

HerStory3

Championing Community
Land Rights and Indigenous
Women's Leadership in Asia



Published by
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

Published by : Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)



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HerStory 3 : Championing Community Land Rights and Indigenous Women's Leadership in Asia

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◊◀ Foreword

The women's movement has been promoting another way of looking at records of events or personal accounts as "*her story*" instead of "*history*". This is clearly an attempt to rectify historical accounts to include the perspectives, struggles and invaluable contributions of women. It is also to raise the voices of women and make them more visible, not only for the past but also for the present. "*Her story*" is now gaining more attention as part of the overall gender-equality goal being championed by women.


The indigenous women's voices and "*her stories*", as an integral part of the women's movement and indigenous peoples' movement, remain faint. This reflects the overall conditions of indigenous women as relatively more marginalized, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. It also illustrates the urgent need to strengthen indigenous women's organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and as indigenous peoples.

This book, as a compilation of indigenous women's "*her stories*", is a reflection of the conditions and struggles on the ground of indigenous women. They are the stories of Katima, Jannie, Endena, and 13 other indigenous women who are extraordinary women in their own right. They are in the hearts and minds of other women and villagers because of their suffering, struggles, sacrifices, commitments, dedication and lifetime achievements in advancing the dignity of women and indigenous peoples.

This is now the third volume of her stories to be produced by AIPP to amplify the voices and struggles on indigenous women across Asia. This year we are focussing on indigenous women as land rights defenders, in line with the Global Call to Action on Indigenous and Community Land Rights. We hope this will generate more attention to the plight of women who are at the forefront in defending the land rights of indigenous peoples, and the recognition of their vital



contributions roles and contributions to the protection of mother earth. These women's voices and their stories need to be heard and relayed. They echo the realities on the ground and their actions are inspiring reflections of what can be done. Their shared aspiration for equality and dignity for all needs the support of everyone. After all, the world will only be truly free if women and indigenous peoples are equal to the rest of society and cultural diversity is respected and promoted.



*Joan Carling
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact*



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◊< Acronyms

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AGMS	Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha
AIPP	Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
AMAN	Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago
BCV	Building Community Voices
BWF	Borok Women's Forum
CIYA	Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association
CNDP	Chin National Democratic Party
FLAG	Free Legal Assistance Group
HA	Highlander Association
IMPECT	Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association
IWFNEI	Indigenous Women Forum of North East India
JKKK	Jawatankuasa Keselamatan dan Kemajuan Kampung
JOAS	Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia
JPIC	Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KPUS	Kamaiya Pratha Unmulan Samaj
MW	Megawatts
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NPA	New People's Army
NPC	National Power Corporation
NRS	Nepali Rupees
NTFP	Non-timber Forest Products
PC	Philippine Constabulary
PESA	Panchayati Raj (<i>Extension to Scheduled Areas</i>) Act
RI	Revenue Inspector
TOA	Tambon Administrative Organization
UEC	Union Election Commission
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
VAIW	Violence Against Indigenous Women
VDC	Village Development Committee
WOREC	Women Rehabilitation Center



◇ Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Asia, estimated to be more than 260 million, are disproportionately suffering from multiple forms of discrimination and oppression based on their ethnicity, race, location and economic status; rendering them part of the poorest of the poor, most politically disempowered and culturally and socially discriminated. In addition to this, indigenous women, estimated to be 50% of the total indigenous peoples population are even more discriminated and marginalized on the basis of the intersectionality of their gender and ethnicity.

The dimensions of gender oppression and exploitation of indigenous women have distinctive features in the customary laws, practices and beliefs of indigenous peoples. The practice of customary law is still prevalent, and more dominant, than national legal systems in many indigenous communities across Asia. Customary practices relating to indigenous women have both positive and negative aspects in relation to women's rights governing their daily lives in many communities.

Indigenous customary laws are largely against violence against indigenous women (VAIW) as they provide due recognition to the physical integrity of women as child bearers. On the other hand, customary laws do not consider women as equal to men in almost all aspects, including in decision-making. Traditional governance systems are only for men, and in general, the heavy agricultural work is left to the women. The traditional patriarchal system and mentality still prevail in the relationship of indigenous men and women.

In 2013, AIPP published *'HerStory of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice'*, off the back of the Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions project. In 2014, we proudly produced a second book-length collection of personal essays and stories of Indigenous Women change makers across Asia. Now, once again in 2016, we are publishing HerStory 3, with the generous support of NORAD.



The following stories have been collected through the tireless dedication of our partners and friends from indigenous communities in Northeast India, Mainland India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Nepal, Cambodia and the Philippines. Many of the forthcoming stories have been narrated in the storyteller's indigenous language, translated into the national language, and then translated again into English. In order to protect the integrity of the stories and in respect for the authors, the majority of the text has been directly translated with minor technical editing. The stories have passed through many ears to end at this publication, and we applaud those women who have participated, for their bravery and commitment in sharing their stories.

This publication is a reflection of the hard work of everyone involved in the Indigenous Women's movement in Asia. We hope that this collection of stories can be used to empower and promote the solidarity of all indigenous women.



Chapter 1:

Indigenous Women Defending their Collective Rights to Land PART 1

1. Tep Tim, Preah Vihear, Cambodia
2. Yebet Binti Saman, Mengkapur, Malaysia
3. Sambolaxhmi Debbarma, Tripura, North East India
4. Katima Leeja, Chiang Dao, Thailand

Name: Tep Tim
Ethnicity: Kui
Preah Vihear, Cambodia

Tep Tim is one of the key influential and respected indigenous leaders in Cambodia, having initiated and founded several indigenous peoples' organizations like IRAM, OPKC and CIYA. Her contribution to the Indigenous Peoples' movement is well recognized by society. Tep Tim, who is 61 years old now, is a great source of inspiration for the younger generations and is still very active in advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples.



◆ Tep Tim (left) at a community meeting in Cambodia

But her journey was not always easy. She has faced a lot of challenges, made sacrifices and experienced loss and tragedies in her life. She said that the patriarchal mindset in our society means that daughters are property of 'others' and have no right to make their own choices or decisions. Despite her strong willingness to continue, Tep Tim had to quit her studies after grade 5 and was married by the age of 15. Child marriage was very common at that time and it still exists in some communities today. She gave birth to her first child when she was just 16 years old.

Just after that, her father who was in the police force, suddenly disappeared and nobody could find out what happened to him. Being the eldest daughter, she and her husband had to take care of her mother and younger siblings (*two brothers and two sisters*). This added more responsibilities to Tep Tim and her husband.

By the age of 33, she was already a mother of seven children and they lived in a remote area where they had rice farming. When her

seventh baby was just 10 days old, the Military came to her house and arrested her husband and uncle. They accused them of giving shelter to the revolutionary group. The villagers tried to protest against it but they too were threatened with death. Her husband was just 45 and her uncle, 50 years old. Both were assaulted and later killed.

Her husband's death was the biggest tragedy after her father's disappearance. She had lost two important people in her life. Her husband was the head of the family and had taken care of everything. She was more involved in taking care of the children and the household work. Now all of sudden, she became the head of the family with enormous responsibilities. She would regularly break down. But when looking at the innocent faces of her children, she felt that if she gave up hope, then the children would lose everything. At least, she had to be strong and live for them, although it was not easy.

Her in-laws were supporting her in the field but that was not enough for the living of the whole family. With the small babies, she started selling chickens and palm and coconut juice in the city. Since, she could not complete her studies, she wanted all her children to go to school. She used to work very hard during

Now all of sudden, she became the head of the family with enormous responsibilities. She would regularly break down. But when looking at the innocent faces of her children, she felt that if she gave up hope, then the children would lose everything. At least, she had to be strong and live for them, although it was not easy.

the daytime and then would have sleepless nights as she worried about her children and their future.

But it seemed the tragedy didn't end. Three years after her husband was killed, her younger brother was also arrested and killed by the Military while he went to the forest for hunting and collecting non-timber products. In 2000, her son who had joined the military was also killed in a bomb blast. He was just 22 years old.

In 2000, after her son died, she started her association with the Buddhism for Progressive Society (BPS). They invited her to attend her first training on peace and advocacy skills. That was the first time ever for her to get connected with the outer world as she was always so confined to household chores. This also helped her to heal her pain somewhat. After that she started to manage her work and her engagement on peace and advocacy work.

Later, she was selected as one of the women group members who could read and write, and she had a chance to meet 24 women from other provinces. Slowly, she started understanding human rights, how Indigenous Peoples as minorities are facing challenges due to their distinct identities, and how their own rights to land, forest and territories are being violated in the name of development even though its ensured in the constitution. This made her realize that she needs to contribute towards her community.

For the first time she got involved in a protest against a company (*affiliated with a high official/influential man*) which was trying to bulldoze on their

She understood the collective power of the community and she learnt how to respond using the existing law.

land. She started organizing the community members and made them understand that they need to fight back otherwise they would get evicted from their ancestral land and forests. Then, she took the lead and confiscated the two machines. She was threatened for getting involved in this matter. For the first time, she experienced a confrontation with the government and armed forces. But she was not scared of anything. She understood the collective power of the community and she learnt how to respond using the existing law.

In 2002, there was another incident whereby the government approved a license to a Chinese plywood company to cut the raisin trees. When the communities tried to protest, they said they are just going to cut the top of the tree but, in fact, they cut the trees and blocked the forest road. On behalf the community, Mr Som, Mr Kolkum, Mr Nueon

and Soksem were appointed as representatives to file a complaint to the government as they could speak Khmer. Tep Tim was also active in this campaign. She mobilized the community and also raised funds to support the representatives to go to Phnom Penh for the campaign against the company and the government's intervention. Each family contributed 10,000 Cambodian Riel. She too attended the national campaign in Phnom Penh with the representatives of other provinces, Khmer activists and other IPs. But it seemed the community voice was not heard and the representatives decided to block the road. The situation became chaotic and one of the activists died during the clash. Finally, the then King Sihanouk intervened and cancelled all the license of companies.

This is how she started getting more involved in the movement. Tep Tim who was a housewife before, was now turning to be an active leader of the community. She started feeling that she can make contribution to change the society which discriminated against Indigenous Peoples and how important it is for them to secure their rights to land and forests. She attended more trainings organized by various organizations including SADP, BPS, NGO Forum. She knew the value and benefits of the forest, how important it is for the future generations and that it's the indigenous peoples who are protecting and safeguarding it.



◆ Tep Tim speaking during AIPP's 3rd Indigenous Women's Exchange in Yangon, Myanmar

She also realized that without strong community mobilization, it is not possible to fight for their rights, whether it is with the government or with private companies. She started visiting each villages/districts and meeting peoples to discuss the issues and concerns of IPs and the need to be organize and united. She would walk miles for this. Most of the villages she visited had almost similar problems; land grabbing, land concessions, threats, insecurity and fear. During this time, she found some potential peoples who could also be active in the movement.

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In 2004, with the help of SADP and in cooperation with Highlanders Association, Tep Tim organized the first meeting of 24 Indigenous communities from 15 provinces. That was the first time the Indigenous leaders had come together, shared their experiences and made the commitment to work together. As a result of this meeting, Indigenous Rights Active Members (*IRAM*) was formed with 50 members and Tep Tim was selected as one of seven national representatives. *IRAM* is a network of 17 indigenous groups in Cambodia and is active in all 15 provinces. After being associated with *IRAM*, she was more engaged in community organizing and mobilization, awareness raising and capacity building activities. She left *IRAM* in 2013.

She was also one of the founding members of Organization to Promote Kui Culture (*OPKC*). The organization was formed in 2005 (formally registered in 2006) and is working for the promotion and protection of Kui culture, language and tradition. She is also one of the founding members of Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association (*CIYA*) which was formed in 2005 (*registered in 2008*) to promote and engage the youth in indigenous movements. She has tried to work in collaboration with all of these organizations to build the collective power of indigenous peoples. She is also an advisor to Cambodian Indigenous Peoples

Alliance (CIPA), a national alliance of indigenous peoples organizations and groups.

Currently, she is leading a campaign to secure the community land titles of indigenous peoples in Cambodia. The indigenous peoples in Cambodia take her as an inspirational figure. She is brave and strong and is in a position to interface with all stakeholders including government and the big companies. Her leadership role in community organizing is the key to the Indigenous people's movement in Cambodia. There are still lots of challenges but she is happy that more indigenous youth are now actively taking the lead.



◆ Tep Tim and other delegates from Cambodia during the 3rd Indigenous Women's Exchange Solidarity Night.

Tep Tim is also a happy mother and feels proud for what her children have achieved. One of her sons is a teacher now, her daughter is a nurse and the fifth one is studying in grade 12. Despite her hard work, two of her children dropped out after Grade 3 but they are also doing their own thing. Her children and other family members support of her mission has always been very crucial to where she is right now. Although, recently she is having some health problems, she shows her commitment to fight for the rights of indigenous people's rights until her death.

*Written by Chanda Thapa
Translated by Lorang Yun*

Name: Yebet Binti Saman
Ethnicity: Semaq Beri
Kampung Mengkapur, Malaysia



◆ Yebet Binti Saman

Yebet Binti Saman is an indigenous Semaq Beri elder who grew up depending on the forest for her livelihood. Although she has never been to school before, and is unable to read or write, she became the first Orang Asli woman plaintiff to lead her community in a legal suit against the state authorities, in defense of her community's customary territory.

Yebet grew up during a time of great difficulty. The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), a civil war between the colonial government and the communist insurgents forced her and her family to go into hiding when she was a child.

From around eight until 12 years old, Yebet, her parents and siblings would constantly be on the move around their customary land, looking for food and hiding in caves. They didn't even have clothes then, as

they tried to remain as inconspicuous as they could. They feared if they were spotted by the communists, they would be shot.

With an intimate knowledge of the forest within their customary territory, passed down from her parent's parents and their parents before that, Yebet and her family were able to survive those difficult years.

The Semaq Beri community in the area known as Kampung Mengkapur, was eventually forcibly moved to a resettlement site by the colonial government. There, Yebet soon started a family of her own. With her vast knowledge of medicinal plants in the forest there, she served her community as a healer.

When the threat of the communist insurgents eventually dissipated, Yebet and some members moved back to their customary territory. Over time, a new threat emerged. Developers started opening up land around Yebet's and her family's customary territory.

"They come in and cut the forest. They plant oil palm. They started digging the earth for iron, destroying our caves for limestone and now they want to also dig for gold," Yebet explained.

In a place where Yebet once recalled seeing an elephant giving birth, the deforestation, followed by the planting of large-scale plantations and iron mining, desolated the once pristine forest.

The limestone caves, notably Bukit Tongkat, was the resting place of the remains of an elderly Semaq Beri woman and child. Yebet and her community would often go there to clean the area and pay their respects. It was also one of the caves which she and her family sought refuge in during the Communist Insurgency. This historical cave now faces the threat of limestone mining.

Their cries to the contractors to stop the work were met with deaf ears as developers ravaged the land for resources.

Yebet said it was then that they were certain that they have legitimate rights to their customary territory and could act to claim those rights.

Yebet and her community were not sure what was the next step to take, until one of her daughters, Fatimah a/p Bah Sin, attended a workshop explaining the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). When Fatimah returned from the workshop, she told her family about what she learned.

Yebet said it was then that they were certain that they have legitimate rights to their customary territory and could act to claim those rights. With that, Yebet and her community sought out help to bring their case to court. She could no longer watch the rivers where she fishes, turn brown, and she could no longer bare to watch their sacred areas flattened and dug up.

“Because the developers did not want to hear us when we asked them to stop. We want to know now if they are in the right, or we are in the right. Which is why we brought this matter to be decided by the authorities,” Yebet explained on her decision to lead her community in a legal battle against the developers and state authorities.

On 14 December 2012, Yebet and five other fellow villagers filed the suit in their personal and their representative capacity for 76 other villagers, claiming native title rights to the customary lands in Kampung Mengkapur.

During the course of the case, Yebet along with two other witnesses, took the stand over six trial dates.

As she stood in the witness stand, the lawyers of the defendants interrogated her and tried their best to discredit her and her community’s relationship with their customary land.

On the fourth year of the trial, the lawyers representing Yebet and her community assessed the case and advised them to accept the original

settlement offer from the State Government, which was for the state to recognize their village area but not their larger customary territory. Yebet and the other claimants took the advice and accepted the bittersweet judgement. The case was closed early this year on 18 February 2016.

Commenting on the judgement, Yebet explains that she accepts the amicable settlement. However she remains vigilant as despite the judgement, the land area delineated as theirs still faces encroachment from developers.



“Even though I don’t have formal education, do not underestimate me. I am not afraid to protect our customary land,” Yebet reiterated.

“We may go out and explore the world, but as Orang Asli, Indigenous People, we must not be laid to rest in another person’s land. We were born here and therefore we must be laid to rest here together with our ancestors,” she added.

Yebet made history by being the first Orang Asli woman plaintiff to lead her community in a court battle for their customary land rights. She continues now to be the pillar of strength and guidance for her community in defending their customary territory and protecting what’s left of the forest there.

Written by Puah Sze Ning

Name: Sambolaxhmi Debbarma

Ethnicity: Tripuri

Tripura, North East India



◆ Sambolaxhmi Debbarma

North Joynagar village is located under Jirania Sub-Division, in the State of Tripura, Agartala, Northeast India. In this indigenous village almost all families belong to the Tripuri Community and since the start of a railway project (*and many other development projects*), the native people have been living in fear of eviction. In the village, from the eldest members to the younger members, they play the important role of protecting their village from land alienation. Initially they were hopeless, but with the help of some good-spirited and good-minded people, other women's groups from other villages and Borok Women's Forum (BWF), they had the solidarity and support to protect their village.

The BWF organization, headed by Presati Debbarma, Kwbuti Jamatia, Esmā Debbarma, Sukini Debbarma, Anjili Debbarma, and Secretary Khumtiya Debbarma, helps and supports the village of North Joynagar, especially the women, to be stronger and more united. The villages were supported with awareness raising activities on land, forest and resources, and from time to time, BWF members would visit the village and gather information. In fact, when BWF started to visit and create awareness in the village, the villagers felt morally stronger and in higher spirits to protect their land.

The Indigenous Women Forum of Northeast India (*IWFNEI*), in solidarity, has also supported and provided good advice to the women's group of North Joynagar village. IWFNEI Convener Kheshili Chishi

expressed her solidarity and supported in organizing awareness for the women's group which was implemented with financial support from IWFNEI. The women members of IWFNEI from almost all parts of Northeast India showed their support and solidarity toward the indigenous peoples of North Joynagar.

Sambolaxhmi Debbarma is one of the elderly women of North Joynagar village. She had been evicted thrice from her home in the same village without any compensation. In 2007, when the railway project started, she was evicted from her land because it fell within the railway line project

Sambolaxhmi Debbarma is one of the elderly women of North Joynagar village. She had been evicted thrice from her home in the same village without any compensation.

and when she failed to provide a legal land title, she was denied any compensation. After she had been evicted, she made her home near the paddy field belonging to her ancestor, away from the rail line project. Again, she was not free as all her paddy fields, and even her home, were covered by mud and water from the railway project. Sambolaxhmi approached government offices, seeking help and remedy but she was completely denied. On these instances, she had to shift again from her new home to the hill top. In 2011, while she was still getting settled with her family, she was asked again to move out from her home because the area where she had made her hut belongs to two private companies. She wondered, since when had the land been owned by these companies, as her ancestors had been living here for centuries and this was the place where they had been doing shifting cultivation since time immemorial.

Earlier life, Family and Work

Sambolaxhmi Debbarma has three elder sisters and two elder brothers. As she is the youngest child, she had greater responsibilities because all her elder brothers and sisters had left home after marriage to move to other villages. Her parents wanted to educate her but she was not free from agricultural work and zoom cultivation to contribute to her family earnings. However, she could manage to attend school up

until class six; her parents also advised her that beside studies, jhum cultivation for her family must be her first priority. Furthermore, after all her brothers and sisters left home to settle with their own respective families, Sambolaxhmi had greater responsibility to take care of her parents. Day and night, she had to work for her family. In the day time she would help her parents in jhum cultivation and in the evening she would weave cloths for her and family. The situation changed, as her father got sick so she had to work even harder, including in her neighbour's field, for food. At times after school she would work in someone's field to earn some money and buy rice and things necessary for home. One day, there was no rice left in the home, so after school she went to work in someone's field which allowed her to buy some eggs for her sick father and her cousin bought some rice for her on credit. On reaching home, she found her father seriously ill and finally her father passed away. It was hard for her to forget her father but she was determined to live a normal life, though she and her mother had to work harder in the absence of her father. After her father's death, she eventually married and had two children, a girl and a boy. She wishes both her children to be educated and they both go to school.

Current Situation

As a result of her eviction, Sambolaxhmi has suffered economically, spiritually and socially. She has been deprived of any government compensation as she failed to produce patta (*official documents*). She has to struggle hard for her family along with her husband and they still work in their field and often also labour in someone else's field. Her children attend a local school, where the teacher rarely turns up. Due to their worsening economic condition, she could not afford to continue sending her daughter to study. Her daughter now helps in the field, while her son continues with school and reads in class four.

She has been deprived of any government compensation as she failed to produce patta (*official documents*). She has to struggle hard for her family along with her husband and they still work in their field and often also labour in someone else's field.



◆ Indigenous Women of North Joynagar in one of the awareness Programme.

The family of Sambolaxhmi is still living in the land where they were asked to leave by the projects. One year ago, there was continuous pressure from the government officials, political parties, policemen and even threats from people in the village who had been bribed for the project. As of now, they are still insecure about their land and no official statement had been written to state that government is not taking their land for the project.

The greatest impact of her eviction is that her family has been made landless, has suffered poverty, and she could not afford good education for her children.

As of now, they are still insecure about their land and no official statement had been written to state that government is not taking their land for the project.

Her Struggle

In spite of her looming eviction she has been strong enough to protest and lead other women's groups to fight for their cultural land. The only strength she has even when she had suffered eviction and poverty is that the land belongs to her ancestors and it is the place where her **omthai ni thwi kwlai ma ni jakha** (*navel blood had dropped when she was being born, as had her ancestors*).

Everyone in the village of North Joynagar knows about her eviction and the villagers feel annoyed and have great resistance to the project. On the hill, along with Sambolaxhmi, there are twenty-four other families who would have been evicted, despite them living there in the land of their ancestors.



◆ Newspaper clipping in Dainiksambad regarding the protest made against FCI & IOCL project by native people of North Joynagar

Although the village was worried and tense with pressure from the eviction, still they all stood firm against it. The nearby villages, the Borok Women Forum, Indigenous Forum of Northeast India, and other likeminded people came to help in the form of awareness raising and capacity building trainings and by having solidarity.

Sambolaxhmi, being inspired further and supported by BWF and by many other supporting villages, stood firm and determined to protect her ancestral land. She inspired everyone, especially the women's group, to stand for their village. There were many protests made by the women's group, along with other members of the village. In all the protests made by the villagers, the women's groups always stand in front, saying in loud voices that "***Chini Ha No Norokno Rise Riya***" (*we will never ever give you our land*).

As of now, the native people in the village of North Joynagar still remain in a dilemma. Although they have protested against the project, they are still in fear of being alienated from their land.

By this period, the Company had already planted their pillars demarcating their boundaries without the knowledge of the villagers and irrespective of many protests made by the villagers. The companies, with the help of the government, were doing their best to take the land of these Indigenous Peoples who are the rightful owners. They have hardly followed any rules for acquiring the land, and even if they followed the rules, this still does not justify taking the land of Indigenous Peoples.

As of now, the native people in the village of North Joynagar still remain in a dilemma. Although they have protested against the project, they are still in fear of being alienated from their land. The government office has not issued any official written statement against the protest or the villagers' unwillingness to give their land, nor have they said they will no longer take the land.

This story of the Indigenous Peoples of North Joynagar is perhaps a long story; pen, paper and words are not enough to express their agony and pain they have gone through, especially the brave lady Sambolaxmi Debbarma and her family.

Written by Khumtiya Debbarma

Name: Katima Leeja

Ethnicity: Lisu

Ban San Pa Hiang, Chiang Dao District, Thailand



In many cases, defending the rights of indigenous peoples places our lives as activists at stake; and it often seems our lives are hanging on a thin thread ready to fall down. If we do not take a step, we will live our lives in fear and be bullied all the time. How can we secure our lives in such a situation?

"I tried hard to bring justice to his death, but failed all along. That is why I became a human rights defender."

I am Katima Leeja, a young Lisu who lives in Ban San Pa Hiang, Chiang Dao district, Chiang Mai Province in Thailand. I received a Bachelor Degree in Accounting from

Rajabhat University in Chiang Mai. My father was shot to death after the accusation that he committed community forest encroachment and he was alleged to have fought with the officers and ended his life in an armed fight. Being his daughter, I tried hard to bring justice to his death, but failed all along. That is why I became a human rights defender.

I was brought up in Ban San Pa Hiang where the majority of people are cohabitating Northern Thai and Lisu. Except for a few members, most Lisu families have not been granted citizenship. With no ID cards, non-citizen members of my community are more easily exposed to ill treatment by other people. There were times, for example, when the lowlanders' cattle were encroaching on our farmlands. The Thai owners responded to our demand for compensation with their challenge that we better report to the police. Indeed, we did not know the law that even without ID cards we have our rights to receive compensation from the cattle owners.

A person having no citizenship does not mean that his/her rights can be violated by anyone. However, the Lisu villagers are afraid of getting arrested, so they dare not go to the police station to report the cattle encroachment into their farmlands.

Moreover, although the children without citizenship are allowed to go to public school, they are not entitled to receive student uniforms, textbooks, and other stationeries provided by the government. At the university level, non-citizen students do not have access to government loans for their study. In addition, without ID cards we cannot receive free health care.

Many of our villages are located either in the National Park, or in the forest reserves. Our lack of land titles becomes one of the chronic problems that forces our people to be encroachers of the protected forests. This subjects us, indigenous people, to expulsion from our home land by the authorities at any time; and with no ID cards, some government agencies even claim that we do not belong to the country. Furthermore, conflict between lowlanders and Lisu people often takes place out of prejudice. It so happened that a lowland leader, in order to increase the forest areas, launched his reforest campaign into our farm lands. Thus, Lisu farmers cannot make use of their farm lands anymore, and when they went back to their farms, they were intimidated by the lowland leader. Some families have even cleared their fields, but these were later confiscated back by the authorities. Lisu villagers feared going back to their farms again. Surprisingly, the local Thai leader granted permission to his relatives to cultivate the former Lisu's lands. Such incidences take place every now and then.

“This subjects us, indigenous people, to expulsion from our home land by the authorities at any time; and with no ID cards, some government agencies even claim that we do not belong to the country. Furthermore, conflict between lowlanders and Lisu people often takes place out of prejudice.”

The death of my father was the result of ethnic prejudice. He was shot on the day he went in search of his lost buffalo around 9:00 a.m., but we were informed about his death at almost 1:00 p.m. on the same day. He was found lying dead in the forest about 100 meters away from his farm land that he was deprived of. The fact that he declined to give away his land made him a target of the people with ill-intention. Six farm lands of our family were forcefully taken away by the sub-district officer (*kamnan*). Before the shooting incident, my father said that this plot of land was our last resort for family survival. Five bullets were found in his body. After his murder, the sub-district officer and his team went to report at the district police station that a Lisu man from Ban San Pa Hiang was sneaking into the reforested area and clearing the land; that he took an armed fight with the officer's surveillance team and was finally shot to death. We could not believe such explanation considering the evidence at our disposal; all the bullets struck his back implying that he was shot from behind and indeed it was not a gun fight. In consultation with the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) and the Lisu Network of Thailand, on the grounds of our disbelief about the fighting, and the fact that my father carried no knife, with no trace of wood cutting in the area, it was suggested that we submit this case to the National Commission for Human Rights. Soon, Dr. Nirandra Phithakwachara, a Human Rights Commissioner, paid his visit to the field in Chiang Dao District and interviewed a number of people: the Deputy District Officer, the Police Inspector, the Chiang Dao Hospital doctor, the forester from the Office 16, Chief of Muang Khong Tambon Administrative Organization (TOA), and the sub-district officer of Muang Khong, but to no avail; there was little cooperation. There was the suggestion to send this case to

“The service of the lawyer was provided by the Center for the Protection of Community Rights. Through cross-examination, the provincial court was requested to determine whether there was a fight or an ambush using testimonies and evidence gathered from all related stakeholders. Finally, the Chiang Mai court judgment concluded that the incident was not a fight at all.”

the Chiang Mai Provincial Court for cross-examination. This was done with the help of a lawyer, Mr. Sumitchai Hathasarn, also a member of the Sub-Committee for Human Rights at that time. The service of the lawyer was provided by the Center for the Protection of Community Rights. Through cross-examination, the provincial court was requested to determine whether there was a fight or an ambush using testimonies and evidence gathered from all related stakeholders. Finally, the Chiang Mai court judgment concluded that the incident was not a fight at all. The Chiang Mai court decision was forwarded to the Supreme Court as it involved the state personnel. From the Supreme Court, the case was sent back to the Chiang Mai court and then to Chiang Dao Police Station; because the account was so weak and identifying the culprit was impossible. The task to reformulate the court case was assigned to the Chiang Dao authorities to send the clearer and complete case to the official attorney so that he/she can file it as a court case again. However, up until now, this murder case is still lying on the desk at the Police Station without any progress.

“I decided to join a number of meetings, workshops, trainings, and demonstrations where I can voice our problems and at the same time learn about new knowledge, as well as new skills. My contribution has been recognized gradually by other people. At present, I have been accepted to become a member of the highest Committee of the Federation of Northern Farmers focusing on the issue of land rights.”

My father was the first murdered victim in the area. If I do not rise and fight, there can be other murder cases following and the villagers can be intimidated and mistreated time and again. I decided to join a number of meetings, workshops, trainings, and demonstrations where I can voice our problems and at the same time learn about new knowledge, as well as new skills. My contribution has been recognized gradually by other people. At present, I have been accepted to become a member of the highest Committee of the Federation of Northern Farmers focusing on the issue of land rights. My service is specifically rendered to indigenous brothers and sisters in our Network who have been affected by the current Claiming Back of Forest Policy. My work was

appreciated by the villagers, in terms of giving advice and sending letters to authorities. My intention is to strengthen the community's capacity to rise up on its own and to demand for community rights as well as to fight injustice. Almost everyday, I receive several phone calls asking for advice on the violation of land rights. Most of the villagers' problems are related to the new announcement of new forest reserve, national park and land grabbing by outsiders.

“We firmly believe that community land rights can prevent the situation when land will eventually fall into the hand of outsiders. Our villagers have hope that community land rights will be recognized by the state so that they can live their lives without fear. This is why more and more people are rising to struggle for land rights.”

It is very crucial to assist the villagers on land rights because this is related to their livelihood. Without farm land, people would be compelled to seek refuge in urban migration to offer their labor for sale. Soon, numerous problems would be ensuing, including the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking and oppressed workers. For a person without an ID card, the risk is even higher. Back in the community, only the elderly and small children are left behind, leading to family breakdown. Indeed, land ownership provides security to our lives. We do not demand for individual land rights for it can be sold easily. Instead, we need community land rights, meaning, the land belongs to the whole community. We firmly believe that community land rights can prevent the situation when land will eventually fall into the hand of outsiders. Our villagers have hope that community land rights will be recognized by the state so that they can live their lives without fear. This is why more and more people are rising to struggle for land rights.

In 2014, the government had a policy to increase forest areas in Thailand. This had tremendous impact on indigenous peoples throughout the country. Farmers in numerous communities were arrested with the charge of encroaching and destroying the forest.

Members in a number of communities were accused of having illegal wooden planks in their possession. Meanwhile in other communities, government officers invaded farm lands and cut the on-farm products which can fetch family income for the whole year. All these remain problems of today and seemingly, there is increasing number of incidences. If these sufferings are not healed, I will have to keep working on the promotion of human rights for my indigenous brothers and sisters.

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*Written by Katima Leeja, as told
to Kamonphan Saelee and Kanlaya Chularattakorn
Translated by Chupinit Kesmanee*



Chapter 2:

Indigenous Women Defending their Collective Rights to Land PART 2

1. Leticia Bula-at, Cordillera, Philippines
2. Balamdina Kerketta, Odisha, India
3. CK Janu, Kerala, India
4. Dam Chanthy, Ratanakiri, Cambodia

Name: Leticia Bula-at
Ethnicity: Naneng, Kalinga
Cordillera, Philippines

Leticia Bula-at, aged 68, with a son and a daughter, lives in the mountains of the Naneng tribe in Barangay Dupag, Tabuk City, Kalinga. Her husband died in 1972 due to illness (*El Tor*) and since his death, Leticia singlehandedly supported her family through difficult times as a fulltime mother and farmer. Her two children were able to finish their studies until college through perseverance, work, sweat and sacrifice.

Leticia relates: *“One day in February 1977, I was just around 28 years old then, a group of Philippine Constabulary (PC) came to our place, led by Major Mayanggao, and employees of the National Power Corporation (NPC). They planned to construct their camp or barracks there, bringing with them a 6x6 military truck filled with lumber. At that time, our community had set up a barricade to stop the construction of the Chico River Dam (the biggest dam in Asia), which would flood our*



◆ Leticia Bula-at

villages. The dam was a project of then President Ferdinand Marcos, funded by the World Bank and implemented by the National Power Corporation. The Philippine Constabulary served as guards for the employees of NPC who were working in the construction of the big dam along the Chico River in our place.

While the PC soldiers and NPC employees were unloading the lumber from the 6x6 truck, our group of women hurried to stop them. We requested the PC and NPC to stop unloading the lumber but they did

not listen to our demands. Angered, the group of women rushed to carry the lumber and return it to the truck. The soldiers did not respect us and pushed us until we fell into a deep canal where they trampled on us. I was injured in my feet and shoulders, while the other women continued to return the lumber to the 6x6 truck of the PC. That night, the soldiers secretly carried the lumber up to the site where they started to build their camp.

The next day, upon learning that the soldiers were already setting up their camp, the same group of women, this time accompanied by the older women in the community, went to the road to barricade. Major Mayanggao got angry when he saw us. He tried to attack us but the older women took off their clothes, thereby preventing any harm from being done to us.

We experienced so much hardship, hunger, violence, tiredness and sleepless nights during that period. The PC and NPC people did not stop building their camp and barracks. But we also persisted and continued with our barricade. When they failed to stop our protests and barricades, the PC and NPC tried to invite us to a meeting with them in the PC barracks in Bulanao. They loaded us into two trucks to bring us to the meeting. But when we reached Sitio Gaogao, the two trucks stopped. I asked permission to go and urinate, and when the soldiers were not looking, I ran and returned to the site of our barricade.

“We experienced so much hardship, hunger, violence, tiredness and sleepless nights during that period. The PC and NPC people did not stop building their camp and barracks.”

I learned the next day that no meeting was held. Instead the soldiers brought my village mates to Camp Juan Duyan in Bulanao and imprisoned them in the PC barracks. Our other male leaders and ‘pangat’ (peacepact holders) were also arrested and imprisoned in Camp Olivas in Pampanga.

With the arrest of our companions, the number of people guarding the barricade dwindled and the PC and NPC grabbed the chance to

set up their camp and barracks. We still did all we could to stop them. The women were at the frontlines of the barricade and we experienced being boxed and hit with guns by the PC soldiers. Meanwhile, we submitted petitions protesting the Chico River dam and exposing the arrest and detention of our village mates. Then Sen. Jose Diokno, Sen. Tanada and Atty. William Claver of the Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG) served as the lawyers of the detainees.

I will never forget what happened in March 1978, when I, together with some young women went to stop the survey being done by the NPC, and guarded by the PC led by Major Joshue, at the part of the Chico River in front of our village. We went to remove the stakes being put down by the NPC as part of our protest against the construction of the dam in our ancestral land. When they saw us removing the stakes, the PC soldiers chased us away until we reached our houses. Major Joshue caught me and hit my head with a pouch containing magazines of bullets. Not content, he struck me in the back with the butt of a gun. When my 9-year old child witnessed this abuse being done against me, he got angry and threw a stone toward the soldiers. Here, Major Joshue pointed his gun at my child. It was only when the women started screaming that Major Joshue stopped abusing me. This incident had grave psychological impacts on my two children.

“We went to remove the stakes being put down by the NPC as part of our protest against the construction of the dam in our ancestral land. When they saw us removing the stakes, the PC soldiers chased us away until we reached our houses.”

On April 24, 1980, soldiers of the Philippine Army, led by Major Adalem, shot and killed Macliing Dulag in Bugnay, Tinglayan. He was a leader and pangat of the Butbut tribe; a brave comrade in the struggle against the Chico dam. It was also during this time that many support groups came from different sectors; church groups, priests and nuns, academe, anthropologists, lawyers and others like Senators Diokno and Tañada. I was one of those who often joined the delegations to Manila, attended forums, meetings and inter-tribal assemblies to express our opposition

against the destructive dams and the abuses of the Army and PC. It was also during this time that I learned about the situation under the dictatorship and system of government under President Marcos.

In 1979, members of the New Peoples Army (NPA) arrived in our place. They called us to a community meeting and told us that they are an armed group who have come to defend us and help us stop the construction of the dam by the government of President Marcos. Many of our men and women who had the physical ability joined the NPA because they believed that it is only through armed struggle that the dam project could be stopped, especially in the face of violations by the PC of our human rights. It was during this time that the abuses by the military and the PC worsened, both against the legal opposition and the armed resistance.

Another incident that I will never forget happened in June 1984 when the group of Major Asprec of the Philippine Army came to our house to investigate me. They asked many questions – why am I a widow? How did my husband die? Why don't I get married again? Who is working for me since I am always in the barricade to protest the dam? Where do I get the food to feed my children? They required me to report every Monday to their barracks, where I went through many psychological interrogations.

By 1983, the human rights violations committed by the Philippine Army and PC in our place were worsening. Our barangay officials (who were all male) were being harassed and pressured because of the encounters/offensives between the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) and the NPA in our place. It was here that the community decided that women should be the ones to sit as barangay officials. I was one of those chosen to become a barangay kagawad (council woman). With all women taking their positions as barangay officials, we were able to face the members of the AFP and PC and assert the rights of our community.”

Leticia was one of those who was being persuaded by the NPC to sell her land and accept the offer of relocation, but she firmly stood by the agreement reached among those in the dam-affected areas that no one would sell their land and that no one would accept to work for the NPC.

“Nine years passed from 1977 to 1986 and the plan of President Marcos to construct the Chico dam in our place had failed. From my experience and practice during our struggle to defend our land, I learned about the issues of self-determination and the oppressive laws (such as the Land Registration Act of 1906 and Forestry Code or Presidential Decree 705). I learned about other laws and policies in relation to land, martial law and the dictatorial system of the government of President Marcos. It was here that I understood the roots of the problems for the majority of Filipino people, primarily the peasant sector and the people in Kalinga and in the Cordillera mountains. I now understood why President Marcos was pushing the construction of the big dam that would submerge and destroy our farms, homes and land that we till – ‘the minority peoples who will be affected in the site where the dam will be built should sacrifice so that the majority of Filipinos will have energy supply.’

In 1986, after the overthrow of President Marcos through People’s Power, President Corazon Aquino came into power. I continued to join the organizations and sectors who were helping us in the anti-Chico Dam struggle. I participated in the petition which we submitted to President Corazon Aquino to cancel the plan of the government to build the dam.

Since 1987 until now, the anti-people policies of the government continue such as the EPIRA Law, Mining Act, Forestry Code, etc. These laws and policies are being used by the national government in connivance with capitalist investors to take over and grab our ancestral lands and resources. At the same time, the government continues to neglect the provision of basic social services to indigenous peoples.”

“These laws and policies are being used by the national government in connivance with capitalist investors to take over and grab our ancestral lands and resources.”

This is the reason why Leticia continues to be committed to work with people’s organizations and non-government organizations. She was a founding member, and later a Chairperson, of Innabuyog-Kalinga, a provincial-level organization of women. She was also a founding

member of Innabuyog, a regional women's organization in the Cordillera, where she played a leading role in the women's movement to expose and campaign against violence against women, and for the defense of land, life and resources. She is also a volunteer barangay health worker under the government's Department of Health until the present.



◆ Leticia
Photo during town fiesta.

Aside from her sacrifices in addressing the issues confronting the people, Leticia never left her work of tilling the land. Since 1977 until the present, she has practiced farming in a way that preserves the soil and the environment. She does agro-forestry by planting different kinds of fruit trees like marang, rambutan, mango, longan, pomelo, guyabano, cacao, avocado, coconut, santol, banana, coffee and narra. She also continues to practice an integrated farming system by growing rice, legumes,

corn, sweet potato, cardis (*cow pea*) and different kinds of vegetables. Her harvest of fruits and crops is for the consumption of her family. Any surplus produce is exchanged for other kinds of products needed in the kitchen and other needs such as salt, sugar, lard, soap, clothing and others.



◆ Leticia Photo during
graduation of
her granddaughter.

Aside from her sacrifices in addressing the issues confronting the people, Leticia never left her work of tilling the land.

Leticia's life shows that land is life; together we should unite to nurture, defend and protect the land from plunder and destruction.

*Written by Jenaro Bula-at
Translated by Jose Amian C. Tauli*

Name: Balamdina Kerketta
Ethnicity: Khadia
Sunergarh District, Odisha, Mainland India

Balamdina Kerketta was born on the 3rd of January, 1959, in the village of Kendudihi, Raiboga Police Station of Sunergarh District, in Odisha State. Kerketta was the second of five sisters.

Kerketta got married in 1987 at the age of 28 to Bernard Kerketta of Petlotoli village, Kukuda Panchayat and they have seven children - four girls and three boys. She was widowed in 2005 and remains the head of the family in Petlotoli. She is illiterate as she does not know how to read and write. She is a housewife and looks after field cultivation work for her income.

The Petlotoli belongs to village Dhaurada, Kukuda Gram Panchayat, Rajgangpur block, Dist-Sundargarh, Odisha. It was once fully surrounded by forests with an abundance of natural resources.

The Petlotoli belongs to village Dhaurada, Kukuda Gram Panchayat, Rajgangpur block, Dist-Sundargarh, Odisha. It was once fully surrounded by forests with an abundance of natural resources. Due to the forest, there was no soil erosion and the fertility of land was good. People were living happily and with no interference from outsiders. They helped each other and had a good sense of belongingness among them. At present, the situation of this village is changing due to the increase in mining activities in the area.

On 17th October 1980, one company started mining work. Five years later, another mining project was started on 16th October. The land was leased to both mining companies for a period of 20 years. The companies did not obtain the consent of the community people and illegally began their work in Petlotoli. The company proceeded with approving paper work with different people of Kukuda Panchayat. There was no PESA Act-1996 and Right to Information Act-2005, so the people of Petlotoli could not stop the mining work. The middleman

(broker) hired by the company cheated the villagers. Only those who spoke in favour of the company received services while others did not. In those days, the process of public hearing was in different forms. Without the knowledge of the land owners, roads were made and mining waste materials were dumped around the village. Taking into account all of these issues, protests were made against the company and an application was given to the police station. The community did not even allow the company vehicle to enter their land, hoping to get justice. However, nine local leaders were jailed in 1980. They were released a few days later on bail.

“He held my leg and said, ‘Let me open this mine, otherwise my family will die of hunger.’”

Balamdina Kerketta, recalls: *“In 2005, another Company again came to Petlotoli to reopen the company. Ramphal Kapoor came with Ray Singh, the manager of the mine and started measuring around the mines. At that time, no villagers were at home. All had gone to work in their field. I was also in the field for paddy collection. One girl from the village came running to me and told me that some people had come and were measuring around the mines. I understood that the mining company people might have come and as I held my child on my back and sickle in my hand, I went to them and asked them why and with whose permission were they measuring our land. Then manager of the mines, said to me ‘Why you are scolding and warning mother, nothing will happen. Don’t worry.’ He held my leg and said, ‘Let me open this mine, otherwise my family will die of hunger. It is because of my stomach that I am opening mines.’ Then I told him that for many years, you ran the mines but had never asked how we were. I said, ‘Now you are holding our feet to open mines. We do not know you. Go away, because this land that you are measuring is not your father’s property, stop measuring. Otherwise I will hit you with this sickle, which is our Indigenous Peoples’ arms.’ I threatened to hit the manager. Then he moved ahead where people were measuring. He asked his people to carry on measuring. Again, I kept my child and sickle on the ground and holding two stones in my hand, told them to stop measuring. At last they stopped measuring and left the place.*

In 2014 Khatang Revenue Inspector (RI) came again with some of the officials who were from Madras and started measuring land around the mines. I saw them coming. I followed them to see what they were doing. When I saw them measuring land around the mines, I went near them and asked them what they were doing. Khatang RI threatened me saying, 'Do you know who I am? I am a government representative.' I told him, 'We have Gaon Sarkar in our village! Have you asked permission from the village? If not, then stop measuring our land.' I had an axe in my hand. One of the supporters of the mining company said to me, 'We have leased this land and we will open mines here.' I went near him and asked him to stop threatening me otherwise I would attack him with this axe. By that time, other villagers also came running and shouting at them to stop measuring. Eventually, they stopped and went back.

Later, in 2014 yet another company wanted to take water from the Petlotoli mines. The company organized some of the local village leaders to speak favourably for the company by giving them money. One person was from the neighboring village of Turi Toil. In his name they brought JCB (a vehicle used for heavy work, including digging and loading) and started digging to fix the pipe. Some of our village women came to him and asked him why he was digging pits. He told them that it was his right to dig and take water from the mines for his field. However, it was his hidden intention to provide water, as he was working on behalf of the company. He also claimed that the company has spent so much money in taking out the lease, that they have the right to use resources as they like. Meanwhile I had gone to Gombardih School for a Parents meeting, when someone from the village sent me a message through the phone about the incident. I immediately left the meeting and rushed to the spot and stood in front of the JCB and asked the driver to stop, 'otherwise I will throw stones on your JCB.' He said, 'Don't throw stone I have only rented the JCB. If you throw stones, I will have to pay for it.' Some people who were from the company quarreled with us. We told them that without a decision of our Gram Sabha, we will not allow them to take water from our village mines. In the end they stopped and went back." Now there are two Community Lift irrigation points installed, and agriculture activities are lifting water from these abandoned mines.



◆ Balamdina Kerketta

The example of Petlotoli is not only for this locality, but for all Indigenous Peoples. Only 24 families in the hamlet have fought unitedly. Through the success and courage of Balamdina Kerketta, and the support of others in the village, big companies Limited have been forced to leave. Until today, the people of Petlotoli continue to come forward to openly fight against land grabbing.

Written by Kashmir Toppo and Remish Ekka

Name: Chekot Karian Janu (C.K. Janu)

Ethnicity: Adiya Adivasi

Kerala, India

“We will stand until we get our demands met. We might fall if we get tired, but we will stand up again. The approach from the government is discouraging and they have not shown a positive sign from their side. We are also part of this state, we also have a right to live here peacefully,” says C. K. Janu, leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha.¹



¹ See more at: <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/12391/#sthash.CNmjrQyv.dpuf>

India, home to the largest population of Indigenous Peoples in the world, has witnessed a long history of struggle of its Adivasis (*Indigenous Peoples*) for the defence of their land and resources. Throughout these struggles, Adivasi leaders have stood up and mobilized their people to reclaim their rights. Chekot Karian Janu (*C.K. Janu*) is an exceptional indigenous woman leader who has led her people to demand their land rights in the state of Kerala. C.K. Janu spearheads the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (*AGMS*), a social movement advocating for restoration of illegally alienated land, prevention of alienation of land, the redistribution of land to the landless Adivasis and self-governance for Adivasis in Kerala.

Kerala, a state in South India, is known for its high literacy rate and life expectancy and for its model of development. Kerala is a state where, for the first time in world's history, a Communist Party came to power through the ballot. Kerala is a state where land reforms and left party labor movements had taken place. Kerala is a state where her people are always proud of their high socio-political consciousness, people's movements etc. Undoubtedly Kerala is a first world state within a third world country. This is not the situation, however, for the Adivasis in this state. The Adivasi areas remain as a fourth world in this first world. In the 2011 census of India, the population of the scheduled tribes (*STs*) in this state was 484,839 or 1.5% of the total population of the state. Historically excluded and alienated from their lands, the Adivasis in this state have been continuously struggling since the 1970's for their land rights. Their struggle never received support from mainstream society or the media until 2001 when the Government entered into an agreement with the Adivasi-Dalit Struggle Committee, in turn giving birth to *AGMS*, which more recently spearheaded the Stand-Up Struggle in 2014.

Kerala is a state where, for the first time in world's history, a Communist Party came to power through the ballot.

The Stand-Up struggle was the result of the Government breaching the agreement that was formulated during the 48-day land protest in 2001 in front of secretariat and at the time of the Muthanga land struggle in 2003. The 162-day long Adivasi Stand-up Struggle (“*Nilpu Samaram*”) started from 9th July 2014 and called for the implementation of the agreement with the Kerala government, which included land distribution for farming. In particular, the government promised to distribute 0.4 - 2 hectares of cultivable land (*as per land availability*) to all landless tribes in each district of Kerala. Aside from this, the Stand-up Struggle also demanded the following: the Kerala government must declare tribal inhabited areas in the State as Scheduled Area under the *V Scheduled of the Constitution* and enable the implementation of the provisions under the Panchayati Raj (*Extension to Scheduled Areas*) Act (*PESA*); restoration of encroached and alienated tribal lands; implementation of the Forest Rights Act; provide Scheduled Tribe status to the Adivasis who are not already recognized as STs; and end the police reign and torture in the name of Maoist threats and connections. In the *Nilpu Samaram*, the group composed of Adivasi women, men, children and elderly stood uninterrupted for 11 hours everyday, for five long months, in front of the Kerala Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.



In an article written by Rupesh Kumar in 2014, he stated that the strike was not only for the struggle for land rights but to also strongly affirm that the Adivasis are fully equipped to claim their political needs and means by themselves. He further stated that the mainstream society, having understood the political significance of such struggle, extended solidarity to the Adivasis by providing physical, mental and economic support. An example of this is the support from academic institutions like the Sacred Hearts College in Kochi where the students went out of their classrooms to stand in solidarity with the Stand-up Struggle and the Adivasis. Some also went to Thiruvananthapuram to extend their support to the Adivasis. Such involvement by the public spread throughout the State. This struggle ended in December 17, 2014 after the government agreed to almost all demands raised by the protestors. However, the promises were not fulfilled and C.K. Janu announced that the “*Nilpu Samaram*” will be re-launched on January 1, 2016.

An example of this is the support from academic institutions like the Sacred Hearts College in Kochi where the students went out of their classrooms to stand in solidarity with the Stand-up Struggle and the Adivasis. Some also went to Thiruvananthapuram to extend their support to the Adivasis. Such involvement by the public spread throughout the State.

C.K. Janu, through AGMS, also spearheaded other mobilizations to call for the distribution of land to the landless. The Muthanga Incident in 2003, where Adivasis (*through AGMS*) gathered to protest the Kerala Government’s delay in allotting them their promised land in 2001 and to prevent their eviction from the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, resulted to a violent encounter between the police forces and the protestors and led to the arrest of C.K. Janu and other Adivasis who participated in the protest. C.K. Janu was put behind bars for three months and was brutally beaten up and tortured by the police force. The extent of brutality was such that C.K. was unable to wear a regular outfit due to the swellings and wounds on her body and she appeared in front of the court with a shawl wrapped around her.

Recently, in April, 2016, C.K Janu took the movement to another level by forming a political party called *Janadipthya Rashtriya Sabha* and joining the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). She believes that the Adivasi question can be solved only if the Adivasis come into politics and hold power, in order to be in a bargaining position with the state to assert the rights of Adivasis. Though her coalition with the NDA was a surprise to her well-wishers, she explains: *“The Adivasi question was never a point of discussion in mainstream politics as they did not serve as the vote banks, even during election time when the issues of all the other sections of the society were discussed and considered. In every struggle and protest for the rights of Adivasis, the ruling party always made false promises and deceived the Adivasis. It is in this context that I decided to join a third front, the NDA, to leverage for the welfare of the Adivasis. The cause and the struggles of my people - the Adivasis - rather than personal ambitions or a political career is what I stand for. My image and any personal interests matter least to me. I have not hesitated to assert Adivasi interests and cause at all times; my primary commitment is to the cause and not the alliance. I make this clear; I will do whatever is necessary to ensure that our cause is not compromised even a bit.”*

The resolve of C.K. Janu to fight for land rights for the Adivasis in Kerala is borne out of her own life experience. Her parents are from the Ravula community popularly known as Adiya, which means slave, and are landless agricultural labourers. An excerpt from her narration of her life story which appeared in the *Bhashaposhini* Vol.25, No.7, December 2001 and which was translated by Usha Menon from Malayalam language, reflects not only the story of her life but also of her people.

In every struggle and protest for the rights of Adivasis, the ruling party always made false promises and deceived the Adivasis. It is in this context that I decided to join a third front, the NDA, to leverage for the welfare of the Adivasis.

“All the land we had, had been taken by the landlords and the new settlers put it in their names. What was left belonged to Vallil Swamy. When our forefathers cleared the wild forest by burning the foliage and stumps and planted the thina, the fertile land would be taken over by the landlords; or the new settlers would pay them something and make it theirs. They will start planting. We had to toil on that same land and would not be paid any wages either.

In our community the women take on more responsibility. They go for coolie work. They do all kinds of farm work. Digging, planting seeds, preparing the ground for planting, and so on; they do all the work on the land. They also look after the little ones in the hut.

The lifestyle of our people, rituals and existence itself are closely connected to the land. If that is severed, they have a lot of problems. It will be wrong to compare with the mainstream society’s ways and customs. When looking at the newly formed colonies we can see this.

Our people who could dig the land and find water now have to go on strikes because the taps are dry. This happened because our sources of existence were banished by the plans and programmes that have been executed. Our people and our forefathers were used to getting firsthand information from nature and from the land. Our farming implements, vessels, places of stay – we could make all these. We could live with the animals. We could know the changes in nature. All that was possible because we had land. In spite of this now, we need to compete with mainstream people and we are always the losers.

To really try and understand the needs of our people and to work for it, people must come from our community. The way mainstream (society) perceives our society itself should change. The outsiders who come to us, exploit our lack of knowledge regarding the rest of the society. The huts of the Paniyar and others are decorated with kolams and drawings. Using mud and cow dung they make neat huts. Even the Kurumars have this. But among the Adiyars, this custom does not exist. Now the huts have calendars with pictures of

gods and goddesses. They buy them from here and there and stick them on the walls. The pictures of cine stars are also stuck on walls like this. Since the colony started, this kind of decoration has become popular.



“The systems of land ownership in mainstream society, their ways and ideas and the systems necessary for our community are different. That is why, for our existence on earth, we had to fight the governmental powers.”

The language and ways of our children staying in the hostels for purposes of study, have changed. Don't know if that is for their good or not. Our community is creating people who remain close to our ways and customs; people who are sympathetic to our customs and manners are coming up in our community. However, if the tradition of working on the land were preserved, the difficulties of our people would be removed. The right to live on the land, for claiming ownership of the land for its rightful owners, led to all the strikes and movements. The systems of land ownership in mainstream society, their ways and ideas and the systems necessary for our community are different. That is why, for our existence on earth, we had to fight the governmental powers.”

Written by Robeliza Halip and CR Bijoy
Editing by G. S. Divya

Name: Dam Chanthy
Ethnicity: Taumpaun
 Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia



Dam Chanthy, from the Taumpaun indigenous group, was born in September 1955 in Talao Commune, Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province. She is married to Loung Sothea, and they have six children together. She was born and raised in a poor agricultural family that mainly depended on traditional rice planting and wild vegetables.

In March 1996, Chanthy was a translator for a NTFP (*Non-Timber Forest Products*) organization, and later, for other projects on gender and health. In 2000, she established the Highlander Association (*HA*) and played the role of General Manager, eventually quitting the work with NTFP. Later, she became a council member for 3SPN. Since 2000, she has been active in leading communities to claim their rights. In 2003 until 2005, she worked with indigenous communities to educate villagers in 18 communes on the topic of

However, the community had already sold around 700 hectares of land. As a result of her and the Commune Chief's efforts to educate the communities, she received death threats.

“Do not to sell land to outsider community” because at that time there were huge cases of land grabbing happening in the area. However, the community had already sold around 700 hectares of land. As a result of her and the Commune Chief’s efforts to educate the communities, she received death threats. In 2003, King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen gave back the land through his Excellency Noun Phea to the communities (*Veat Kloe and Chhroung Community*).

In between 2003-2004, Dam Chanthy, alongside the Thian and Sus communities, had demonstrated against Men Sarun Company. After that, Bou Lam, (*Ratanakiri Vice Provincial Governor at that time*) threatened her and the communities to leave the demonstration. Bou Lam claimed that that land was the state’s land; he invited Dam Chanthy into a car with him where he ordered her to stop supporting the affected communities. She refused, and she was later arrested and convicted for her political actions.

In August, 2005, a criminal threatened to kill Chanthy, which had supposedly been prepared for days in advance. This threat was because Chanthy had worked to educate community peoples to not sell their community land. She encouraged the community members to commit to not selling their collective land and in the end, about 10 communes committed to not selling their land to outsiders.

The death threat came to Chanthy’s attention, when her brother-in-law told her that someone was preparing to murder her on the coming Friday. On that day, when the suspected assassin approached her farm, a friend of Chanthy’s asked him what he was doing there. The suspect replied that he was there to hunt deer in the surrounding forests. Later on Friday night, the suspect again went to her farm and asked her brother-in-law, “*Where’s the farm owner? I came here to kill her and her husband because someone paid me to kill her.*” He then claimed that he was to be paid \$50 if he killed her with three bullets. Needless to say that Chanthy’s brother-in-law warned her not to return to the farm and he kept the three bullets as proof of the incident.

The suspected assassin again tried to find Chanthy at her office, but couldn't as she was in La Ok village for the HA Annual Assembly. In La Ok village, a man came out from a suspicious vehicle asking for Mrs. Dam Chanthy. Thankfully the villagers understood that this man was looking for Chanthy so they replied that she had already gone back to Banlung. In fact, she was still there at the workshop.

That same day, Chanthy called Human Rights organisations such as UNOHCR and ILO for advice and consultation on her security. The organisations advised her to leave Ratanakiri for a while in order to ensure her personal security. The next morning, she left for Phnom Penh where she stayed with support from UNOHCR and ILO and other human rights-based NGOs. Afraid for her personal security, she then decided to fly abroad to escape the suspect. At the beginning of 2006, she flew back to her homeland.

Chanthy has often been threatened and harassed. In 2016, there was yet another incident with a car and motorbike without number plates outside her office. The drivers approached HA staff members and asked; *“Where is the chief of Highlander Association? Did all of you date with her?”*



Furthermore, Chanthy suggests that other organizations are not happy with Highlander Association because they are working on mining and communities and using the slogan *“Land is our Life.”* According to her, several organizations leave in the middle of meetings, believing that *“Land is our life”* is a dangerous work.

Nowadays, Mrs. Dam Chanthy is facing a complaint to the court accusing her of causing insecurity at the local level by mobilising the community against the government's development projects.

Written by Yun Mane and Mong Vichet



Chapter 3:

Power, Politics and Indigenous Women

1. Baket Endena Cogasi, Mountain Province, Philippines
2. Beatrice Belen, Kalinga, Philippines
3. Emmanuela Shinta, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia
4. Hkawli, Kachin State, Myanmar
5. Basanti Chaudhary, Kailali District, Nepal

Name: Baket Endena Cogasi

Ethnicity: Kankana-ey

Agawa in Besao, Mountain Province, Philippines

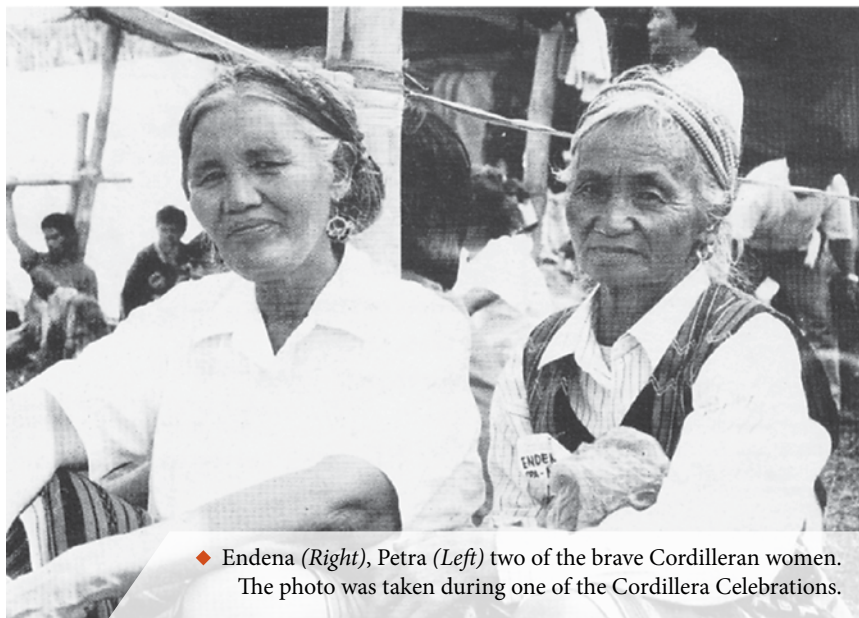


◆ Endena, during the Innabuyog Congress in 2011.

Baket Endena Cogasi finished her good journey on earth on her favorite date, March 8 or International Women's Day. Endena Cogasi hailed from Sabiyan, Agawa in Besao, Mountain Province. She lived a simple life, raised her own family, yet had the heart to serve her own community and people.

She was a woman of courage. She did not yield to military harassment even when she was asked to walk to the military station with a gun pointed at her back.

She was a woman of courage. She did not yield to military harassment even when she was asked to walk to the military station with a gun pointed at her back. Without fear, she demanded the soldiers to put away their gun and return her bolo (*a large cutting tool*) that they stole! She was a woman of courage. She joined delegations to dialogue with the military like the 702nd Brigade where at that time Major Palparan (*accused of numerous human rights violations*), was one of the commanders. Former Senator Jovito Salonga even acknowledged her courage in one of the peace rallies in Mountain Province against the 702nd Brigade in December 1991. Along with other Cordillera elders, women and the youth, she stood in the frontline, faced with strong will the state's security forces during a rally at the national headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in August 2004 during the World's Indigenous Peoples Day to demand justice for the series of political killings among indigenous peoples and other human rights violations against indigenous peoples.



◆ Endena (Right), Petra (Left) two of the brave Cordilleran women. The photo was taken during one of the Cordillera Celebrations.

She was a woman of courage. She was one of the pioneers and consistent leaders and advisers of Innabuyog and the Cordillera Peoples Alliance along with Mother Petra Macliing, Leticia Bulaat and others.

Age did not stop her but eventually her ailments hindered her presence in key gatherings. The last event she attended was the 21st year of Innabuyog on 8 March 2011. But in any event, her spirit was felt with almost everyone looking for her.

She received the award, *Tanggol Karapatan (Defense of Human Rights)* from the Cordillera Human Rights Alliance in December 2010. On 8 March 2011, she was honoured by Innabuyog, along with other indefatigable women leaders, for her exemplary contributions to the Cordillera women's movement. She received the award, "*Honoring 100 women to mark 100 years of resistance*" from the Asia Rural Women's Coalition in an event organized by the Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Center on October 2012, simultaneous with awarding events all over the Asia-Pacific. The award was received by Innabuyog

in her behalf as her ailment did not allow her to travel. Indeed, she was a woman of courage. Mother Endena inspired a number of Cordillera women and men, young and old to follow in her footsteps of courage and dedication to serve the women and people.

She received the award, “Honoring 100 women to mark 100 years of resistance” from the Asia Rural Women’s Coalition in an event organized by the Cordillera Women’s Education Action Research Center on October 2012, simultaneous with awarding events all over the Asia-Pacific.

As she goes to her final resting place, the indigenous women and peoples’ movement in the Cordillera through Innabuyog and the Cordillera Peoples Alliance pay the highest tribute to her as an indigenous woman leader and elder, a mother, sister, aunt and grandmother. *Your goodness will always be remembered and emulated by the living whom you have inspired, Baket Endena.*

Written by Vernie Yocogan-Diano



Name: Beatrice Belen
Ethnicity: Uma
 Lubuagan, Kalinga, Philippines

“They asked who I am? My umbilical cord is attached to this land. It is where I was forged. It is where I was born. So it shall be my burial ground,” were the words of Beatrice Belen in resistance to Chevron’s application for a geothermal power project which encompasses 11 ancestral domains including hers in Uma, Lubuagan, Kalinga.



◆ Beatrice Belen

On the issues of government abuse, health, and social support, she is tireless in extending any help she can offer. At the village level, she is a health worker, the voice of the voiceless, and a defender of ancestral land.

Beatrice is commonly describe by the members of the Uma tribe as a fearless woman who speaks without hesitation, especially on matters involving women and children. On the features of a mobile phone, she can be the speed dial because in times of community and family emergencies, she is always in demand. On the issues of government abuse, health, and social support, she is tireless in extending any help she can offer. At the village level, she is a health worker, the voice of the voiceless, and a defender of ancestral land.

For her colleagues in Innabuyog, the alliance of indigenous women's organization in the Cordillera, Beatrice is a fierce speaker with a clear grasp on the rights of indigenous women and their communities. She is a feisty public speaker on the issues of land, food, and rights. Most part of her life was spent in being the voice of her community and other villages in terms of protecting the women, children, ancestral land, and cultural identity.

It is then infuriating that this woman leader is being threatened in her own homeland by state security agents who have encamped in the village since October 2015. Beatrice was seething in her seat on August 11, 2016 at the women's center in Baguio City after she received a call from her family in Uma. She narrated that the 50th Infantry Battalion summoned her and some members of her tribe to clear their names. "Apay adda basol ko?" (*Did I commit any crime for me to clear my name?*) she exclaimed.

At this time, Beatrice was always reporting rights violations committed by the soldiers, especially against the women and children. She became the voice of the community members; complaining about sexual harassment, indiscriminate firing, intimidation, anti-social activities, and even assault committed by the soldiers.

Since October 2015, soldiers under the 50th Infantry Battalion have encamped in civilian homes in Sitio Ag-agama, Western Uma, Lubuagan, Kalinga. At this time, Beatrice was always reporting rights violations committed by the soldiers, especially against the women and children. She became the voice of the community members; complaining about sexual harassment, indiscriminate firing, intimidation, anti-social activities, and even assault committed by the soldiers. She has been very vocal in demanding their pull out because of the disruptive effects of encampment in terms of livelihood and community cohesion. She is never intimidated whenever she questions the wrongdoings of the state security forces. According to Beatrice and her organization, Innabuyog, it is her courage that always makes her a target of intimidation and political persecution by the soldiers and corporations salivating to control their territory.

Tracing back to 2012, Beatrice was one of the brave women who led a barricade at the entrance of their village to block the Chevron personnel who were on their way to check their temperature test gadgets. It was on May 18, 2016 that a village elder caught the security guards of Chevron installing a temperature test without their consent. The community immediately called for a meeting and planned to confront and demand the company to immediately uninstall their paraphernalia. Beatrice and other community leaders faced the personnel of the company at the barricade and after a few hours, the engineers uninstalled the gadget from their village.

Chevron has a long standing application for a geothermal power project with a potential capacity of 120 MW. The application affects 11 ancestral domains in Kalinga including that of the Uma tribe. The firm opposition, however, of several tribes always hampers Chevron's pursuit. The resisting tribes, including Uma, always iterate that their lives depend on their land and its resources. There is no amount of money, job offerings, or relocation that can dissuade them from their position. Beatrice always mentions that their ancestors protected their ancestral land from any threats of tribal invasion and corporate greed and that if they will allow such greed-driven project to push through, it will be an insult to the bravery of their forebears.

Beatrice has been active in the campaign against extractive industries, not only those affecting her ancestral domain, but in the whole Cordillera region. She believes that Indigenous Peoples have the right to plot their own destiny including the governance

Her people, she said, suffered historical government neglect but they survived through practicing their indigenous practices of self- help and solidarity.

of their land and natural resources. Her people, she said, suffered historical government neglect but they survived through practicing their indigenous practices of self- help and solidarity. They protected their natural resources that nourished them for generations. *"We will not allow the government and the corporations to take that away from us,"* she added.

She has been visible on television, heard over the radio, read in the newspapers speaking the voices of her tribe and the women of the region she is representing. She never fails to attend red letter dates for women and indigenous peasants. This, despite her never-ending tasks within her family. Beatrice is married to an industrious and patient man who always understands her absence in some work in the field. She is also a mother of four.

Sometimes, she is mocked by some people that she does not get any benefit from her activism. She would always reply that she may not get any monetary benefit from what she is doing but she can ensure that the next generation can still have a place to go home to or a place they can call their ancestral land.



Innabuyog, the alliance of indigenous women's organization in the Cordillera is now calling all human rights advocates to speak up for the threatened human rights defenders like Beatrice. They had been campaigning for the pull out of the army troops in the area but their voices fell on deaf ears. The ongoing military encampment in their village is trying to quell a courageous woman who only wants to protect her tribe from corporate greed and her tribe from military aggression.

Written by Alma B. Sinumlag

Name: Emmanuela Shinta
Ethnicity: Dayak Ma'anyan
 South Barito, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia



◆ Portrait of Emmanuela Shinta

Not many people know what happens in Kalimantan (*Borneo*), and many people misunderstand Dayak people, the indigenous people of Kalimantan. Many say that the Dayak are primitive, wearing wood skin as their clothes, eating human and many other negative statements. Many Dayak people live in poverty and have low education while

they live on an island rich in natural resources. Since Orde Baru, the government of President Soeharto, natural resources in Kalimantan have been taken and the benefit is not for the Indigenous People, but for the investors and central government of Java island.

Many Dayak people live in poverty and have low education while they live on an island rich in natural resources.

In 1995, President Soeharto instructed the opening of one million hectares of forest in Central Kalimantan for farming and the making of a mega canal as a watering system that cut the peat dome between Kahayan river and Sebangau river in Central Kalimantan. The land in Kalimantan is peat and it is not suitable for farmland because it is wet and very acidic; the canal will dry the peat and it will be easy to burn. But the instruction could not be disobeyed. One and half million hectares of forest and peatland in Central Kalimantan were opened, the peat dome was cut to make the mega canal, many trees were cut and thousands of animals were killed. At the beginning of 1996, fire signs began to appear. In the middle of the year, a great fire started and continued with the drought and forest fires raged between 1997 until 1998. Forest fires occurred for one full year. Since then, until today, forest fires and haze occur every year in Kalimantan, especially in Central Kalimantan. It has been 19 years.



◆ Peat Land Fire (Photo By Bjorn Vaughn)

Emmanuela Shinta, a 23 year old lady, a Dayak Ma'anyan from South Barito Central Kalimantan, is an environment activist and young leader who worked hard at the grassroots level when forest fires and haze occurred in recent years. Since 2012, Shinta has dreamed to found a media based on culture and humanity that can provide a space for Dayak youth to express creativity and to deliver their stories. After four years learning about media and journalism, she worked as editorial chief of a Christian Magazine and worked in an NGO as the coordinator of media and campaign.

Ranu Welum Media Community started when Shinta realized that there are so many complex issues happening in Kalimantan and not many people were aware of them, especially the Dayak people themselves. Shinta met a Papuan friend, Wensi Fatubun who founded Papuan Voices, a media campaign for Papuan people. He encouraged Shinta to struggle for humanity in Kalimantan by using media as a tool for advocacy and campaign for the right of Kalimantan people and she started with Dayak Voices in the NGO, JPIC Kalimantan (*Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation*) where she worked. In 2014, *Ranu Welum* Media was founded as a young Dayak community to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Ranu Welum, derived from Dayak Ma'anyan Language, means Living Water. Its slogan is 'the eyes for Dayaknese.' Thus, this community is expected to be part of a transformation of people's lives in Kalimantan. They have been oppressed by various kinds of problems on natural resources and agrarian conflicts, and have become a tool to save forest and heritage in Kalimantan. Since that time, the young people have been actively making short films about Dayak culture, language, humanity issues, natural resources issues, land grabbing and the Indigenous People of Kalimantan.

In 2015, the situation was very terrible in Central Kalimantan. The haze was so thick that it had turned to yellow and was very toxic. Millions of hectares of forest, peatland, rubber fields and the land along the roads

The schools were closed for two months, rubber farmers lost their rubber fields, and hundreds of vehicular accidents occurred because of the thick haze.

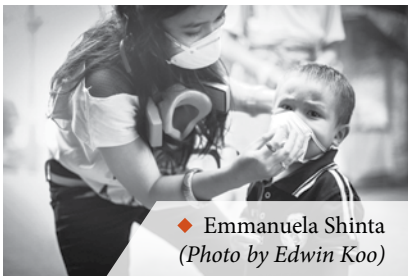
in Central Kalimantan were burnt badly. Thousands of people were hospitalized, and more than ten people - babies, young people and elders - died because of breathing problems. The schools were closed for two months, rubber farmers lost their rubber fields, and hundreds of vehicular accidents occurred because of the thick haze. But this situation almost never appeared in the media. It was never exposed.

In September 2015, Shinta, who at that time still worked in JPIC Kalimantan which collaborates with activists, NGOs and students in Palangka Raya, was the coordinator of the Anti-Haze Movement. They protested in front of the office of the Governor of Central Kalimantan, asking for help and a solution since many people were suffering and dying. The governor did not give any response or answers.

"This is our last effort," stated Shinta after the protest. *"If the governor does not do anything, we are just waiting to die."* Political issues and corruption play a big part in the situation. Billions of rupiah (*Indonesian currency*) were allocated to stop and prevent the forest fires and haze and to help the people, but the help never came. The local government tried to hide the situation in Kalimantan.

At that time, the atmospheric particulate matter was more than nine hundred, while the dangerous level of air pollution is just three hundred and sixty. The air pollution measurement moved up to more than two thousand, yet the help still did not come.

Shinta and her team in Ranu Welum Media, collaborating with the Anti-Haze Movement, made every effort to help the suffering people. They cooked and fed the fire fighters with their own money. The fire fighters were working 24 hours everyday to extinguish the fire without proper tools and equipment; they did not even wear safety clothes or shoes. Shinta and her team drove their motorbikes around Palangka Raya and travelled to the villages in Central Kalimantan to distribute masks and medicine, conducted health services and educated people about the danger of the haze. They documented the stories of the people and posted these on social media, whether as photos or video. They kept campaigning through online media to spread the news.



◆ Emmanuela Shinta
(Photo by Edwin Koo)

Shinta and her team in Ranu Welum Media, collaborating with the Anti-Haze Movement, made every effort to help the suffering people. They cooked and fed the fire fighters with their own money.



◆ Burnt Land (Photo by Lina Karolin)

Since the people of Kalimantan, including Shinta and her team, kept spreading the news about the forest fire and haze in Kalimantan through online media, many people were reached. Channel News

Asia from Singapore came in the thick of the haze to document what was happening and Shinta became one of the hosts in the film. This documentary film, entitled *Get Real: The Heart of The Haze* was screened in Singapore. The news about forest fires and haze in Kalimantan was spread widely and since then, help, support and volunteers came to Kalimantan to help the people. Let's Help Kalimantan and Relief Singapore from Singapore came to distribute face masks, then support and help also came from Big Red Button Singapore, David Metcalf and his colleagues and TRI Handkerchiefs, from Bali.

Media came, including local, national and even international media, to interview Shinta. People in the world started to know what was happening and reported the story of Kalimantan. Shinta and her team hosted many of those people who came. Supplies, masks, medicines and volunteers came to support the grassroot works in Palangka Raya and Central Kalimantan. Shinta and her team travelled to more than 20 villages to distribute masks, medicine and food and conducted health services while they continued documenting the stories from the ground and spreading the world.

The haze is very dangerous to health and people who are exposed for a long time could suffer dangerous diseases like lung cancer, heart attack and stroke. It also damages the brain.

In April 2016, Shinta founded a campaign, Youth Act Movement, which involved many young people to join and do real action to stop and prevent forest fires and haze in Kalimantan. This movement is focused on raising the awareness of Kalimantan people on what is happening in Kalimantan, telling people that forest fires and haze are not just part of the season, but that it happened because of humans. More than 90% of hot spots were found in corporate concessions, which are the biggest cause of forest fire and haze in dry season. The haze is very dangerous to health and people who are exposed for a long time could suffer dangerous diseases like lung cancer, heart attack and stroke. It also damages the brain.

Shinta and her team travelled to other cities and countries to tell their stories and meeting people who want to support them.

“We will never stop this effort,” said Shinta.

The struggle just began and Shinta and her team, Youth Act movement, keep working on forest fire issues, together with activists, schools, universities and communities in Palangka Raya. Ranu Welum Media continues to produce short documentary films about the situation and circumstances in Kalimantan, about the indigenous Dayak people and spreading the stories.

The struggle just began and Shinta and her team, Youth Act movement, keep working on forest fire issues, together with activists, schools, universities and communities in Palangka Raya.

To enable transformation, the mindset and the way people think should be changed. Ranu Welum Media is the eyes and the mouth, and the hands and feet of Dayak people for freedom and transformation. This year, their short documentary film about forest fire and haze in Kalimantan in 2015 *When Women Fight* was screened in ASEAN Peoples’ Forum in Dili Timor Leste, then was screened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia during the Freedom Film Festival and Ubud Writers Festival in Bali. This is a great opportunity to spread the issues in Kalimantan which have been kept from the public for many years. This is the time for real action for justice and humanity to save the Indigenous People of Kalimantan, to save the land of Borneo.

Written by Lina Karolin


Name: Hkawlwi Xalang
Ethnicity: Kachin
Kachin State, Myanmar



◆ Hkawlwi

Growing up as one of eight children to parents who are Kachin farmers, Hkawlwi spent a great deal of her leisure time helping her parents on the farm with her siblings when they were not going to school. This was also one of the reasons why Hkawlwi became an avid football player and went on to become captain of the football club representing Kachin State. Having Hkawlwi as captain, the Kachin State female football team won the 1998 cup in the competition playing against six other states and seven other divisions.

“I am not sure what I can contribute to this project (Her Story) by sharing my story as it is not very different from many.” Humbly said, yet Hkawlwi, is a very well respected figure in the Kachin community for her commitment and work through the organization she founded, *“Bridging Rural Integrated Development and Grassroots Empowerment,”* known to many as BRIDGE (*MAHKRAI in Kachin – the indigenous language*). BRIDGE works with numbers of displaced communities on food security, economic empowerment, land management and forest conservation.



Although she was already attending university, the government of Burma/Myanmar closed down universities in the country. While she had to put school on hold, she went to Hpakant, a place known as “*Little Hong Kong*” for its high quality jade, cash and gambling. Hkawli landed herself a job as an assistant at a local gambling station. She was making money but what she witnessed didn’t make her happy: extreme drug addiction among the local Kachin youths, unemployment, dead bodies from drug overdoses without anyone to bury them, and people living around garbage piles.

She didn’t know what to do with such social turmoil that she was witnessing. She kept asking herself whether she should try to forget about what she saw or whether she could do something about it. One thing was very clear to her - she must leave the place for now. She must get ready if she were to do anything; after all, she was a young university student with a very limited exposure to the outside world.

It just so happened that a few of Hkawli’s friends asked her to join them to study English and other vocational skills in Rangoon, the former capital city. She willingly agreed to it and they all went to Rangoon.

While studying to become a chef in Rangoon, the opportunity presented itself to her to continue her journey to Chiangmai, Thailand to work at Pan Kachin Development Society. During her time there, she was offered a chance to attend ALTSEAN-Burma’s 6-month internship program in Bangkok, to learn English and Advocacy, among many other skills.

This was an awakening experience and one of the defining moments for Hkawli as she learned more and more about Burma’s politics. “*I was so shocked to learn that we (Indigenous People) have no rights, and no opportunities. That’s when I became more aware that I must do something to change this.*” After the internship with ALTSEAN-Burma, Hkawli worked as a program manager at the Environmental Desk for Steve Thompson, an environmentalist, where she spent time researching the effects of gold mining on water sources. She was later entrusted to develop an Environmental section in Pan Kachin’s magazine, “*Langji*

U Pyen Yu Su.” So, Hkawlwí travelled frequently to record and report stories of environmental issues, especially destructive logging, in Kachin State. These were defining and important years for Hkawlwí shaping the future she would later take on.

Amidst the projects and works, she learned more about the needs of villagers where she was conducting the environmental research. The needs were overwhelming, from health, environmental knowledge, sustainable agricultural farming to women’s lack of role in family and decision-making in and for her community. Hkawlwí realized that the time has come for her since her work in Hpakant, the city of jade mine, about doing something for the community. For that, she needed to be based in the community to work with them.

In November of 2010, she with ten others, founded Bridging Rural Integrated Development and Grassroots Empowerment in Gauri Krung area, controlled and administered by Kachin Independence Organization (*KIO*)² – one of the largest ethnic armed organizations fighting for greater political equality and federalism in Burma. BRIDGE’s programs include food security, women’s empowerment, health program, forest conservation, land management and publication of community newsletters. BRIDGE works with internally displaced persons (*IDPs*) who fled their homes and villages due to the fighting between the Burma Army and Kachin Independence Army (*KIA*). These *IDPs* receive insufficient humanitarian support for their survival due to the systemic restrictions put up by the central government to deliver aids to them by UN agencies and *INGOs*.

In the Food Security Program and Economic Empowerment Program, women learn about organic farming and also methods of using a small

² Kachin Independent Organization is a political group composed of ethnic or Indigenous Kachins in northern Myanmar/ Burma. The Kachins are a coalition of six sub-groups whose homeland encompasses territory in China and Northeast India. Kachin Independent Army is the military wing of the Kachin Independent Organization. See also in <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/component/content/article/57-stakeholders/155-kio>

space of land to increase production. Hkawlwí saw organic farming not only as a way to provide food security, but also to bring a small source of income to the women from the IDP camp. When asked why new sources of income are only focusing on women, Hkawlwí answered, *“In a household, who is the breadwinner who determines who has a voice in family matters? By helping women and wives to earn extra income, they are given a voice. This has been an opportunity to help create gender equality in those communities.”* She continued, *“When BRIDGE was first set up, there were very few women in the meetings, and when they were present, they wouldn’t make any comment or participate in the discussion. But now we see major differences, more women’s presence at the meeting and they also raise their concerns and are active during discussions on community matters.”*

Another unique experience for the community members is that vegetables grown at the organic garden organized by BRIDGE are distributed equally amongst the IDPs.

Another unique experience for the community members is that vegetables grown at the organic garden organized by BRIDGE are distributed equally amongst the IDPs. This creates a stronger sense of community and unity, helping them to get through the tough time together while they are displaced from their homes. *“It feels like we are back at our farm producing vegetables again and [we] feel productive once more,”* said a 56 year old farmer who now lives at one of the IDP camps.

With the Health Program, two nurses travel with the mobile clinic team when they visit the villages. While this program’s focus is on prevention and to provide health education- such as how to keep personal hygiene or how to stay healthy by eating nutritious food- through workshops, people expect BRIDGE to also give them medicines and treat their common sicknesses. That is the reason why they have two nurses travelling with the health team. BRIDGE also has 10-minutes TV and radio air time at Laiza TV and radio to educate on health issues.

Through the Forest Conservation and Land Management programs, BRIDGE promotes environmental awareness, protection of clean

water sources, and conservation of customary forest management. *“Our survival as Kachin indigenous peoples depends on land and water. This is the source of our food as well,”* said Hkawliwi. She gives one example; there is a certain time of the year when community members all agree not to pick mushrooms from the forest to allow their growth and reproduction. People follow the rules because they mutually made the decision. So, this shared space creates a mutual understanding and a sense of responsibility that they are the caretakers of their forest. To protect their own land, community members are given workshops to learn about National Land Laws and examples of international best practices.



“Especially seeing how things with communities and people here have changed over the years since we started working, such as their land management skills, organic and sustainable farming or even their personal growth and empowerment; this is all that matters to me.”

“Of course there are so many challenges when working; however, I don’t perceive them as challenges. The reason is that I am doing what I think is meaningful and important for me, and for our people, no challenge is too big to let me down. My work gives me such fulfillment and meaning in life.” Especially seeing how things with communities and people here have changed over the years since we started working, such as their land management skills, organic and sustainable farming or even their personal growth and empowerment; this is all that matters to me. The immense amount of trust that we have for each other between BRIDGE and the communities we work with is a very important milestone.”

“Another success I consider important is that when I first came to this area to work, members of our KIO/KIA didn’t really trust me because I am from the city, although I am Kachin. I can understand why they would suspect me though because it is hard to believe why someone from the city would come to the rural area and to get dirty here. But, what’s important to know here is that I am working in their administrative area, and I need their permission to do what I do. But, after years of hard work and commitment through good intention, I think they came to trust me. ‘Trust’ has been built and it is a significant achievement that I feel.”

“We need our land to feed us; we need our forest to provide us with fresh air and other important sources for our survival. Only by preserving and protecting these, can we attain happy and healthy lives with quality development.”

“To answer your question on what I want for the future, I want our people and our community to live a meaningful and peaceful life while protecting what’s important to us - our culture, language, land and our forest. We need development. When I say “development” I don’t mean how much money people earn and how much they can buy. Development to me is a quality, sustainable and peaceful life. We need our land to feed us; we need our forest to provide us with fresh air and other important sources for our survival. Only by preserving and protecting these, can we attain happy and healthy lives with quality development.”

*Written by Naw Stella,
Editing by Flora Bawi Nei Mawi*

Name: Basanti Chaudhary
Ethnicity: Tharu
Basauti Village, Kailali District, Nepal

The Kamaiya system, which is a term for traditional forms of forced and bonded labour systems, was in practice in Nepal since the 17th century. Historically, people without land or work could get loans from local landowners allowing them to sustain a minimum livelihood. In return, they had to live in the landowner's house and work on their lands as a quasi-slaves³.

Kamaiya bonded labourers lived on their employers' land, got very little or no free time, and they and their families were bound to perform domestic work in the house of the landlord. The Kamaiya system under which thousands of agricultural labourers were bonded was abolished by law in 2002.

Similarly, the Kamlari system is the domestic work of unmarried girls of former Kamaiya families for landlords' households. Many Kamlaris were in bonded labour to the landlord. Even years after the legal abolition of the Kamaiya system, Kamlari practice has continued in many parts of south western Nepal. However, the practice has almost disappeared in some districts including Dang⁴.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamaiya>

⁴ http://www.antislavery.org/includes/documents/cm_docs/2009/f/forced_and_bonded_labour_in_nepal_july_2009.pdf



◆ Basanti Chaudhari

Basanti Chaudhary, 33, is from the Tharu indigenous community of Nepal. She lives in Kailali District, the western part of Nepal. Basanti, a former Kamlari, is currently the chairperson of Kamaiya Pratha Unmulan Samaj (KPUS) (*Society for Bonded Labour Eradication*). She has been working to ensure the rights of the former Kamaiyas/Kamalaris at the decision-making level.

Basanti was born in Basauti Village Development Committee (VDC) of Kailali district, a midwestern region of Nepal. When she was approximately 10 years old, she learned about Kamaiya. She was still a child when her family migrated to the Fulbari VDC of Kailali district to work as a Kamaiya. Three generations (*since her grandfather's generation*) in her family had worked as Kamaiya and Kamlari.

Like many children in the Tharu Community, she also lived a difficult life. After they migrated to a village of Fulbari VDC-5, she started working as a Kamlari; living in a local landlord's home for five years. While working as a Kamlari, she had to work in the kitchen, mainly cooking and washing dishes. Fortunately, she got an opportunity to pursue education while working as a Kamlari. "*When I used to see friends my age going to school, I developed a strong desire to go to school,*" she

recalls. “One day, I asked my landlady if I also could go to school after the completion of my work at home. She granted me permission to study.” Basanti went to the local school namely Chandrodaya Secondary School by herself and enrolled in Grade 1. She was a genius student and topped her school from Grades 1 through 5. She thinks that that might be the reason her landlord allowed her regular attendance at the school.

She was a genius student and topped her school from Grades 1 through 5. She thinks that that might be the reason her landlord allowed her regular attendance at the school.

As she grew up, she realised how she was kept in control as a Kamlari. While studying in Grade 6, she ran away from the landlord’s home and started

living in her own house. She continued her education, but when she lost her father the following year, she went through extreme financial hardship. She started working as an agricultural labourer to pay her school fees and to afford stationaries. Her brother, who used to work in Kanchanpur as a Kamaiya, also helped her in pursuing education. Meanwhile, it was her responsibility to take care of her younger brother’s education and manage food for the family.

While studying in Grade 9, she had an opportunity to work with a local NGO called Kamaiya Pratha Unmulan Samaj. In order to help her in pursuing her education, she was provided with the opportunity to work for the organisation for nine months. With her monthly salary of Nepali Rupees (NRS) 800, she was able to pay the school fees along with the food items for the family. It made her life easier.

After she passed the SLC (*equivalent to Grade 10*), she was appointed as a Social Mobilizer by the same organisation. Later on, Kamala became the secretary of KPUS. During that time, she was able to bring her elder brother (*who used to work as a Kamaiya in Kanchanpur*) back to the house. Both older and younger brothers received house wiring training with her help and started a wiring shop. She also worked for the Women’s Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), Nepal for five years. In 2011, she was elected as a president of KPUS. In 2016, she was unanimously elected as the president for the second term.

As per her experience, Kamaiyas and Kamlaris are still not treated well in society, like when people criticize the dress of Kamaiyas and Kamalaris. Basanti is vocal in expressing the things that she does not agree with. *“People don’t trust women’s leadership,”* she laments. *“When I was elected as a president of KPUS for the first time, my opponents, especially males, gossiped against me stating that the organisation will not function well due to a woman’s leadership.”* As the majority members in the working committee were women, some male activists even mocked it as women’s committee. In spite of those obstacles, she proved her leadership. Basanti claims that the organisation has now received more projects and programs more than ever before.



◆ Basanti and her Team

In spite of those obstacles, she proved her leadership. Basanti claims that the organisation has now received more projects and programs more than ever before.



◆ The participants at a Building Leadership of Former Kamlaharis training.

It is not easy for a married woman to carry out the responsibility both at home and office. It is challenging to coordinate and manage the time for the house, office and study. *“Nevertheless, I am trying to manage my time at my level best,”* she states, adding, *“I would like to work for the empowerment of Kamaiyas and Kamalaris by ensuring their rights in the future as well.”* As per her plan with her involvement in the movement at the organizational level, she says, *“I will keep myself involved in the movements until the political and other rights of Kamaiyas/Kamlaris, and indigenous women are ensured.”*

Written by Raju Bikram Chamling



Chapter 4:

Community Organizers and Social Champions

1. Jannie Lasimbang, Sabah, Malaysia
2. Aw Kan Lo, Chin State, Myanmar
3. Yulia, Maluku Province, Indonesia

Name: Jannie Lasimbang
Ethnicity: Kadazan
Nampasan, Penampang, Sabah, Malaysia

Growing up in a family of 13, one learns and gets good practice in diplomacy and team work. I was the slow one in my family, and my grandfather used to put aside food for me because he knew I could not compete with my other smart and fast-thinking siblings.

I grew up in a family with my strong mother and eldest sister as role models. We had to work very hard for a living - cultivating our rice fields, our lands and collecting whatever supplementary needs from our immediate environment, which in the early 60's right up until the 80s was abundantly endowed. During my childhood days, girls and boys go through a stricter upbringing than they do now. Girls do most of the household chores, while boys do the tougher jobs like ploughing and fencing. Generally, the girls cannot escape the chores while my brothers had much fun (*and punishment*) escaping theirs. It is indeed sad to see so much deterioration of our environment and the fun that our children are missing now.



◆ Jannie Lasimbang with the police.

My schooldays were not much to be proud of because I was very shy and not very good in my studies. I studied overseas, which was a real cultural shock for me but it strengthened me as a person and distinguished the indigenous values that I should hold on to. Many of my university mates from Malaysia in the 70s and early 80s were keen to forget their indigenous roots and looked at the West and having high-paying jobs as having much more prospects. I never understood it but I was pulled to work for our rural Orang Asal communities even though I had no training or clarity on how to go about it.

“It is indeed sad to see so much deterioration of our environment and the fun that our children are missing now.”

Community work was non-existent when I started. There was no money, no organization, no friends and no status for the work in 1984. But it was appealing to a young woman to be considered “*brave*” and “*fascinating*” for driving alone and wandering in the interior! I have always thought that communities were living perhaps economically difficult, but contented lives. It was appalling to discover how logging companies have been bulldozing traditional lands of the Orang Asal, polluting rivers the people depended upon, and leaving them with nothing but misery. All these were done with the blessings of the government. My mouse-like spirit was awakened.

For the next 32 years, it was to be my journey of discovery; listening, networking, advocacy and struggle with people who cared deeply for their lands, their *adat* and their future. After grounding myself at the community level, I was thrust into the international and regional work and I thank the Creator, the spirit of my ancestors, my friends and the Orang Asal communities for challenging and guiding such a timid woman.

In May 2013 after completing three years as a commissioner with the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, I worked with the Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (*Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia or JOAS*). As the JOAS Secretariat Director in a national network, I had to manage the programmes that the JOAS Steering Committee



◆ Jannie and her family.

approved. It was a real challenge as we only had five staff at that time and about 85 indigenous member organizations. There were so many indigenous communities facing intimidation and threats for defending their lands. Advocacy and campaign, as well as network building, were critical to ensure the voice of the Orang Asal are heard, and for them to overcome the culture of fear and apathy.

In 2016, I had to stand trial for leading a successful assembly for clean and fair elections. These were tough times but never boring, and I did what I could to the best of my abilities. Annoying moments were those when I, as a woman would have to do the menial but necessary tasks, but then a male colleague gets to be called the “boss.”

I saw that Orang Asal women leaders often do not have the chance to gain experience in the social and political spheres. Building women’s leadership became one of my focuses, and a series of leadership seminars were held for each of the regions (*Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia*). One of the activities was to challenge women leaders to be active in the political sphere - to seize opportunities to be in key positions in the community or in political parties whenever they arise.

“Annoying moments were those when I, as a woman would have to do the menial but necessary tasks, but then a male colleague gets to be called the “boss.””

Thus, when the Penampang District decided to do open elections for the posts of the *Pengerusi* or chairperson of the *Jawatankuasa Keselamatan dan Kemajuan Kampung* (*Village Development and Security Committee or JKKK*), I encouraged women leaders in the district to vie for these positions. Persons were previously just appointed to these posts. I was pleased to see that four women that I knew wanted to contest. I wanted to test the grounds myself, so I decided to contest in my own area, which was composed of two villages - Nampasan and Tanaki. Only one out of the five women who contested, lost in the elections in March 2016.

Leading a community that has grown quite dependent on the government and leaders to resolve their problems is a challenge, and perhaps as a woman, we do have a tendency to want to help as much as we can. Six months on as a woman *Pengerusi* JKKK, I found myself pulled in all directions: my work with JOAS, family responsibilities, my activism and this new responsibility. Many of my committee members were women who are dedicated but were so busy with family life or were already activists in their own right. Getting the community to be more

active is a huge task, but I am happy to say at least, there is no apparent discrimination against indigenous women leaders.

“I see more women coming forward to help and participate in programmes. In different groupings of PJKKs, the men do form the majority but I believe they have grown to respect the women in the team.”

I see more women coming forward to help and participate in programmes. In different groupings of PJKKs, the men do form the majority but I believe they have grown to respect the women in the team. In Penampang, we have an Orang Asal woman District Officer and despite her petite and feminine style of administration, the village leaders do seem to respect her. Orang Asal women have proven themselves more than capable! I am aware that more Orang Asal women leaders have to be built and while the issues can



be more challenging now for indigenous women human rights defenders in Malaysia, it is heartening to see young women coming to the fore.

Written by Jannie Lasimbang

Name: Aw Kan Lo (Awi Monica)
Ethnicity: Chin
Paletwa Township, Chin state, Myanmar



“It is very important that no one is allowed to live with pride and supremacy before other fellow nuns. Authoritarian communication causes teamwork to collapse thus it leads to disharmony and conflict and the results are almost unwanted consequences. As this space is not military, no one is assumed to use veto power or command, but genuine respect is demanded as their world is different from the outside world (the time she was in a nunnery was the time the military regime was very powerful in Burma).”

Aw Kan Lo (also called Awi Monica), is the third daughter of U Pat Kin and Daw Kan Tin who have eight children. She is a 40-year old Khumi⁵ Chin woman and is currently living in Yangon. Her father was a missionary personnel and her mother was a housewife. Her parents used to live in *Wat Ku Taung* village in Paletwa area, in Chin state. When she was still in her mother’s womb, her mother got a wound on her hand, so she went down to Paletwa to get surgical intervention. Unexpectedly, Aw Kan Lo was born in Paletwa while her mother got treatment in the compound of the English Church, the biggest denomination in Paletwa area during the 1970s. Her childhood and adolescent years were mostly spent in bed due to unknown weakness and sickness. She realized that *“life is too short, thus,*

⁵ Khumi is one of 63 sub-groups of Chin, mainly living in Paletwa township in Chin state, Myanmar.

something meaningful needs to get done.” This is the prime reason for becoming a grassroots social worker, an indigenous women activist, an agent of justice, politician and a founder of a community-led development organization.

To follow her intuition and act according to her personal philosophy, she decided to become a Roman Catholic nun once she passed the matriculation examination. Her experience as a nun stimulated many questions about life, tranquility, peace and harmony. All members need to crave for, be sustained with, and value having and living in peace. She narrated: *“It is very important that no one is allowed to live with pride and supremacy before other fellow nuns. Authoritarian communication causes teamwork to collapse thus it leads to disharmony and conflict and the results are almost unwanted consequences. As this space is not military, no one is assumed to used veto power or command, but genuine respect is demanded as their world is different from the outside world (the time she was in a nunnery was the time the military regime was very powerful in Burma).”*

In principle, the person in charge of the nunnery is called “*provincial*,” but is not assumed to operate as a supreme leader. The reality differed as the rules and regulations were standardized; very advanced but impracticable. For instance, junior nuns were not allowed to attend their family’s funeral without valid reasons, and it was demanded of junior nuns to agree with whatever the superior said, causing inferiority complexes for minor mistakes. However, Aw Kan Lo really enjoyed spending time with children⁶ and assisting nurses in their mobile clinic. She had been transferred to several places in the country, thus, she gained various cultural and social experiences from her travels. She found that teaching songs is very useful in giving messages. Likewise, introducing the young generation to the concept of nature-culture harmony at home is a fundamental foundation for peace, trust and respect in the wider community.

⁶ Roman Catholic Church is well known for century for its kindergarden program in Myanmar. The nuns are the key persons who normally take care of this program.

That is what her new organization, which she founded with two men, called **Raiki⁷ Community Development Foundation** in mid-2016, was founded on. She attempted to add value to her organization by bridging government agencies and international development agencies at the grassroots level. She noted that *“many development agencies who come here (Paletwa) are comparable with the few in other parts of Chin state and weak to bridge government staff with grassroots level and the targeted community.”* Government staffs of lower ranking positions are mostly local. For *“a real change,”* the participation not only from the community, but also from the grassroots government staff is crucial. As core activities of **Raiki**, she intends to give intensive awareness rising on gender - which is still very challenging in her community - using the method of dialogues between both the community and grassroots government staff. In this vein, her fellow women will learn public speaking and enhance negotiation skills, while her friends who work in the government sector will be more cooperative in community development work including legality and customary law.

She noted that “many development agencies who come here (Paletwa) are comparable with the few in other parts of Chin state and weak to bridge government staff with grassroots level and the targeted community.”

She stated that the problem is, her fellow indigenous women never have a chance to speak publicly. Most of them are *“voiceless”* on many issues, including those relating to land and inheritance. Although women in her community are managers of land, this was never recognized. Those who go to the farm, fields and orchards are women. Comparing the work schedule between men and women, demonstrates obvious differences. For example, men will be lying around and participating

⁷ Raiki is Chin indigenous term for a flower called ta-zin in Burmese. Paletwa area in Chin state where Khumi Chin’s territory is well known for its significant flower Raiki.

in fun work or government related work. She also engages in several dialogues and forums about enhancing the role of women in customary law.



Aw Kan Lo is determined as an indigenous woman. She is defending women's rights to natural resources, especially land and inheritance law for Chin women against the hegemonic state and the male dominated customary law and practice. Although she has a wide range of grassroots experience in the area of education, development, missionary work, NGOs and politics, her contribution and commitment is mostly faint and low-profile. Her voluntary works are not for fame or popularity but she still wishes to have recognition by the society. Her vision is to work for her people as much as she can. Although she is well known for her community work, which is mostly voluntary and needs a constant stream of commitment, she never thinks this is special. She perceives that working for the people, especially for the marginalized, is her untold duty in life.

In 2015, Aw Kan Lo ran as a candidate for the State level election from Chin National Democratic Party (CNDP). According to Union Election Commission (UEC) in 2015, only 13 % of the 6,074 candidates in the November parliamentary election were women, although their participation is considerably higher than in previous polls. Additionally, indigenous women often face double discrimination on the basis of being indigenous and being women. She was not successful in the election as she did not have sufficient financial capital to design and run her campaign. However, she tried to reach her constituency as much as possible with limited finances in a highly remote area. The story of Aw Kan Lo is one of an indigenous/ethnic woman politician whose experience was a shining light on her fellow indigenous women's experience in Myanmar. In this way, indigenous women are far from being the problem, and in fact are the solutions when it comes to natural resource management and governance issues.

However, she tried to reach her constituency as much as possible with limited finances in a highly remote area. The story of Aw Kan Lo is one of an indigenous/ethnic woman politician whose experience was a shining light on her fellow indigenous women's experience in Myanmar.

If one observes the political landscape of Myanmar, there are many obstacles for women politicians to enter this space, particularly those from among indigenous/ethnic nationality communities, even if present State chancellor Aung San Su Kyi is a woman. There were two different categories for women candidates back in 2015: those who got support from their family and those who did not. Women from the first category are (*unsurprisingly*) less than the latter. Common among these women candidates were personal attacks, insults, defamation and malicious integrity. One significant happenstance is that most of the second category received inefficient financial support from the family and the party themselves. The common reason that the family, as a unit of the society, does not want to support women is simply that politics is seen as a man's job and not for women. Aw Kan Lo case is one of them.

Her political agenda is to “*carve opportunity for women in the management of natural resources, leadership in politics, economics, education, religion and development.*”



As Aw Kan Lo narrated: “Parties are more focused on male candidates than on women candidates.” However, as she reasoned with herself to become a politician, entering into the political field will enhance her grassroots work more effectively and she can make much better changes. Her political agenda is to “*carve opportunity for women in the management of natural resources, leadership in politics, economics, education, religion and development.*” Through her organization, Raiki, she intends to achieve peace and development by focusing on the rights of women to inheritance customary law.

Written by Flora Bawi Nei Mawi

Name: Yulia Awayakuane

Ethnicity: Tananahu

Tananahu village, Maluku Province, Indonesia

Yulia Awayakuane, or widely known as the Ina *Latu*⁸ of Tananahu village, celebrated her 51st birthday in early 2016 together with her family. Being in her 50s with four children does not stop her from fighting for and with the indigenous community she is leading. It is her second term (2013 - 2019) as the Ina *Latu* of Tananahu. She was re-elected by consensus by the community after finishing her first term, which started in 2007. Likewise, the first election process of Ina *Latu* was also smoothly done because of the tremendous support from her family members, especially the male family members. The encouragement from her husband and children is the biggest motivation for her, as there was some



◆ Yulia Awayakuane

hesitation in the earlier stages. Initially her husband was not encouraging of her becoming King, because it is such a huge responsibility with many challenges. However, eventually joined the rest of the family in supporting her and believing in her.

According to Ina *Latu*, it was not at all easy when she took the leadership, as the village was facing many issues, including land scarcity caused by a 30-year concession given by the government to National Plantation Company XIV (*formerly known as National*

⁸ Female leader of a village, also known in local language as Ibu Raja (*In English: Ms. King*)

Plantation Company XXVIII), which started its operation in 1983 and was contracted up until 31 Dec 2012. With the belief that when a community unites, problems can be changed into hopes, she decided to dedicate herself to work with and for the community. Under her leadership, the community started its resistance against the company long before the end of its contract, as the people saw no positive impacts from the existence of the company and its plantation project.

Instead, scarcity of land became a major issue since the company started eroding the territory of the Tananahu community. The land of the community became less and less, barely enough for cultivation for daily life and survival, leading to a situation where more than five families have to stay in one house on a small piece of land and, especially for the indigenous women, who are forced to go much further and deeper into the forest to explore and collect forest products to fulfil their daily needs. At first, the Plantation Company was laughing at the *Ina Latu*, looking arrogantly upon her as if she was ‘just a woman and, worse, an indigenous woman.’ However, their view has changed after seeing the solid support given to her by the whole Tananahu people.

With the belief that when a community unites, problems can be changed into hopes, she decided to dedicate herself to work with and for the community.



◆ Ina Latu with Village Government Staff.



On 3 January 2013, the Tananahu people finally reclaimed their land by cutting down cocoa and coconut trees, just three days after the end of the company's contract. However, despite the fact that the contract had already expired, the Tananahu women who entered the plantation area were beaten by police officers and company security personnel. The women were accused of being thieves and trespassers. The case was reported to the police and legal aid was provided by AMAN, Maluku chapter and its network. Support was also given to the community to help them in claiming back their collective land. In the interview for this story, *Ina Latu* said: *"We will continue fighting for our land. Contract of the plantation company has ended in 2012 and we don't want to extend the contract. We are suffering greatly; we haven't felt any positive impacts from the plantation activities. We will never stop fighting!"*

However, despite the fact that the contract had already expired, the Tananahu women who entered the plantation area were beaten by police officers and company security personnel.

Recognition of the role of indigenous women has been increased since *Ina Latu* took the leadership. The *Ina Latu* is a living example and evidence that the indigenous woman is capable of leading their community and can play a pivotal role in their communities' survival

- not just cooking, doing dishes or collecting firewood from the forest. Ina Latu has the full support of the community, both women and men, and she is consistently proactive in asserting community land rights. More and more women's groups were established in the village with the main aim to empower indigenous women and increase their participation at all levels in the community, particularly in the political sphere.

One of the indigenous women's groups is currently involved in the formulation of the regulation on Customary Governance of Tananahu Village. A specific section in the draft regulation is dedicated to the promotion of the recognition of the crucial role of indigenous women and the importance of their full and effective participation at all levels for the protection of their rights and to ensure that their voice is heard in processes that potentially impacting them.



◆ Ina Latu with Traditional Dance Performers.

More and more women's groups were established in the village with the main aim to empower indigenous women and increase their participation at all levels in the community, particularly in the political sphere.

The indigenous women's groups recently conducted a series of gatherings and meetings to discuss possible activities to support the campaign as well as to collaborate with other indigenous communities, wider civil society organizations and networks who work for and support the recognition and protection of indigenous peoples' land rights.

Tananahu community is one of the supporters of the Global Call to Action on Indigenous and Community Land Rights or also known as the #landrightsnow campaign. The indigenous women's groups recently conducted a series of gatherings and meetings to discuss possible activities to support the campaign as well as to collaborate with other indigenous communities, wider civil society organizations and networks who work for and support the recognition and protection of indigenous peoples' land rights.

Nowadays the community has more freedom to use the land, unlike before when they faced abuse from the company. Part of the land has been used for villagers to build their houses and other collective uses. At the same time, lobbying and negotiation is ongoing as the company is still claiming that they have rights regardless of the 2012 expiration date on the contract.

Written by Patricia Miranda Wattimena

AIPP at a Glance

The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples' movements as a platform for solidarity and cooperation. AIPP is actively promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and human rights; sustainable development and management of resources and environment protection. Through the years, AIPP has developed its expertise on grassroots capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global levels and strengthening partnerships with indigenous organizations, support NGOs, UN agencies and other institutions. At present, AIPP has 48 members from 14 countries in Asia with 7 indigenous peoples' national alliances/networks and 35 local and sub-national organizations including 16 are ethnic-based organizations, five (5) indigenous women and four (4) are indigenous youth organizations.

Through our Indigenous Women (IW) programme, AIPP aims to empower indigenous women through networking, education and capacity building activities with the overall goal for indigenous women to assert, promote and protect their rights as women and as indigenous peoples.

Our Vision

Indigenous peoples in Asia are living with dignity and fully exercising their rights, distinct cultures and identity, and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their own future and development in an environment of peace, justice and equality.

Our Mission

AIPP strengthen the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of indigenous peoples in Asia to promote and protect their rights, cultures and identities, and their sustainable resource management system for their development and self-determination.

Our Programmes

Our main areas of work among the different programmes are information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global. Our programmes are:

- Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy
- Regional Capacity Building
- Environment
- Indigenous Women
- Research and Communication Development
- (Indigenous Youth.)

AIPP is accredited as an NGO in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and as observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). AIPP is a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC).

“The indigenous women’s voices and ‘her stories’, as an integral part of the women’s movement and indigenous peoples’ movement, remain faint. This reflects the overall conditions of indigenous women as relatively more marginalized, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. It also illustrates the urgent need to strengthen indigenous women’s organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and as indigenous peoples.” Joan Carling, Secretary General, AIPP

HerStory 3 reflects the strength of the indigenous women’s movement for empowerment, leadership and justice and is a result of the dedication of our partners and friends from indigenous communities in the Philippines, Northeast India, Mainland India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal, and Cambodia. Here, 16 women have bravely shared their stories to empower and promote the solidarity of indigenous women, not only in Asia, but worldwide.

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