

ADAM'S APPLES

A photoessay from Chin state,
Myanmar



Chin state

Chin state is a remote region in Myanmar's North-West, bordering Indian Mizoram and Manipur to the north, and Bangladesh to the south. Isolated and relatively undeveloped, its economy is almost entirely agrarian.

Chin State differs from most of Myanmar in several respects. The Chin number nearly half a million in-state, with many more living abroad in places like Indianapolis in the US (known colloquially to the Chins as Chindianapolis). Each region of Chin state has its own ethnic groups and subgroups such as the Mizo, distinct styles of cloth and clothing, and often several different languages.

Chins are predominantly and devoutly Christian, while Myanmar is majority Theravada Buddhist. There has historically been extensive religious persecution in the state as a result, although this has diminished significantly in recent years as state-led religious discrimination towards Christians has abated. Chin state is now one of Myanmar's most peaceful regions and modern Chins take high rank in the current National League for Democracy government. One of Myanmar's two vice presidents is a Chin Christian.

Unlike most of the Myanmar languages, the Chin scripts are latin-based, with the largest being Hakha Lai. Both Christianity and the latin Chin scripts are the result of British missionaries crossing from Bangladesh. Hunting was and is an essential part of the Chin culture, and skulls and pelts are a common decoration in homes. Historically, hunting was a test and signifier of masculinity, although this belief and its practices have diminished in recent decades, likely due in part to hunting's reduction or extinction of much local wildlife.

The weather and topography of Chin state is also very different to that of most of Myanmar. Chin state is hugely mountainous, with the state capital Hakha sitting at 1800 meters above sea level. The winters are much colder (snow is not entirely unheard of) and the summers much milder. In the cold and the hot seasons, it is dry, acrid and dusty, especially when farmers light their annual slash and burn blazes. When monsoon strikes, or cyclones roll in across the Bay of Bengal, visibility shrinks to almost nothing and the mountains disappear in clouds, mud and mist.

Chin cuisine bears little resemblance to Indian or Bangladeshi food, despite the geographical proximity. The most famous dish is Sabuti, a meat and corn soup. Soups, salads and rice form the majority of the Chin diet, although crops - and therefore, available dishes - are somewhat periodic due to the intense seasonal changes. Green tea, as with all of Myanmar, is an essential part of both diet and daily routine.

This photoessay from 2017 explores the apple farming industry on which much of life in Dimpi Village, northern Chin state, depends.







The roads of Chin state

Travelling to Chin State is difficult, although it has improved in recent years, and a future airport in Falam township will dramatically improve the states' connection to the rest of the country. As of 2019, travel to Dimpi village still required a 2 hour flight or a 20 hour bus from Yangon to Kalaymyo, followed by a 3 hour drive from Kalaymyo to Sozaang village, and a final 6 mile motorbike ride from Sozaang to Dimpi. This final stretch is along a road too small and fragile for anything larger than a bike.

The roads of Chin state, never great at the best of times, suffer greatly during monsoon, when weaker sections of the track are prone to landslides and being washed away. During this period, construction is unceasing, as private and Japan-funded workers strive to keep the roads open. Should they wash out, there is rarely an alternative route through the mountains, and travellers risk being stranded until construction crews arrive. As very little is produced in Chin state itself, vast convoys of trucks and vans operate year-round to import manufactured goods and foodstuffs to the region, mostly from Kalaymyo in neighbouring Sagaing division and beyond.

Far Right: The main road from Dimpi to Sozaang during monsoon season.







Dimpi village

Dimpi comprises around 200 households, making it quite a substantial village by Chin standards. At around 1500 meters, the terrain is typically mountainous and difficult to access and cultivate. Houses are usually built on stilts in the traditional Chin style. As flat land is in short supply, this enables a house to be constructed on hillsides, and creates a storage and livestock area beneath the building. Being away from the national grid, the village's sole source of power is a community-funded hydropower generator at the bottom of the valley.



Dimpi Baptist Church

The Baptist Church is only one of several churches of various denominations in the village. Churches function as both places of worship and common areas for events and occasions. Here, village men are slaughtering a pig for a feast, which will then be prepared by the village women. Chin gender roles are, broadly, very traditional, although there are some overlaps in areas of labour and farming amongst others.



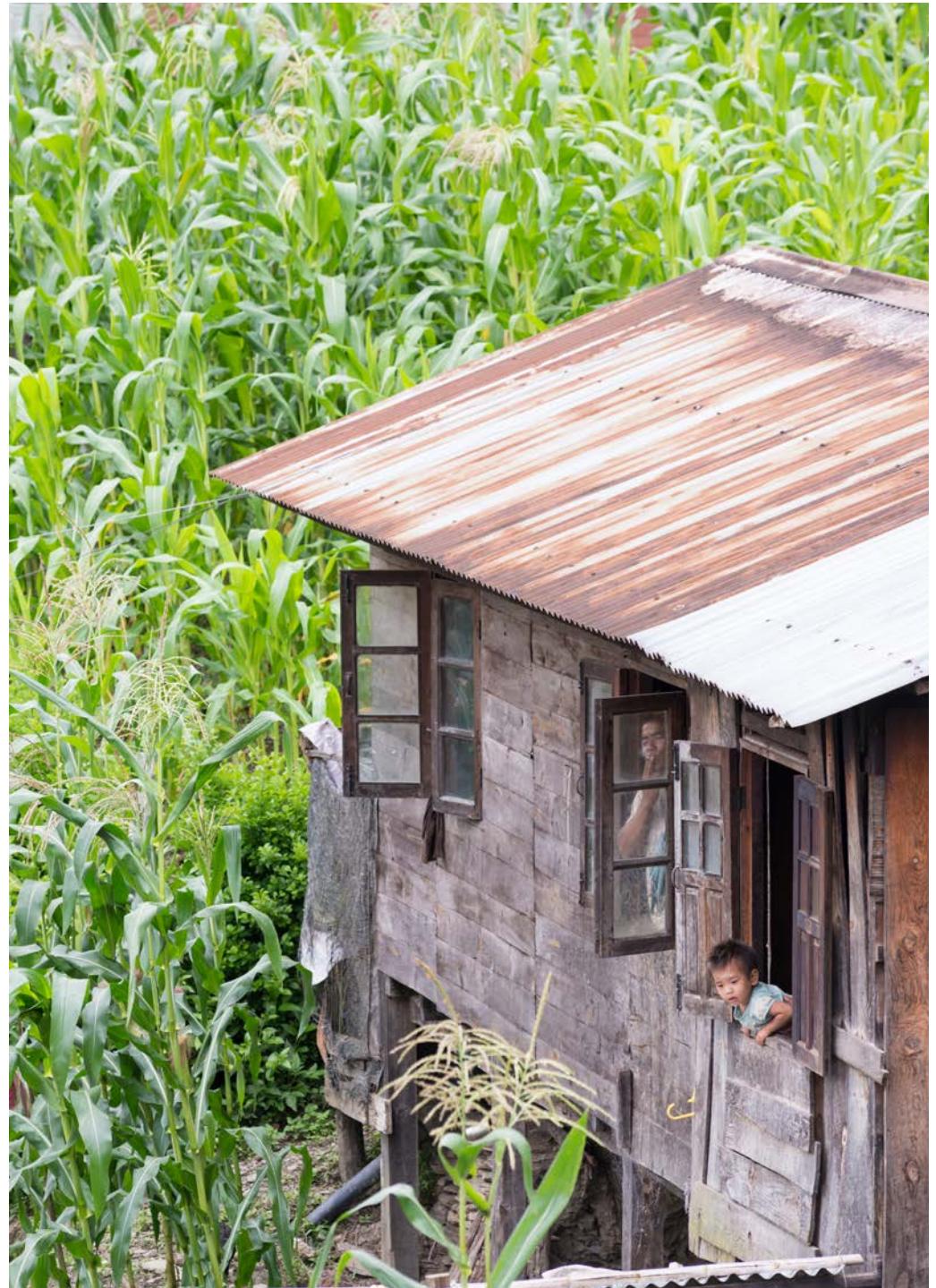


Education in Dimpi

Education in Chin state, as with all schools in Myanmar, must be conducted in Burmese, the language of the dominant Bamar ethnic group. Children across the country wear the same uniform, follow the same curriculum, and typically learn by rote, a teaching method that focuses on learning through repetition. If students wish to learn in their local language, they must do so outside of school. In Chin state, this is typically in private classes late in the evening.

Middle right: This is the government middle school, a wood and steel building partitioned into several classrooms. It is built on the largest area of flat land in the village; it even has a football field.





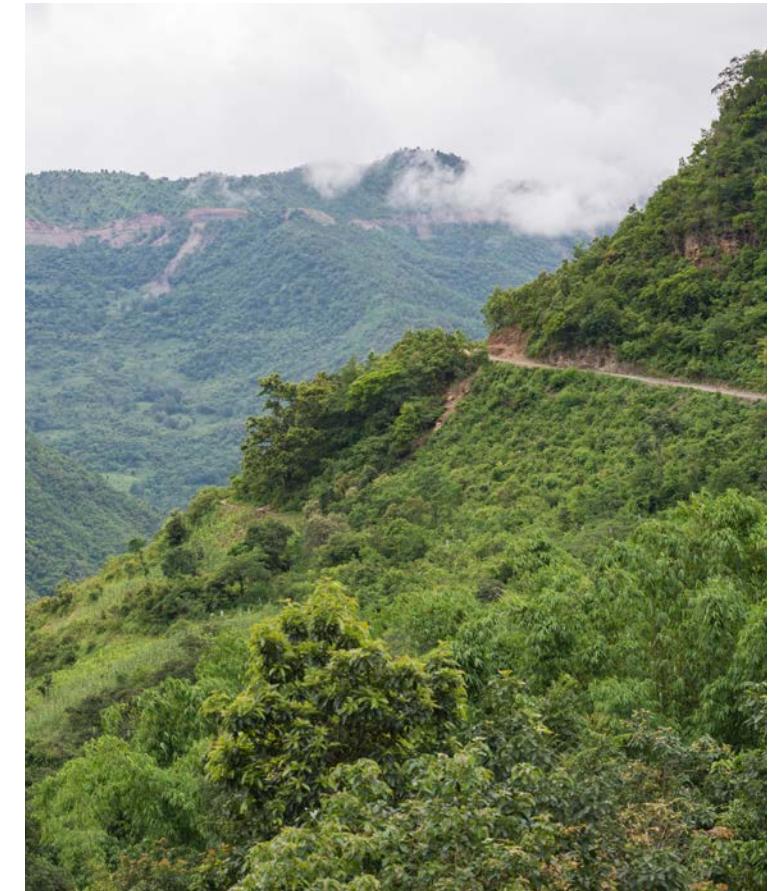




Dimpi's apple orchards

Apples are the lifeblood of Dimpi village, making up their largest crop and agricultural export. The agricultural process is complicated by relative poverty and topography, which ensures the vast majority of the farming and transporting must be done using traditional methods, by hand and on foot.

Far Left: The main apple orchards for Dimpi village are at around 1900 meters above sea level. The orchard opposite has around 1500 trees, which support 5 households. Each household's trees are separated by man-made boundaries, such as small channels or walls, and must be tended frequently.





The climb

The climb to the orchards is steep, slippery and humid. Initially the trail is well-constructed and easy to follow, but accessing the upper orchards deteriorates into an uphill scramble through damp, dense bush. The orchards are also home to vipers. The nearest hospital is at least a couple of hours away in good weather, so bites can easily be fatal.

Accessing the orchards is one thing, but transporting their fruit back to the village by foot using traditional woven baskets is another. Labourers without their own farms are paid proportionate to the amount of apples they can carry, either the two miles to Dimpi village or a further six miles to Sozaang village, next to a major highway. A strong person can carry 40 viss in one trip (a viss is the local unit of measurement, 40 viss is around 55 kg).



Orchard maintenance

Caring for the apple trees occupies much of the farmers' lives. They need to plant new saplings, prune young, dead or dying trees, clear undergrowth, and of course harvest the fruit.

The farmers do complain of a lack of knowledge. A fungal disease is sweeping several of the orchards and either killing their trees or reducing their harvest. Without outside help from agricultural specialists, they have little chance of combating it.

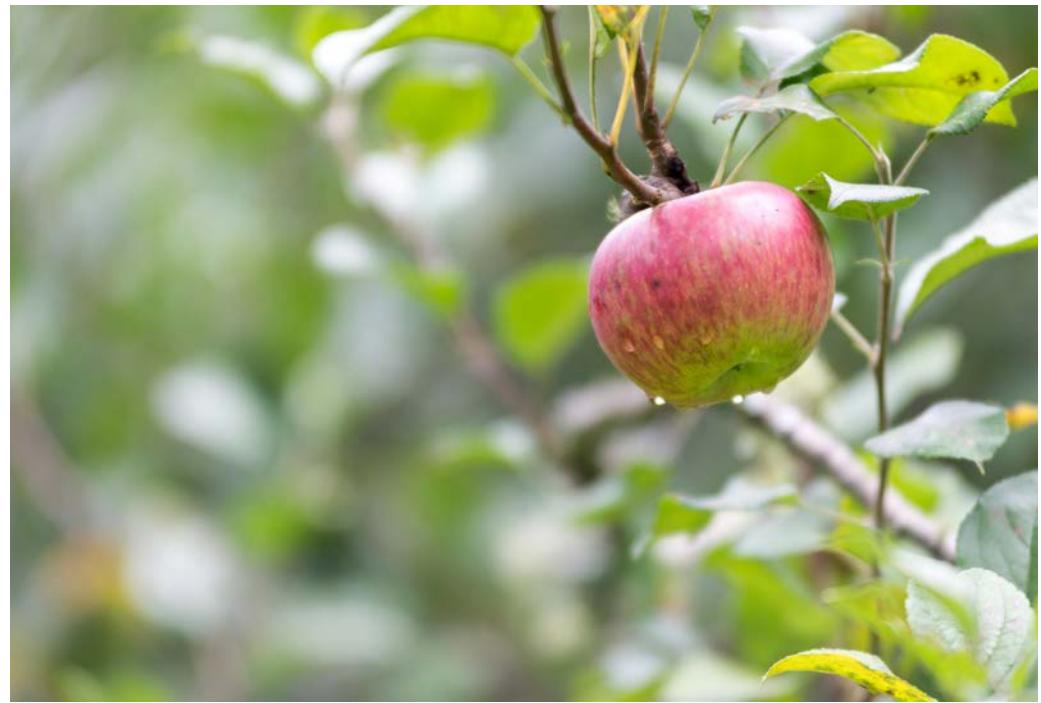


Right: Jin Khan Dar and Thiau Za Dal clear a plot to plant a sample tree in the orchard. A 3 year old tree, it is unlikely it will flourish as its taproot is not long enough.

Left: Zel Zalian, 58, watches as his nephew Thang Muan Lian and his wife Man Khan Niang weigh the apples from his orchard.













Dimpi resident and apple farmer Jin Khan Dar (60), his wife Nyaung Thian Khup, and his children Jin Cian Khoi (5, left) and Khai Ngaih Zeng (3, right)

These are the youngest of 9 children, and apple farming is their only income. In the best years, their orchard produced 3000 viss (around 5000kg) of apples. Last year saw a catastrophic reduction to around 200 viss (around 280 kg). Jin Khan Dar lacks the knowledge to explain exactly why this happened, but believes it was due to unusually heavy rain when the fruit trees were flowering.



Dimpi resident Thawng To Mang, 49 sits in his home

Another apple farmer, Thawng To Mang's 5 surviving children and wife live in Kalaymyo while he remains in Dimpi alone to tend to the crops. His eldest son, pictured behind him to the left, was killed in a motorcycle accident in Kalaymyo while studying at university. He was only 20.





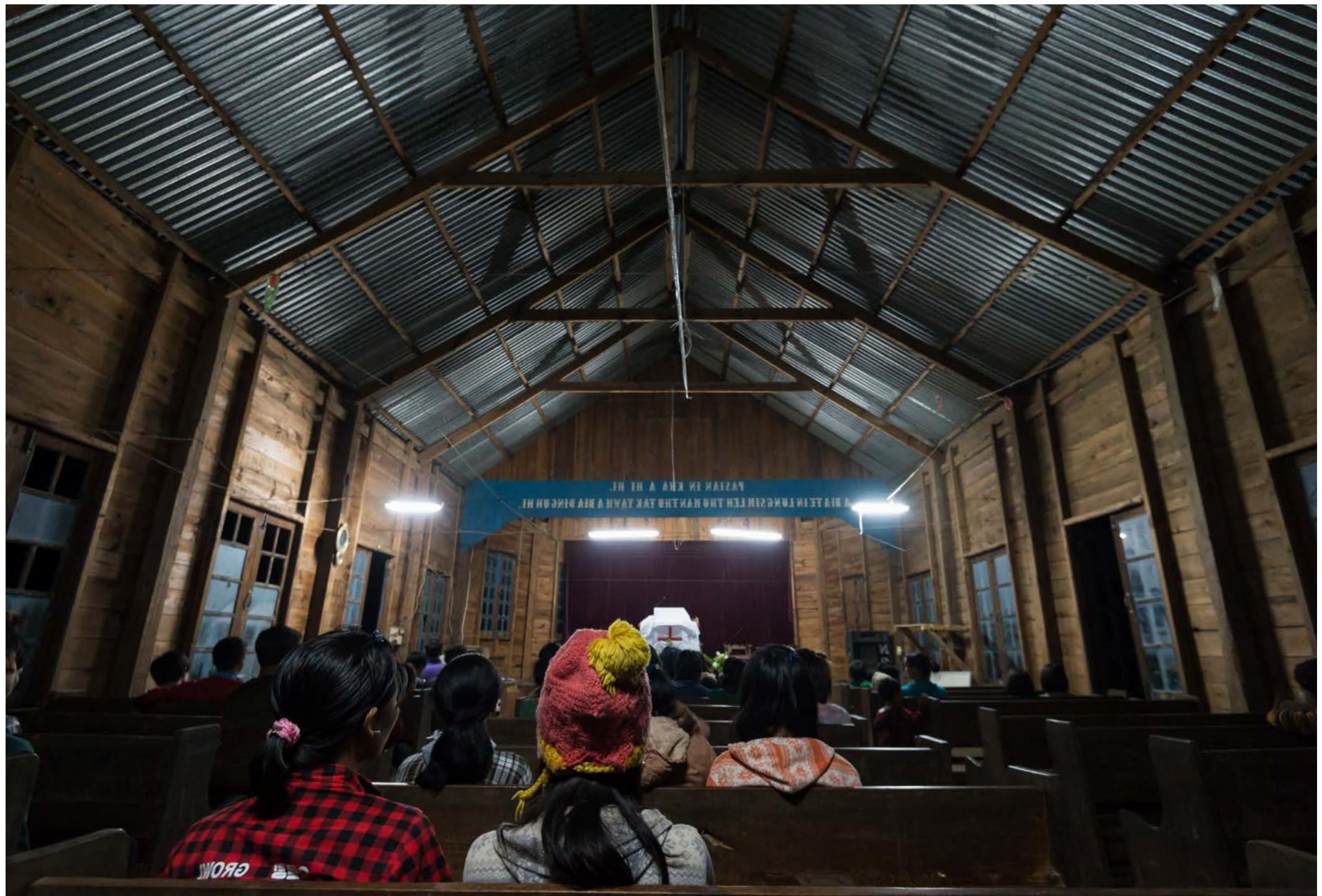
The harvest festival

Back in the village, Dimpi villagers are conducting the annual harvest festival in the Baptist church. Apples feature prominently.

Left: Mang Khan Sum, the visiting Associate Director of the Myanmar Baptist Convention, leads prayers.

Right: Dimpi pastor Zam Sawm Sing says a harvest prayer in the Baptist church. Aged 47, he has been the pastor since 1997.









The final step

For most of the apples, the final step is transport to Sozaang village to be sold along the highway. Usually this is conducted on foot, but some fortunate workers use motorbikes to expedite their journey through the mud and rain. Once the apples arrive, they are sold by enthusiastic vendors to occupants of the many minibuses and vans ferrying passengers through the mountains to Tedim, a major Chin town.



This photoessay was funded by DanChurchAid and photographed and produced by Seb Higginson.

More photos can be viewed at www.storgaardphotography.com