

Albert Siamkima Khawlhing 1938-1992

For me a brief biography of Siamkima, whose voice we hear reciting the sad story of Tualvungi and Zawlpala, necessarily involves the story of his friendship with an American professor of anthropology, F. K. Lehman, and commences when Siamkima is a teenager in a Mizo village in Assam eager to learn more about English and English literature.

Albert Siamkima Khawlhing was born into a traditional Mizo family in Lung Leh (Assam). His clan was Khawlhing, also the name of a ridge of mountains (Khawlhing Tlang) on the border with the Chin State in Burma. Nobody in his family was literate.

He attended school there and later at Aizawl whose mission high school he left prematurely to work in the collieries at Kaleywa on the Chindwin river, an area of Mizo settlement. In 1957 he stepped out from between two houses in the Mizo settlement of Tahan (near Kalembo) and addressed Professor F. K. Lehman with these words: "Sir, Hast thou any English books to sell?" Prof. Lehman explains, "He really did not know the difference between modern and Shakespearean/biblical English then." Prof. Lehman worked with Siamkima in Tahan for the next month before leaving for further research in the Chin Hills.

Eventually Siamkima returned to school in Shillong and went to college there, becoming a lecturer in English at Aizawl, at what became a part of Northeastern Hills University (NEHU). He met his wife when she was his student at NEHU. His friendship with Prof. Lehman continued through correspondence. In the early 1970s Prof. Lehman brought Siamkima to the University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana, to do graduate work in English literature. His English was so good that professors in the university had him tutor the undergraduate students of his department who needed help in writing their own language. While at the University of Illinois Siamkima so impressed the faculty with his knowledge of Shakespeare that they wanted him to stay for a PhD. However, the formalities of his visa and family responsibilities back home forced his return to Aizawl in the late 1970s.

I was invited to work with Siamkima in Illinois by Prof. Lehman in 1975 and again in 1976. Later, perhaps in 1977, Siamkima visited my family in our rented house in Berkeley where we did further work especially focused on texts. Siamkima and I corresponded for several years after I left Berkeley and he returned to Mizoram. Because he was a teacher it bothered Siamkima to provide texts extemporaneously.

He was uncomfortable with the occasional false starts and with the corrections he would have to make. So he read "Tualvungi and Zawlpala" from the collection "Mizo Thawnthu" (Mizo folktales). Sometimes his corrections to the written text are audible in the audio files accompanying this text.

Siamkima quickly learned the 1970s academic linguistic jargon and would volunteer for instance that a certain Mizo example provided by him in response to my solicitation was an example of "Tough Movement".

Siamkima died at too young an age, probably due to ulcers, early in the 1990s. He was in his early fifties. His wife survived him and is an English teacher in a Mizo high school. She and their children and grandchildren still live in Aizawl where Prof. Lehman visits them occasionally. I remember Siamkima as a formal though at times very funny man. When he stayed with my family in Berkeley my new son (now the father of our grandchildren) was still an infant and Siamkima taught us how to wrap him in a thin blanket and carry him on our backs (naawpuakpuan), a traditional Mizo practice that I note is very similar to the Baby Bjorn baby carriers now sold to young couples.

Siamkima was a consistent advocate for Mizo literacy and the growth of a literature among the Mizo. A sample bibliography of his works includes: "*The Lushai-English Translation and Grammar*" (1963-1964), "*Ka Zinna Ram*", an account of his travels in the 1970s (1979), as well as the articles he wrote in the 1980s for *Thu leh Hla*, a monthly Mizo literary journal, where Siamkima both served on the editorial board and as editor.

Note: My thanks to Prof. F.K. Lehman (now retired) for all details of Siamkima's early life, family and his background in Assam and Burma, as well as for my own exposure to the Mizo language and my introduction to Siamkima.

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