

EXCERPTS

From

The Diary Of A University Geologist

By Dr. Yin Yin Nwe

Our last night in the Chin Hills was a big occasion for the village. Earlier that evening, the Chairman of the local Township Council had informed us that he and some others had shot a couple of barking deer, and that we would have these with our dinner at the feast and dance the village was arranging in our honour, at which I would be expected to give a speech.

After an arduous day in the field, we had our usual baths, and then we walked over to the schoolyard where the whole village had congregated. A big bonfire had been built and a few chairs had been placed to one side of the fire. On the other side, an enormous crowd sat on the ground facing the chairs, their slippers under their bottoms in lieu of cushions. As the Chairman of the Township Council led us into the circle of light in front of the school, a murmur of anticipation tripled through the crowd. Old ladies pointed me out to each other, presumably as the strange woman who wore trousers and climbed Wetgaungtaung, and people stood up unabashedly to examine me.

There were some men already seated in some of the chairs; the centre ones had been left vacant for us. Introduction followed, and I realized with surprise that all elders from villages of the surrounding hillsides had walked to Webula for this big occasion. For some of them, the journey had taken the better part of the day, and they expressed in halting Burmese how glad they were that we were going to dance and join them in the festivities. I was greatly touched, and at the same time, my heart sank with the dawning realization that everyone was expecting me to be one of the performers for that evening. I told the Chairman that I was not used to public speeches, my knowledge of Burmese dancing extended to only the simplest

movements, and that I would probably end up making a fool of myself if I attempted to give a performance of Chin dancing as everybody seemed to be anticipating so joyously. The Chairman murmured reassurances, and I consoled myself with the thought that in our group Ko Hla Htay, at least, was one other person who was no less ignorant, as far as Chin dancing was concerned.

Soon afterwards, the feast started, with rice, curry and barbecued barking deer washed down with cups of Chin Khaungye, brewed from millet. The village elders are with us; most of the crowd however had already eaten and sat watching us intently. After the dinner came the speeches. The Township Council Chairman gave a lengthy speech in superb Burmese extolling the virtues of our field trip here, how it would promote better understanding between the various races of Burma living together in peaceful harmony and so on. In contrast, I floundered through my short thank-you speech, but everyone was very polite and I received an equal share of applause. Finally, there were a few announcements in the Chin language, space was cleared around the bonfire, and the musicians field in.

The instruments were traditional Chin ones; a short cowhide drum supported by a strap around the neck and shoulders; a dried cow-horn struck with a stick; an assortment of gongs; an oboe or hne fashioned from a dried gourd shell, and finally a bamboo flute played beautifully by our friend Khen Khen Pah.

Communal dances were first, and Ko Hla Htay and I were literally dragged off our chairs to join in these. I found it easier than I had expected. We formed a large circle of thirty to forty people around the fire, men alternating with the women. Ko Hla Htay was flanked by two pretty girls, while I myself had The Township Council Chairman on my right with our guide Thuan Thuan Pah on my left. As the music started, the entire circle began moving clockwise and anticlockwise in a repetitive sequence of steps and kicks, and dancing with our Chin hosts, who were all beaming encouragement at us, I did not feel self-conscious at all.

At the end of these dances, we all returned to our chairs, I was told that the two best dancers in the village would now perform for our benefit, and into the circle of light stepped an old lady and our guide Thuan Thuan Pah. It was explained that the old lady was the doyenne of Chin dance in the area and Thuan Thuan Pah was one of the few young men who had learnt from her.

"It's sad that our young people are losing their interest in such traditions," one of the elders remarked. "All they want to do nowadays is to switch on the radio and shake their bodies in imitation of Western dancing. Look at the lady, she's really very good."

The music was now very quick. The young man and the old lady stood facing each other. Their hands made little fluttering gestures and their feet stepped quickly in time to the frenzied beating of the drum and gongs. It was the dance of "Two Butterflies in the Fields" and I was amazed at the agility of both dancers. I couldn't guess the age of the old lady, but it appeared to be considerable judging from her wrinkled face. Thuan Thuan Pah seemed to be enjoying himself hugely and the lightness of his feet was almost incongruous with his stocky, squat build.

Then followed a solo performance of the sakaw dance by Thuan Thuan Pah: it seemed to be a dance which had been developed for men only. He squatted on the ground holding between his outstretched arms a large sakaw, a round woven bamboo tray about two feet in diameter. Then still on his haunches, he shuffled his feet and swayed and hopped in time to the music not an easy feat to perform without falling over backwards. With a sudden change in the music, he jumped, still squatting, over the sakaw without letting go of it, so that at the end of the jump, he had it held behind him with both hands. Another change of the tempo, and again he jumped, this time backwards through by his hands and the tray, to end up in the original position. After a few more jumps in this fashion, the audience started clapping wildly as he got up and handed the sakaw over to Ko Hla Htay, who started squatting and shuffling quite gamely; Perhaps because he was quite athletic, he managed to leap both forward and

backward over the sakaw without falling over, although perhaps his movements were not as synchronized to the music as those of Thuan Thuan Pah. The Chairman from the Township Council was next. He, being a sedentary office worker, was somewhat less agile and could not perform the leap backward: he landed instead on his bottom much to the delight of the audience.

A few minutes later, my turn came, and with much misgiving, I allowed myself to be dragged up to face Thuan Thuan Pah, who was already well into his imitation of a butterfly in the fields. For a while, I too hopped and fluttered, attempting to follow his example and become the second butterfly, feeling that I was making a fool of myself to start out with, but gradually becoming women what encouraged by the approval of the crowd.

We left the village of Webula early the next morning. Our language was sent ahead by ear, while I arranged to walk down to the Pamonchaung plain with Ko Hla Htay, so that we could collect specimens of ultramafic rock along the way. Our Chin friends from the village accompanied us down the road to say goodbye. Finally, we insisted that they stay behind, or they would have too long a climb back to Webula. Final goodbyes were said, everyone shock hands and we walked on, leaving them behind. Every time the road curved around in the hairpin bend, we could see them waving to us again and yet again, gradually becoming smaller and smaller as we walked down, until finally the massive hulk of Wetgaungtaung hid them from our sight and we could see Webula no more.

Dr. Yin Yin Nwe

Dedicated in affectionate memory to the villagers of Webula, Northern Chin Hills.

Ref: Kan Baw Za Magazine, 1987/88, page. 160 to 163.