

Neighbors from Burma

Images and stories from the Chin community



Letter from the Curator

At Southport Public Library

◦ Photography Exhibit

October 27, 2010 to January 10, 2011

◦ Community Festival

November 6, 2010, 1-4 pm

Hi piahpuai hi kan zapi i bomhchannak in a chuakmi a si. Chin mipun hoi he runkhat in, kei lengnu ka lenti tikah an mithmai a panhning le capo an thiamning, riantuan an i zuamning, an chungkhar le an pipu nunphung an tleihchanning hna nih an sinah tleihchannak a ka ngeihter chin. Hi hmanthlak pawl hi thla -4 in thla-6 hrawng ka rau. A hlei in, lungthin-thazaang tanpi in hmanthlak a ka bawmmi hna Sophia, San San, Gideon le Helen sinah lunglawmhnaak tampi ka ngei. Digital camera pakhat cio ka pekhna ii, Indianapolis ii an nunning -tuanbia langhter an duhmi hmanthlak, thlak dingah ka sawm hna.

A hnu ah kan i tong than hna, hmanthlak pawl cu kan chek hna ii an mah duhmi tete pa 10-15 hrawng kan thim. Cun, zeii ruang thengah dah hihi na thlak timi, an chimmi an aw kha ka lak hna. Cu nih a chuahpimi cu, hi pali hna ii community nunning muisam a kengmi tuanbia dawhdawh "photo voice," hmanthlak authawng tikha a si.

If you drive down Madison Avenue in southern Indianapolis, stop for a minute at East Stop 11 Road and look around. You'll see the Chin Community Center hiding around the corner, along with Chin Brothers Restaurant and Grocery. This is a neighborhood where more than 5,000 Chin people live. But who are the Chin people?

Originally from Burma in Southeast Asia, many people from Chin State fled the oppressive military regime to search for freedom. Some went to Malaysia, others to Thailand and India, but they got registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and resettled in the United States. Because policy allows people to move where they have relatives, the Chin population in Indianapolis is growing exponentially. The U.S. federal government provides assistance until individuals and families can find jobs and stability.

In Indianapolis, that stability is often found in their community and in the thirteen large Chin Christian churches in the area. As I have become friends with many, I am drawn to their warm smiles, vibrant sense of humor, strong work ethic, and dedication to their families and culture.

The backstory

This photography exhibit is borne out of collaboration. I made some of these photos over the course of four to six months, but many thanks also go to Sophia, San San, Gideon and Helen for their enthusiasm and artistry. I gave each of them a digital camera and asked them to make photographs over two weeks, telling stories of their lives in Indianapolis that they wanted to tell.

When we met again, we went through the photos together, and they chose 10 to 15 of their favorite images. Then I recorded their voices explaining why they made those particular photos and what was going on in them. The result is "photovoice," beautiful and compelling stories by four of the individuals that make up this community.

Many thanks also to Christopher Bawi, Nancy Michael of Refugee Link, Za Bik of the Chin Community Center, Thiang Jeu Nu (Ni Vang), and many others who have contributed their voices and visions to "Neighbors from Burma."

Anna Batcheller

Anna Batcheller



Chin National Day

“We have been celebrating Chin National Day every year on February 20. A lot of people ask us why we celebrate Chin National Day in another country? Right now in Burma the problem is lack of democracy. We have no rights under military governments or any other governments. Their target is to become one nation, one ethnic group: that’s Burmans. And one language: that is Burmese. One religion: that is Buddhist.

“Right now there are more people outside of Chin State than people in Chin State. So we want to keep the spirit alive here, even in another country. And we also want to give that seed to our children. We are now fighting for democracy in Burma. So as long as we don’t get democracy, we have to tell our kids that we are still fighting. That’s what Chin National Day is about for now. We want to keep our culture and literature alive through our children. We want to keep our culture and practices here in the USA also—our culture and traditional dances, even wrestling.”

—Za Bik, Chairman of the Chin Community Center

“A tulio cu, Kawlram democracy dothlennak ca’h kan doliopi a si. Democracy kan hmuhhlan lo cu, kan fa le hna sinah, hi ralpi kan dohlio rih dahfawh tihi kan chimpeng ko lai. Chin Miphunpi Ni zong nihhin hihi a langhter. Kan holh, kan ca le kan nunphung hna zong kan fa le nih nunpi hna seh tiah kan duh. U.S.A zong ah kan nunphun zalam le kan zaihla, kan lam le kan Laipeih te pawl zong thlaulo tein tuahpeng ko uhsih tihi kan duh.”



Photovoice



When I put Justin Bieber on, they were yelling very much, like, "Yeah! Justin Bieber!!"

I came from Chin to Malaysia to Chicago to Indiana. When I left for Malaysia, I was three years old. I took this picture because they were making a secret for three of us. We were talking about our friends and when we go on the bus. This is at house church. On Saturdays, we used to go to people's house for church. I was reading a Bible right before this.

"Three of my friends and I love Justin Bieber very much because he's a good singer. We always dance when we sing his songs. My friend and I were kind of yelling and we were in a little bit of trouble for that. The four of us were holding our hands and shaking our hair, and we were so dancing. When I put Justin Bieber on, they were yelling very much, like, "Yeah! Justin Bieber!!" I was plugging my ears, but I was still yelling a little bit too. Because I kind of really love Justin Bieber."

—Helen lang, age 8

My name is Thawngthathawng Lian, the legal name here, but I go by Gideon. It's easier. It's always a problem to fill out the form. They don't have that much space for me.

"My life is pretty simple. On weekdays, I go to school. On the weekend, I hang out with my friends in the community. Most Saturday nights I go and practice choir at church. Sunday we go to church. After church we hang out or play soccer. That's the basic life.



"So far we are isolated. It could be because of the language. Most of the people who come here who are my age don't speak English very well. To hang out with others outside the community, we don't know the culture. Generally we grew up in different parts of the world, and we have different interests."

—Gideon Lian, age 19

"Chin ram in Malaysia ah, cun Chicago ah, cun Indiana ah ka ra. Malaysia kan kal ah kumthum ka si. Hi hmanthlak ka thlknak cu kan pathum ca'h thil thuhmi te an tuahlio a si cuh. Kan hoi le he Bus in kan kallio kong khi kan ceih ko cuh. Mahhi cu muu, mi inn kan i pumhnak ah a si. Zarhteni fate cu, mi inn ah kan i pum hna cuh. Pumhnak ah Bible ca ka rel ve.

"Ka hoi le pa-thum he Justin Bieber kan uar ningcu! hlasak a thiamtuk cu ta. A hla kan sak poh ahhin kan lam lai cuh. Ka hoi le he cun kan auchih ii, a pawih pah tawn. Kan pali cun kan kut kan i tlai hna ii, kan sam kan leichih, kan lamchih. Justin Bieber hla ka chuah fatin, ka hoi le cu thangpi hin, "Yeah! Justin Bieber!!" tiah an au chih. A caancan ah ka hnakhaw kaa phih, a sinain ka auchih ve. Justin Bieber kan uartuk ca'h a si cuh."



"Ka min taktak cu Thawngthathawng Lian a si, nain, Gideon tiah ka hman deuh. A fawideuh fawn. Form phih tikah a pawih ttheu tawn. Catlap blank ah ka min aa tlum tawnlo.



"Zeipi ngai tuahmi ka ngeilo. Ca-cawnni poh ah siangin ka kai. Weekend poh ah kanmah community chung ka hoi le he kan lengti. Zarhteni zaan ah choir ka cawng pah tawn. Zarhpini ah ka pum. Pumh dihnu ah kan leng, a silo le pumpululh kan chuih. A phungmen nundan te khi a si.

"A tutiang cu, lileng in kan um. Kan holh ruang deuh ah a si khomen. Hika a rami keimah tthirual a tamdeuh cu Mirang holh an thiamtuk hna lo. Mi phundang he lenti dingah cun, an nunphung kan thei fawn lo. A fawinak in cun, kan tthannak vawlei aa lawhlo tikah, tuah kan duhmi zong aa dang ve."

“You should go to Burma. The government is just bad. Everything about Burma is so beautiful. I still want to go back to Burma. I don’t think I will be able to live there. I’ve been here since I was little, in this environment and culture. My dad has asylum status. Political asylum. I’m not a refugee. That’s just how it works. We can’t go back there.

“I guess in every family, we are close and bound together. The oldest (my dad) is the most respected person whenever they make a big decision or a big move, or change anything in your life. They will come and talk to each other, usually at the oldest person’s house. It’s not like a meeting, but we all gather around and resolve—‘What should we do?’

—*Sophia Par, age 19*



“Kawlram ah kal ve hmanh uh. A cozah tu cu a chiabak henta. Kawlram aa dawhnaak cu a tamtuk ko na in. Khikalei ka um kho tilai ti cu ka ruat tilo. Ka hmette in hika an nunning le an tlawlennak ah ka umve cang cumuu. Ka pa hi political asylum in a ummi a si. Kei cu refugee ka silo. Matikhan, a ngah ve ko. Kir thanding tu cu a har cang.

“Chungkhar poh ah an sidih lai tiah ka ruah, kan karlak ah fek tein pehtleihnak a um. Upabik (kapa) hi upatbikmi le zei tuahpoh ah, hmailei nunnak ca ii aa thleng khomi thil pipa ca zongah bia khiaktu a si. Cingla-rualchan khuakhan lairel tik zongah upabikmi inn ah i tawn ii, ‘Zei tin kan tuah lai?’ tiah khuakhan a si.”

We all gather around and resolve ‘What should we do?’

“I took this picture because they are all Chin people from Burma. This buffet is so long—a lot of food. And what they want, they choose by themselves. What they like, they can eat. In Burma, we didn’t have anything like this. I feel sorry because when you eat in Burma, you can’t choose as you like, but they distribute little bitty things—the meat, the curry. It’s distributed, a little bit to each person.

“So when I see this one, I am very happy. Because what you want, you can take by yourself. We have a lot of fried foods. This way I am very happy. But a lot of Chin people are left in my country, my state. I want to share this food, but I cannot share it. This way, I feel sad. Now, a lot of Chin people can eat nice food. That’s why I’m so happy and I took this picture.”

“Hi hman ka thlak mi a ruang cu, Kawlram in a rami Chin miphun lawng te an si ca’h a si. Hi buffet hi a sau ngai—rawl le a tling. An duhmi poh an mahte in lak khawh a si. Duhmi poh ei khawh a si. Kawlram ah cun hi tihin kan ei kho nemmaam lo. Ka lung a thalo ngai, Kawlram ah cun, sa tehna hi a phawt tein phawt a si, a thlawm tete cio in a si cu muu.

“Mahhi ka hmuh tikah kaa lawmngai. Na duhmi poh nangmah tein na lakkhawh cuta. Meh thawthaw a tam fawn. A nuam bak ko. A sinain, kan ram ii kaltakmi hna kan miphun hoi hna sinah hi rawl thaw hi cheuh ka duh ve hna, ka cheu kho hna lo. Khi tikah ka ngeih a chia than. Hika a ummi Chin tu cu rawl thatha an ei cang. Kaa lawmh ve tikah hi hman ka thlaknak hi a si.”



When you eat in Burma, you can’t choose as you like...

—*San San, age 28*

A hlanlio ah hin khua pakhat ah, nufa hna pahnih an um ti a si. A fanute a min cu Nga Tai ti a si. Nga Tai cu aa dawhtuk ah hin a pum cungah sawiding pakhatmanh a umlo ti a si. A mui aa dawhtuk tikah a hmu mipoh nih an duh dih. Nga Tai an hmuhpoh ahhin an thinlung zong hi a nuam ti a si.

Voikhat cu an khua ah ruapi a sur ciammam ii tivante he, tivapi he ti kha a lian dih. An khuachung vialte kha tinih a chilhdih tikah, mi vialte cu tlang sandeuhnakh ah khan heh tiah an kai ti a si. Ti cu a thang chin lengmang. Ti cu a vun than lengmang pah khin "Tai Tai" ti khin a awn ti a si. Khuami pawl cu an kharuah kha a hartuk ii, mahhi ti hi "Tai Tai" tiah a timi hi Nga Tai a duh ii a siko lai tiah an ruah ti a si. Khi tikah, Nga Tai samfang pakhat te kha an phawi ii ti chung ahcun an thlak. Mah samfang pakhat te an vun thlak khan ti cu "Tai" tiah voikhat te khi a awn ii tlawpal a zordeuh ti a si.

A sinain, tlawmpal ah ti cu a thang than lengmang. Khuami cu an kharuah a har ii, Nga Tai thilri vialte cu pakhat hnu pakhat an thlak ti a si. Thil an thlak fatin, ti cu a zordeuh lengmang. Cu ticun, Nga Tai thil vialte cu pakhatmanh tanglo in an thlak dih. A sinain, tlawmpal ah ti cu "Tai Tai Tai" a ti ii a rak thang than lengmang.

Mah tikah khan, mi zapi cu an kharuah a hartuk. A zeiti a sihanh ah mah ti hi Nga Tai pei a duh ko hi an ti ii Nga Tai kha ti chungah peihding in an timh ti asi. Nga Tai nu cu a ngeih a chiatuk ii a fanu Nga Tai cu fekte in a kuhchih. A fanu ti chung ii peihnakh sacun, mizapi an thih hmanh kha a duh deuh. Mi zapi nih cun thih kha an duhcio lo tikah khan, Nga Tai tu kha a nu tak chung khan heh tiah an chuhchih. Cu ticun, Nga Tai nu cu a tah ai pahbu in a fanu cu ti chungah cun an thlak. Nga Tai tichung a pil thluahmah lio ah a nu nih.

"Ee ka fanu ka sianlo te, nang kha ngami ah hung i cang law, kei kha cite ah ka rak i cang lai. Zingtha Zing1 ah kan i tongte lai" tiah a tah. Nga Tai cu ti chungah cun a liam thluahmah. Ti chung a hun liam thluahmah lio ah, ti zong cu a zor thluahmah ve ti a si.

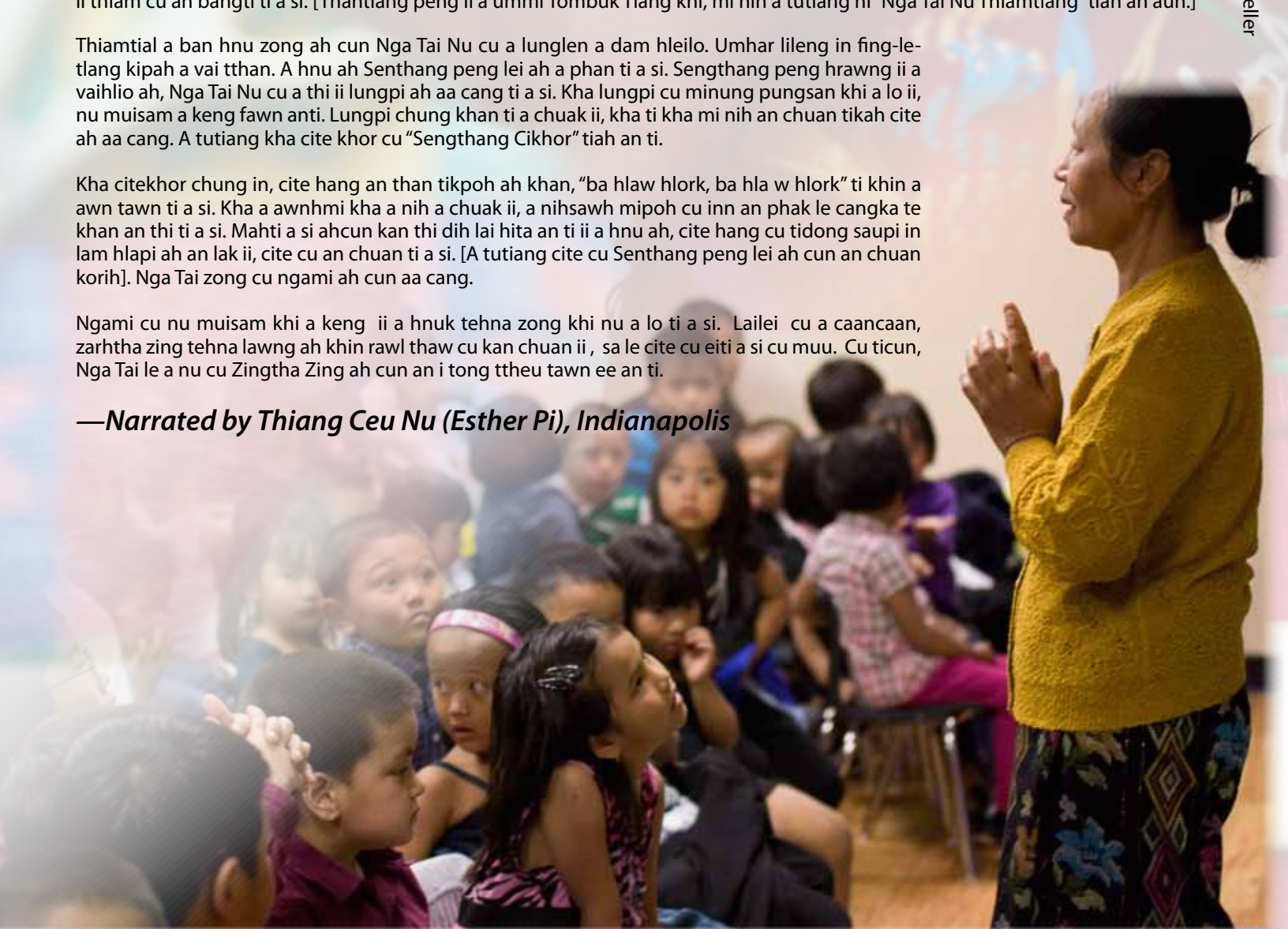
Nga Tai tichung an thlak hnu cun, a nu cu a ngeih a chiattuk ahhin, inn um zong kha a zuam tilo. Ngeihchiat-lunglen in, khua zakip ah a vai. Thlang sang kip ah a kai ii fing-le-tlang kip khi a cuan. A len a vahpahbu khan nikhat cu khua a ruat ii, umharphen ah thiamtial ka bang lai a ti ii, tlang khat le tlang khat dan in thiamtial cu a bang ti a si. A thiam banmi cu va phunkip nih khan an bomh ii thiam cu an bangti ti a si. [Thantlang peng ii a ummi Tombuk Tlang khi, mi nih a tutiang hi "Nga Tai Nu Thiamtlang" tiah an auh.]

Thiamtial a ban hnu zong ah cun Nga Tai Nu cu a lunglen a dam hleilo. Umhar lileng in fing-le-tlang kipah a vai tthan. A hnu ah Senthang peng lei ah a phan ti a si. Senthang peng hrawng ii a vaihlio ah, Nga Tai Nu cu a thi ii lungpi ah aa cang ti a si. Kha lungpi cu minung pungsan khi a lo ii, nu muisam a keng fawn anti. Lungpi chung khan ti a chuak ii, kha ti kha mi nih an chuan tikah cite ah aa cang. A tutiang kha cite khor cu "Senthang Cikhoh" tiah an ti.

Kha citekhor chung in, cite hang an than tikpoh ah khan, "ba hlaw hlork, ba hla w hlork" ti khin a awn tawn ti a si. Kha a awnhmi kha a nih a chuak ii, a nihsawh mipoh cu inn an phak le cangka te khan an thi ti a si. Mahti a si ahcun kan thi dih lai hita an ti ii a hnu ah, cite hang cu tidong saupi in lam hlapi ah an lak ii, cite cu an chuan ti a si. [A tutiang cite cu Senthang peng lei ah cun an chuan korih]. Nga Tai zong cu ngami ah cun aa cang.

Ngami cu nu muisam khi a keng ii a hnuk tehna zong khi nu a lo ti a si. Lailei cu a caancaan, zarhtha zing tehna lawng ah khin rawl thaw cu kan chuan ii, sa le cite cu eiti a si cu muu. Cu ticun, Nga Tai le a nu cu Zingtha Zing ah cun an i tong ttheu tawn ee an ti.

—Narrated by Thiang Ceu Nu (Esther Pi), Indianapolis



Long, long ago in a land far away, there lived a mother and her lovely daughter named Nga Tai. Nga Tai, a flawless beauty, was so sweet and kind that everyone in the village adored her. Her tantalizing almond eyes sparkled like the twinkling stars, and her dark, long hair was as shiny as silk. Her graceful demeanor and elegance warmed everyone around her.

One monsoon season, a heavy rain started to fall. As big and small streams began to swell and the water flooded into the village, the villagers had to move up into the mountains. The floodwaters made an unusual sound—*Tai Tai Tai*—as they grew. The panicked village elders were convinced that the water was calling for Nga Tai to make a sacrifice. So they plucked one beautiful strand of Nga Tai's hair and threw it into the raging flood.

Look! The water receded a little. But before long, it began rising up again, calling, "Tai Tai Tai." So the villagers threw Nga Tai's shirt into the water. The flood receded temporarily, but again it rose and said, "Tai Tai Tai." Then, one by one the villagers started throwing Nga Tai's clothes into the raging flood until she had nothing left. The water receded every time they threw in Nga Tai's clothes, but kept rising afterwards, getting closer and closer to them.

The people were terrified. They had no doubt that the water wanted nothing but Nga Tai herself. They said, "It's better to sacrifice one life than to lose all." So they planned to throw poor Nga Tai, shaken with fear, into the water. Her mother Nga Tai Nu¹ cried desperately, holding tightly on to Nga Tai and refusing to let her go. She would rather let the whole village drown than let go of her sole daughter. But her fragile arms were easily overpowered by the people's strength. They pulled her daughter away and threw her into the water. As she watched Nga Tai drown, she wailed, "O my dear daughter, I never want to let you go. You will become *Ngami* (a fish that resembles a woman), and I will become a grain of salt. We will meet again on the sacred morning."² As Nga Tai sank slowly into the flood, the water began to recede. Soon, the flood was over.

After the unbearable loss of her daughter, Nga Tai Nu no longer wanted to live in the village. She roamed in the wilderness up high in the mountains and gazed wistfully over the scenery. Her loneliness and boredom didn't cease, so one day she decided to loom colorful tapestries. Her long, large loom stretched from one mountain to another. Several kinds of birds flew over to help her weave.

Even today, Tombuk Mountain in Thantlang township is called "Nga Tai Nu's Looming Mountain"³ by many people. But loneliness kept the inconsolable mother wandering from place to place until she settled in Senthang region, a part of Haka township in Chin State, where she passed away. She became a salt rock that resembled a woman's body, and eventually a salt pond formed around her.

The villagers nearby began making salt from the pond, heating the salty water in a big pot over the fire until all the water evaporated and left salt in the bottom. Sometimes the pond made a bubbling noise, "*baw-hlaw-hlork*." If anyone made fun of that noise, or laughed at it, they would die as soon as they arrived home. Because they were afraid of this curse, the people later irrigated the pond to a place further away and made salt. The salt pond is now called *Senthang Cikhor*, which means Senthang Salt Pond.⁴ Some salt waters flow into a creek and stream nearby. And so mother and daughter meet again.

To this day, when people eat *Ngami* fish with salt they recall Nga Tai Nu's lamentation over her daughter: "You will become *Ngami*, and I a grain of salt."

—***Narrated by Thiang Ceu Nu (Esther Pi), Indianapolis***

1. Nga Tai is the name of the woman, and Nga Tai Nu is her mother. "Nu" means mother.

2. Chin families saved special meat, fish or chicken for sacred days such as a Harvest Feast, New Years and Christmas.

3. Nga Tai Nu's Looming Mountain is between Tlangpi and Thantlang Farrawn villages, Thantlang Township, Chin State, Western Burma.

4. Salt ponds still exist around Chawncum and Keizuan villages, Senthang region in Haka Township, Chin State, Western Burma.

Chin Community



“We the Chin people are helping each other, one another. So, for example, here in the community, there are pastors, elders, deacons. They take their church members to employers whenever they have time. The Chin people are very quick in learning. In Burma, you know, they never worked in factories. They had no environment with machines and these telephone things. But when they are told by their team leader and supervisor in the new work place, they easily learn things. I am impressed by them so much.”

“Kannah Chin miphun pawl hi pakhat le pakhat kan i bowm. Tahchunnak ah, kan community chung ah pastor te, Khrihfa upa te an um, tlangtla khotu upa an um. Hi hna pawl nih, caan an pek khawhchung in, an mah le membercio kha rian ah an kalpi hna. Chin pawl hi an thluak zong a rang. Kawlram ah sehzung zong ah an tuan ballo. Seh thilri tepawl, telephone tepawl zong an tawng ballo. A sinain, an upa te supervisor tenih an chimh hna ii, fawite’n an thiam ko. Ka khuaruah an ka harh ttheu tawn.”

—*Thlasui “Sui” Tluangneh*



“Most people from my country—the refugee people—can’t read English. Like their food stamp statement, their bank statement, and even their invoice from electric department, they don’t understand. So I explain it to them and translate for them.”

“Kan ram in a rami—refugee a tamdeuh cu Mirangca an rel kho hnalo. An foodstamp ca te hna, bank ca tehna, an electric bill tehna khi an fiang kho tawnlo. A sikhawh chung in ka leh piakpah lengmang hna.”

—*Than Hre*

“I work at the CVS warehouse. I like it a little. My work is very hard. In Burma, I ran a pharmacy. Here, my children have a good education. I am very glad to live in America.”

“CVS warehouse ah ka tuan. Ka uartuk cu a silo. Ka rian cu a harbak. Kawlram ah cun si dawr te khi ka hei tuah. Hika ahhin cun, kan fale pawl hi thate’n ca an cawng kho hna. America um cu ka lawm bak ko.”

—*Daw Dwe*

Indianapolis, IN



“We come from the same village. We dated over the phone until we met again in the States. After two months, we said, ‘I love you.’ Our parents agreed to the marriage, so it will be blessed. We want to help those back in Chin State.”
—**Thun Thun & Par Ku**



“Khuakhat kan si. U.S ii kan i tawn hlanchung cu telephone in bia kan phai. Thla-hnih hnu ah “Kan duh” timi bia sunglawi kan i chim veve. Kan nu kan pa le zong nih, hna an kan tlakpi, hi ruang ah thlachuah kan tong lai tiah ruah a si. Chin ram ii kal takmi hna bowmchanh kan duh hna.”
—**Thun Thun & Par Ku**