



Research Paper

Evolution of *Zualko* in Mizo Society: Adapting Traditional Communication Practices in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The study explores the evolution of the traditional practice of *Zualko* in Mizo society, focusing on its adaptation to the digital age and the efficiency of social media in information dissemination. Through telephonic interviews with YMA leaders, the study captures diverse practices across communities within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation Areas, shedding light on communication modes during crucial situations. This study serves as a comprehensive exploration of Mizoram's cultural resilience in the digital age. As Mizoram navigates the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, *Zualko* emerges as a symbol of cultural dynamism, offering valuable insights for preserving heritage while embracing opportunities presented by the digital era.

Key Words: *Zualko*, cultural evolution, social media, Information Centre, digital age.

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I. Introduction

Mizoram, situated in the northeastern region of India, is not only renowned for its breathtaking landscapes but also for the rich cultural practices that have withstood the test of time. At the heart of Mizoram's cultural identity lies the traditional practice of *Zualko*, a unique messenger system that has transcended generations, embodying values of urgency, kinship, and communication. As the winds of change swept through Mizoram with British colonization and the advent of Christianity, the *Zualko* underwent a metamorphosis, adapting to the modern era while retaining its cultural essence.

To navigate the historical roots of *Zualko*, examining its role as messengers in transmitting momentous news with cultural subtlety and care. It unravels the impact of colonial influences and Christianization on Mizoram's cultural landscape, leading to a reconfiguration of traditional practices and the emergence of Information Centres. In the contemporary cultural mosaic, the *Zualko* practice has undergone a profound transformation, leveraging Information Centres and social media for information dissemination. This study presents a refined analysis of various communities' approaches, balancing traditional practices with the demands of contemporary life. Recommendations are provided to foster cultural preservation, enhance digital literacy, promote community engagement, and ensure ethical social media use. As Mizoram threads the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, the tradition of *Zualko* emerges as a symbol of cultural resilience. Mizoram's vibrant cultural tapestry continues to thrive, adapting and flourishing in the ever-evolving landscape of the 21st century.

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of *Zualko* practices in contemporary Mizoram, weaving together the threads of tradition and modernity. The study delves into the effectiveness of social media, Information Centres, and evolving communication methods within the Young Mizo Association (YMA), an integral community organization. It also brings forth a discussion on the practice of *Zualko* in traditional Mizo society and how it has evolved over time. It explores the digital wave that has gradually permeated Mizo society, with social media platforms becoming ubiquitous and reshaping communication patterns. The findings and recommendations of this study offer valuable insights for communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers, providing a roadmap for celebrating cultural heritage while embracing the opportunities presented by the digital age.

II. Methodology

This current study employs a qualitative research design to thoroughly examine the effectiveness of social media for *Zualko* in contemporary Mizo society. The research specifically focuses on the utilization of public information centers, social media platforms, and modes of communication.

Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The source of primary data were Telephonic interviews conducted with key informants (branch leaders) of the Young Mizo Association (YMA) from various localities within the Aizawl Municipal Corporation Area. Key Informant Interviews were conducted using an Interview Guide which covered topics such as the announcement of death, communication related to serious patients, and emergency situations in the community. Secondary sources of data include information collected from books, journals and other documents in order to identify common themes related to *Zualko* and their evolution over time, facilitating the construction of a comprehensive narrative.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained, and the study adheres to ethical guidelines and standards governing social research.

III. Overview of *Zualko* in Traditional Mizo Society

In early Mizo society, the practice of dispatching messengers, affectionately termed '*Zualko*' emerged as a cultural cornerstone, particularly in the transmission of momentous news to families residing in distant villages or to the same village from the forest¹. This age-old custom not only bears historical significance but also reflects the Mizo people's deep-seated values of kinship, urgency, and communication.

The *Zualko*, typically young bachelors, embody a sense of duty and responsibility as they embark on swift runs to deliver crucial messages. Regardless of the hour or prevailing weather conditions, their urgency transcends personal inconvenience, underlining the paramount importance of promptly informing relatives and loved ones. The very essence of this tradition is encapsulated in the term '*Zualko tlan*' signifying a messenger's rapid stride in delivering news that often pertains to life-altering events².

In instances where a sick individual in the village wishes to reach out to family members in a distant locale, the first acquainted young man mostly from the '*Zawlbuk*' is promptly chosen for the mission. The selection process is often implicit, with the elders intuitively identifying a suitable individual based on their reliability and capability to convey the message urgently. The urgency in such scenarios is not just about the swift passage of information but also about the cultural importance attached to the immediacy of connection and support, and carried out solely on the basis of '*tlawmngaihna*'.³

In the realm of agricultural pursuits or activities like slash-and-burn and hunting, where unforeseen accidents are not uncommon, the *Zualko* swiftly returns to the village to disseminate the news. In instances where only a handful of individuals are available, a spontaneous arrangement is made to attend to the immediate needs of the affected, while others take on the role of *Zualko*, contributing to the seamless functioning of this communal support system.

The manner in which tragic news is conveyed is marked by a cultural subtlety that sets the *Zualko* tradition apart. Instead of bluntly announcing distressing events, the *Zualko* deliver their messages with a calm demeanor, skillfully alluding to the gravity of the situation without causing immediate distress. For instance, phrases like "*In chhungte chumi khami chu a na zual deuh a, a ngaihtuahawm deuh a nih hmel e*" delicately convey that a severe illness has befallen the family, and the situation is critical. This indirect communication style showcases the thoughtfulness embedded in the tradition, aiming to provide information while preventing immediate emotional upheaval among the receivers. In cases of accidents or injuries, their response often involves phrases like "He met with an accident and hurt a bit," maintaining a degree of ambiguity even when questioned by curious family members. This intentional use of language aims to convey the gravity of the situation while preventing an abrupt emotional response, showcasing the nuanced and considerate nature inherent in traditional *Zualko* practices².

Renowned Mizo poet, Lalmama, in his evocative poem "*Virthli leng*" draws a vivid parallel between the speed of *Zualko* journeys and the swiftness of the wind.

*"Dan rual lohvin i liam,
Thinlai thawng biahthu keng em ni?
Virthli leng, khawiah liam che maw aw?"*²

This artistic expression encapsulates the rapid and purposeful nature of the *Zualko*, who prioritize reaching their destination swiftly to fulfill their role as messengers in times of need.

The *Zualko* tradition within the traditional fabric of Mizo society is not just a means of information dissemination; it is a cultural phenomenon embodying values of swift support, empathy, and the art of delicate communication. As the Mizo community navigates the intersections of tradition and modernity, the *Zualko* tradition stands as a poignant reminder of the cultural richness embedded in their practices⁴.

IV. Transition to Post Christian Era

In the wake of British colonization and the advent of Christianity, profound transformations have swept through Mizo cultural practices, traditional beliefs, and the overall way of life. This shift is particularly evident in the response to death and accidents, both of which have assumed heightened significance in this altered landscape. While the practice of sending messengers or *Zualko* endures, the rituals and ceremonies associated with death have undergone a noteworthy transformation. The traditional funerals, deeply embedded in Mizo cultural practices, have gradually made way for Christian funeral rites. This shift reflects not only a change in religious orientation but also a broader reconfiguration of cultural norms and expressions^{5, 6}.

The forces of colonization and Christianity brought with them a focus on modernity and development. The establishment of civil society organizations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA) alongside the introduction of various institutions such as churches, dispensaries, hospitals, and schools, has fundamentally altered the socio-cultural fabric of Mizo society. The overarching impact has been a shift in the way of living and a redefinition of beliefs and practices.

One of the significant repercussions was the abolition of Mizo customary practices, including the dissolution of the *Zawlbuk*, a social institution in the village often headed by the chief⁷. With political participation becoming more prominent, Mizo society witnessed a transition from traditional practices to a more politically engaged one. Villages, now organized with their own village council, take charge of political issues through the Village Council Court. The YMA, in particular, assumes a multifaceted role, managing customary practices and upholding cultural traditions within the changing societal landscape.

The evolution of the *Zualko* practice exemplifies this dynamic shift. Initially rooted in community-driven efforts, particularly by the YMA, the *Zualko* tradition has modernized with the establishment of Information Centres in villages. In some instances, the *Zualko*'s role has transformed from physical messengers to the utilization of modern communication methods, such as torchlight signals employing Morse code⁸. The skills in signaling using Morse code, once crucial during and after the Mizo National Front (MNF) Movement, have found a contemporary application in the context of *Zualko* communication.

After Mizo embraced Christianity, a distinctive practice emerged wherein churches would ring bells immediately upon the confirmation of a death. This practice, akin to the traditional *Zualko* system, serves as a means of rapidly disseminating information throughout the community. Remarkably, this practice endures in various Mizo communities till today, highlighting the fusion of Christian rituals with indigenous communication methods. The ringing of church bells not only serves as a solemn acknowledgment of the departed but also exemplifies the abiding influence of both traditional and Christian elements in the contemporary Mizo cultural landscape^{2, 9}.

Presently, every community has its Information Centre, often under the auspices of the YMA, serving as a centralized hub to disseminate information regarding deaths, accidents, emergencies, and other crucial announcements. This evolution showcases not only a shift in the medium of communication but also the adaptability of traditional practices to contemporary technological advancements, underscoring the resilience and dynamism inherent in Mizo cultural evolution.

V. Emergence of Social Media

The digital wave has rapidly swept across the tranquil hills of Mizoram, bringing with it the transformative emergence of technology. The outbreak of television, mobile phones, and internet connectivity, coupled with the advent of smartphones, has sculpted a new technological horizon in this serene region.

Central to this technological renaissance is the remarkable emergence of social media. In contemporary Mizoram, social media platforms have become ubiquitous, seamlessly integrated into the fabric of daily life. The accessibility of these platforms has transformed the way Mizos connect, communicate, and share. From bustling urban centers to remote villages, the pervasive influence of social media is now an integral part of the Mizoram experience.

In the digital symphony of Mizoram, the emergence of technology, marked by the prevalence of social media, has become a unifying thread that transcends geographical boundaries. The connectivity fostered by these technological advancements reflects a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity, shaping a cultural landscape where the past and the present converge in the embrace of the digital age. In recent years, Mizoram has witnessed a transformative shift with the advent and proliferation of social media. The emergence of social media has not only redefined communication patterns but has also brought about substantial changes in the way Mizos interact, share information, and engage with their cultural practices.

One of the significant impacts of social media is its role in preserving and disseminating Mizo cultural heritage. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become virtual spaces where Mizos, both within the region and in the diaspora, can connect, share, and celebrate their cultural identity. The sharing of traditional songs, dances, and rituals has found a new platform, fostering a sense of community even in the digital realm. Social media has played a crucial role in redefining the narrative around Mizo cultural practices. Traditional

ceremonies, once confined to local communities, now find a global audience through online platforms. This has not only created awareness but has also garnered appreciation and interest from a broader spectrum, contributing to the preservation of Mizo culture in the digital age. The influence of social media is not confined to cultural expression alone; it has also shaped the discourse around social issues in Mizoram. Platforms like TV Scroll, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have become channels for rapid information dissemination during emergencies, accidents, or other critical situations.

The emergence of social media in Mizoram marks a significant cultural paradigm shift. From preserving traditional practices to shaping contemporary discourses, social media has become one integral part of Mizo cultural expression. Navigating this digital landscape requires a thoughtful approach to harness its benefits while safeguarding the authenticity and richness of Mizo cultural heritage.

VI. Contemporary Practice

In the contemporary cultural mosaic of Mizoram, the practice of *Zualko*, once a deeply rooted traditional communication method, has undergone a metamorphosis in response to the digital age. Various communities exhibit diverse approaches in leveraging Information Centres and social media platforms for the dissemination of critical information, with death announcements, emergencies, and other services taking center stage.

Some communities steadfastly uphold the tradition of utilizing Information Centres as vital hubs for public announcements. Especially in the aftermath of a death or during emergencies, these Information Centres remain active, providing a dedicated space for immediate and widespread dissemination of crucial information. This practice aligns with the historical role of *Zualko*, emphasizing the urgency and communal responsibility associated with conveying significant news.

Contrastingly, certain communities exhibit a more restricted use of Information Centres, reserving them for announcements primarily during active hours. In such cases, the Information Centres serve as centralized communication points but are not as actively employed during off-hours. This approach reflects a transitional phase where traditional communication methods coexist with modern practices, adapting to the changing rhythm of contemporary life.

The predominant trend, however, leans toward the extensive utilization of social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook for information dissemination (See Fig. 1). These platforms have become the contemporary counterparts to traditional *Zualko* practices. The immediacy, reach, and accessibility of social media align with the evolving needs of Mizoram's dynamic cultural milieu. Death announcements, emergency alerts, and information about social services find a virtual stage on these platforms, allowing for rapid and far-reaching communication.

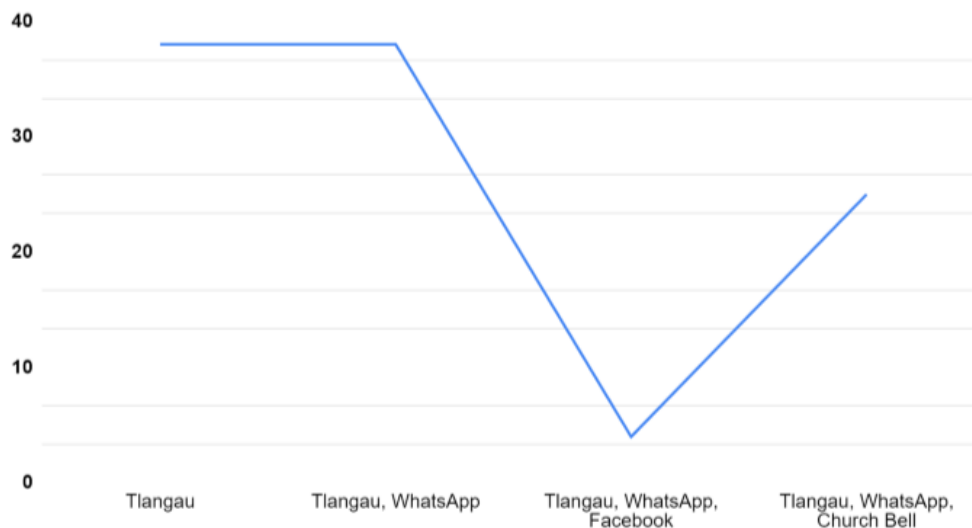


Figure 1: Mode of Zualko Information of various community

Source: Survey

The study indicates that all communities rely on both *Tlangau* (Information Centres) and social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, for communication purposes. Some communities refrain from announcing deaths after 11:00 PM, choosing instead to wait until the next day. Conversely, others promptly announce deaths as soon as they are confirmed. The practice of *Tlangau*, or village crier, remains prevalent as a traditional method

of disseminating community-related information, with certain communities opting not to disclose causes of death due to various psychological and social factors.

In the contemporary digital landscape, every community utilizes social media platforms to disseminate information, particularly regarding death announcements and community affairs. Some communities employ electronic media and social media, such as WhatsApp for death announcements even before they are relayed to the larger community. The latter are officially informed through Tlangau or Information Centres, following a standardized format that includes details such as the number of deaths in a year, name, age, relatives (in some communities), address (including satellite imagery in some communities), causes of death (not universally disclosed), time and place of death and mourning, and the officiating priest or elder and affiliated denomination. Additionally, an Alco sign-board containing the same details is typically stuck at the deceased's residence to aid in identification.

While Facebook usage has dwindled in various communities following the widespread adoption of WhatsApp, some still utilize it alongside WhatsApp for sharing *Zualko* announcements through community pages or groups. *Zualko* information and other news related to deaths and emergencies are commonly disseminated via Facebook due to its extensive reach.

Traditionally, the ringing of a church bell serves as a proclamation of a death in the community. Despite advancements in other modes of *Zualko* information, the church bell remains in use by several communities today. Some communities ring the bell following the *Tlangau* announcement as part of the mourning process for church members.

The advantages of using social media for *Zualko* practices are manifold. Beyond the speed of information dissemination, these platforms offer real-time updates, ensuring that communities stay informed promptly. The interactive nature of social media enables engagement and active participation, fostering a sense of community even in the digital realm. Additionally, the inclusivity of social media ensures that the diaspora and those residing in different locations can stay connected and informed about significant events in Mizoram.

VII. Recommendations for Cultural Adaptation in the Digital Age

The suggested recommendations for modern practices aim to embody a comprehensive approach that safeguards cultural heritage while adopting the effectiveness of contemporary tools, such as:

There is a necessity to initiate cultural awareness campaigns to highlight the historical significance of *Zualko* in Mizo society, emphasizing its role in times of urgency and development of educational programs within communities, utilizing both traditional and digital mediums, to instill pride and understanding of the practices. Storytelling sessions and workshops are required to create a living archive, passing down *Zualko* traditions from one generation to another. This can be done in collaboration with cultural organizations to include *Zualko* in mainstream cultural events, reinforcing its cultural significance.

Implementation of digital literacy programs can be undertaken to empower community members with the necessary skills to effectively use social media platforms for *Zualko* practices. Training focused on information verification and online etiquette to mitigate risks associated with online communication can be conducted. The younger generation must be encouraged to actively participate in digital content creation related to *Zualko*, blending tradition with modern communication channels. Communities need to be continuously educated on responsible online behavior through awareness campaigns and training sessions. Partnerships with technology experts to enhance digital literacy initiatives can be fostered.

Promotion of community-driven initiatives such as online forums, virtual gatherings, and social media groups dedicated to *Zualko* practices can be facilitated. Challenges or campaigns can be developed on social media platforms to encourage active community participation, fostering a sense of unity. Other initiatives could be designation of themed days or weeks that celebrate and reflect on the significance of *Zualko* within the community. Facilitation of collaborative digital projects, such as creating an online repository of *Zualko* stories and experiences, to enhance community engagement are some ways to engage the community.

Elevating Community Information Centres demands robust infrastructure and technological integration. Equipping these hubs with updated communication tools will ensure real-time connectivity across traditional and digital channels. Training programmes can be organized for operators, encompassing both technological and cultural aspects, empower them to navigate social media for *Zualko* practices. Collaboration with local telecom companies will enhance technical capabilities, allowing these hubs to serve as central points for community engagement. Protocols for simultaneous announcements through traditional and digital channels ensure broad dissemination, catering to diverse communication preferences can be created. An adept network of Information Centres becomes the heartbeat of *Zualko* practices, harmonizing tradition with contemporary efficiency in Mizoram's cultural landscape.

Lead community-driven initiatives should establish guidelines for respectful and ethical communication on social media platforms, specifically regarding information dissemination. Educational campaigns to raise

awareness about the dangers of misinformation and promote responsible online behavior within the community could be conducted. Partnerships with civil society organizations to facilitate workshops on ethical practices tailored to the cultural context of *Zualko* and other information sharing can be formed. Community leaders must be encouraged to set examples by demonstrating responsible social media use in their communication.

VIII. Conclusion

The transformation of the traditional Mizo practice of *Zualko* in the contemporary era reflects a dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and technological advancements. The study delves into the intricate fabric of Mizo society, exploring the historical significance of *Zualko* as messengers embodying values of kinship, urgency, and refined communication. The transition to the modern era, marked by colonial influences and Christianity, witnessed a metamorphosis in the *Zualko* tradition, adapting to the changing socio-cultural milieu through Information Centres and modern communication methods.

The emergence of social media in Mizoram has brought about a cultural paradigm shift, seamlessly integrating into the daily lives of Mizos and redefining communication patterns. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have become contemporary counterparts to traditional *Zualko* practices, providing real-time updates and fostering community engagement. The study emphasized the need for strategic cultural preservation initiatives, digital literacy programs, and ethical guidelines for social media use to ensure the seamless coexistence of tradition and modernity.

The diverse contemporary practices observed among Mizoram's communities highlight the adaptability of *Zualko* to the digital age. While Information Centres remain vital for some, others have seamlessly embraced social media for disseminating crucial information. The recommendations provided offer a comprehensive roadmap for fostering cultural preservation, enhancing digital literacy, promoting community engagement, and ensuring ethical social media use.

As Mizoram navigates the intersections of tradition and modernity, the *Zualko* tradition stands as a poignant reminder of the resilience and dynamism inherent in Mizo cultural evolution. The study's findings and recommendations provide valuable insights for communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers seeking to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the benefits of contemporary technological advancements. Through a thoughtful and inclusive approach, Mizoram can continue to celebrate its rich cultural tapestry while embracing the opportunities presented by the digital age.

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