



Research Paper

Bawi or Servitude in The Mizo Society and Its Abolition

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Abstract: The Bawi system in Mizo society, a form of servitude, was integral to traditional customs. It included various forms of servitude, such as distress servitude (*Inpuichhung Bawi*), sanctuary servitude (*Chemsen Bawi*), and deserter servitude (*Tuklut Bawi*), each with distinct roles and conditions. The system allowed individuals to seek refuge with chiefs in exchange for labour, but it was considered milder than slavery. British colonial rule and missionaries, particularly Dr. Peter Fraser, were important in abolishing the Bawi system. A key turning point occurred in the early 20th century when Fraser advocated for the system's abolition, leading to conflicts with colonial administrators. Ultimately, the British government passed legislation to abolish the practice by 1927. The abolition reflected broader colonial efforts to reform indigenous customs.

Keywords: Bawi system, Mizo society, Servitude, British colonial rule, Abolition, Peter Fraser.

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I. Introduction

Servitude, also known as the *Bawi* system in Mizo society, has an unclear origin but is a significant category within their traditional customs. According to Sangkima, "*The origin of the custom is not known, but it is believed to be as old as the society itself, and only the chief could possess a Bawi.*"¹ Lewin asserts that "*Boi*" is the term used in the Mizo dialect, signifying a person who has forfeited the right to individual action, but the term 'slave' would not be entirely appropriate in all other aspects.² William Van Schandel stated that, there were two types of servitudes, servitude-by-refuge (*bawi*) and servitude-by-capture (*sal*).³ There were three main types of servitude-by-refuge known as *Bawi*: Distress servitude, known as *Inpuichhung Bawi*; Sanctuary servitude, known as *Chemsen Bawi*; and Deserter servitude known as *Tuklut Bawi*.

Distress servitude or *Inpuichhung Bawi*:

These individuals, driven by starvation or dire circumstances, sought refuge in the chief's house. This category primarily consisted of orphans, widows, and others who could not support themselves and lacked relatives to provide for them. *Inpuichhung Bawi*, in particular, comprised a significant portion of this group. In exchange for their food and shelter, *Inpuichhung Bawi* essentially became members of the chief's household. The young men among them were responsible for tasks like cultivating the chief's land and tending to his fish traps. The women and girls took care of duties such as cleaning rice, sewing clothes, fetching wood and water, and looking after the chief's children. In addition to these responsibilities, the *Bawi* often used the chief's firearms

¹ Sangkima, "Bawi and Sal as an Important Economic Factor in Early Mizo Society with Special Reference to The Chief," in *A Modern History of Mizoram*, ed. Sangkima (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2004), 14.

² T.H. Lewin, *The Progressive Colloquial Exercise in The Lushai Dialects of the 'Dzo' or Kuki Language*, With Vocabularies and Popular Tales (Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Company Limited, 1874), 80.

³ William Van Schandel, "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*, edited by Ulbe Bosma and Karin Hofmeester (The Hague and Boston: Brill, 2018), 174-207, 26 April 2021. <https://www.academia.edu/37600727>.

and ornaments. It was within the Bawi's rights to leave the chief's house and seek a new master if they were mistreated or harmed by the chief or his wife.

Given that a more significant number of Bawi was believed to enhance the chief's reputation, they were generally well-treated by Chiefs who were willing to receive them. A *Bawi* could earn their freedom by offering one *Gayal* or its equivalent in cash or goods. When a young male Bawi reached the age of marriage, the chief would procure a wife for him, and they would reside in the chief's house with their wife for three years. After this period, they would establish their household and be known as *Inhrang Bawi*, working for themselves. They had to give the chief the hind leg if they killed any animals during this time. Failure to do so necessitated the payment of one *Gayal* or its equivalent. If the chief required rice, he could call upon the Bawi for assistance, and similarly, if the Bawi needed help, they could seek the chief's aid.⁴

Sanctuary Servitude or *Chemsen Bawi*:

The Sanctuary servitude known as *Chemsen Bawi* were a distinct category of *Bawi* in Mizo society. They included individuals who had committed crimes and sought protection from the chief against retaliation from the aggrieved victim's relatives. This category also encompassed those unable to repay their debts and thieves who had managed to avoid punishment and became the Chief's *Bawi*. The chief would release these individuals from their obligations under the condition that they and their children became his *Bawi*. Unlike *Inhrang Bawi*, the *Chemsen Bawi* did not live in the chief's house and worked directly for him. However, their children were regarded as *Bawi* to the same extent as their parents. Additionally, the chief collected the marriage price for the daughters of the *Chemsen Bawi*.⁵

Deserter servitude or *Tuklut Bawi*:

The Deserter servitude, known as *Tuklut Bawi*, consisted of individuals who switched sides during the war. They abandoned the losing side and joined the victors, pledging that they and their descendants would become the Chief's *Bawi*. To secure their freedom, a *Tuklut Bawi* could obtain it by offering a *Gayal*, and one *Gayal* would secure the release of the entire family. Like the *Inhrang Bawi*, the *Tuklut Bawi* did not reside in the chief's house. In most respects, the status and position of the *Tuklut Bawi* were similar to that of the *Inhrang Bawi*.⁶

Abolition of Servitude

The colonial rule significantly impacted Mizo society by abolishing the Bawi servitude system. The British had already prohibited slavery with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, freeing all enslaved people by 1838. Upon colonizing the Lushai Hills in 1890, the British found the bawi custom illegal and allowed those classified as bawi to gain freedom by paying a customary ransom of Rs. 40 or providing a *Gayal* or other assets. Many, including sanctuary servants like *Chemsen Bawi* and deserters (*Tuklut Bawi*), were liberated. The British were particularly concerned about the distress servitude category known as *Inpuichhung Bawi*.⁷

The controversy surrounding the Bawi system in Mizo society began with the arrival of Welsh Missionary Dr. Peter Fraser. In the words of B.C. Allen, 'In December 1908, Dr Fraser, an M.D. of Edinburgh with his wife and one Mr Roberts, who is his personal employ, came to Aijal to work as members of the Welsh Mission. This gentleman had no previous experience of the East, and within a very short time of his arrival, he assumed an attitude of active hostility towards many of the customs of the Lushais, more particularly to... the *bawi* custom under which retainer is supported by the chief and in return work for him.'⁸ In the year 1909, a youthful chieftain by the name of Khawvelthanga, hailing from Maubuang, embraced Christianity and released all of his *bawis* with the following declaration:

From this time, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the name of our King Edward, I free you from slavery. From this time, no one will be able to make you a slave.⁹

⁴ J. Shakespear, *The Lusei-Kuki Clans*, (Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 2008), 46-47.

⁵ Shakespear, *The Lusei – Kuki Clans*, 48.

⁶ Shakespear, *The Lusei – Kuki Clans*, 49.

⁷ Sangkima, *Essays on The History of The Mizos*, (Guwahati: Spectrum, Publication, 2004), 83.

⁸ B.C. Allen, "Letter to The Secretary of the Government of India in the Foreign Department," February 1911, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 7, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

⁹ Mangkhosat Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, (Aizawl: The Mizo theological Conference, 1996), 153.

Major H.W.G. Cole, Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, opposed the reform of the Bawi system, arguing it would anger the ruling chiefs.¹⁰ This led to a dispute with Peter Fraser. In response to Cole, Khawvelthanga sought official confirmation that his *bawis* would not revert to servitude under any future chief. Cole clarified that while Khawvelthanga could manage his *bawis*, he lacked authority over those belonging to other chiefs.¹¹ Cole warned that Fraser's actions had sparked significant discontent, potentially leading to his assassination or a wider uprising. He noted that previous Superintendents had already addressed many issues with the *bawi* system and advised against further changes to avoid disturbances.¹² Fraser, however, believed that the presence of *bawis* in a chief's household indicated slavery within the British Empire.

Consequently, Fraser argued that the existence of *bawis* contradicted the Constitution and should be completely abolished.¹³ R.J. William, Secretary of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission, noted that both Lushai Christians and *bawis* seeking help to secure their freedom highlighted their plight. He found it perplexing that a British subject had to pay what he saw as a ransom for liberty.¹⁴ Initially, Fraser complied with the Superintendent's instructions by paying the Rs 40 fee to release some *bawis*. However, as more *bawis* sought his help, he printed postcards to raise awareness and funds for their cause. This situation intensified the conflict between Fraser and Major Cole, driven by their differing perspectives and circumstances.¹⁵

To calm the anticipated problems, Major Cole issued an order in the November issue of *Chanchinbu*,¹⁶ wherein it was explained that in the Lushai hills, the concept of "bawi" or slavery was not the typical form of bound slavery. Instead, individuals can buy their freedom by paying a ransom. They have the freedom to go wherever they please, suggesting they are not enslaved. Therefore, it is more accurate to call it "Membership of the Household" rather than "slave price" (Bawi man). It suggested that it should be referred to as "Payment for board of household members" (chhungte chawmman). Anyone who wishes to buy their freedom can do so by giving the chief either forty rupees or a Gayal, and one family will be allowed to ransom themselves.¹⁷

Dr. Fraser gained support from other seasoned missionaries in the district.¹⁸ The Superintendent warned D.E. Jones that if they could not cooperate with the government, he would seek another mission to take over. While D.E. Jones and other missionaries encouraged Fraser to adopt a conciliatory approach and expressed support for abolishing the *Bawi* system, they advised caution to avoid harming both the *bawis* and the mission. Despite their efforts, Fraser submitted a memorandum to King George, wrote to Members of Parliament, and issued a press statement, escalating the controversy and angering the Superintendent. D.E. Jones strongly criticized Fraser's actions to both him and Major Cole, while the Directors of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission also disapproved.¹⁹

With the instruction of the Mission Directors, on November 1910 at *Mawphlang* in Khasi Hills, the district committee took up the matter at the meeting.²⁰ In the words of Dr Fraser, "Major Cole was invited into the final meeting. At first, he appeared to be satisfied with the agreement, but towards the close of the conference, he asked me whether I would accept the '*bawi*' system as it now is. Otherwise, I would not be allowed to return to Lushai. To this question, I replied, 'I cannot accept the '*bawi*' system as it now is.'" Fraser further stated, "for me 'to accept the '*bawi*' system as it now is" would be to accept a system which has been acknowledged to be a system of slavery by other missionaries besides myself, and as illegal by Government officials. Besides, this

¹⁰ J. Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram 1890-1954: The Bureaucracy and the Chiefs*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2007), 73.

¹¹ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 153.

¹² Allen, "Letter to The Secretary of the Government of India in the Foreign Department," 18.

¹³ Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, 74.

¹⁴ R.J. Williams, "Letter to B.C. Allen, Esq., Officiating Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam," March 1911, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 5, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

¹⁵ Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, 74.

¹⁶ *Chanchinbu* or *Mizo leh Vai Chanchinbu* was a monthly magazine published by the government of the Lushai Hills.

¹⁷ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*. 156.

¹⁸ Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, 74.

¹⁹ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 160-161.

²⁰ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 160 -161.

question has already been referred to higher authority.²¹ The meeting did not have any good results on the *bawi* issue, but it somewhat put more pressure on both sides.

Major Cole informed the district committee that he had restricted Dr. Fraser's movements, preventing him from visiting certain villages in Mizoram until the issue was resolved. He pressured Fraser to either leave Mizoram or sign an agreement allowing his return under specific conditions.²² These conditions required Fraser to focus solely on his role as a Medical Missionary, providing religious instruction and medical care, without involving himself in Lushai disputes or complaints. He was to refrain from expressing opinions on Lushai customs and direct any secular matters to the Superintendent, his assistant, or Reverend D.E. Jones. Furthermore, he needed to ensure that his staff did not interfere in Lushai disputes, except within his compound. Before undertaking extended tours, Fraser had to consult with the Superintendent, especially in politically sensitive areas. Failure to comply would result in his departure from the Lushai Hills within one month.²³

Dr Fraser refused to sign the agreement and thought he did not feel justified. He also believed that signing the agreement would forfeit his right and duty to speak out in the name of the Lord and Master.²⁴ When Major Cole heard Dr Fraser's refusal to sign the agreement, he sent a letter to him and mentioned that 'Your refusal is being reported to Government with a recommendation that you can only return to Aijal to set your private affairs, and a further communication will be made to you in due course.'²⁵ Dr Fraser wrote him back and said that he did not think any missionaries would be willing to sign this agreement or to expect any preacher of the Gospel to sign away his liberty of speech and conscience in such a way, and since Major Cole recommended the government to banish him from Lushai Hills, he informed him that he was appealing and asking for a trial.²⁶ Dr Fraser submitted his appeal letter and asked for a trial to the Viceroy of India on December 22nd 1910.²⁷

The Directors beseeched the government to permit Fraser to continue his work in the Lushai Hills before making their final decision, as the need for Fraser's service in Mizoram was very crucial since no other medical missionaries were serving in the Lushai Hills then. Moreover, due to his advancing age, which is forty-seven years, he will face difficulty in learning new languages like Bengali sufficiently well to conduct religious services effectively in any of the stations in the plains, and the Directors fear that he and his wife would not be able to work for any length of time in the extreme heat of the plains.²⁸

The Directors also expressed their irritation concerning the independent action of Dr Fraser in sending petitions to the King, letters to Members of the Parliament, and releasing a statement to the press. At the same time, they still hoped that Dr Fraser would co-operate and permission could be given to him to remain in Mizoram.²⁹ Therefore, the directors requested Dr Fraser to give an undertaking in order for him to continue his work among the Lushais, whereby he was not to take any action regarding the bawi system, as the Superintendent would make recommendations to the Commissioner for reform. He was also instructed to consult with his colleague on all matters to be brought before the government, and decisions made by the District Committee are to be followed and sent to the government by the committee's secretary. If he disagrees with the committee's majority decision, he can appeal to the Directors. Additionally, any correspondence regarding the Mission's work or negotiations with the government is not to be sent to the press or any person without the approval of the Directors, except for the Secretary of the District Committee and the General Secretary of the Mission.³⁰

By the instruction of the Directors, the district Committee was held in Shillong from 28-29 June 1911 to make a further effort to persuade Dr Fraser. The members of the District Committee were engaged in a heated argument

²¹ P. Fraser, "Letter to Reverend T. W. Reese, Secretary of the D.C. Welsh C.M. Mission, Shillong," December 1910, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²² Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 162.

²³ Major Cole, "Copy of a Draft Submitted by Major Cole," expected to be signed by P. Fraser as a condition for his return as a missionary to Lushai, FDEP, 13, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²⁴ Dr. Peter Fraser, "Letter to Reverend J. Ceredig Evans, Chairman, D.C. Welsh C.M. Mission," December 16, 1910, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 13, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²⁵ H.W.G. Cole, "Letter to Dr. Peter Fraser," December 19, 1910, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 14, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²⁶ Dr. Peter Fraser, "Letter to H.W.G. Cole," December 21, 1910, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 14, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²⁷ Dr. Peter Fraser, "Letter to His Excellency the Viceroy of India, Calcutta," December 22, 1910, FEAP September Nos. 5-21, 11, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

²⁸ Williams, "Letter to B.C. Allen, Esq.," 6.

²⁹ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 164.

³⁰ Williams, "Letter to B.C. Allen, Esq.," 6.

with Fraser concerning his procedures. Efforts to convince him to accept the three conditions were unsuccessful.³¹ At this point, the government felt compelled to order the removal of Dr Fraser from the Lushai Hills. Dr Fraser left on 26th October 1912, and Major Cole was transferred to Manipur.³²

Before Dr Fraser left Mizoram, by order of their directors, members of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission in Assam met in a conference at Aizawl in October 1911 to consider a solution to the *bawi* issue.³³ In attendance were three individuals: the Reverend Mr Evans, a seasoned missionary with thirty years of service in the Khasi Hills; the Reverend Mr D.E. Jones, who has dedicated sixteen years to his Missionary work in Aizawl; and the Reverend Mr J.H. Lorrain, a pioneering missionary associated with the Baptist Mission Society, whose involvement with the Lushai Hills spans over two decades. The conference considered the issue enunciated by the Superintendent about certain principles with the object of putting into clear light the modification in the *bawi* system, which successive superintendents had introduced to effect improvement. After careful consideration, the missionaries agreed that if it were generally known that all cases arising out of the *bawi* system would be decided on these lines, there would remain no system feature to which objection could be raised. The principles were agreed by this conference are as follows:

- (1) That the use of the word “*bawi*” should as far as possible be discontinued.
- (2) That claims for “*bawiman*” should be treated exactly like the claims which any Lushai, not a chief, might advance against any persons to whom he had given board and lodging.
- (3) That claims against “*bawis*” other than those which would fall under suggestions (2) should not be entertained unless for express consideration received, and should in that case be limited to the amount of such consideration.
- (4) That the liabilities of “*bawis*” should not be increased by the adaption of suggestions (2) and (3), and that the claim against any one family of “*bawi*” should not exceed Rs. 40, the present maximum liability that is enforced.
- (5) That it should be widely made known that it was not open to a Chief to take back forcibly any “*bawi*” who had left his service, the only admissible course being for him to apply to the courts, and ask to have his claim for compensation decreed. That it should, similarly, be made known that any “*bawi*” discontented with his lot was free, either to leave the service of his chief and allow the latter to apply to the courts for compensation, or himself to appeal to the courts to record an order that was no longer a “*bawi*”.
- (6) That any other questions arising in connection with the “*bawi*” system should be decided according to universal Lushai custom as binding on all Lushais, no distinction being made between Chiefs and ordinary people.³⁴

Following the settlement, the government of Assam proposed a change in the future status of *Bawi* in Mizoram.³⁵ The following measures proposed in the Assam administration’s letter No. 5028-P., dated the 23rd June 1915, were as follows:

- (1) A date should be fixed after which the “*bawi*” contract could not be entered into.
- (2) It should be notified that the government would pay to the chief the customary ransom (Rs 40) in the event of any “*bawi*” coming forward and asking to be declared free.
- (3) Government should recover from persons in whose behalf ransoms were paid such portion of the money paid as it could reasonably recover.
- (4) Persons so released would be at liberty to leave the chief’s house or to remain in it as they wished, provided that if the chiefs did not desire to maintain them in their houses they would have to leave, and government would have to make arrangement for their relief.
- (5) It should be explained to the chiefs that they would have the same rights as other Lushais to bring suits in the ordinary way for the recovery of the maintenance charges of any persons whom they might support in their houses.³⁶

In 1923, Mr W.L. Scott, the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, completed a census of *bawis* in the district. The number of in-dwelling *bawis* families was 316, comprising 476 *bawis*, of whom 119 were males between the ages of 16 and 60, and 357 were women and children. The number of out-dwelling *bawis* was 1110 houses, and the number of heads of family or youngest sons was 1,123, of whom 1,061 were between the ages of 16 and 60. The total number of families or houses was thus 1,426, but the peculiar customs concerning the *bawis* prevalent

³¹ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 165.

³² Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, 75.

³³ Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*, 166.

³⁴ The Hon’ble Mr. W. J. Reid, I.C.S., “Letter to The Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department,” February 1914, FEAP March 1914 Nos. 11-17, 13, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

³⁵ Sangkima, *Essays on The History of The Mizos*, 83.

³⁶ Chief Secretary, “Letter to The Government of Assam,” February 1923, FEAP 1923 File No. 522, 6, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

amongst the Chins and the Lakhers in one area of the Lungleh sub-division will make it necessary to pay the redemption price in respect of individuals and not in respect of families. Consequently, the total number of cases for which the redemption price to be paid was 1626. The initial expenditure in redeeming all the *bawis* in the district would be about Rs 65,000.³⁷

In 1927, the Government of Assam changed the word *bawi* to a newly coined term *chhungte* or *awmpuite*, which means 'inmates of the house'. Then, the term *bawi* was no longer permitted to be used in Mizoram. However, the issue of *bawi* reached the King of Great Britain, and he referred the petition of Dr Fraser to the parliament for discussion, and accordingly, the parliament discussed the issue. Mary Winchester, once a captive in the Lushai Hills in the early 1870s and who was then restored to her relatives in London in 1872, was instrumental in bringing about this effect. The British parliament finally passed a resolution to abolish the customary practice of *bawi*.³⁸

II. Conclusion

The research revealed that the Bawi system, a form of servitude in Mizo society, operated within the framework of tribal governance, particularly under the authority of chiefs. This system offered different forms of protection but significantly limited the freedom of individuals under its control. It functioned not only as a social safety net but also as a mechanism for economic and political control.

With the advent of British colonialism and Christian missionaries, particularly Dr. Peter Fraser, there was a growing opposition to the system, which was perceived as unjust. Although initially met with resistance from colonial authorities who sought to preserve indigenous power structures, missionary advocacy played a critical role in influencing the eventual abolition.

By 1927, the Bawi system was legally abolished, marking a significant shift in Mizo society. This abolition reflected broader colonial efforts to reform traditional customs and resulted in the weakening of the tribal chief's authority, paving the way for socio-political modernization in Mizoram.

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³⁷ Chief Secretary, "Letter to The Government of Assam," 7.

³⁸ Sangkima, *Essays on The History of The Mizos*, 83.