



A Brief Historical Account of the Bawm (Bwmzo) people

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Abstract

The Bawm or Bawmzo people, a small tribe that originated from the Chin State of Myanmar, now forms a tiny portion of population in Bangladesh. Largely unknown to the world, their history needs to be told.

Keywords

Bawm, Bawmzo, Lai, tribe

Introduction

Bawm (pronounced *bom*), also known as *Bawmzo* (pronounced *bom zo*), are a small tribe inhabiting today's parts of Chittagong Division (formerly Chittagong Hills Tracts) of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Their history is relatively unknown. The Bawm tribe belongs to a larger ethnic group called Lai (also known as Chin in Myanmar, and Pawi in India).

Originally from Tiphul village in the Chin State within Haka Township, the Bawmzos entered Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, possibly in two successive waves. The first migration took place probably around 1500 AD, and the latter around 1770-72.

This paper attempts to give a brief historical account of the tribe, including their origin in the Chin State of Myanmar and their settlement in Bangladesh.

Generic name

Whether Bawmzo or Bawm?

There has been a great deal of confusion over the two terms, Bawmzo (pronounced Bom zo) and Bawm (pronounced Bom). Which one is the correct generic name for the group? The confusion is clearly visible from some of the writings of scholars belonging to the tribe from Bangladesh. Let's take a look:

Nathan Loncheu (2013) *Bawmzo: A study of the Chin-Kuki-Zo tribes of Chittagong*. The book is 'Dedicated to the Bawmzo people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts'.

Zir Kung Shahu & S.L. Pardo (1998) *The Bawms: Forest wandering tribe of Chittagong Hill Tracts*.

Zawlremthang (2017) *The Bawm Dictionary (Bawm into English and Bangla)*.

Available sources in Myanmar and India, both oral and written, strongly suggest that Bawmzo, and not Bawm, is the original generic name of the tribe we now know as Bawm.

The founding of Tiphul village in Chin State (formerly Chin Hills), Myanmar (formerly Burma), by a man named Bawmzo, the progenitor of the Bawmzo people (Lalthangliana, 2018: 21-22), is a clear indication that the original generic name is indeed Bawmzo. Today's inhabitants of Tiphu village themselves acknowledge the fact that the said village was indeed founded by the Bawmzo people, once upon a time in the past. The founders of the village, the Bawmzo people, however left the village long ago. There are no Bawmzo people anywhere in the Chin State today. The inhabitants of today's Tiphul village are all Lais (Interview: Rev. Henry Siang Kung, 2020).

Folktales of Lusei people, who once lived alongside the Bawmzo in the Chin State but who now inhabit Mizoram (India), that have references to Bawmzo characters are another instance of the original generic name likely being Bawmzo. One such Lusei folktale is the tale of 'Sawngkhara and Chawngvungi'. The main character in the tale is Sawngkhara who is a 'Bawmzo' young man. In another Lusei folktale 'Laltheri and Chalthanga', the main character Chalthanga is also a Bawmzo young man.

Then, one of the most authoritative Lusei (Mizo) historians Liankhaia in his book, the first Mizo history book ever penned, referred to a group of people migrating from the Chin State (to Bangladesh, author) that passed through south Mizoram, as 'Bawmzo' (Liangkhaia, 1938, 1976: 5, 8).

Above all, the early writings about the Bawmzo people of Chittagong Division (formerly Chittagong Hills) of today's Bangladesh invariably describe the people as Banjoojee, Bounj-jus, Banjogis, Bunjugees, Bom-Zou, Bawm-zo, etc (Carey and Tuck, 1896, 2008; Lewin, 1870, 1978; Phayre, 1941, Schendel, 1992, 2018; Parry, 1932, 1876; Shahu & Pardo, 1998). These are all corruption of the word 'Bawmzo'.

Thus one Lai (also known as 'Chin' in Myanmar, and 'Pawi' in India) group, known originally as 'Bawmzo' from the Chin Hills and to their earlier period of settlement in Bangladesh, gradually began to be known as 'Bawm', replacing 'Bawmzo' altogether. The transition from 'Bawmzo' to 'Bawm' must have been a result of two things. One, a matter of convenience since it would be easier to pronounce Bawm than Bawmzo, a

word shorter by one syllable. Two, Bawm would have a wider acceptability than Bawmzo among various clans ruled by the Hlawmcheu chiefs. Prominent Lai clans such as Bawitlung, Khawnglawt, Aineh, Chinzah, etc., were clearly not belonging to the original or historical Bawmzo group. These clans would have natural reservations about Bawmzo as self-appellation since Bawmzo people were considered less prominent in the society.

When 'Bawm' began to replace 'Bawmzo' cannot, however, be ascertained. The fact that Bawmzo was used among the older generations of Bawm in Bangladesh can be seen from Bawm folktales and lullabies in today's Bangladesh. Those folktales and lullabies speak of 'Bawmzo' people. One such lullaby is: *Bawmzo ral ka tawng ka tawng* ('I met Bawmzo warriors').

Interestingly, the Bawm people of today's CHT could not recall any time in history when Bawmzo was ever applied by themselves in reference to their own group (Interview: Zirkung, 2020). And as early as 1845, four years after the death of chief Liankung, Barbe in his paper implied that the people called themselves 'Bom' (Barbe, 1845).

Books published there in Bangladesh by the Bawm people (information obtained from personal communication with Mr. Zir Kung Shahu) clearly reveal that 'Bawm' is the generic name recognized by the people themselves. Bawm Dan Bu, 1948 ('Bawm Customary Law'); Bawm Kristian La bu, 1956 ('Bawm Christian Hymnal'); Bawm Bu Bulbu, 1960 ('Bawm Primer Book'). Bawm is therefore the correct appellation of the people. In fact, Bawm is now constitutionally a recognized tribe in Bangladesh.

Place of origin

The origin of Bawmzo is traced to the founding of a village called Tiphul in Chin State.

Once upon a time, there lived together three men, Bawmzo, Khenglawt and Tuanpung in a huge cave at Mt. Rung Tlang (Mount Rung), near Haka in Chin State. Khenglawt man founded Hranghrin village, Bawmzo man founded Tiphul village, Tuanpung founded Lente village, all located in today's Chin State (Lalthangliana, 2018: 21-22).

Thangliana does not specifically refers to the three persons as three groups of people. But inference can be made that the three men were leaders of whoever followed them. As in most cases of tribal or clan formation, there usually was a patriarch, the first man, a progenitor. These three men Bawmzo, Khenglawt and Tuanpung respectively are then most likely the direct ancestors of the three clans of Bawmzo, Khenglawt and Lente that are found in the Chin State of Myanmar, the Indian state of Mizoram, and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh.

In course of time, both Khenglawt and Bawmzo became ancestors of Khenglawt and Bawmzo clans. Lente, a village founded by Tuanpung, however became more prominent than its founder so much so that Lente has borne the name of a clan today. It may be noted that all the three clans Bawmzo, Khenglawt and Lente belong to the Lai group. Vumson said that Bawmzo specifically belongs to the Zahau group of Lais (Vumson, 1986, 70).

Hranhring and Tiphul villages are still there in the Haka Township. Lente is also still there in the Falam Township. The village is known for its pot making. Though we do not know that time of the founding of the three villages, it is likely that the villages were founded around the same time as the estimated time of the founding of Haka village, that was, in the year around 1400 AD. Haka as we now know is today's Capital of the Chin State.

Migration: From Chin Hills to Lushai Hills to Chittagong Hill Tracts

Not much is known about the Bawmzo during a period between the founding of Tiphul village and the group's sojourn with Vanhnuahtlir, son of Falam chief, who left his royal palace to embark on a new conquest towards the Chittagong Hills around 1720.

Folk tales of the Lusei tribe, who now inhabit Mizoram, have references to Bawmzo. One such Lusei folktale is the tale of 'Sawngkhara and Chawngvungi'. The main character in the tale is Sawngkhara who is a 'Bawmzo'. In another Lusei folktale 'Laltheri and Chalthanga', the main character Chalthanga is also a Bawmzo young man.

Then came a revelation that the Bawmzo people were among the earlier settlers in the Lushai Hills, along with Pang, Tlanglau, Khiang and Chawrai. These groups of people entered Lushai Hills through an area south of Lunglei, passing through Tlabung, and entered an area what would later become Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh (Lalthangliana, 2001: 202-203). Liangkhaia puts the period of this migration and a possible brief halt in Lushai Hills to be roughly between A.D. 900-1500 (Liangkhaia, 1938, 1976: 5, 8). Though we do not know the reason of migration from the Chin Hills to Bangladesh, the Bawmzo and other groups of people could have left Myanmar due to pressure from stronger tribal forces.

Let it be noted here that Bawmzo and Tlanglau are Lais. Pang are also known as Pangkhua and Khiang are also known as Khyang, Khyeng, etc., in Bangladesh. The correct name of 'Chawrai' is 'Cho-rei', this is how people from the tribe write their generic name.

The reason why Vanhnuahtlir had decided to leave a palace in search of a new domain is said to be a dream or vision in which he was told that one day he would be ruling at *Tlanglianpui* (*Tlang-lianpui*), literally 'big mountain'. And after his conquest of vast areas of south Lushai Hills and eastern CHT, Vanhnuahtlir established his palace at *Tlanglianpui*. He named the 'big mountain' *Rengtlang*. To this day, it remains *Rengtlang*. *Reng* means a cong, *tlang* means *mountain*. As a part of tributes, he brought two big cong at his newfound palace (Hlawhcheu, 1994: 12).

Apart from his (Vanhnuahtlir) vision, it is possible that his own kinsmen from the Bawmzo and Tlanglau who have already settled in CHT (Lalthangliana, 2001: 202-203) have suggested that he should found a new domain for himself. They could have met during an animal hunting or enemy raiding expedition the Lais from Chin Hills often carried out deep into the CHT. It is also possible that the first Bawmzo and Tlanglau settlers in the CHT continued interactions with people of their original homeland in Chin Hills.

And so in 1770, Vanhnuaithlir Hlawncheu, son of Falam (Chin State) chief Chhiatinkhara (a powerful chief that ruled over thirty five villages), left Falam to embark on an ambitious campaign for territorial expansion in the west. He passed through southern Mizoram and entered Bangladesh. The groups or clans that followed Vanhnuaithlir were: Bawmzo, Khenglawt, Fambawl, Fanchun, Tlanglau, Thihlum, Pang, Miria, Vanphawng, Hauheng, Tuallawt, Bunglei, and Ramlawt (Hengmanga, 1987, 21-26; Hlawncheu, 1994: 3-4; Dounge, 2015:61). Besides south Mizoram, Vanhnuaithlir conquered and ruled a vast territory that formed a part of what came to be known as Chittagong Hill Tracts. Liankung who succeeded his father Vanhnuaithlir further extended Hlawncheu's territory.

It may be noted that large parts of Arakan Hill Tracts (now Rakhine State), Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh were under Hlawncheu chiefs whose seat of power was initially at Rengtlang (Bangladesh). The Hlawncheu chiefs, who came from Falam, later ruled from Lawngtlai, Mizoram, India. In the west, their territory extended as far as the Bay of Bengal, up to Cox's Bazar city and the Chittagong sea port. In the north, their territory extended as far as the river port of Paletwa on the river Kolodyne (Hengmanga, 1987: 26-29; Dounge, 2015). Paletwa is 158 km from the Sittwe (Akyab) sea port. It was said of Vanhnuaithlir, who was so powerful in the eyes of his people, that but not for the presence of the sea (Bay of Bengal) in the north and the west, he would have conquered the entire world (personal accounts of descendants of Vanhnuaithlir as told to the author) !

Bawmzo's entry and settlement in Bangladesh

Since Vanhnuaithlir was believed to have founded Sangau and Pangkhua villages (Mizoram, India) at the foot of Blue Mountain in 1773 (Dounge, 2015:61), the entire period of migration and territorial conquests of Vanhnuaithlir and his teams must be roughly between 1770-1820, from the time he left his home in 1770 and the year he died in 1820.

According to Spielman, the Bawmzos reached the CHT in 1830s (Spielman, 1968). Liankung, who succeeded his father Vanhnuaithlir, was summoned in Akyab by Lieutenant Arthur Purvis Phayre, Senior Assistant Commissioner, Arakan, in 1841, in connection with Liankung's raid on Khumi villages. Liankung was at the peak of his power during the face to face meeting with Phayre. Shortly after the interview, Phayre added in his account, the death of the chief by poison (Phayre, 1841: 702). Liankung was poisoned to death in 1841 by an enemy king of Arakan, 'Pamanga Mawklal' (Mogh king Pa-mang-a) (Hlawncheu, 1994: 12-13).

Vanhnuaithlir must have arrived and reigned in the eastern parts of CHT beginning from around 1780-90 till his death in 1820. As early January 1799 (though published in 1808, Macrae's paper was dated January 24th, 1799) John Macrae reported that "The Kookies are often attacked by the Banjooges (another term for Bawmzo, author), who, though not so numerous a race of people, yet, from being all united under one Rajah, always prevail, and exact an annual tribute of salt from the two Kookie Rajahs, TH'ANDON and MANKENE" (Macrae, 1808). His son Liankung have expanded Hlawncheu's chiefdom further in the west, thereby reaching the very heart of CHT in 1830s.

The earliest record of Lai settlement in Arracan (now Rakhine State in Myanmar) and Chittagong Hill Tracts of today's Bangladesh is dated 1787. Hutchinson (1906: 159-160) reproduces a "letter received about June 24th 1787, from the Raja of Arracan to the Chief of Chittagong " that reads: "...Lais', ...and other inhabitants of Arracan have now abandoned and taken refuge near the mountains within your border ...". Hutchinson also mentions that 'Banjogi' (Bawm, author) and Pankho (Pangkhoa or Pang, author) are Lais Hutchinson (1906: 159-160). "The Banjogis have tree septs', writes Hutchinson, such as Doi Tlung (Bawitlung, author), Lon Sing (Hlawchhing, author), and Sunkla (Sunthla, author) Hutchinson (1906: 160). In the light of this record, the Bawm people under Vanhnuaitlir must have settled in Arracan and Chittagong areas at least about 1780.

Bawm as a tribe

Bawm is actually a tribe, not a clan; for it is a composition of various clans. Sahu & Pardo, two Bawm scholars in the Chittagong Hills, classify the Bawm into two 'principal clans: the *Sunthla* and the *Panghawi* '. A closer study of their list reveals that there are as many as fifty six separate clans (Sahu & Pardo, 1998: 20-21). It is interesting to note that the Bawmzo group gradually absorbed in its fold others clans that were not originally a part of the historical Bawmzo, such as Zahau, Zathang, Chinzah, Aineh, Khenglawt, Bawitlung, etc.

The Bangladesh government, through 1991 census, recognized Bawm as one of the eleven recognized tribes in the country. The recognized eleven tribes are: Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Marma, Mro, Pangkhua, Tanchangya and Tripura (Roy, 2012: 4). The Bawm people who left Bangladesh and settled in Mizoram, India, are mostly found within the Lai Autonomous District Council area of south Mizoram (India). They still normally call themselves Bawm, and have even formed a Bawm Students' Association. But they have no problem in identifying themselves as Lai. Since Bawm is not a recognized tribe in Mizoram, or in India, they would invariably identify themselves as Pawi (Lai) for the purposes of census, etc. Pawi is a recognized tribe in Mizoram (India).

Bawm as Lai

The Bawm origin and history, tightly intertwined with that of the Lais (also known as 'Chin' in Myanmar, and 'Pawi' in India), along with social-cultural similarities between them, make it amply clear that the Bawms are indeed Lais. Though separated from the Lai main groups in India and Myanmar, the Bawms still speak Lai language with minor differences from Lai *holh* (Lai language). Mr. Zir Kung says that though they normally call themselves Bawm, they also refer themselves as *Lai*, *Laimi* ('mi' means 'person', 'people') (Sahu & Pardo, 1998: 20-21; Nathan, 2013). Sahu and Pardo further write, "The Bawm people are known as Bawm Zo by Laimi or Lai, the same groups of people living in Falam, Haka, Matu, and Thlantlang in the Chin Hills of Myanmar and also by the Pawi of Mizoram" (Sahu & Pardo, 1998: 11).

Population, areas of present settlement

The Bawm are still living there in today's Bangladesh. Many of them have migrated to Mizoram (India) on account of political instability and ethnic tensions as a result of which their population dwindled. The Bawm population in Bangladesh in 1981 was 6040. In 1998, there are 62 Bawm villages in Chittagong Division of Bangladesh, an area where they are mostly found. The highest concentration of Bawm population is in Ruma Thana (Bandarban District) in the Chittagong Division. The tribe's literacy was 80 % in 1998. Today, all of them follow Christianity (Loncheu, 2013; Shahu & Pardo, 1998). Bangladesh census of 1991 records the Bawm population as 13, 471 (Roy, 2012: 14).

Apart from being a religious and ethnic minority, Bawm people live mostly in hilly areas of the country that are less productive than the plain areas. As is the case with minorities in today's Bangladesh, Bawm people are socio-economically less developed. Government jobs are largely beyond their reach. Encroachment of their land by the majority Muslims is rampant. The future of the Bawm people in Bangladesh is quite bleak. Unless things dramatically improve for them in the future, all of the Bawm people may be compelled to eventually leave their country.

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