimize blame in the eyes of the state. Villager Raltawnga Chhonghlut Pawi (a brother of Pasina) could thus tell McCall that ‘although the spirit has said [that the British empire will fall] we do not actually believe such things’—not denying the ontological reality of the spirit’s voice or the potential truth of its words, but deftly absolving the village from direct culpability.¹⁴⁷ Chhawngthiauva Sasem Pawi said: ‘I do not believe they have such power but if the spirit directs then it is spiritual power.’¹⁴⁸

In certain areas like ‘belief’, Kelkang’s revolution could thus be a soft one, pragmatic enough to give where necessary. For example, McCall would insist that Raltawnga publicly renounce his uplink to the *thlarau*; failing to do so would mean ‘many years before [Raltawnga] sees his family and the Lushai Hills again’—a particularly grave threat given the region’s long history of penal transportation in the region. The villager quickly complied in front of the 100 congregants gathered, who, tellingly, held a church service as usual that evening, regardless of the military presence.¹⁴⁹ Others claimed ignorance: ‘I have forgotten all,’ the cultivator Dosata said when asked about the church meeting where it had been planned to kill McCall, ‘though it was only five days ago.’¹⁵⁰ Thangchhima Lushei confirmed that the *thlarau* had indeed promised rice from the skies, but Thangchhima refused to name the human possessed to say so.¹⁵¹ One Kamthanga Pawi claimed to be a Roman Catholic too busy to know anything about village happenings.¹⁵² Through deft responses, obscuratation, and concealment, the village minimized direct culpability.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ ‘The Deposition of Raltawnga Chhonghlut Pawi’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ ‘The Deposition of Chhawngthiauva Sasem Pawi’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ ‘The Deposition of Raltawnga’, MHC, p. 2.

¹⁵⁰ See ‘DW44’ on ‘The Deposition of Nunkulha Zahao’, MHC, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ ‘The Deposition of Thangchhima Lushei’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁵² ‘The Deposition of Kamthanga Pawi’, MHC.

¹⁵³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

The most serious evasive technique was the planned attempt on McCall's life. The envisioned method of communal trampling offered a great advantage: 'no one would be able to say exactly who killed [McCall].'¹⁵⁴ This was not only a tactic for the moral diffusion of responsibility amongst humans—the rationale undergirding military executions by firing squad—or merely an escape strategy designed for colonial courts. It was also transcendently pragmatic: the *spirit* of the malevolent victim would not be identify the killer to cause him misfortune. When the famous Mizo chief Darbilli was killed by a *dawithiam* (a sorcerer, literally 'someone familiar with malevolent magic'), the sorcerer *had* to be communally destroyed. Villagers hauled before colonial courts claimed: 'I do not know who actually killed him—all the men of my village were there and all said they had killed him.'¹⁵⁵ In the same way, when a rogue tiger had to be killed in the Lushai Hills, 'the men of the village would surround the tiger and attack simultaneously with arrows, so that the tiger would not know who had killed him'.¹⁵⁶

For all his knowledge of the hills, McCall's discussions of the planned assassination overlook the historical depth of communal murder, of communal trampling, as a defensive tactic in the hills—one reserved in the uplands for ultimate predators. The planned method for killing McCall was commensurate with who he was and what he had done. In the past, the metaphor of the tiger was often invoked to describe certain powerful, despotic, and unpopular British officials. Chiefs warned their villagers in the presence of such British officials: 'Be quiet, these foreign chiefs when angry [are] like tigers.'¹⁵⁷ Ill-tempered British road engineers earned Mizo nicknames like Sapsakeia, the Tiger Sahib.¹⁵⁸ It was

¹⁵⁴ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 6; McCall, *Lushai*, pp. 221–2.

¹⁵⁵ 'Political Case', 27 January 1898, MSA CB-5, Pol-46, p. 1; also see R. Sneyd-Hutchinson, 'Summary of Events for 18 Jan. to 31 Jan.', 1898, MSA CB-5, G-52. For another communal murder shortly after the Darbilli case, see the 'Statement of Chonga, Son of Puchinga, of Khuangtin' and the 'Statement of Saiklira, Son of Dartunga of Kuatin', MSA CB-5, Pol-46.

¹⁵⁶ E. Chapman and M. Clark, *Mizo Miracle* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1968), p. 12. For another account of the communal hunting of tigers, see John Shakespear, *The Lushai Kuki Clans* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), pp. 34–5.

¹⁵⁷ The quotation is from an article extracted in the lecture notes of R. G. Woodthorpe, 'The Lushai Country', 1889, The Royal Geographical Society Manuscript Archive, London, mgX.291.1, p. 36.

¹⁵⁸ Vanlalchhuanawma, *Christianity and Subaltern Culture: Revival Movement as a Cultural Response to Westernisation in Mizoram* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006), p. 100.

precisely McCall's predatory tactics—his unprecedented persecution of genuine prophets and the possessed, his storming of the village of a *thlarau*, his astonishing authority wielded as head of state in the hills, the most powerful creature in the forest—that made him answerable with almost formulaic strategy. That the communal nature of the planned murder might obstruct the workings of the colonial courts was an additional advantage.

If McCall missed the full significance of the plan for his assassination, he also seems not to have noticed the novelty of the variety of clans or the polyglot roadworkers and pilgrims who surrounded him in rural Kelkang. Perhaps McCall was accustomed to the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of the bustling colonial headquarters of Aijal in which he lived his daily life—a settlement so grand that Mizos called it *Zawlkhawpui* (the 'Great Village') and where Mizo groups and family clans from across Northeast India rubbed shoulders with a dizzying array of Bengali clerks, Gurkha sepoy, Burman peddlers, Khasi contractors, Goan musicians, Naga sweepers, and North Indian schoolboys.¹⁵⁹

The trial records from distant Kelkang reveal the presence of an astonishingly wide range of historically distinct clan groups, from Raltes, Zahaos, and Chawngthus, to Fanais, Hrahseles, and Hmars, owing primarily to the influx of pilgrims. Offhand references in the trial records reveal some of the kaleidoscopic heterogeneity that pilgrimage produced; for instance, Runa Pawi notices how 'those near me [in the Kelkang church] were men of other villages'.¹⁶⁰ This was a categorically polyglot rural village. In the 1930s, the regional dialects of the Raltes, Pawis (Lai), and Fanais were connected to, but still distinct from, the Lushai 'Duhlian' dialect rapidly rising under the mission's patronage in schools and print media.

This staggering diversity of clans, all gathered in a single rural village, might help us better explain the *thlarau's* actions as well as its greatest material demand on villagers: it 'told people to kill animals'.¹⁶¹ Such demands came comparatively late in the movement, as it gained followers and attracted pilgrims, and reveal that the spirit's logics were evolving. When the demand finally came, it was total: testifiers' accounts are full of animal death. It was in 'God's name', according to

¹⁵⁹ Jackson, 'Globalizing'.

¹⁶⁰ 'The Deposition of Runa Pawi', MHC, p. 1.

¹⁶¹ McCall, 'Judgment', MHC, p. 1.

Chhawngthiauva Sasem, that he, Tlangbawia Tlao, and Hnawzkama Tulian, identifying from the Pawi clan, responded to the *thlarau*'s demands by killing 'a pig, a goat, and a *mithun* [hill buffalo]'.¹⁶² Zadala and Chaldaia, identifying as Fanai, slaughtered animal wealth, too.¹⁶³ Nunkulha, identifying as Zahao, contributed 'pig's meat' (*vawk sa*). The church elder Lianhranga killed two pigs at the *thlarau*'s request.¹⁶⁴ Using Taibawnga's mouth to speak, the *thlarau* also required a pig from the village teacher's father.¹⁶⁵ Some 29 animals were killed in all, including two the day before McCall's arrival.¹⁶⁶ Themes of food and animal death also dominate the memories of Pi Tuathangi, who was ten years old in 1937 and remembers well this characteristic slaughter.¹⁶⁷ The spirit was insistent. Holdouts were unacceptable. '[C]alamity would come' to the village if animals were withheld; animals had to be given 'on pain of calamity'.¹⁶⁸

What do we make of this? After all, animals often represented a cultivator's most valuable belongings. McCall's explanation held that Kelkang's leaders were shrewd performers who 'claimed' mediumship of the spirit for material and political gain.¹⁶⁹ The animal destruction he chalked up to insanity and foolishness.¹⁷⁰ Author Stephen Fuchs, writing about 'tribal' prophetic movements, assumes gullibility on the part of Kelkang's villagers: the 'two Lushai elders ... plotted the whole affair beforehand in order to make capital out of these revival tendencies in the Welsh Church of Lushai'.¹⁷¹

But a more upland-centred perspective—one that does not write off upland logics, but rather follows clues as to the spirit's changing motivations—suggests an alternative angle. Traditionally, villages in the

¹⁶² 'The Deposition of Chhawngthiauva Sasem Pawi', MHC, p. 1.

¹⁶³ 'The Deposition of Zadala Fanai', MHC, p. 1.

¹⁶⁴ 'The Deposition of Lianhranga', MHC, p. 1.

¹⁶⁵ 'The Deposition of Kaphranga Tlao Pawi', p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ 'The Deposition of Liannawla', MHC, p. 2. Also see 'Tunlai chanchin', *Mizo leh Vai*, September 1937, p. 130.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Tuathangi.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Deposition of Hrangbawia', MHC, p. 1; McCall, 'Judgment', p. 1 ('on pain of'). Also see 'The Deposition of Liannawla', MHC, p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ McCall, *Lushai*, p. 220; also see McCall, 'Judgment'. The human leaders of the movement do not seem to have benefitted materially: each had only two items of clothing to their name when they were taken into custody (khaki shirts and Lushai *chadr*, or wraps); see the warrants of commitment preserved in MHC.

¹⁷⁰ See McCall, 'Kelkang khuaa mi'.

¹⁷¹ Fuchs, *Rebellious*, p. 145.

region had coalesced around principles of clanship, with divisions based on traditions and genealogies of common ancestry. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, there were thus Lusei villages, Ralte villages, Hmar villages, and so forth—the foil against which later Mizo authors in Aijal would view the historical novelty of myriad swirling clans in that settlement.¹⁷² Despite these seemingly rigid divisions, membership in single-clan village communities was both extendable and interchangeable. A villager could *saphun* ('change group') by adopting the *sakhua* (the clan group's 'guardian spirit') of the village that she hoped to join. A Ralte villager might thus safely join a Lusei village without endangering the well-being of either the migrant or the group.¹⁷³ Since the village and its well-being (its health, prosperity, wealth, and fertility) were all bound up with the single *sakhua* spirit, it was a necessity that newcomers, whether willing fugitives seeking refuge with a chief or unwilling captives abducted in war, should 'adopt' the village's *sakhua*.¹⁷⁴ This was accomplished through formalities led by a village expert (*puithiam*), where animal wealth was destroyed for the village *sakhua* and communally consumed by the *sakhua* and villagers (Figure 6).¹⁷⁵ While this guardian spirit could move along with the village, the spirit was portable only within its specific ethnic environment.

In a massively diverse Kelkang—a village attracting wonder-workers, pilgrims, and road builders from different clans across the land—there were meanings that defied colonial logic attached to animal death, feasting, *saphun*, and *sakhua*. By ordering the destruction of animal wealth in a specific moment, the spirit of Kelkang acted as required by the law of a Christian *sakhua*, ensuring the well-being of those living in the conditions it had created and fusing bonds between once disparate clans. In a vernacular article publicly sentencing Kelkang's inhabitants, McCall addressed Kelkang's villagers directly: 'For peace and harmony to thrive in the society you should keep in mind what is good in the eyes of God and not the society in everything you do, in your taking care of your cattle and your behaviour towards your neighbours.'¹⁷⁶ But an upland-centred perspective suggests that it was precisely for 'peace and harmony to thrive in the society' that villagers in Kelkang

¹⁷² Makthanga, 'Tui leh ram' ('Water and Land'), *Mizo leh Vai*, January 1926, pp. 17–24, quoted in *Being Mizo* (trans.) Pachuau, p. 180.

¹⁷³ See Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, pp. 179–82; and Pachuau and van Schendel, *Camera*, p. 83.

¹⁷⁴ Shakespear, *Lushei Kuki*, pp. 48, 54.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁶ McCall, 'Kelkang khuaa mi'.



Figure 6. Killing a *sial* (or hill buffalo). *Source*: Photograph album, MPCSCA.

did act on correct behaviour towards their cattle and neighbours, which meant destroying and consuming animal wealth for the good of the diverse human clans assembling in Kelkang. Beyond the promises of freedom from colonial domination and manna from the skies, there was thus pragmatism in adopting a new *sakhua* spirit—this new possessing spirit of the *Mizo Kristian*. And villagers acted on it. As animals were killed and the number of feasts skyrocketed, Liannawla could marvel: ‘Before this trouble about one third were Christians now two thirds are Christian.’¹⁷⁷

The uniquely portable *Kristian thlarau* at Kelkang was not pinned down to any exclusive clan or to any specific place¹⁷⁸—an inclusivity that reverberated beyond the village and the year 1937. By fusing diverse clans together into one, the spirit inadvertently boosted, and co-constituted, a new sense of belonging then flickering to life across the region, whereby diverse groups of uplanders were increasingly seeing themselves as one people—as ‘Mizo’. Certainly, the broader category of

¹⁷⁷ ‘The Deposition of Liannawla’, MHC, p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, pp. 180–1.

‘Mizo’ was, in part, spurred by the actions of outsiders, particularly by the state borders that had circumscribed and ‘territorialized’ the hills for the first time. But the Mizo nation was also an idea imagined by insiders and not just by those upland humans—students, authors, politicians—who would soon take up the term and use or contest it in a variety of ways. Upland spirits imagined it into existence, too. The conversions facilitated by the *thlarau* were not merely religious, but also inextricably ethnic and political. These conversions contributed to a broader refashioning of the social landscape already underway, playing a peripheral but still active role in generating a wider territorial identity that, inadvertently and not long thereafter, would be used to assert upland rights against the colonial and postcolonial state.

In the moment, colonial agents with preconceived ideas about ‘religion’, ‘belief’, ‘revival’, ‘millenarianism’, ‘end-times’, and the inexplicable irrationality of Kelkang’s animal slaughter recognized little of the communal pragmatic potential of the Christian message in a rural village reconciling pilgrims and clans with a Christian *sakhua*. Viewed from another angle, the story of Kelkang’s Mizo Christianity is as much about village well-being, *saphun*, and indigenous assertion as it is about revival and conversion. It is as much about spirit possession, emergent politics, and the local fusing of clans as it is about the speaking of tongues, an established religion, and the global extension of Christianity.

Punishing the possessed

McCall sentenced Kelkang’s three human prophets to three years of rigorous imprisonment and deported them to a jail in Sylhet.¹⁷⁹ Robert Reid, the governor of Assam, additionally ordered that the three men ‘refrain from any public exhibition of worship or preaching any form of religion whatsoever’.¹⁸⁰ Local punishment was comprehensive. All 96 men in Kelkang were divided into work gangs and forced to walk to Aijal—an 18-day round trip—where they were subjected to six days of unpaid, disciplinary labour (*sazai hna*), levelling a mountaintop for a

¹⁷⁹ See McCall, ‘Judgment’, MHC.

¹⁸⁰ J. P. Mills, ‘Orders of the Governor of Assam’, 28 July 1938, MHC, p. 1. Reid’s personal diary shows that he also summoned to Shillong missionary representatives from Cherrapunji, Sylhet, and Aijal for comment on McCall’s action (‘all spoke highly of McCall’) and the possession trancers (‘and condemned the revivalists’); ‘Personal Diary of Robert Reid’, 28 September 1937, BL Mss Eur E278/52, p. 271.

colonial army barracks.¹⁸¹ All firearms in Kelkang were confiscated, leaving the villagers vulnerable to wild animals and less able to hunt. The rate of house tax was doubled for two years and those women previously exempted (for example, widows like Kapdaii) not only had their privileges revoked, but were forced to pay taxes retroactively. The church drum (*khuang*) was seized—a particularly galling punishment from the Mizo perspective, where the expression ‘dancing without a drum’ (*khuang lova chai ang*) conveys the peak of purposelessness and senselessness.

The superintendent then broadcast word of the punishments across the Lushai Hills, publishing two lengthy articles in the popular Mizo-language periodical *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin*.¹⁸² In these, he humiliates the villagers of Kelkang (‘the people dance and shiver like monkeys’—the simile an especially grave insult in Mizo, using the word *zawng* in pejorative reference to humans).¹⁸³ In other correspondence, McCall holds Aijal’s Welsh missionaries responsible for the uproar (*buaina*), issuing them with an ultimatum unprecedented in political history of the district: ‘stop the dancing or leave the Hills.’¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile, McCall launched an unprecedented surveillance campaign. An order ‘promulgated extensively’ across the Lushai Hills on 27 September 1938 saw Mizo speakers of *vantaung* (what McCall labelled ‘gabbling’) reported to the government.¹⁸⁵ Extant records include not only surveillance reports penned for McCall by a variety of Mizo chiefs, but also lists of the names, locations, and activities of some 48 men and 39 women singled out for special surveillance across 13 villages.¹⁸⁶ Some

¹⁸¹ McCall, ‘Kelkang khaw’, pp. 150–2; Lalsangmuana, ‘Historical Evaluation’, pp. 52–6. A ‘List of punitive labour of Kelkang village’ is contained in MHCII. The list records the names of all 96 male villagers and the dates on which they fulfilled their *corvée* obligations. At least two men were exempted from hard labour thanks to medical certificates provided by Pika, a medical officer stationed at the Champhai dispensary.

¹⁸² McCall, ‘Kelkang khaw’, pp. 150–2; McCall, ‘Kelkang khuaa mi’, pp. 146–50.

¹⁸³ McCall, ‘Kelkang khaw’, p. 150.

¹⁸⁴ McCall’s letter is referred to in Hughes to Thomas, 25 September 1937, CMA 27,366, p. 1. Also see E. L. Mendus to A. G. McCall, 6 March 1937, CMA 27,353; and Eirlys Williams to Thomas, 8 October 1937, CMA 27,399, pp. 1, 2. In the latter, Williams complains that the superintendent ‘says very cruel things and is very unfair in his accusations’ and she cancels her holidays ‘in view of what is happening’.

¹⁸⁵ Hughes to Thomas, 25 September 1937, CMA 27,366, p. 1; also see A. G. McCall, ‘Order on Khamlova Lushai’, 29 April 1938, MHCII.

¹⁸⁶ See, for example, Tlanglianchhuma to the Superintendent Lushai Hills, 11 October 1937; Lalzuala to the Assistant Superintendent Lushai Hills, 12 October 1937; and

were pursued across colonial borders.¹⁸⁷ Private missionary letters report a steady stream of these *mihlin* (literally ‘joyful people’, meaning speakers of *vantaung*) arriving into McCall’s government offices after being reported by chiefs and government officials.¹⁸⁸ In Aijal, one Zakamlova Lushai, who held offshoot revival meetings in his private home, was threatened with deportation.¹⁸⁹ Separate paper trails in the colonial archive follow Darsavunga of Reiek and the young man Neihliana from near Aijal, both for their alleged uses of *vantaung*.¹⁹⁰ Khamlova Lushai’s house in Aijal (which McCall’s spies alleged was the scene of ‘hysterical displays of trembling and gabbling’) was slated for destruction.¹⁹¹ In all this, McCall’s message was clear: ‘only authorized “[sic] persons may address members of the public on religion.’¹⁹²

But the state’s dogged pursuit and incarceration of upland spirit mediums failed to stop upland spirits. Historian Zairema sees the mid-1930s as a turning point in the regional history of Christianity and as a historical moment in which Mizos first seriously contested and even seized the reins of spiritual leadership—a process that would only deepen until the last British missionary left in 1968.¹⁹³ By 1937, congregants in places like Tanrhil were commenting that church

Vanhnuaitanga to the Superintendent Lushai Hills, 14 October 1937, MHCII. The aggregated surveillance list is ‘Hmawng Kawng Khua Harh na Chang Hming ziak na Lis’, October 1937–38, MHCII.

¹⁸⁷ Marginal note by McCall on the letter Lalluaia Sailo to A. G. McCall, 4 January 1938, p. 1 (‘if he goes over to Manipur state [W(?)e should keep a look out [on] his activities’).

¹⁸⁸ Hughes to Thomas, 2 October 1937, CMA 27,366, p. 2.

¹⁸⁹ A. G. McCall, ‘Order’, 6 May 1938, MHCII. When confronted by McCall for allowing ‘gabbling’ in his home, Zakamlova responded by sending two imported pamphlets entitled ‘Baptism of the Holy Spirit’ to McCall and wrote that ‘there are a number of Englishmen, Conquerors of the World, who subscribe to this belief regarding “gabbling”’. Kamlova to Supt; 2 May 1938, MCHII. Zakamlova was a compounder and an elder in the dominant Welsh Presbyterian Church until he left in 1938; his contact with Assemblies of God missionaries in Bihar and Calcutta worried Welsh missionaries in Aijal. Later, he would be instrumental in founding a formal Pentecostal presence in Mizoram. See, for example, Gwen Mendus to Thomas, 9 September 1937, CMA 27,353; and Hughes to Thomas, 2 October 1937, CMA 27,366, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹⁰ See MHCII.

¹⁹¹ Thakthing, Aijal. A. G. McCall, ‘Order on Khamlova Lushai’, 29 April 1938, MHCII.

¹⁹² McCall, untitled note, 27 September 1937, MHCII.

¹⁹³ John Meirion Lloyd, ‘The Life of the People of North Mizoram Prior to and Subsequent to the Advent of Christianity, up to the Year of the Mizo Church’s Jubilee

meetings were ‘much nicer without the Sahibs!’.¹⁹⁴ Later, the governing Presbyterian church would come to tolerate many elements characteristic of the Kelkang experience (boisterous music, dancing, *vantawng*, lay prophecy), though conservative elements remained: in 1949, it published *Harhna Hruaina*, a guidebook to appropriate practice in revival, urging restraint, and condemning excess.¹⁹⁵ Meanwhile, broad feeling across the district held that the government’s punishment of Kelkang villagers was too harsh.¹⁹⁶ As with its challenge of established church authorities, Kelkang’s direct confrontation with the colonial state over foundational, transcendental matters may also have fanned the first popular Mizo demands for political representation. In 1933 and 1934, petitions for a Mizo presence on Assam’s Reformed Council were forwarded to the governor of Assam, one featuring nearly 3,900 signatories.¹⁹⁷ Another dissolved when McCall forced its supporters to withdraw their names in a public meeting held in April of 1934. As at Kelkang, these upland nationalisms folded older clan divisions together into an emergent ethnic category of ‘Mizo’. Though it is conventionally approached anthropocentrically, this was a process also actively shaped by a spirit at Kelkang, complicating the notion of ‘secular nationalism’ as well as blurring the boundaries of politics and religion to indistinction.¹⁹⁸ Such ethnic imaginings—breathed to life by humans *and* spirits—would eventually coalesce into the region’s first political parties, such as the Mizo Commoners’ Union formed in 1946

in 1944’ (M. Th. dissertation, United Theological College, University of Wales, 1986), pp. 314–5.

¹⁹⁴ Gwennlian Mendus, diary entry for 11 April 1937, CMA HZ1/3/1-30 (the entry can be found on p. 41 of the journal beginning ‘23 August 1936’).

¹⁹⁵ *Harhna Hruaina* (‘Revival Handbook’) (Aijal: The North Lushai Assembly Standing Committee, 1949), cited in Pachuau and van Schendel, *Camera*, p. 275 (also see pp. 275–9).

¹⁹⁶ Hughes to Thomas, 25 September 1937, CMA 27,366, p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ Imdad Hussain, ‘Resistance, Pacification, and Exclusion: The Hill People and the National Upsurge’, in *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, (ed.) Arun Bhuyan (Guwahati: Government of Assam, 2000), p. 290, cited in Joseph K. Lalfakzuala, ‘Encounter with the British: The Legacy of Autonomy in the Mizo Hills’, *Social Change*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2017, p. 589.

¹⁹⁸ Chad M. Bauman, ‘Does the Divine Physician Have an Unfair Advantage? Healing and the Politics of Conversion in Twentieth-Century India’, in *Asia in the Making of Christianity: Conversion, Agency, and Indigeneity, 1600s to the Present*, (eds) Richard Fox Young and Jonathan A. Seitz (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 320.

under the leadership, notably, of a Ralte-clan civic leader and a Hmar-clan entrepreneur.¹⁹⁹

Conclusions

Despite their claims to secular sovereignty, colonial governments often had to deal with spirits. This article has sought to show how spirits had to deal with colonial governments. In Kelkang, a specifically Mizo Christianity was forged behind the veil of the rainy season of 1937. The *thlarau* encouraged a vision of the uplands and of Christianity purged from British domination. This article illustrates the novel ways in which ‘conversion’, understood from a hill perspective, could be socially and politically transformative within and beyond a moment of anticolonial resistance and indigenization.²⁰⁰ It advocates for a ‘more-than-human’ history extending beyond nonhuman animals, for the hills of Northeast India were also alive with spirits. It applauds and contributes to recent studies that foreground the agency of ordinary people in shaping diverse Christianities.²⁰¹

The *thlarau* bids us towards several broader reorientations. ‘Literacy’ understood inclusively extends beyond the alphabetic.²⁰² ‘Secular nationalism’ can be spirit-generated, recalling the *thlarau*’s minor but still active role in co-forging a collective ‘Mizo’ political identity. And the concept of ‘conversion’, which until recently has earned more tacit acceptance than critical reflection, can itself be converted.²⁰³ As Joy

¹⁹⁹ David Vumlallian Zou, ‘Vai Phobia to Raj Nostalgia: Sahibs, Chiefs and Commoners in Colonial Lushai Hills’, in *Modern Practices in North East India: History, Culture, Representation*, (eds) Lipokmar Dzūvichū and Manjeet Baruah (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 135. The political party was later renamed the Mizo Union.

²⁰⁰ David Mosse, ‘Accommodation, Reconciliation and Rebellion in the History of Tamil Catholicism’, in *Christianity in Indian History: Issues of Culture, Power and Knowledge*, (eds) Pius Malekandathil, Joy L. K. Pachuau, and Tanika Sarkar (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016), p. 186.

²⁰¹ For example, Tara Alberts, *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, ‘Preaching (傳 chuan), Worshipping (拜 bai), and Believing (信 xin): Recasting the Conversionary Process in South China’, in Young and Seitz, *Asia*, pp. 81–107; and Vélez, *The Miraculous Flying House*.

²⁰² Also see Rappaport and Cummins, *Beyond*.

²⁰³ For two recent studies approaching the concept critically, see David Lindenfield and Miles Richardson (eds), *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with Missionary*

Pachau and Willem van Schendel have shown, thinking with local categories like *sakhua* (and, as I argue here, *zawl*, *zawlnei*, and *thlarau*) can open up fresh perspectives on the malleability of the meanings of ‘conversion’, ‘revival’, and ‘Christianity’.²⁰⁴ For the villagers of Kelkang, many of whom identified as new Christians, practices of animal death and feasting contoured to older conventions that implicated village well-being, neighbours, spirit mediumship, clanship, and adoption. ‘Conversion’ in Kelkang also meant *saphun* and *sakhua*—practices that, according to contemporary Mizo logics, could offer well-being amidst both colonial oppression and a complex and jarring flux of clans, Christian pilgrims, and roadworkers. This article argues that the foregrounding of local terminology can open up causal explanations, interpretative pathways, and complexities otherwise obscured by Western categories and frameworks.²⁰⁵

However, ‘decolonizing’ these histories also calls for centring indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, attempting what historian Kenneth Mills has called ‘near immersion’ into the historical worlds of our subjects.²⁰⁶ In the case of Kelkang, this requires pinpointing interpretations about how spirits operated in a particular region at a particular time. Most importantly, it calls for seeing historical evidence about spirits as historical evidence about spirits, rather than *only* as metaphor, symbol, cultural expression, tool, or delusion, though doing so does not preclude the possibility or even the primacy of these or other causal explanations. Such a methodological manoeuvre attempts to incorporate indigenous knowledge more seamlessly into historical narrative but does not implicate historical Mizos as ‘exotic’ or ‘irrational’.²⁰⁷ To the contrary, it sidesteps both presentism and Euronormativism by exoticizing the *modern* perspective. To paraphrase historian Timothy Brook, the

Christianity, 1800–2000 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); and Young and Seitz, *Asia*. The phrasing borrows from Alberts, *Conflict*, preface, p. xvii.

²⁰⁴ Pachau and van Schendel, *Camera*, p. 83–4.

²⁰⁵ Clossey et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II’; and Edward Anthony Polanco, ‘“I Am Just a Tçitl”’: Decolonizing Central Mexican Nahua Female Healers, 1535–1635’, *Ethnohistory*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2018, pp. 441–63.

²⁰⁶ See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd edn (New York: Zed Books, 2012), quoted in Polanco, ‘I am’, p. 444; ‘near immersion’ in Kenneth Mills, ‘Mission and Narrative in the Early Modern Spanish World: Diego de Ocaña’s Desert in Passing’, in *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity*, (eds) Andrea Sterk and Nina Caputo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 115–6.

²⁰⁷ Clark et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III’, p. 7.

widespread inability of us moderns to see historical spirits as spirits is ‘our peculiarity, not a peculiarity of those who could’.²⁰⁸

What might the more active centring of spirits look like? Anthropologists of Christianity lament that ‘the model of colonial power/missionary project on one hand and “native population” on the other has rarely been problematised’.²⁰⁹ We might start by problematizing the binary itself. By ‘listening respectfully and quietly to the historical subjects’ and the sources, and by attempting to more accurately reflect the historical experience of indigenous groups and the past exigencies and intellectual contours of their worlds, a new set of actors emerges.²¹⁰ The long trend in social history has been a gradual widening of the circle of who and what mattered—children, women, non-Europeans, the environment, nonhuman animals.²¹¹ Might the *thlarau* present another frontier?

Several pioneers are already pushing boundaries, responding to (and even pre-empting) recent methodological calls for scholars to defy presentism, Eurocentrism, and the assumptions of Western modernity by more thoroughly ‘infusing their histories with the [historical, non-Western] perspectives available to them despite how untenable these ideas may seem to us moderns’.²¹² In a Naga context, Arkotong Longkumer sets aside neo-functionalalist interpretations that would construe the thus-far untranslatable notebooks of 1930s Heraka prophet Gaidinliu as mere imitations of the state’s ‘literary power’ or as talismans efficacious only ‘in the minds’ of her followers.²¹³ Instead, he dwells on those ‘instances where writing is provoked by the spirits’, respectfully privileging historical Naga epistemologies and imbuing his narrative with the ‘dreams, visions, and prophecy’ that attend to a Heraka sensory experience of the past.²¹⁴ In a Mughal context, Taymiya R. Zaman proposes humbly ‘attuning ourselves to the

²⁰⁸ Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 21, quoted in Clossey et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II’, p. 2, emphasis added.

²⁰⁹ Bernardo Brown and R. Michael Feener, ‘Configuring Catholicism in the Anthropology of Christianity’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 28, 2017, p. 148.

²¹⁰ Luke Clossey, ‘The Geographies and Methodologies of Religion in the Journal of Early Modern History’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol. 20, 2016, p. 549.

²¹¹ Clossey et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II’, p. 4.

²¹² Clark et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III’, p. 8; and Clossey et al., ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II’, pp. 2–4.

²¹³ Longkumer, ‘Lines that Speak’, p. 131.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

unfamiliar rhythms, presences, and voices of the past in a spirit of receptivity'.²¹⁵ She does so elsewhere when rethinking the 'construct' of linear time, her critique guided in part by living sufi poets who declare such notions 'comical'.²¹⁶ Geographically further afield, David Gordon's 'post-secular' perspective on Zambian history centres 'this-worldly spirits' and what he provocatively terms their 'invisible agency'.²¹⁷

Welcoming Mizo or other indigenous knowledges into academic analysis is no straightforward task. This article proposes one way forward: a thatched interweaving of upland and academic perspectives—combined to 'encompass[] the best of each'²¹⁸—can serve as a theoretical blind for observing the behaviour of the *thlarau* in the historical wild. The spirit's motivations and intentions may remain unknowable; indeed, in this sense, the spirit is not unlike the lesser documented humans at Kelkang.²¹⁹ But the specificity and timings of the spirit's movements do underscore how the logics of spirit worlds are neither static nor timeless. Irreducible to colonial imperatives, the *thlarau* evolved its actions and reactions over time, initially to decades-long shifts in colonial conditions (such as the expansion of alphabetic literacy and road networks in the region) and, later, in rapid flashes of spontaneous reactions set within precise moments (such as the specific timing of its demands for the consumption of animal wealth, only after the ethnic makeup at Kelkang reached critical mass). Spirits lived in the moment. Indeed, it was precisely because human relationships with spirits were so dynamic and historically contingent that anything happened at Kelkang at all.²²⁰

By the same token, however, the story of Kelkang does not offer up a general model of how 'Christianity in the uplands' became 'upland Christianity'. Future research might usefully compare the elaborate dances between spirits and humans in adjacent locales, across other contemporary Christianities, or even across time in Kelkang itself: in recent years, the village has again spoken up from the margins, hosting

²¹⁵ Clark et al., 'The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III', p. 3.

²¹⁶ Taymiya R. Zaman, 'Cities, Time, and the Backward Glance', *American Historical Review*, vol. 123, no. 3, 2018, p. 702.

²¹⁷ 'Post-secular' and 'this-worldly' in Gordon, *Invisible*, pp. 22, 5.

²¹⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 106, quoted in Clark et al., 'The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III', p. 9.

²¹⁹ Clark et al., 'The Unbelieved and Historians, Part III', p. 8.

²²⁰ Also see Redden and Jackson, 'Gods, Spirits, People'.

tens of thousands of twenty-first-century pilgrims who travel the same colonial road networks but who now export a spirit's message through hashtags and YouTube videos.²²¹

A dynamic world of spirits, mediumship, and rapidly indigenizing Christianities can be glimpsed by looking for what was familiar to participants rather than exotic to colonial authors, and by attempting to see upland worlds of possession, communal trampling, and sensory experience on their own terms. As Frederick M. Smith writes in a different context, historians' conventional 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (where spirits can be symbols or tools, but never spirits) continues to prove to be of much analytical value. But it 'must not become a hermeneutic of mandatory, routine rejection' of the historical subjects' knowledge, wherein the scholar's worldview obliterates the historical subject's.²²² In 1937, in the Lushai Hills District, the histories of Christianity and colonialism changed when a spirit moved.

²²¹ The 2015 events at Kelkang are outside the scope and aims of this article. For social-media posts, see the Twitter hashtag '#Kelkang', www.twitter.com/hashtag/kelkang?lang=en [accessed 6 April 2020]; for newspaper reports, see archived articles in *Vanglani* at www.vanglaini.org [accessed 6 April 2020]; also see Heath, 'Khawhar Zai', pp. 282–3. A related YouTube video produced by the modern-day church choir at Kelkang concludes with a visual reference to the events of 1937: see 'Kelkang Kohhran Zaipawl 2015—Harhna Ropui' ('Kelkang Church Choir 2015—The Great Revival'), performance, 18 December 2015, video, <https://youtu.be/my417bPcDio?t=280> [accessed 6 April 2020].

²²² Smith, *Self Possessed*, pp. 17, 83–4, n. 58. Also see Chapman et al., *Seeing Things Their Way*.