

Lost Israelites From the Indo-Burmese Borderlands: Re-Traditionalisation and Conversion Among the Shinlung or Bene Menasseh¹

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SHINLUNG AS CHILDREN OF MENASSEH IN JERUSALEM

On Thursday night, December 4, 2003, eight brides in white dresses and veils from the so-called Bene Menasseh (Hebrew: "Children of Menasseh") community in Israel were married to eight grooms in suits in Jerusalem's Great Synagogue. 400 friends, relatives and supporters attended the ceremony, which was conducted by a Rabbi under the traditional Jewish wedding *chupa* (bridal canopy). The eight couples had been married previously in India, but not according to Jewish law. According to the Associated Press reporter, a 31 year old member of the community called Michael Menasseh, who immigrated to Israel nine years ago, acted as translator and adviser for the group (Rabinowitz, 2003). Menasseh said that the reception in Israel had been mixed, because of questions over their Jewishness. "We have a connection (to Judaism), but there is no proof," he said. "It is very difficult for us" (Rabinowitz, 2003). All the couples had undergone full orthodox conversion to Judaism according to the *halacha* (Jewish law). Since their original weddings had taken place when they were not Jewish, they now had to re-marry according to Jewish tradition in order to be recognised as married couples in the Jewish religion.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Religious conversion implies accepting a set of beliefs and practices which is quite different from the system of truth and religious commitment previously experienced (Heirich, 1977). The reasons for group conversion are often intriguing and encompass such searching questions as why one group in a particular culture area might be reluctant to convert to a world religion while another group might endorse it (Rigby, 1981); why conversion movements gain sudden popularity; and why people convert at all (Kammerer, 1990). Ideas about the millenium are often associated with conversion, and sometimes

account for periods of intense religious fervour (cf. Wilson, 1973).

The study of conversion from one religion to another has been a traditional subject of interest for anthropologists and members of other disciplines, yet it has suffered from several major limitations. It has characteristically been discussed in relation to Christianity, 'conversion' often being synonymous with 'conversion to Christianity' (Pauw 1975). Of course, this is not exclusively so, and conversion to Islam has been documented in several contexts. However, conversion to Judaism, traditionally a non-proselytizing world religion,² is a relatively unexplored field.

In academic circles, the study of conversion has sometimes tended to don the mask of objectivity, while actually supporting conversion, the researcher in fact being (Lienhardt, 1961), or 'becoming', the missionary or the convert. Lienhardt, whose excellent studies of the Dinka constitute classic reading in anthropology, is probably the best example of his kind. Furthermore, research has usually focussed upon a single conversion movement, irrespective of the fact that adherents to one religion may have undergone multiple radical transformations. In the case of indigenous religions, believers may adapt basic elements of traditional religion with a more dominant religion; in the case of world religions, adherents may convert to a second, or even third, world religion in the course of one life-span. Added to this complex reality is the phenomenon of "re-traditionalisation", by which otherwise often heterogeneous populations are integrated and mobilized against an external tradition and culture (Smith, 1990).

DUAL CONVERSION AMONG THE SHINLUNG

This paper is an attempt to delve into some of the issues of conversion raised above among a collection of different tribal peoples claiming Israelite descent who lived in the Indo-Burmese

borderlands, and some of whom today live in the State of Israel. In India, they were known by a variety of appellations, but collectively as the Shinlung;³ in Israel, they are known as Bene Menasseh, linking them with the Biblical tribe of Menasseh. There is no attempt in the article to support or refute these peoples' claims or their conversion to Judaism, although I do recount to 'emic' worldviews and indigenous reconstructions of past, present and future. Instead of describing a single conversion movement, then, which is the usual focus of articles on religious conversion, this article deals with the phenomenon of dual conversion to a second world religion, while exploring the connection between traditional religious beliefs and the new religious cognitive order.

In fact, the Shinlung from the Indo-Burmese borderlands have taken place in two stages: the first was from different types of indigenous religions, often described as animistic religions, to Christianity, and the second conversion was from Christianity to Judaism, a world religion that is relatively insignificant in India and Burma.⁴ While this paper does recount the first metamorphosis to Christianity, the subject matter is different from many other articles on conversion in that the primary focus is on conversion to Judaism, a world religion that, while containing missionary elements, is not usually considered a proselytising religion.

The Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand, documented by Kammerer (1990, 1998), share a similar background to the Shinlung, from many points of view. They converted to Christianity, despite their initial resistance to the new religion, from an indigenous *zah*, or form of religion and way of life. Clearly, the Akha did not convert to Judaism, and herein lies the great difference; nevertheless, the Shinlung replaced their indigenous religion by a different world religion. Following Kammerer (1990), it would be inappropriate to analyse the contact between different forms of religion – in our case, indigenous religion and Christianity and then Judaism – according to Western models of co-existence, compartmentalism or syncretism, as in other parts of the world; an alternative model of what Kammerer (1990: 287) calls 'replacement' is more apt, by which the tribal peoples abandon one set of norms and customs and change their religious identification and participation.

The process of conversion to Judaism among

the Shinlung began some 30 years ago, when groups of heterogeneous people in Mizoram and Manipur in India and in Tiddim, Burma, started observing Judaic practices in the belief that Jewish customs and the Jewish faith were compatible with indigenous tribal religion and could in fact replace it. Their link to Judaism was through a lost Israelite claim associated with millenarian beliefs, which may have been introduced to them through Christianity, or alternatively, may have been inherited from their indigenous religious beliefs. The dual conversion appealed to ancient ties, as well as creating older yet newer identities of ethnicity and nationalism.

In this article, the fabrication of a new ethno-history and the creation of a wider myth of allegiance to an ancient Jewish diaspora shall be examined in order to seek an explanation for the recent, somewhat bizarre, religious transformation to Judaism, and its results: the emigration of a few hundred people from India and Burma to pursue a new destiny in a new location in Israel.

CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

The conversion of the tribal peoples of north-east India and Burma to some form of Judaism over the past few decades has not swelled the ranks of the Jewish communities in India and Burma to any extent. The numbers converted are both insignificant, and almost impossible to assess due both to the closed nature of the geographical areas from which they hail, and the dynamic nature of their conversion. Moreover, contact between the converted tribal peoples, who today call themselves the 'Children of Menasseh' and the local Jews in India is limited to a handful of pupils who study side by side with Bene Israel Indian Jews in Mumbai, and familiarity with one or two leaders of the Indian Jewish communities in Calcutta and New Delhi. In 1996, I noticed two Shinlung members attending the synagogue prayers in New Delhi; however, they were not counted as part of a *minyan* (quorum) by the regular members of the community belonging both to the Baghdadi Jewish community and the Bene Israel, on the grounds that they had not yet converted to Judaism. In 2000, on a visit to the Jewish community of Bombay, I was informed that one or two pupils from north-east India that were studying at the ORT (Organisation through Rehabilitation Training) Jewish technical school in Bombay were attributed special privileges.

Although Christianity and Judaism in India and Burma can be said to display structural similarities in terms of their out-of-caste relation to Hinduism and their incongruity with Buddhism, numerically they are intrinsically different. Christians in India number more than 14 million souls, while at their peak prior to 1948 the Jews were only 23,000 (Reissner 1950); today a total of 5,000 Jews live in India.⁵ In Burma, no more than a handful of Jews remain.⁶

The total phenomenon of conversion to some form of Judaism in situ in north-east India/Burma is probably not widespread. In the second half of the 1980s, Tudor Parfitt was informed in Bombay that “several thousand families” had “reverted” to Judaism in Manipur (1987). Clearly, the magnitude of the phenomenon waxes and wanes from year to year, but in the past five years or so, it has received encouragement from reports of the Jewish weddings described at the outset of this article and the mostly positive newspaper articles. As far as I can assess today, the actual numbers of self-acclaimed Jews in all of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam in India and Tiddim in Burma may only encompass a few thousand people. However, an affiliation to Judaism by virtue of imputed common Israelite ancestry appears to be shared more generally by thousands of people in the area. An informant living in Israel the West Bank settlement in Beth-El at first told me that “thousands” of people are practising Jews in Mizoram alone.⁷ In the course of the interview, the number of adherents to Judaism shrank to “a few hundred”. It is clear that the significance of the phenomenon far outweighs the actual statistics. To date, over 700 people have converted officially to orthodox Judaism according to *halachic* (Jewish law) Israeli Rabbinical requirements either in India or in Israel. To the best of my knowledge, no Shinlung has converted to Reform or Conservative Judaism, whose conversions are not recognised by the orthodox Israeli establishment for purposes of marriage with other Jews.

This article, then, will survey some of the different tribal groups from north-east India and Burma involved in the religious conversion process. It will attempt to describe elements of the indigenous religion, and the subsequent conversion to Christianity. Recent claims that the Shinlung are ‘lost Israelites’ from the tribe of Menasseh will be examined in the light of millenarian traits and the myth of the Ten Lost

Tribes. I shall then examine the source of the relatively recent religious transformation of the tribal peoples of north-east India and Burma to Judaism and the source of the widespread affiliation with an Israelite heritage is related to the process which Smith (1990) terms “re-traditionalisation”. The connection between re-traditionalisation and the search for ethnic autonomy will be examined in an attempt to understand the reasons for conversion among groups of people whom, at first glance, bear no apparent allegiance to the religion to which they are converting. There is no documentary evidence of Jews or Israelites on the Indo-Burmese borderlands, and legends about the Ten Lost Tribes were not traditionally associated with this culture area.

SHIFTING TRIBAL IDENTITIES

The Shinlung, who are scattered over present-day Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and the plains areas of Burma, live side by side with the Nagas and the Meitheis, who are often known as Manipuris in the state of Manipur (Hodson, 1975). According to an informant from Mizoram, the origin of the word Shinlung is obscure, although *shin* denotes the peoples’ putative connection to China, and *lung* means ‘stone’ and refers to their genesis in a cave, a familiar theme in Chin-Lushai mythology. The Shinlung represents a collective identity which includes Chins, Kukis, Lushai, Mizos and others,⁸ and tribal identity shifts between different tribal appellations according to context. According to Lehman (1992), the designation is restricted to the inhabitants of Myanmar’s Chin State. “On the Indian side of the border the major related people are the Mizo, or Lushai, or Mizoram State. The Kuki and Hmar are their relatives in Manipur State. The Plains Chin, or Asho live in Myanmar proper just east of Chin State” (Lehman, 1992: 62). A recent complication is the identification of some Chin-Kukis with Nagas, whereas only at the beginning of the century, according to my informants, these were two distinct ethnic groups; simultaneously, tribal hostility has erupted between these two groups in recent years. Although Thadou is the dominant Kuki group and dialect in Manipur today, included in the Shinlung collective designation are members of different tribal groupings speaking different languages and dialects from the Gange, Hmar, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei, Aimol, Zou and other tribes. The subtle

differences between the tribes are sometimes one of location. As Sara, a recent convert to Judaism from the Vaiphei tribe told me at a wedding in Jerusalem in August 2000: "People in Israel think we're all the same – but some of us can hardly even speak with the others because we're from a different tribe." It should also be recalled that despite their apparent homogeneity from an outsider perspective, many tribes are in conflict over competing resources and loyalties both in Mizoram and Manipur.

Each tribal name is beset with its own difficulties of definition, and, indeed, self-definition, and tribal affiliation may be flexible, negotiable and changeable. The tradition of shifting tribal identity may thus account for the apparent ease with which Shinlung adopted a new Israeli identity as Children of Menasseh. Lebar et al. point to the difficulties in defining the better known term, Chin. They state: "The Chins present particularly difficult problems with respect to group identification and synonym" (Lebar et al., 1964). Lehman (1963: 9) differentiates between the inhabitants of different geographical areas by calling all the peoples who live south, east and west of the Southern Chin Hills "Southern Chin" (Lehman, 1963: 14). However, within the Hills, there are both Southern Chin, who live in the former Arakan and Pakokku Hills Tracts, and Northern Chin, who comprise nearly all of the people on the Haka-Falam border in the Chin State of Burma and in the Tiddim area of Burma, as well as the Lushai and Lakker on the Assam side. Excluded from this categorization are the Kukis of the Chittagong Hills, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, whose social organisation is similar to the Southern Chin.

The terms Chin, Kuki and even Mizo are virtually interchangeable. Kuki is a term generally said to have been invented by the British, although Lehman attributes the term to the Manipuris, or the Hinduized Meitais (1963: 5). Kukis can be divided into Old Kukis, which includes members of the Vaiphei, Chote, Purum and Aimol tribes, and New Kukis, which includes members of the Thado, Kolhen, Chilou and Biete tribes (Lebar et al., 1964). Some of the New Kukis are Northern Chin who arrived in their present terrain during the middle of the nineteenth century; the Old Kukis, like the Vaiphei tribe probably were expelled from the Chin Hills a half a century earlier (Carey and Tuck, 1896). Again, in recent years, some tribesmen, and particularly those

from the Vaiphei, Gangte, Zou and Paite tribes, have rejected the negative connotations of Kukis and have either identified themselves as Shinlung or as Zomi. During the 1990s a Kuki-Paite conflict erupted in Manipur on the basis of ancient tribal acrimony; recently, the Nagas and Kukis have openly expressed hostility over territorial issues, while the Hindu Meitais are also vying with other tribal groupings on religious grounds.

After the annexation of the area in 1891, the British divided the territory into two administrative districts: the North Lushai Hills and the South Lushai Hills. In 1808 the two districts were amalgamated to form the Lushai Hills district, after the name of the local tribes people, the Lushai, and the District was incorporated into part of Assam. Although there is no satisfactory evidence for the origin of the term, Lushai is apparently a Chin word meaning 'long-head' (*lu*=head; *sei*=long) according to the fashion in which men wore their hair-knots and turbans.⁹ In 1954 the Lushai Hills District was renamed Mizo District, after the name of one of the predominant tribes in the area, the Mizos (Ray, 1982).

The majority of those who define themselves as Shinlung, hail primarily from Mizoram, and are often Lushai, but others also live in Manipur, the Tiddim area of Burma over the official border, and in Israel. The Shinlung do not represent a culture or a tribe, as Leach so astutely pointed out for the neighbouring Burmese Kachin and Shans (1954). However, as with the Kachin and the Shan, tribal identity with the wider connotation Shinlung is flexible, members preserving membership in the Shinlung entity at the same time as they negotiate other tribal or sub-tribal identities, including new-old Biblical ones, such as the Children of Menasseh.

Today, some 800 Shinlung individuals reside in the state of Israel, although the numbers change from time to time according to Israeli government policy.¹⁰ My informants there hail from the Haka Chin, Vaiphei, Gangte, Zou, Paite and other tribes. Some are content to self-identify as Shinlung, or by a specific tribal identification, although they have emerged in the press and in popular parlance as a conglomerate known in Hebrew as the Bene Menasseh, or the Children of Menasseh, thereby tying them to a Biblical tribal appellation from a different religion with a different destiny.

INDIGENOUS TRIBAL RELIGION

While the thrust of this article is on recent

conversion to Judaism among certain Shinlung, a brief description will be given of traditional religion, as it can be gleaned from documentary sources. The description will of necessity be truncated, its purpose to point out the major elements of belief and practice. Although north-east India/Burma is populated by various tribal peoples, the following account will both be generic and a-historical with an awareness that tribal variation in belief and praxis has not been specified and in many cases has not been documented ethnographically.¹¹

The Shinlung believe in a monotheistic, omnipresent god, who represents goodness (McCall, 1949). The Lushai and Mizos call this high god *panthian* or *pathian*. Lehman claims that the designation *pathian* was adopted by the Chin from the Lushai “perhaps under Christian influence” (1963:177). According to the missionary Mendus, “They believe him to be by nature of disposition, *zaidam*, i.e. good-natured, amiable and humble, but somewhat inactive, particularly as regards controlling the evil spirits.” (Mendus, 1888:37). Among the Haka Chin, the same Supreme God is known as *khuazing* (lit: “when the rocks and stones were soft”) (Lehman, 1963:177). *ath Him*, a class of evil spirits, known as *khuachia* among the Haka Chin, and *ramuhai* or *ram-huei* among the Lushai (McCall, 1949: 68), reign. According to McCall, *ramuhai*, whom Lehman (1963: 183) identifies as “terrifying jungle spirits”, usually reside in high mountains, caves, holes in the earth, water springs or large trees. They have to be propitiated perpetually so that *huaveng*, the spirits of magnanimity, will bring comfort, for the *ramuhai* (and *khuachia*) cause sickness and injury. A whole range of local spirits with different names according to different tribal and sub-tribal divisions inhabit fields, houses and villages. The chief means of establishing contact with and appeasing the supernatural is through the sacrifice of animals, usually fowl or pig. One of the ancestor spirits is known as *mannasi* or *manasia*.

The Shinlung ritual cycle revolves around the ritual recitations such as the Feasts of Merit and the Feasts of Celebration, accompanied by feasting and dancing (Lehman, 1963: 179-182). There are three major festivals or *kut* which are associated with the agricultural activities of the Shinlung. The *Mim Kut*/maize festival, is celebrated in the months of August and September after the harvesting; the *Chapchar Kut* is held in

March after the *Jhum* cutting, or jungle clearing, and is celebrated with great feasting and merriment; the *Pawl Kut* takes place in December once the second harvesting in the year is terminated. Sacrifice and particularly pig sacrifice is essential to the success of the festivals. For example, during *Chapchar Kut*, the first few days are spent by the young men hunting animals and catching fish. Then they kill the pigs, drink *zu*,¹² a homemade rice beer, and partake of the feast.

REVIVALISM

It is difficult to assess with certainty whether millenarianism was indigenous to pre-Christian religion (Goswami, 1980), or whether it was a reaction to the type of Christianity introduced in the region. Conversion to Christianity began after Christian missionaries established themselves in the tribal areas in north-east India in 1894, three years after the British Chin-Lushai Expedition and the Anglo-Manipur War. The Christian missionaries met with considerable success in the area known today as Mizoram. The Methodists (or Welsh Presbyterians) operated from Aizawl, the major centre in the territory, spreading the Word throughout the area. As they had not spread their missionary activity throughout the territory, English Baptists gained approval to operate from Lunglei in the south. In Manipur, the American Baptists were dominant.

Initially, the local tribesmen were offered a puritanical Calvinistic form of Protestantism. Later, Welsh Presbyterianism provided a legitimate framework for prophecy, possession cults and ‘speaking in tongues’, and revivalism clearly appealed to the local population. “Revivalism in its modern form can be attributed to that shared emphasis in Anabaptism, Puritanism, German Pietism, and Methodism in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries on personal religious experience, the priesthood of all believers, and holy living, in protest against established church systems that seemed excessively sacramental, priestly, and worldly” (McHenry, 1993: Vol. 10: 9). Since documentation of revivalist tendencies only took place by the colonisers, it is unclear whether Christianity encouraged indigenous trends, or whether politico-religious movements with millenarian traits, similar to Cargo Cults found in New Guinea, actually preceded the introduction of Christianity.

The reasons for the ease with which the tribal populations embraced Christianity can perhaps be found in the nature of the indigenous religion. It is true that the missionaries opposed animal sacrifice; they inveighed against local morality and encouraged the natives to adopt Western family structure, dress, music and dance. However, the local population discovered that it was possible to embrace Western religion without necessarily abandoning indigenous belief. In addition, millenarianism, which may have been inherent to pre-Christian religion, fitted the very form of revivalist Christianity which they were offered.

In respect to the Lushais, Fuchs (1965) attributes the phenomenon to "several mental qualities" which make them "accessible to revivalism." He writes: "...revivalism is a recurrent phenomenon distinctive of the Welsh form of Presbyterianism. Certain members of the congregation who easily fall into ecstasy are believed to be visited by the Holy Ghost and the utterings are received as prophecies" (1965: 16). McCall (1949) records several incidents of revivalism including the "Kelkang incident" in which three men "spoke in tongues" claiming to be the medium through which God spoke to men. Their following was large and widespread until they clashed with the colonial Superintendent who put down the movement and removed the "sorcery" (1949: 220-223).

Among the Kachar Nagas, a tribe residing north of the Lushais, Fuchs (1966) describes another independent messianic movement that occurred in 1929. Here, a new "Messiah" arose and promised to liberate the Nagas from the rope of both the Kukis and the British.

In the Chin Hills, the most famous revivalist movement was that of Pan Chin Hau, a Sokte Chin who hailed from a village near Tiddim in Burma. Pau Chin Hau founded his movement as a result of a series of dream visions that occurred between 1900 and 1903. In 1930, he moved from Tiddim to his ancestral village of Mualbem, a large village eleven miles south; by 1931, 35,700 followers had adopted the movement. Although it is difficult to ascertain precise Pan Chin Hau beliefs, it is clear that different types of ritual were practised by his followers which included curing rituals, the Sunday ritual, the observance of the New Year, and commemoration of Pau Chin Hau's birth and death days - in brief, a syncretic mix of Western and native traits (Banks, 1967).

The Pau Chin Hau cult allowed sacrifices provided that they were to God. Norr writes that by the time that he arrived in the Kachin Hills in 1940, animism "had become a thing of the past for all practical purposes" (Norr 1983). According to him, the whole Matu Chin became Christian after 1954 and gave up worship in spirits (*nats*). Clearly there is an element of exaggeration in Norr's writing. He writes: "This was the same with the Kachins of North Burma, and within two generations from the beginning of the twentieth century they all became Christian" (Norr, 1983).

Since Indian independence in 1947, the Methodists and the Baptists in Mizoram amalgamated into a united church, despite the fact that foreign missionaries were prohibited from operating there. By 1981, 83 per cent of the population in Mizoram had adopted Christianity (some 400,000 souls) as did 30 percent of the population in Manipur (Samra, 1992: 8). In both states, it was the tribal populations, who were in fact the only target population among whom the missionaries were allowed to operate, who overwhelmingly adopted the new religion. All members of the Shinlung in Israel practised a form of Christianity before their adoption of Judaism.

Conversion to Judaism among the Shinlung, therefore, appears to be part of a wider reaction to Christianity among many tribal peoples of the Indo-Burmese borderlands. While it is unclear exactly which circumstances triggered off this trend, it is apparent that the conversion was related to a general dissatisfaction with Christianity as it was preached in the twentieth century, and a desire to adopt elements of the pre-Christian religion and combine them in a modern framework. The Judaizing Shinlung managed to dovetail a claim of affiliation to lost Israelites with indigenous legends about wandering tribes, and to project millenarianism, which may have been inherent in their own religions, onto modern Judaism.

As with other millenarian movements, the trigger which sparked off the conversion was a dream by a male mystic named Mela Chala from Mizoram. An informant in New Delhi related the following story, which I have heard in many different versions in Israel: "Mela Chala from the village of Buallawn woke up one morning with a dream that the Shinlung were descended from the Israelites. News of the dream spread throughout Mizoram, Manipur and Chin State; it even reached Tiddim, in Burma. Mela Chala further

had the vision that we, as Israelites, would return to Israel. This was in 1951.” It is significant that this was only three years after the establishment of the State of Israel when pro-Israel feeling was running high internationally and the Indian people, in particular, admired the way the Jewish people had successfully gained their independence from the British. “However, to salve Arab feelings and prevent any possible Moslem backlash at home, the government of India decided not to establish normal diplomatic relations with Israel” (Kumar, 2000: 95). Nevertheless, as Rivka Rei, an informant who came to live in Israel in the 1980s informed me (in December 1990), since Mela Chala’s apocalyptic dream, “...people have been trying to return to Judaism in order to return to their ancestral land,” the informant continued. The implication is that the ancient homeland of the Shinlung is the present-day nation-state of Israel. Past is conflated with present, Lost Israelites are conflated with existing tribes.

LOST ISRAELITE CLAIMS IN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

It may well be that the recent conversion to Judaism by Shinlung, who in the past converted to Christianity, is also connected to the existence of millenarianism in indigenous religions in the area. For the link of the Shinlung with contemporary Judaism is through a pervasive myth, common to both Judaism and Christianity, that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel are still alive and exist in dispersion.

Although there is no documentary evidence linking the tribal peoples in north-east India with the myth of the Lost Israelites, it appears likely that, as with revivalism, the concept was introduced by the missionaries as part of their general millenarian leanings (Samra, 1991). This was certainly the case in other countries, where fundamentalist Christian missionaries “discovered” Lost Tribes in far-flung places, in order to speed up the messianic era and bring on the Redemption. In China, for example, the Scottish missionary Rev. T. F. Torrance entitled his 1937 book “China’s Ancient Israelites” expounding the theory that the Chiang-Min are really Lost Israelites (Torrance, 1937).

The claim to adhere to lost Israelite tribes is an ancient one, which is shared by hundreds, if not thousands, of groups throughout the world

(Godbey, 1930). According to the Bible, the northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE and the ten tribes (Reuben, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, Menasseh, Ephraim, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher) in the Kingdom were exiled “...in Halah, and in Habor by the river of Gozan and in the cities of the Medes” (II Kings, 17: 6). The fate of the Ten Lost Tribes has always been something of an enigma. Although it was generally assumed that the Israelites who were exiled eventually assimilated, particular Biblical passages documented their place of exile (I Chronicles, 5:26) and prophetic proclamations (Isaiah, 11: 11-12; Ezekiel, 37: 21-23) suggested that they continued to live on and would be ‘ingathered’ in latter days. Hopes of discovering the Ten Lost Tribes and belief in the possibility of their ultimate return were kept alive throughout the ages. It appears that the myth of the Ten Lost Tribes gained momentum in certain historical periods, such as those associated with the rise of messianism or the growth of fundamentalism (Weil, 1991).

While particularly pervasive in the Jewish world, the myth became popular among various Christian denominations who sought out ‘Israelites’, both among Jews and among Gentiles, whom they could convert to Christianity in order to hasten the arrival of the millennium. Thus, in the sixteenth century, the Bishop Las Casas attempted to “prove” that the American Indians were lost Israelites in order to “save” them (Popkin, 1989). In the nineteenth century, Reverend Wolff, a missionary for the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, became convinced that the Jews of Bukhara, as well as other non-Jewish tribes in the Hindu Kush area, were descendants of the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun (Wolff, 1946).

In this vein, nineteenth century missionary work among the Karen tribe of Burma was inspired by the belief that they, too, were of the Lost Tribes. Dr. Francis Mason, of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, arrived with his wife in Toungoo, Burma, in 1814. By the middle of the century, Mason became convinced that indigenous Karen worship and, in particular, their belief in a monotheistic eternal god called Y-wa, were similar to that of the ancient Israelites and that they were of the seed of Israel (Mason, 1843). According to Stern, this identification lent stature in Karen eyes to their own indigenous beliefs,

which were now recognised as part of a Great Tradition (Stern, 1968). The Masons thus reinforced traditional millenarianism by working with them through Christian revivalism. It appears that in parts of Mizoram, in particular, conversion to Christianity implied the identification of local tribes with Lost Tribes of Israel.

LOST ISRAELITE CLAIMS IN SHINLUNG CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNO-HISTORY

An alternative 'emic' view, held by Shinlung themselves, which opposes the idea that the Christian missionaries introduced the identification of local tribes with Lost Tribes, claims that the legend of the Lost Israelites was part of pre-Christian tradition. On the basis of this claim, some Shinlung desire to 'return' to the people of Israel by adopting Judaism in the Jewish State.

Despite local variations in interpretation of the Israelite claim, the Shinlung have published a number of pamphlets representing different groups which have emerged over the past two decades claiming an Israelite connection. The pamphlets describe, more or less, a common history which sets them off from other tribesmen in the area. An insight into their Weltanschauung can be gained by examining six pamphlets which I have succeeded in securing from different Judaizing Shinlung congregations (Anonymous, 1980; Anonymous, 1988; Benjamin and Yisrael, 1975; Sailo, 1975; Thangruma, 1974; Zaithanchhungi, 1990). Some of the pamphlets are more explicit in linking the lost Israelite claim with Judaism; others are less explicit. Some of the pamphlets are written by people who identify solely with Judaism; others are penned by 'Jewish Christians'.

According to their collective tradition as expressed in all these pamphlets, the ancestors of the Shinlung were Israelites exiled by Shalmanezar, King of Assyria, in 722 BCE. They lived in Persia and Afghanistan and were then pushed eastward into Northern India, through Hindukush, and to Tibet. They migrated to China and settled in Yunan Province. From there, they moved to central China where they came into contact with the now-extinct Jewish Kaifeng community. During the reign of King Chin Shihuangti, who built the Great Wall of China, they were treated as slaves.

According to the publications, the Shinlung

retained their own customs, but were persecuted by the Chinese, who killed all their priests and burned their holy books. In order to escape from the King's soldiers, some of the Shinlung escaped and took refuge in caves. They became known as 'The Cave People', a familiar motif in this part of the world. Emerging from the cave, the people established a separate village named *Sinlung* (hence, their collective appellation, Shinlung). From approximately 1300 CE they moved to Shan State and crossed the great river Irrawady and penetrated into the Apalling hills in Burma. Here, they were maltreated by the king and again escaped. They reached their present habitat in India on the Burmese border about 1600 or 1100 CE, and to this day, know that their origins are different from the rest of the local population.

In addition to the claim of origins, which links the Shinlung to the Jewish people through the Ten Lost Tribes, the pamphlets compare pre-Christian ritual with Jewish religious practice. According to the authors, parallels exist between traditional Shinlung religion, in its various manifestations and Judaism, which, for lack of knowledge, is presented in monolithic fashion, often in its Biblical formulation.

At the level of belief, *pathian* has become an almost monotheistic, omnipresent god, while the roles of *pu vana*, a deity who serves in heaven Bneiath *pathian*, and the 'Maidens of Heavens' termed *khuavang* and *lasi* have been diminished. As in the Jewish belief system, spirits exist, but *pathian*, as creator of the world, has been distanced from them. Evil spirits have been equated with the *satan* and the sacrifices offered to appease the evil supernatural beings have been equated with the sacrifices described in Exodus and Leviticus, Zaithanchhungi (1990: 22) explains differences in practice thus: "There are only few who used the blood of domestic animals for sacrificial offerings to God. Mizos, like the Israelites, used such blood. Their ancestors had lost their written records and traditional rites and practices are taught orally through generations. This practice naturally leads to few differences in the detail of rites but the principal rites of sacrifices as well as its purpose are the same amongst all clans of Mizos" (Zaithanchhungi, 1990: 22). Parallels are also found in marriage and divorce customs, including levirate marriage, as described in the Bible. The system of slavery among the Shinlung is compared to that of Israelite slavery and the Biblical rules to redeem

slaves, as described in *Exodus* 21: 2-6 and Deuteronomy 15: 12-13, are considered to be parallel.

The pamphlets compare Jewish traditional festivals, particularly the three Jewish 'Foot Festivals' or pilgrimages, namely, the Feast of Thanksgiving (*Succot*), Passover (*Pesach*) and the Harvest Festival (*Shavuot*) with the three major Shinlung Festivals described above in this article. A particular resemblance is found between the Jewish festival of Passover, which recalls the exodus from Egypt and on which Jews refrain from eating leavened bread, and *Chapchar Kut*, which occurs at approximately the same time of the year.

Most significant in recent years is the conflation between *Manasia* or *Manmas*, and the Israelite tribal appellation *Menasseh* (or *Menasha*). *Manasia* is a Shinlung forefather. According to Zaithanchhungi (1990), a Christian woman who believes in the Lost Tribe origins of the Mizos: "At family offering the chant is, 'The children of *Manasia* offer Three animal's blood, O God of High' ... At the sacrifice for healing epilepsy, the priest chants: 'Release him we are above your power, we are children of *Menase*' ... When a new settlement is made, clearing the jungle for that purpose, the first sapling felled is accompanied by a chant 'You are obstructing our grandfather *Manasia*' ... In the offering of some sacrifice the chant is, '*Manase*, *Menase* come and help us.'" His powers are said to be inferior to *pathian* yet a tradition states that whenever praying to God. "The name of our forefather *Manasia* must be pronounced." (Zaithanchhungi 1990: 34-36).¹³

Clearly, the veracity of the claims of some of the Shinlung to originate in Israel and to perpetrate Israelite customs is not the focus of this article. On the factual level, there are many difficulties with both the theory of origin and the theory of customs. As Lyman (1998: 7) puts it: "Every aspect of the history – and the very existence- of the ten tribes of Israel is fraught with existential controversy and epistemological conundrums". Suffice it to say that with respect to origin, there is no documentary evidence that the Ten Lost Tribes were exiled as far as China; the Kaifeng community is considered by most serious researchers as a Jewish community from the Kingdom of Judah – probably an offshoot of Iranian Jewry – and therefore not a remnant of Lost Tribes (Pollock, 1984); and there is no reason to believe that lost Israelites remained isolated and unassimilated throughout the generations.

Although this myth was kept alive in Judeo-Christian tradition through the prophetic visions of the eventual Redemption and reunification of the ten lost tribes with the two remaining tribes, throughout the generations there were always sceptics. One of the most famous disbelievers in the return of the Lost Ten Tribes was the sage Rabbi Akiva (c.45-135 BCE) himself, who claimed that the exiled tribes had been assimilated and disappeared (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10: 3). Nevertheless, the myth of Lost Tribe origins remained rampant and, indeed, is widespread among other groups in India and China (Weil, 1991).

With regard to religious beliefs and praxis, it is obvious that knowledge of Judaism among the Shinlung is extremely limited. In the pamphlets cited above, comparison between pre-Christian beliefs and practices and so-called 'Jewish' ones is based primarily on Biblical descriptions with little regard for the evolution of Judaism through the *halacha* (codification of Jewish law). To take but one example, slavery, which is discussed in great detail in the Bible, is now defunct among Jews. The prohibition on lighting a fire on the Sabbath has been subjected to many Rabbinic interpretations and modern-day orthodox Jews can keep food warm on the Sabbath, while not actually lighting a fire. Even if we do compare Shinlung practice with Biblical prescriptions, which, I stress, would not provide much insight in to current Jewish observance, vast differences exist between the two. The most striking example is the consumption of pig, an animal expressly prohibited as unclean and therefore not kosher in the Bible (Leviticus, 11: 7) which is the staple diet of nearly all Shinlung prior to their conversion to Judaism. On *Chapchar Kut*, an important part of the festival is hunting and eating pig. Needless to say, the drinking of *zu* (home-made beer), as an integral part of *Chapchar Kut*, would also be forbidden by orthodox Jews on Passover since beer ferments and is considered the equivalent of leavened bread.

The point, therefore is not whether there is any veracity in the assertions of the Shinlung to originate from the Kingdom of ancient Israel, or whether any comparison can be made between Shinlung religious behaviour and Biblical or Jewish prohibitions or observances, but from an analytical point of view, to discuss how and when these claims developed and what their significance is in the emergence of a new 'Jewish'

identity.

FROM LOST ISRAELITES TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL

An alternative view is to regard the development of the Lost Tribe theory and the subsequent conversion by many adherents to this theory to formal Judaism as an expression of indigenous religion, and in part, a rejection of Christianity. This view is endorsed by Hminga (1963), who maintains that attachment to the Israelite theory by the Lushai was part and parcel of indigenous religion and that the rise in Zionism can be explained as revivalist reaction to Christianity.

“A few years ago a Zionist movement sprang up from the extreme revivalist group which might have been inspired by a fanciful interpretation of the Bible. The people who adhered to the movement claimed that the Lushai people were the lost tribe of Israel. They soon caused a stir throughout the country. They taught that Christ’s Second Coming was drawing near and that the return of the people of Israel in dispersion to their homeland was a sure sign. They said, ‘Christ is going to establish his Kingdom on earth, in Israel, and we, being the lost tribe of Israel must also return to our home land.’ There were several people going round the villages collecting names of those who would like to join the migration party. There was time when ‘migration into Israel’ was in the lips of almost everybody in Lushai. They went so far as to send a deputation to the Consul of Israel in Calcutta,¹⁴ but their representatives came back disappointed. As a result the movement soon declined although a very small remnant still clings to the movement. It is said that they observe the Passover feast and the Sabbath, though they still claim faith in Jesus Christ” (Hminga, 1963).

Contrary to Hminga’s understanding, however, the movement did not decline; in, fact, it flourished. During the 1970s several deputations were made to the Israeli consulate and letters were sent to the Israeli Consulate and the Jewish Agency in Bombay.¹⁵ The petitioners requested further information about Jewish customs; some requested to emigrate to Israel by virtue of the fact that they were ‘Israelites.’ In 1974 a pamphlet written by one of the potential converts was sent to Golda Meir, then Prime Minister of Israel. It stated: “We the children of Israel, your blood brothers, who wept and groaned for the sake of

Zion have the honour to submit this Memorandum for favour of your sympathetic consideration and take necessary action for the MIZOs, in order that we may all return to Zion our ancestral homeland,” According to the Memorandum, “MIZO stands for or typically signifies the Mizoram Israel Zionist Organisation” (Thangruma, 1974).

By 1980, the link between *Manasia/Manmasi* and the Biblical tribe of Menasseh had become solidified, and was clearly couched in terms of an ancient claim. On 29 July 1980, the Christian Reverend Dr. Thangruma wrote to the newspaper “*News from Israel*” circulated from the Israeli consulate in Bombay requesting information and speculating as to which tribe of Israel his people could belong. He also wrote to me consulting with me what possible Lost Tribe they could be; he thought of Ephraim. However, by 1990 he was convinced of their specific tribal affiliation. Thangruma wrote to me thus: “It seems that our loss, the loss of the Children of Menasseh, now known as Mizo, is the deepest or thickest amongst the often mentioned Lost Ten Tribes”.¹⁶

The evolution of attachment and claimed origin to the tribe of Menasseh was strengthened through contacts with Rabbi Avichail, head of an organisation called ‘Amishav’ aimed at “regathering the lost ones in Israel.” In 1980, on his first visit to India from Israel Rabbi Avichail met young members of the Shinlung tribe studying in Bombay with the Bene Israel Indian Jewish community or the ORT trade school. The Bene Israel, aware of the claims of the Shinlung to be Israelites, appeared to be sympathetic to the demands of another group who, 20 years after their own struggle to be accepted as “full” Jews (Weil, 1992), were now also claiming to be a part of the Jewish people.¹⁷

In subsequent correspondence with members of the group in Bombay, Calcutta and Aizawl, Rabbi Avichail, upon his return to Israel, suggested the appropriateness of the group appellation Children of Menasseh which fitted their own pre-Christian affiliation with Mannasi. Avichail (1988) writes: “This tribe traces the ancestry to the tribe of Menasseh. In their prayers and songs they refer to themselves as the Sons of Menasseh, and they pray to the God of Menasseh. The entire tribe is conscious of its Jewishness”. Avichail sent ritual Jewish items to the group via Calcutta, including religious books and skullcaps, and in 1983 he was instrumental in bringing four young people to Israel for religious training. Only

two completed an official Israeli conversion course. Of these, Simon Ginn returned to Churachandpur; and Rebecca Benjamin married and remained in Israel. A third convert, Gideon Rei, returned to Aizawl where he acted as Jewish religious leader of the Israelite community, despite the fact that he did not actually complete the course.

In November 1989, the Amishav organisation arranged for a group of nine young adults to be brought over to Israel to pursue a course of further religious studies. To their consternation, although the previous year's conversion had been ratified by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in Bombay, they had to 're-convert' in Israel to fully satisfy the Chief Rabbinate. Many of the group are to this day continuing to study in separate male and female *yeshivot* (institutes for higher Jewish learning) in Jerusalem.

In 1990, Gideon Rei, who by this time called himself "Chief *Chazan*" (ritual cantor), wrote a letter from Mizoram on headed note paper with the title "United Bene Menasseh: N.E. India and N. Burma." Until that point, I received in personal correspondences, letters from Churachandpur, Manipur, on headed notepaper from the "United Tribal Jews of North-East India (includes Manipur, Assam and Mizoram)". There was no mention then of Burma. It is instructive that the affiliation with the Children of Menasseh was now expressed in its Hebrew version as *Bene Menasseh* and incorporated the Judaizing group in Northern Chin State, Burma. Indeed, in a letter from Tiddim the Secretary of "The Community of Judaism" Lian Tual, explained his tribal name to me as Jinghpaw, equivalent to Kachin, meaning people who love to sing and dance. He writes: "If this is this Jinghpaw or Kachin tribe, we must be ancestry to the tribe of Menasseh."¹⁸ This, of course, is the same group that Leach studied and about whom he reported the ease with which they can change tribal allegiance. Leach was referring to the oscillation between polar political systems embedded in tribal affiliations, and the way Kachin and neighbouring Shan think of the difference between them as one of "ideal" and not of ethnic, or cultural or racial type. It seems clear from the above letter from Tiddim that shifting tribal identity is effected with ease, not necessarily by 'being' but by 'thinking' differently.

In 1991, 14 people identifying with the Children of Menasseh attended the opening of

an exhibition I curated entitled "Beyond the Sambatyon: the Myth of the Ten Lost Tribes", which, significantly took place at a Tel-Aviv museum called Beth Hatefutsoth: the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora. A corner of the exhibition was devoted to photographs of the Shinlung, the process of their Judaization and their linkage to wider legend of the Lost Ten Tribes; the above-mentioned pamphlets were also displayed. After the exhibition, the majority of the group stayed on in Israel and began their process of conversion.

In 1992 a group of young Shinlung arrived in Israel with the aid of the Amishav organization; some of them settled in the Gush Katif area in the Gaza strip. In 1994 a group of families emigrated to Israel and were settled in Kiryat Arba near Hebron and in other settlements in Israel's West Bank. According to Parfitt, their settlement was financed by Dr. Irving Moskowitz, a right-wing wealthy businessman from Florida (2002: 37). By 2000, approximately 400 Shinlung had converted to Judaism in Israel. A new group of Shinlung were studying in a conversion course in Jerusalem and, save one or two Shinlung who had settled in such towns as Beth Shemesh or Kiryat Gat, the vast majority was living in the West Bank. The political ramifications of their choice of settlement have not escaped observers. Most journalists and political commentators believe that the millenarian beliefs which guided their conversion to Judaism dovetail with messianic beliefs of the settlers in the West Bank, who are waiting impatiently for the coming of the Messiah. Small groups of these settlers seek to accelerate this process by the 'ingathering' of Lost Israelites.

SHINLUNG AS CHILDREN OF MENASSEH

The new identity of the Shinlung, which has emerged in recent years is that of Bene Menasseh or the Children of Menasseh. The significance of the new identity is far-reaching for it dovetails elements in traditional religion with a significant force in the Jewish religion; it also permits 'replacement' (Kammerer, 1990) of the indigenous religion by the new one. On the basis of the lost tribe of Menasseh claim, the Shinlung are demanding a 'return' to the Holy land in the same way that the Bene Israel of India (attributed to the tribe of Zebulun or, more recently, the Ethiopian Jews (attributed by no lesser an

authority than the Israel Chief Rabbis in 1973 and 1975 to the tribe of Dan) emigrated to Israel and became 'Indian Jews' and 'Ethiopian Jews' in Israel respectively (Weil, 1992, 1995).

Of course, not all Shinlung desire to emigrate to Israel, even if they have converted to Judaism, formally (i.e. according to the religio-legal demands of the Israeli Rabbinate), or informally (i.e. by adopting Jewish customs). Furthermore, not all Shinlung, who claim they are lost Israelites, desire to convert to Judaism, even if they acknowledge the comparison between Shinlung traditional religion and Judaism.

Some Shinlung have chosen the path of conversion to orthodox Judaism and emigration to the Land of Israel; others have selected the same path of conversion without emigration. Some Shinlung define themselves as Christian, but believe in the imminent return to Zion in conjunction with the Jews; others define themselves as Israelites, but believe they can build Zion in Mizoram.¹⁹ Finally, some Shinlung have affiliated with different 'Messianic Jews' in the United States, who believe that the observance of Jewish practices is compatible with a belief in Jesus as the Messiah. According to Samra, a Messianic Jewish movement named Bet Hashem, from New Haven, Indiana, donated a 'synagogue' for its followers in Churachandpur. Another group called Assembly of Y-weh from Holt, Michigan, was also active in Manipur (Samra, 1991).

DISCUSSION

The reasons why the Shinlung converted and are converting to Judaism appear to relate to the structure and belief of indigenous religion which is being evoked in order to affect the dual conversion through Christianity to Judaism. The transformations are rooted in indigenous religion but also appeal to a modern, yet traditional identity of ethnic autonomy in order to explain the recent religious metamorphosis to Judaism. The seeds of ethnic autonomy can be found in a cultural identity which produces common membership irrespective of divisive and tribal aspirations. As Lehman writes with respect to the Chins, despite the variety of culture within the vast Chin Hills area, there prevails a single, overall Chin cultural and social system which has developed a complex form of socio-political organisation associating it with a former "close connection with the plains civilization of Burma."

(Lehman, 1963: 28)

This form of re-traditionalisation, which integrates and mobilizes otherwise often heterogeneous populations against an external tradition and culture (Smith, 1990), can be associated with the emergence of modern nationalism in North-East India. In the Shinlung case, it has been linked to specific national movements, such as the Mizo National Front, which combined 'Mizo Israelitism' with millenarianism in an attempt to demand national separatism. However, it has also recently forged a new nationalism in the guise of the Children of Menasseh by uniting the ethnic identities of a multiplicity of tribes and connecting them to the wider Diaspora of the Jewish people. Thus, in recent years a new Israelite/Jewish identity with autonomic aspirations has arisen, which incorporates with ease members of different tribes, including a small group of people in Tiddim, Burma, who have been exposed to different religious influences, such as Buddhism. The borders of international agreements are therefore superseded by a new common Israeli cultural identity as Children of Menasseh, which fuses dissatisfaction with local and national governments and past religion, and the search for new horizons. Although it is often conjectured that nationalism can be superseded by a type of cosmopolitanism, internationalism or global culture, in practice all over the world there is a strengthening of geo-cultural tendencies characterized by different trends (Weil, 1999). Among these are the very ethnic autonomy movements and manifestations of re-traditionalisation mentioned above. In the case of north-east India-Burma, the conversion to Judaism and the emergence of new religious forms are linked to the quest to bypass Christianity and the search for ethnic salience in novel form.

The moulding of the new identity in Israel as Jewish members of the tribe of Menasseh turns to ethnic autonomy for its source and is based upon a 'felt antiquity' of ethnicity, the creation of a unit as an '*ethnie*' and the impact of ethno-history. Hence, the significance of ethnic pamphlets, such as these described above, claiming ancient history and affiliation to the Jewish people against the backdrop of the failing appeal of Christianity. As Smith (1990: 15) states:

"The significance of a rich 'ethno-history' is both general and specific. To belong to a 'community of history and destiny', and be part

of a larger cosmic purpose which is simultaneously terrestrial and even 'kin-based', at least in theory, may well fulfil those hopes for immortality which other belief systems promised but failed to meet. Membership of a 'super-family' that stretches back into time immemorial, and so formed into a remote posterity, helps to reassure as it defines a community and a wider purpose beyond individual mortality. More specifically a rich 'ethno-history' is a source of cultural power and a focus for cultural mobilisation... So the very unevenness of ethnic ties and ethnic history is an invitation to cultural emulation and competition, once the process of national transformation begins."

That process is aimed today at uniting tribal affiliations into a crystallized new ethnic group, and writing, or, more accurately, re-constructing an ethno-history which can create the new "community of history and destiny", to which Smith (1990) refers. The process is aided by the compatibility of the indigenous religion, which contained revivalist tendencies, with messianic elements in Judaism, and its 'replacement' by novel forms and customs in the new religion (cf. Kammerer, 1990).

It is little coincidence that the visions of Mea Chala of Buallawn village to 'return' to Judaism and to the Jewish homeland are attributed to the year 1951, exactly three years after the Jewish State of Israel was established and four years after Indian independence was gained.²⁰ The revivalism fitted perfectly with the uncertainty felt for non-Hindus in India, on the one hand, and the strength of the ideology of the 'ingathering of the exiles' for the Jewish people, on the other. The affiliation to a "community of history and destiny" (Smith, 1990) was thus perpetuated through the millenarianism identified in the culture area as a whole. This is particularly prominent among the Karens of Burma whose traditions of Y-wa have been identified with a Hebraic source and whose belief in a holy Book, once lost, which might be returned to them by messengers over the sea, paved the way for the acceptance of Christianity in a millenaristic framework. However, as I have demonstrated, millenarian tendencies are also evident in the very groups we have examined, who are claiming Israelite origin on both sides of the Indian-Burmese border, and in the state of Israel.

Encouraged by the hope of Redemption as expounded in eschatological texts, such as in

Ezekiel 37, and brought to life in contemporary times by messianic right-wing groups in Israel, the Shinlung, transformed into the Children of Menasseh, are seeking the dovetailing of past and future, ethnos and nation in a formulation which defines a "community of history and destiny" (Smith, 1990) binding them through the Jewish religion, to a Jewish 'homeland'. As Parfitt writes, essentially Christian and colonial discourses has drawn on evangelical hopes and expectations to manufacture a novel discourse on the Lost Tribes of Israel in remote parts of the globe, who now turn to Israel as a haven. That is why Shinlung couples, now known as Bene Menasseh, who have already been married in the past and are parents to children, are willing to re-marry as part of a re-traditionalisation process and convert to Judaism in Israel.

KEYWORDS Conversion. Lost Israelites. Re-traditionalism. Shinlung. Judaism

ABSTRACT This paper is an attempt to explain the conversion to Judaism by some members of tribal groups from the Indo-Burmese borderlands, who claim Israelite descent. In India, they are known collectively as the Shinlung; in Israel, they are called Bene Menasseh, or "Children of Menasseh", linking them to the Biblical tribe. To date, some 700 Bene Menasseh have converted to Judaism by orthodox Rabbis in Israel. This article explores the connection between traditional religious beliefs and the new cognitive order. It is apparent that the conversion was part of a wider reaction to Christianity among tribal peoples of the Indo-Burmese borderlands and a desire to adopt elements of the pre-Christian religion and combine them in a modern ideology. The Judaizing Shinlung managed to dovetail a claim of affiliation to the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, a common myth in Judaism and Christianity, with millenarian beliefs. On the basis of the lost tribe of Menasseh claim, the Shinlung are demanding a 'return' to the Holy land in the same way that other groups were 'gathered in' to the Jewish homeland. The transformations undergone by the Shinlung are rooted in indigenous religion, but also appeal to a modern, yet traditional identity of ethnic autonomy, the seeds of which can be found in a cultural identity producing common membership irrespective of divisive tribal aspirations. This form of re-traditionalisation can be associated with the quest for an alternative form of nationalism other than modern nationalism in North-East India. It dovetails past and future, ethnos and nation in a formulation which defines a community of history and destiny, thereby binding the Shinlung through another world religion to the Jewish 'homeland'.

NOTES

- 1 I thank Zaithanchhungi of Aizawl, Mizoram and the peoples of Mizoram and Manipur with whom I have been in contact for their cooperation. Thanks to Dr. Myer Samra, University of Sydney, Australia, who indirectly

spurred me into completing this paper; and to the Singapore-based journalist Lindsey Shanson, who shared with me his correspondence with the peoples of Tiddim, Burma, for the exhibition which I curated in 1991 at Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel-Aviv entitled *Beyond the Sambatyon: the Myth of the Ten Lost Tribes*.

The methodology upon which this paper was written is not based on classic fieldwork, but consists of the adoption of a number of techniques over a 20-year period: correspondence with different Shinlung from Mizoram, Manipur and Tiddim for over 10 years; interviews with 20 Shinlung in Bombay and New Delhi on six different research trips in the 1980's and 1990's; analysis of ethnic pamphlets displayed in the 1991 exhibition at Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora; interviews, including one lengthy video interview, with 15 Shinlung in 1991 who attended the opening of the exhibition; participant observations in the homes of Shinlung in Israel; observations at six weddings of members of the community in Israel; in-depth interviews with four recent immigrants to Israel in 2000 for the purposes of updating this article; newspaper surveys 2000-2003.

- 2 There are, however, strands in Judaism that believe in Jewish missionary activity in order to speed up the Redemption.
- 3 An earlier article on this group appeared in Weil (2003).
- 4 There are three distinct Jewish communities in India: the Bene Israel of Maharashtra; the Cochin Jews; and the 'Baghdadis' (Timberg 1986; Katz 2000; Weil 2002). For specific information on the Bene Israel, see Israel 1998. For information on Cochin Jews, see Mandelbaum 1975. For information on the Baghdadi Jews, see Ezra 1986; Musleah 1975.
- 5 This is an estimate repeated by all Jewish community leaders in India with whom I spoke on a fact-finding visit to India in April 2000.
- 6 According to a recent publication, there are only eight Jewish family names on the Rangoon synagogue's current membership list, while a few descendants of Burmese Jews live in towns other than Rangoon (Cohen & Bignell 1991). At their peak, most of Burma's 1200 Jews were expelled, mostly to Calcutta, by the Japanese, suspicious of Jews as potential sympathisers with the British (Katz & Goldberg 1988).
- 7 Interview on 8 August 2000.
- 8 The abbreviation *Chikim*, referring to Chins, Kukis and Mizos as one tribal grouping, is used by Myer Samra (1991).
- 9 I thank Prof. F. Lehman for this information received in communication from 7.3.1991.
- 10 In October 2003, the Israeli Minister of Interior, Avraham Poraz, requested a meeting with me to make an educated decision about immigration policy vis-à-vis the Bene Menasseh. He had previously met with representatives of the group.
- 11 The descriptions of indigenous religions rely primarily on Lehman (1963, Chap7), Ray (1982) and McCall (1949). The information was confirmed with informants, although I was aware that their attitude to traditional religion was influenced by "social desirability".
- 12 Informants from Manipur also called this *yu*.
- 13 Zaitanchhungi speaks English and I have interviewed her on two separate occasions in Israel, the last time in 1991. She apparently translated these chants to English. Today, a young man from Mizoram is employed by a well-known Israeli author as a translator of many local

songs to English. The author reported in the Absorption Committee of the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) in May 1999 that the songs "prove that the Children of Menasseh are one of the Lost Ten Tribes".

- 14 Dr. Moshe Yegar, past Deputy Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, informed me (in Jerusalem, February 1992) that a similar request was received in Rangoon, Burma in 1961 when he was working in the Israeli Consulate there.
- 15 For example, a letter dated 15 August 1972 by the Manipur Jewish Organisation to the Jewish Agency in Bombay requested that the latter... "with goodwill and understanding would take initiative steps to recognise the Jews of Manipur and to kindly safeguard their rights."
- 16 Personal correspondence, 20 November 1990.
- 17 Dr. Myer Samra pointed out to me (personal correspondence, 4 January 1992), that his experience of the reaction of the Bene Israel to the claims of the Shinlung in the 1990s was not as sympathetic. Some of the Bene Israel ORT youth were hostile to the Shinlung, who were perceived as trying to usurp the Jewish religion.
- 18 Personal communication between Lian Tual and Lindsey Shanson, 22 October 1987.
- 19 The first path is represented by Rivka Rei of Jerusalem; the second by Gideon Rei of Aizawl, Mizoram; the third option is led by Rev. Dr. Thangruam of Aizawl; and the fourth by Zaitanchhungi. Each 'leader' has a congregation of followers.
- 20 Samra (1992), does mention an earlier date of 1936 cited in one letter, but according to most accounts, including his sources of information, Chala's vision occurred in 1951.

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