



Ethnic Affinities between Pawi (Lai) and Lakher (Mara) Tribes

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Abstract

Lakher and Pawi, also known respectively as Mara and Lai, are two tribes living in the Indian state of Mizoram, and in the Chin State of Myanmar. The two tribes have many very similar historical and cultural characteristics. Historical and cultural evidences strongly suggest that the Lakher were once a part of the Pawi tribe.

Key words

Lakher, Mara, Pawi, Lai, ethnic, tribe

Introduction

'Lakher' and 'Pawi' are two ethnic groups living in the Indian state of Mizoram. The two are separately recognized as 'tribes' under Scheduled Tribes list in Mizoram, as per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order, 1956 and as inserted by Act 81 of 1971, Government of India.

The Lakher population is concentrated in the Mara Autonomous District Council (MADC) area, situated in the southernmost part of Mizoram. The Lakher are also found in the Chin State (formerly Chin Hills) of Myanmar (formerly Burma). The Pawi population is concentrated in the Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) area, also situated in the southernmost part of Mizoram. A much larger Pawi population within the state is however found in other parts of Mizoram outside of LADC. In the Chin State, the Pawi population is generally believed to be the largest of all the ethnic groups. But there are no specific ethnic or tribal population breakups either in Mizoram (India) or the Chin State (Myanmar).

A self-governing political institution, under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, called Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) was created for the Laker and the Pawi in 1953. The PLRC was bifurcated into Pawi Autonomous District Council and Lakher Autonomous District Council in 1972. And in 1988, the names of both Pawi Autonomous District Council and Lakher Autonomous District Council were changed respectively to Lai Autonomous District Council and Mara Autonomous District Council. Despite the change of names of the two Councils, the two tribes still remain classified as 'Pawi' and 'Mara' tribes by the Government of India.

In spite of the constitutionally recognised names, viz., Lakher and Pawi in India, the Lakher call themselves 'Mara' (Parry, 1932, 1976). Likewise, the Pawi call themselves 'Lai' (Chhuanawma, 2020). In the Chin State, both the Lakher and the Pawi apply a blanket term 'Chin' in self reference besides Lai and Mara. In this article, the two generic names, Laker and Mara, and Pawi and Lai would be used interchangeably.

Using historical analytical method, some interesting examples of ethnic affinities between the two tribes, Laker (Mara) and Pawi (Lai) are highlighted in this paper. The findings of this research clearly and strongly suggest that the Lakher were once a part of the Pawi tribe.

Meaning of ethnic affinity

Ethnic affinity is defined by Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, as "A cultural background with which a person identifies" (available at, <https://ushik.ahrq.gov/>. Accessed August 24, 2020). Ethnic affinities between the Lakher and Pawi tribes would thus mean 'shared cultural and historical characteristics' among the two tribes or ethnic groups.

Common place of origin

Both the Lakher and the Pawi of India (Mizoram) traced their place of origin in the Chin State of Myanmar. N.E. Parry said: "Traditions says that the Maras came from the north, and it is certain that they all came to their present houses (in South Mizoram, author) from different places in the Haka sub-division of the Chin Hills" (Parry, 1932, 1976: 2). Likewise, the Pawi of Mizoram came from the Chin State, Haka being one the main locations of the forefathers of the Pawi (Hengmanga, 1982; DOUNGEL, 2015).

Chiefs

The chiefs in the Mara areas in Mizoram were drawn from Lai clans such as Chinzah (Mara name, Chozah), Hlawhching (Mara name, Hlychho), Bunghai (Mara name, Bohia), etc. For protection, the Mara people of the then Lushai Hills, now Mizoram, asked the powerful Lai ruling clans from the Chin Hills, the most powerful in those days in the entire in Chin Hills, Lushai Hills, and Manipur, to be their chiefs. And that was how the Maras settled in today's Mizoram under the protection and direct rule of the Lai chiefs (DOUNGEL, 2015).

For instance, the two most famous villages in the Mara area, Saiha (recently renamed Siaha), and Serkawr were founded by the Lai chiefs. The present capital town of MADC, Saiha, was established by Alkheng Hlawhching (Iakhai in Mara) while Serkawr was established by Lianchi Hlawhching (Laichi in Mara). Besides the town of today's Saiha, villages within the present day MADC area such as Serkawr, Tongkolong, Lawngban, Lungdar, Latawh, Maubawk, Phalhrang, Rawmibawk, Riasikah, Tuipui Ferry, Tuisumpui, Phura, Tuipang, etc., were once ruled by Hlawhcheu chiefs from the Lai tribe (DOUNGEL, 2015: 71-2, 78, 134). Similarly, other villages within MADC area such as Chapui, Siata, Chakhang, Chhualung, Lungbun, Niawhtlang, etc., were under the rule of Chinzah clan of the Lai (DOUNGEL, 2015: 71).

Likewise, Zawngling village was ruled by a Bunghai chief. It was annexed to the British empire in 1924. It is interesting to note that Zawngling was the last to surrender to the colonial British rulers in the whole of Lushai-Kuki-Chin land. It may be added here that Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh was annexed to the British empire in 1860, Lushai Hill (India) and Chin Hills (Burma) in 1889-1890, and the hills areas of Manipur in 1919. Zawngling village is still there till today in the MADC area.

In other words, the Mara and the Lai have had the same ruling clans. The two tribes were once ruled by similar royal families.

Clan names

Many of the Mara clan names are the same as those of the Lai's. Such prominent clan names of Mara, viz., Chozah, Hlychho, Bunghia, etc., are all names of Lai clans, corresponding respectively to Chinzah, Hlawhching, and Bunghai (of the Lai). These clans which have now become accepted as 'Mara clans' were obviously originally Lai clans, they have been simply translated literally from Lai into Mara. However, the opposite literal translation of the words is impossible, that is, from Chozah to Chinzah, etc. The prevalence of the same clans among the Mara and Lai tribes is another indication that the tribes have strong ethnic and cultural ties.

Language

In spite of the present day differences between Lai and Mara languages, the two tribes most likely have spoken one language in the past; that is, the two tribes must have spoken Lai language once upon a time. The famous author of Lakher monograph, N.E. Parry, in his classic work *The Lakhers* (1932, 1976), observed that the Maras “speak a language closely akin to Lai”, and continued to add that “Lai is said to be the parent tongue” of the Tlongsai Lakher dialect (Parry, 1932, 1976: 2). The great linguist Grierson also concluded that Mara or Tlongsai as “A dialect of Lai” (Grierson, 1928, 1967: 475).

The etymology of the word Tlongsai (pronounced tlong sai or tlo sai) is quite interesting and insightful.

The term Tlongsai originated from *Tlungsen* (Tlung sen). One Lai chief by the name Alkhenga Hlawchhing, known as Aikhai Hlychho by the Mara people, led some Mara from Thlantlang village (in Chin State) and founded a village called Lungsen (Lung sen) in the Chin State. But the inhabitants of Haka called it Tlungsen. Haka, a neighbouring Lai village also situated in the Chin State, is much older, much more powerful and more prominent than Thlantlang. It was from this village called Tlungsen that one Mara group derived its name Tlongsai, or Tlongai group (Hengmanga, 1987:40-41, as told by Mr.Chhumhmunga Hlawchhing, chief of Serkawr). That is, inhabitants of Tlungsen (Tlongsai or Tlosai in Mara) village subsequently adopted the name of their old settlement (Tlosai) as their common name.

Alkhenga founded several villages in the area now falling within Mara Autonomous District Council, including the most important one Serkawr, which was later to become the seat of Lakher Pioneer Mission, founded in 1905. Tlongsai now becomes an official Mara language in Mizoram (India). And the Tlongsai group is the most prominent one among the various Mara groups.

Dress

The traditional dress of both the Lai and Mara people is the same. The dress of the (Mara) people is the same as that of the Haka Chins (Lais), Shakespear wrote (Shakespear quoted in Allen, 1902, 1984: 151). The Lai *Pu Puan* is called *Mara Phipia* by the Maras, and the Lai *Chanlo Puan* is called *Chylao Poh* by the Maras (Varsangzuali, 2017: 85, 86). There could be no doubt that the Maras got the technique of weaving and the name of these 'puan' from the Lais. And it cannot be vice versa.

Hlado

'Hlado' (hla-do) is hunting songs or chant, sung either on the spot or afterwards, after killing an animal. The Hlado sung by Mara were those of the Lai. The Mara did not have their own Hlado (Shakespear quoted in Allen, 1902, 1984: 151). Parry writes, "All *hladeu* (hlado, author) are sung in a sort of bastard Chin (Lai, author)-no hladeu have ever been composed in the Lakher language" (Parry, 1932, 1976: 179).

Feasts of merit and celebrations, and dances

Feasts of merit and celebrations such as *Khuawngcawi lam*, *Sar lam*, etc., have been borrowed from the Lai (Haka) by the Mara (Lehman, 1963, 1980: 186). The popular Lai dance *Sar lam* or *Sar Lam Kai* is performed by the Mara as *So La Kia*. It is not any wonder then that the dances of Lai and Mara are similar. For the Mara have copied them from the Lai.

Lakher (Mara) as a part of Pawi (Lai) group

Common historical and cultural characteristics among the Mara and the Lai tribes pointed out above clearly indicate that the two tribes were once upon a time one and the same people. They must have lived together for quite a long period of time to have had such similar cultural traits and practices. All this strongly indicate that the Mara people were once, and is still, a part of the Lai group.

N.E. Parry, widely considered the most authoritative author on the Mara, said, “The Maras are a branch of the Lai tribe of Chins” (Parry, 1932, 1976: 1). Vumson also said, “Ethnologically there should be no distinction between Pawi and Lakher. Both are descendants of the Lai, whom the Lusei designated as Pawi ” (Vumson, 1986: 301).

Separation from the Pawi (Lai)

One group of Lai people left their area of settlement in the Chin Sate of Myanmar at a certain point in the past. Over time, the group gradually developed a somewhat separate identity of its own, most notably a dialect (s) or language (s). The breakaway group then came to be known as Mara or Lakher, just as the Bawmzo group of Lai left the Chin State and later came to known as 'Bawm' in today's Bangladesh.

Parry described how the Mara have got separated from the Lai thus: “...there are certain villages in Haka and also in the Lushai Hills the inhabitants of which are half-way between the Pois and the Lakhers” such as

Hnarang or Ngaring in Haka and Iana, and Siata in the Lushai Hills. He continued: "These villages on the border line between Pois and Lakher show how the Lakher gradually formed themselves into a separate tribe after they broke their original homes in the Chin Hills" (Parry,1932, 1976: 3,4).

Conclusion

It is thus clear that the Mara belong to the Lai group. Their origin, history, culture, customs, etc., are all the same with those of the Lai's.

Except for differences in the language or dialect, the rest is the same for Lai and Mara. But language or dialect is not the sole criteria for ethnic identity ascription or identification. If it were the case, a large majority of today's 'Pawi' (Lai) in Mizoram, who have totally forgotten Lai language and have now spoken Lusei for more than a century, would be excluded from the Lai family! Even among the Mara, Perry told us that there are five major groups speaking different dialects-Tlongsai, Hawthai, Zeuhngang, Sabeu, Lilai, and Heima (Perry,1932, 1876: 1).

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