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RESEARCH ARTICLE

LAI, CHIN, AND PAWI: A CASE OF MULTIPLE ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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Abstract

Ethnic groups around the world tend to have multiple ethnic identities. This was largely because the colonial writers and colonial administrators often resorted to randomly naming ethnic tribal groups on the basis of administrative convenience rather than relying on the age old ethnic nomenclature used by the people themselves. The case in point is the Lai people now living in Myanmar (Burma), Bangladesh, and India who were, and are still, known as Chin in Myanmar, and Pawi in India. They were also once loosely known as Shendu, Kuki, and Lushai.

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Introduction:-

This paper makes an attempt to present the case of one ethnic group living in Myanmar (formerly Burma), India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), originally calling themselves Lai, but later got their name applied by others variously as Chin in Myanmar, Pawi in India and Shendu in Bangladesh. The etymological root and meaning of each of the generic names would be analysed in this paper.

Although the Lais have always called themselves as Lais or Lai, or Laimi (Laimi or Lai-mi means Lai person/persons. Mi means person, male or female, either in singular or plural forms) since time immemorial, over the years they have been known by different names in different places. They are known as Chin in Myanmar, Pawi in India, and were once known as Shendu in Bangladesh.

Confused tribal nomenclature:

Though the same people, British colonial rulers and writers have employed various terms to describe the Lai people. It is not just the Lais that have been given different names but other ethnic groups of the then Chin Hills (now Chin State, Myanmar formerly Burma), the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram, India), and Manipur. Thus A.H. Keane, in his *Man, past and present* (1920, 2011), under a caption Confused Tribal Nomenclature, observes, "In truth there is no recognised collective name, and Shendu (Sindhu) often so applied is proper only to the once formidable Chittagong and Arakan frontier tribes, Klangklangs and Hakas, who with the Sukté, Tashons, Siyins, and others are now reduced and administered from Falam. Each little group has its own tribal name, and often one or two others, descriptive, abusive and so on, given them by their neighbours. Thus the Nwengals (Nun, river, ngal, across) are only that section of the Suktés now settled on the farther or right bank of the Manipur, while the Suktés themselves (Sok, to go down, té, men) are so called because they migrated from Chin Nwe (9 miles from Tiddim), cradle of the Chin race, down to Molbem, their earliest settlement, which is the Mobingyi of the Burmese. So with Siyin, the Burmese form of Sheyanté (she, alkali, yan, side, té, men), the group who settled by the alkali springs east of Chin Nwe, who are the Tauté ("stout" or "sturdy" people) of the Lushai and southern Chins. Let these few specimens suffice as a slight object-lesson in the involved tribal nomenclature which prevails, not only amongst the Chins, but

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everywhere in the Tibeto-Indo-Chinese domain, from the north-western Himalayas to Cape St James at the south-eastern (Keane 1920, 2011: 190).

Imposed names:

These names are of course clearly imposed names. For instance, Carey and Tuck wrote, "Those of the Kuki tribes which we designate as 'Chins' do not recognise that name" (Carey & Tuck 1896, 1976: 3). Shakespeare also said the same thing. He wrote, "This term Kuki, like Naga, Chin, Shendu, and many others, is not recognised by the people to whom we apply it" (Shakespeare 1912, 1988: Introduction).

At the time of the arrival of the British (that is, during the second half of the 19th century), it must be noted, that the Lais and other tribes inhabiting the then Chin Hills of Myanmar, Lushai Hills of India, etc., did not know reading and writing. The people then had no written records of their history, their social life, their collective name, and the like. The colonial British military and political officers were the first ones to have written about the tribes. It must also be borne in mind that the colonial British writers' main purpose in writing about the Lais and other kindred tribes was to serve the colonial interests of the British Empire. Before the actual military conquest and the eventual occupation of a land, information about the people, the land, etc., was essential. This was, in short, the objective of most or all of the early British writers whose works on the Lais and its kindred tribes hold a vital key to understand the history of the latter, however incomplete and sometimes biased they may be. And it is through these writings that we now begin to study the history of the people known as 'Chin', 'Pawi', 'Shendu', etc.

These colonial writers would invariably get information (about the Lais, etc), obviously, from people they first interacted with before entering a particular territory inhabited by people of the proposed book. Thus, the British writers would pick 'Chin' from either the Burmans (Burmese), or the Shan or the Kachin people of Burma; 'Pawi' from the Luseis in the then Lushai Hills, now Mizoram (India); 'Shendu' from the Arakanese of the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. This naturally leads to confusion of ethnic identity among the Lais.

What then are the meaning of the different generic names applied to the Lais?

Chin:

The Lais in the Chin State and elsewhere in Myanmar (formerly Burma) are known as Chin or Chins (pronounced 'chhin'). To be sure, the word 'Chin' applies to all the tribes living in the Chin State of Myanmar in the past and today. But the Lais have been the most dominant tribe in the Chin State (formerly Chin Hills) so much so that people such as Rev. Liangkhaia, the first Mizo historian from Mizoram, calls the Chin Hills as "Pawi ram", ('the land of the Pawi people, author) (Liangkhaia 1938, 1976: 5). Not surprisingly, there is thus a sense of monopolization and appropriation of 'Chin' by the Lai people in Myanmar to the exclusion of other tribes (Sakhong, 2003; Son-Doerchel, 2013).

Two British political officers posted in Burma (now Myanmar) Carey and Tuck said that the word 'Chin' "is said to be a Burmese corruption of the Chinese "Jin", or "Yen", meaning "man" (Carey and Tuck 1896, 1976: 3).

For another colonial writer on Burma G.H. Luce, Chin was "a Burmese word (khyang), not a Chin word," and its meaning was "ally or comrade" (Luce 1959 quoted in Lehman 1963, 1980: 1). The Chins were considered, in the opinion of F.K. Lehman, allies by the Burmans because they held a flank (i.e., the Chindwin Valley above Monywa, an area East of Halkha-Falam) of the developing Barman state against its enemies, such as the Sak (Thet) of Central Burma during the 13th century AD (Lehman 1963, 1980: 22).

There are some who hold that Chin means 'basket' in Burmese and Chins are those who carried baskets (Vumson 1986:4). It is very unlikely that the Burmans would call their alliance partners Chins 'basket carriers'. Luce says, "There is no mention of any fighting between the Chins and the Burmans (Luce 1959b:89). At the most, as Lehman said that the word 'Chin' was only homologous with, and not the same as, the contemporary Burmese word 'chin' which meant 'basket' (Lehman 1963, 1980: 22).

It is thus likely that the word 'chin' is etymologically a Chinese word 'Jin', or 'Yen' which means 'man'. The Burmese has corrupted these words as 'khyan' (pronounced in Burmese as 'chin') which means 'ally or comrade, friend or companion'.

Yet, there is still another angle to the meaning and origin of 'Chin'.

In an interview, Dr. Zhu Qingzhi, Associate Professor of Chinese Literature & Language, Sichuan University, China, told the author of this book that people of ancient China were one once known as 'Chin', or 'Qin'. Even now, in countries like Japan, people of China are still referred to as 'Chin' (Interview, Qingzhi, Delhi: 1993). It may be added here that the name China got its origin from Qin Dynasty, or Ch'in Dynasty. Qin Shi Huang (also spelled Shihuangdi, Shi-huang-ti, Shi Huang Ti, and also called Zhaozheng) was a ruler of Qin dynasty, during 221-210 BC. He unified the entire country, for the first time in the history of China, and became the first Emperor of China. It was from this Qin dynasty that the name China is derived. In 213 BC he started construction of the first part of the Great Wall of China (Encyclopedia Britannica online, Qin Dynasty, 2020).

'Chin', therefore, could well be a name applied to the Lai people by the Burmans, or Shan, or Karen with whom the former had had long historical interactions. They could be called 'Chin' to mean 'people from China', or 'People of China', the Chinese people. In a footnote to his monumental work the Linguistic Survey of India, Grierson notes that, "The word Chin is perhaps related to names such as China, Ching-pa, Shan, Siam, etc., all common within the various branches of the Indo-Chinese family" (Grierson 1904: 55). This aspect however needs further investigations.

Interestingly, the Lais of Chin State today use both Chin and Lai as self-appellations.

Pawi:

The Lais in Mizoram and elsewhere in India are known as 'Pawi' (pronounced poi). Some British writers such as William Shaw use 'Poi' instead (Shaw, 1929).

The Lusei people of Mizoram were the first to call the Lai people 'Pawi'. The British, who came to the then Lushai Hills from Assam side of India interacted first with the Luseis of north Lushai Hills. The British writers then used 'Pawi' as a generic term for the Lai people living in the then Lushai Hills. The Lai people of Mizoram also eventually adopted the term 'Pawi' for their collective ethnic name. Pawi is in fact one of the constitutionally recognized tribes, called Scheduled Tribes, in Mizoram today.

What must be the etymological origin of the word 'Pawi' ?

The first Christian missionaries to Mizoram, J. Herbert Lorrain and Fred. W. Savidge, who created the Mizo (Lushai) alphabet, also wrote the first Mizo (Lushai) grammar and dictionary called A Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai Language (Dulien Dialect), published in 1898 (Lorrain & Savidge, 1898). The book is still widely considered the most authoritative English to Mizo (Lushai) dictionary. On page 165 of the book, we find: 'Poi', as a plural noun, being defined as "the Chins and other tribes who wear their hair in a knot upon the top of the head". On the same page of the book, we have 'Poi', as a verb, with these meanings: "to be of consequence, to matter, to be a pity, to be a misfortune". The correct Lusei word should actually be "pawi", and not 'poi'.

Regarding the probable origin of the word 'Pawi', a few points need to be noted here. It is fairly certain that 'Pawi' is a term used by the Lusei people to refer the Lai people. The British colonial writers then used the term in reference to the Lai people of the then Lushai Hills. Further, the meanings of the Lusei word 'poi' as "to be of consequence, to matter, to be a pity, to be a misfortune", do not seem to have any meaningful connection with 'Pawi'.

As such, the most probably origin of the word 'Pawi' appears to be the Lai word 'pawte' (pronounced po-te), or 'paw-te'. 'Pawte' in Lai language means leopard. 'Pawite', or 'Pawi' must be a Lusei corruption of the Lai word 'pawte' (Hengmanga, 1987: 4-5; Tribal Research Institute, 1988: 2-3).

A Lai warrior would very often attack his enemy with a loud cry, "I am a pawte!", or "Here comes a pawte!". This was intended to embolden himself and to frighten the enemy. A warrior, charging an enemy with a loud cry, declaring himself a 'pawte', a killer machine, would be a typical scene in those days. For instance, in the early period of wars among the Kuki-Chin-Lushai people, roughly between 1500--1700 (indeed even earlier than these dates suggested by Laingkhia, author), battles were fought by representatives of a tribe or a community (Liangkhia 1932, 1976: 27). The whole tribe or community was not involved. Single combats battles were the norm in those days. The identity of those warriors would then very often determine the identity of the whole tribe or community at war. So, when a warrior in a battle field said that he was a 'pawte', the enemy camp would invariable conclude that the particular warrior and the people he represented were indeed 'Pawte' people.

Liangkhaia writes, "Initially (that is, a period between 1500 and 1700, author), a war or a battle involves only the bravest among the clan or tribe. The chosen warriors would engage in a fight on a bridge laid across a trench.....using 'kawlnham'. The result of the duel determines an outcome of the battle" (Liangkhai, 1938, 1976: 27). ('kawlnham', 'a large knife', a 'Burmese dao'. Lorrain & Savidge, 1898).

The Luseis, who were at war with the Lais, would have frequently heard the Lai warriors proclaiming themselves as 'pawte'. Therefore, the Luseis would have concluded that the collective name of the (Lai) people must indeed be 'Pawite'.

The 'pawte' (leopard) is a fearsome and deadly killer animal. A 'pawte' is agile, stealthy, speedy, strong, ruthless, aggressive, and dangerous. A 'pawte' is, in short, a perfect killer machine. So was a Lai warrior. The Lai warriors and the Lai people in general were known for their bravery and skills in battles, or in single combats. And the fact that, at the time of the advent of the British in the then Lushai-Kuki-Chin land (today's Mizoram and Manipur in India, and Chin State in Myanmar) the Lais ('Tashons', that is, Tlaisun at Falam in the then Chin Hills, now Chin State, author) were the master of the entire Kuki-Chin-Lushai land (Carey & Tuck, 1896, 1976) was therefore no surprise.

The Lusei people in their personal conversations would often refer to the Lai people as "Pawite". They would say something like: "A Pawite merchant", "A Pawite traveller", and so forth. Their stories also very often contain Pawi characters who are simultaneously called, in the story itself, both 'Pawi' and 'Pawite' (Malsawma, 1979). In other words, the Luseis use the words 'Pawi' and 'Pawite' interchangeably. The great linguist Grierson also said that the words 'Pois, Poi-te' (and added that "te is the plural suffix") were used by the Luseis in reference to the Zahao (Zahau, author), or any "tribes who wear their hair in a knot upon the top of the head" (Grierson, 1904: 55,107). Zahau/Zahao are Lai.

However, the word 'Pawite' tends to have a negative connotation and hence is gradually replaced by 'Pawi'.

The Lai people in the Lai Autonomous District Council (LADC) area, in southern Mizoram, now tend to use Lai as self-appellation while in the rest of the state where we find a much larger number of the tribe's population of the state, the Lai people still use Pawi as self-appellation. And 'Pawi' is still the official name of the Lai tribe in the state. The change of name of a District Council created for the tribe, from Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (1953) to Pawi Autonomous District Council (1972), and again to Lai Autonomous District Council (1988) clearly reflect the rising awareness about ethnic identity among the tribe.

When was the first time that the Lais were referred to as Pawi? Hengmanga's assertion that the word 'Pawite' first came to be used in the famous North-South War of the Lushai Hills that took place in 1856 (Hengmanga, 1987: 5) seems to be inaccurate. For there were already Lusei-Lai wars as early a period between 1500 and 1700, well before the two groups migrated to areas west of the Tiau river in the then Lushai Hills, now Mizoram.

It is most likely that the Luseis referred to the Lais as 'Pawite', or 'Pawi' while the two communities were still together in the Chin Hills. We do know that the Lais and the Luseis had directly interacted with each other in the Chin Hills for quite some time. When the Luseis entered the Chin Hills long time ago, wrote Rev. Zokima, the Lais and the Paites were already well established there. It was with the permission of Lai chiefs that the new Lusei settlers (who would not be obviously having chiefs, the author) established villages (Zokima, 1993: 21). In other words, the Luseis and Lais lived together in the Chin Hills in areas east of the Tiau river. And it was the Lais that accommodated the Luseis in their (Lais) land.

Liangkhaia (1938, 1976) is of the opinion that the term 'Pawi-te' as an appellation for the Lais originated long ago, about 900 AD, or at least between 1000 and 1500 AD. Liangkhaia writes, Lusei people did not yet cultivate cotton, nor did they know how to make cotton yarn, (Lusei) Men, he says, wore a garment called 'Hnawkhal' (Hnaw-khal, hno-khal, author) while the women wore a 'Siapsuap' (siap-suap, author) (Liangkhaia, 1938, 1976: 21-22). He says that the story of a 'Pawite lifted away by herons' is said to have referred to an incident of a 'Pawite', who strung several herons on the cords of his Hnawkhal (Liangkhaia, 1938, 1976: 21-22). Liangkhaia's account of the origin of the word 'Pawite' points to the use of the term 'Pawite' by the Luseis very early on in the Lai-Lusei history, as early as 9th century AD, or even before this time.

Hnawkhal and Siapsuap were made of ropes strung together. The ropes were taken from the bark of a tree called 'vaiza' (vai-za). Hnawkhal is actually a Lai (Pawi) word. For Hnaw-kal is a "raincoat used by the Pois" (Lorrain, & Savidge, 1898).

It is unlikely that men from the materially more advanced Lai (Spearman, 1880, 1983; Shakespear, 1912, 1988; Carey and Tuck, 1896, 1983) would wear Hnawkhal as a main upper garment during this point in time. The Lais, or their ancestors, must have worn cotton, or even silk, garments long ago while in China. The Lai men would have used Hnawkhal as a raincoat, and not as a main garment.

One incident pre-dating the North-South Lushai battle of 1856 was the so-called 'Thlanrawn massacre' ('Thlanrawn rawt' in Lusei) that took place in 1760. In this incident, a Lusei chief Lallula, a tributary chief of the Lai chief at Thlanrawn village in Chin Hills, tricked a large number of Lai warriors from Thlanrawn (Lai) village to gather at his village Zopui (later named Samthang), promising the latter a large amount of tributes. Most of the Lai warriors, while they were sleeping, were killed by Lallula and his men. However, Lallula and his people left the village for fear of a reprisal from the Lais and moved westward to Sialsuk near Aizawl (Liangkhaia, 1938, 1976: 52-54). 'Pawite', hence, must be in use much before 1856. Much of Lallula's post-Thlanrawn life was spent in mortal fear of the ghosts of Thlanrawn. In 1792, 32 years after Thlanrawn incident, Lallula gathered as many as ten Lusei chiefs at S. Sabual village to wage an all out war against the Lais of Chin Hills. But his plan failed for want of support from other chiefs (Chuaudaia, et al, 1996, 2018: 1-30).

Shendu:

The term 'Shendu', or 'Shendhoos', or 'Tseindu' was applied by some British writers (Hunter, 1876, 1873; Spearman 1880, 1933; T.H Lewin 1870, 1978; Phayre, 1841) to the Lais in Bangladesh. The Lais, Parry said, "are called Shendus by the Arakanese", and "well known by name and repute in Arracan" (Parry, 1932, 1976: 2, 6). But none of these writers tell us the meaning of 'Shendu'.

Arakanese people, known as Rakhines, or Marma, or Mog/Magh, are believed to have settled in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh at least since the 16th century. They were once a formidable force in the area (Wikipedia, The Rakhine people, 2020). The Arakanese people would have had interacted frequently with the Lais who established their rule in the CHT from about the middle of the 18th century under the powerful Hlawcheu chiefs (Lai) coming from Falam (Hengmanga, 1982, 1987).

So, 'shendu', or 'shendhoo', or 'tseindu' must surely be an Arakanese/Rakhine word. An interview this author had had with Rev. Chuangsavunga clearly reveals the etymological root and meaning of 'Shendu'. Rev. Chuangsavunga is a pastor at Lairam Isua Krista Kohhran, Hqrs. Lawngtlai, Mizoram, who spent 24 years (1994-2018) in Rakhine-inhabited areas of Myanmar. According to Rev. Chuangsavunga, Rakhine or Arakanese apply 'Shendu' (pronounced shin-du) to all the Chins in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. Literally, the word 'Shendu' means 'people of Chin' or 'Chin people'. 'Chin' is pronounced by Arakanese as 'Shin'. In Arakanese, 'du' means 'persons'; 'du' is a plural form of person or human ('Chin lu-mio' in Arakanese means 'Chin tribe', 'lu' means 'people', or 'human being'. 'du' could thus also be a variation of 'lu' as well) (Interview, Chuangsavunga: 2020). Rev. Chuangsavunga further told the author that these days Rakhine people normally use the term 'Chin' (for people of Mizoram and Chin Hills) although 'Shendu' was still used by them. 'Shendu' was now normally reserved, he said, for the more backward tribes of among the Chins.

Baungshe:

'Baungshe' is another appellation used by the Burmese to refer to the Lais or all the Chins (Carey & Tuck, 1896, 1983). But from the available literature and documents, we know the term is rarely applied. Grierson said that 'Baungshe' was applied by the Burmese to all the Chins who wear their hair in a knot over the forehead". In Burmese, paung means to put on, and she means in front (Grierson, 1904: 55).

Kuki:

The term 'Kuki' (pronounced koo-ki) is also sometimes used to refer to the Lais. As a matter of fact, the term was loosely used to refer to all the Kuki-Chin-Lushai tribes, that is, the tribes living in today's Manipur, Chin State of Myanmar, and Mizoram state of India. Of late, and within India, the term has now been used to refer to, more or less exclusively, the Thadou (Thadou-Kuki) tribe of the North East India living in the states of Manipur, Assam, etc.

The word 'kuki' seems to have first appeared in Tripura (India) around 1490 during the reign of Tripura Raja Dhanya Manikya. It is recorded that the 'Kukees' inhabited an area east of Tripura during this time, that is, 1490 (Bhattacharya, 1992: 44-58). According to Grierson, the "Kukis are mentioned in connection with the Tipperah (now Tripura) Raja Chachang, who flourished about 1512 A.D." (Grierson, 1904:1).

According to Reid, 'Kuki' (actual words of Reid is 'Kukis') is a Bengali term meaning 'hill-men' or 'highlander'(Reid, 1893, 1976: 5). To Grierson, the great linguist, "Kuki is an Assamese or Bengali term, applied to various hill tribes such as Lusheis, Rangkhols, Thados, etc." (Grierson, 1904:1). Vumson, on the other hand, said that the word 'Kuki' is supposed to be a Bengali word which means "something like savage or wild hill people" (Vumson, 1986, 1).

I was told by some of my Assamese friends that 'kuki' is not an Assamese word. Therefore, it is most certain that the word 'kuki' is a variation of a Bengali word 'khuki' which means 'little girl'. The online Bengali dictionary definition of 'khuki' is as follows:

khuki n an infant girl; a little girl; a daughter. int. (voc.) my daughter, my girl. pana n. simulating the behaviour of a little girl, affected girl-ishness. khuku affectionate form of khuki . khukumani n. (in endearment) dear girl (Bengali Dictionary online, 2020).

In that case, the 'Kuki' people of those days must have looked more or less like, in the eyes of the Bengalis, 'little girls' because of being relatively short in stature and of their long uncut hair. The term 'Kuki' as 'little girl' then, must have been applied to those people as a figure of speech, and not literally. The Kukis (especially the Thadou tribes and their kindred tribes of Manipur and Tripura) would come down from the hills, where they traditionally used to live, to raid people living in the plains, such as the Bengali. In course of time, 'Kuki' as a 'little girl', would have been applied to mean 'hill-men' or 'highlander'.

Foreign Terms:

All these names: Chin, Pawi, Shendu, Baungshe and Kuki are foreign terms applied to and imposed on the Lais. While Shendu, Baungshe or Kuki have never been applied to themselves by the Lais, Chin and Pawi (along with Lai) have been applied and adopted by the Lais themselves in Myanmar and India respectively. In India a move is now on to replace the term Pawi with Lai as an official name of the tribe.

Lai:

Unlike other terms, the term 'Lai' is neither an imposed name nor is the word foreign. Lai is a nomenclature applied and accepted by the people for themselves and is a Lai word. It is thus an authentic and the original name of the people. Besides, the term has a very clear and precise meaning, devoid of any confusion. Above all, its meaning and connotation is most positive, befitting the rich cultural, material, and political heritage of the Lai people.

According to Grierson, the famous linguist, the word 'lai' "is said to mean 'middle' and the use of it as a tribal name is accounted for by the fact that the Lais are the central tribes in the Chin Hills" (Grierson, 1904, 1967: 115).

In the words of anthropologist Lehman, the University of Illinois (USA), "although basically 'lai' means "centre", its meaning is best rendered as "intermediate" (Lehman 1963, 1980: 305). In his article 'Ethnic categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems', Lehman has explained the meaning of 'lai' more elaborately. He described the meaning of 'lai' in the context of a triplet of terms- 'kawl', 'lai', 'zo'. Lehman said, "Kawl is a somewhat derogatory word for Burmans and 'lai' (its general gloss is "central") is the word Haka speakers use for themselves, reflecting their view that they are the cultural and political culmination of the cultural tradition. Zo, whose gloss is again 'relatively uncultured', is here opposed to 'lai' reflecting the way in which Haka speakers look down on people of other parts of the Chin Hills" (Lehman, 1967: 108). Again, Lehman said, "The Haka villagers call themselves 'lai', thinking of themselves as better than their cultural relatives to the South, who in turn call themselves 'lai', resent the term 'zo', and apply it only to the people even further South" (Lehman, 1963, 1980:30). Thus, the "Haka call themselves 'lai mi' and call the people subjects to them and farther south 'zo mi' " (Lehman, 1963, 1980:54). The word 'lai' meant, Lehman further said, something comparatively better. He said that the people in the Chin State practised two types of Jhum: 'lai lo' and 'zo lo' ('lo' means a paddy field). 'Lai lo' referred to "fully productive and intensively cultivated fields" while 'lai lo' referred to poorly cultivated and less productive fields" (Lehman, 1963, 1980:54).

Lai thus means centre, middle; superior, dominant; productive, fruitful.

Conclusion:-

We thus see that the Lai tribe has been given various generic names by other non-Lai people throughout their history. This leads to ethnic name confusion and disunity among them. Since the 1980s, however, there has been a conscious effort on the part of the Lais to come back as it were to their 'Lai' root, and to forge unity among them. There are signs that Lai would eventually replace Pawi and Chin, the two self-appellations now being used by the people themselves, but slowly being shunted and less applied among them.

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